

CASE STUDY

Stockport Council



“Based on W3C AAA compliancy, the Stockport website barely registered a single A rating. We needed a much more robust, streamlined, and ‘future-proof’ website which was as accessible as we could reasonably make it . Mediasurface helped us get there.”

MEDIASURFACE



ANDREW KIRKHAM, OPERATIONAL HEAD OF THE COUNCIL'S E-SERVICES

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Accessibility success at Stockport


PROFILE

Our website is "a service-delivery tool for the Council to communicate and transact effectively with key audiences. In its look and feel, it must project Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council as being one unified organisation."

SYNOPSIS

Working towards achieving the 2005 'Modernising Government' standards and AAA compliance, Stockport Council took the decision to exceed targets, rather than merely reach them and hit deadlines. Whereas a typical business website is there to sell a company's products, the council provides access to services and also promote the borough for inward investment, employment, tourism and education and so on.

"We set out to strip the website down, and re-build it, with accessibility and usability our prime focus. Using Mediasurface has meant our extensive web site was completed in just 10 weeks, making it not only one of the most accessible sites in the UK but also one of the fastest deployed." said Andrew Kirkham, Operational Head of the Council's e-Services.



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INTRODUCTION

All public sector bodies are facing a deadline to deliver services online. By the end of 2005 all transactions that can be delivered online must be delivered online, which is all part of the current government's 'Modernising Government' initiative. This initiative was described by the government as "a significant step forward in what is a long-term programme of reform" in a policy document issued back in 1999. It was said to be "modernisation for a purpose" and part of an attempt to end the view of IT projects as something which happen in isolation within an organisation, rather than something that has to work with the organisation's needs in mind.

The targets and the 2005 deadline were put in place to compel all local authorities, central government departments and other public sector bodies to embrace this view of how IT should be working in unison with the rest of the organisation. But there's more to hitting targets that simply adding on functionality to existing IT systems. But first we needed a much more robust, streamlined, and 'future-proof' website which was as accessible as we could reasonably make it.


This latest version of the site has been applauded as setting new standards for online accessibility.

Stockport Council set up a website in 1998; there have been four revisions of our website since then. This latest version of the site has been applauded as setting new standards for online accessibility; it is in line with the recommendations of a report issued in April 2004 by the Disability Rights Commission (DRC) and is one of the first such sites in the UK to meet the exacting AAA standard of the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C). Naturally, such recognition is gratifying, and in terms of boosting staff morale, has been very welcome, but

winning praise was never the aim of our project. We set out to strip it down, and re-build it, with accessibility and usability our prime focus. We aimed for 'accessibility for all'. That job is done. But now there is a host of others – because it's still far from perfect: content needs more development, and it must become much more transactional. However, the foundation for progress is now solid, and we are seeing significant increases in use.

SETTING THE SCENE

New regulations announced in the Disability Discrimination Act, which came into force in October 2004, meant everybody with a presence on the web had to make 'reasonable adjustments' to cater for the needs of web users with disabilities. The issue of greater usability has also been taken up by the W3C, which published its own set of guidelines for standards with levels of A, AA and AAA, the latter being a prestigious accolade of true usability. The recent DRC report found over 80 percent of web sites were "next to impossible for some disabled people to use" and of 1,000 surveyed not one managed to meet the W3C AAA compliancy.

The previous Stockport website barely registered a single A rating. The pursuit of AAA standard was never one of our project's initial aims (at first, we would have been happy with AA) but as we went along, we decided to aim as high as we could. Achieving this recognition shows that we were able to get to very heart of what was needed to make our new site a success. A fundamental part of getting it right in this case was a genuine understanding of the needs of a local authority website, the needs of its audience and how these differ from the commercial world. Although this may sound a little like stating the obvious, the differences are materially important and a failure to recognise them would have been disastrous. Part of our duty is to communicate with the residents of Stockport and make sure they are fully aware of the range of services the borough makes available; 

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the driving force behind all of this is the welfare of residents, it's not driven by profit or gain. It is also to inform the public about who is responsible for the provision of services and how they can engage in the democratic process and influence the level and quality of services. Whereas a typical business website is there to sell a company's products, we're there provide to access to services and also promote the borough for inward investment, employment, tourism and education and so on.

When it comes to promoting the borough, as a place to live and work the site is vital. Some estimates are that around 83% of senior people considering re-location for home or work visit the website of an area concerned as their first, primary source of information. It is an organisation's website which can play a major role in influencing their decision even to request job application details. If the site is positive and upbeat, they may make that vital inquiry. If it's poor, they may look elsewhere!

In terms of leisure and tourism - and we do have some fascinating venues - we feel the site allows us to punch above our weight. We are convinced that the web is often more value than acres of promotional print.

Perhaps one of the most immediate ways in which a website helps a local authority can be seen in a very straightforward example. We used to publish a printed A-Z guide of services a few years ago but, not surprisingly, we found it got out of date quite quickly. Now it's

online and it has become a more flexible and up-to-date resource.

It acts as a backbone to our new site. An increasing number of people are now used to receiving information electronically and we've seen an increase in the demand for other communications to be delivered this way. It is also a highly effective way to demonstrate

where council tax is being spent. For our council, the web will never totally replace letters, phones, and personal contact – but it will be a very important channel for thousands of taxpayers to access our services if they wish.

The elected council members were very keen that the new site was to reflect the needs of the wider community here in Stockport and accessibility is obviously an essential part of that. The decision to rebuild and re-launch our website was taken following a usability survey carried out by RiverInteractive on the incumbent site and a survey of local users and council staff. The site was proved difficult to use, especially for people with disabilities and the elderly, and struggled to meet even the basic standards of the WC3.

We have agreed a formal purpose of our website. All content must be aligned with that purpose. Our website is "a service-delivery tool for the Council to communicate and transact effectively with key audiences. In its look and feel, it must project Stockport Council as being one unified organisation." The principles have been adopted to clarify the purpose of our Internet presence to assist in the prioritisation of pages and the way the site is structured.

Internet content must assist the Council in conforming to the following aims:

- To support the Community Strategy and the Council Plan
- To provide direct, transactional services for citizens
- To support the democratic process
- To provide access to services and information of other agencies (i.e. joined up government)
- To provide a two-way information and communications resource for the Council



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- To promote Stockport to specific audiences to achieve corporate marketing and communication objectives
- To provide access to and support for lifelong learning
- To assist in the recruitment of high calibre employees for Stockport Council

The site will also assist the Council achieving its e-Government targets set for 2005.

Our commitment to getting our information out into the wider community goes back 30 years; in 1974 the council set up a series of information bureaux, like satellite offices, across the borough to act as information and advice centres for residents. At the time we were a leader in the field in community-based access points. There is also free internet access

available via all our libraries, which again provides access to those who want it but perhaps don't have it at home. And of course, the more we are able to deliver transactions electronically the better we can re-route resources and help those people who need face-to-face contact.

The site will also assist the Council achieving its e-Government targets set for 2005.

Ensuring we reach out to all our local residents of is a

continuous challenge. We have a high rate of PC ownership in homes across Stockport. From the point of view of maintaining contact with the section of our population that owns a PC we can cover a lot of ground; we are producing web versions of some of our main printed communications (our three-monthly civic newspaper The Review for example). The online newspaper is attracting more and more attention and we are able to email single articles to people. But, of course, there are many sections of the community that don't have ready access to the internet and the council has a duty to ensure we are communicating with them and meeting their needs too.

We are now convening a group of people with a range of disabilities, including physically and visually impaired users, to review the new site with a view to making suggestions for further enhancements that will form part of Phase II of our web improvement project. We have been learning as we go along, and it has been helpful for us to learn more about the range of disabilities for which we must try to cater.

What is meant by accessibility?

We see accessibility as the art of developing things to be used by the totality and not just the majority. It is important that our website is developed to serve the largest possible audience using the broadest range of systems (hardware and software platforms) and that the needs of users with disabilities are considered.

We have to appreciate that users of our website may have different standards of technology and, therefore, to ensure access to our information on the web the onus is on our web authors to deliver the messages of the web in a way that allows everyone to benefit. Some of the key audiences to consider are:

The inexperienced or techno-phobic

A number of electronic devices such as video recorders, mobile phones and microwave ovens cause confusion for some people, others have little experience of computers. For both audiences, the inherent complexities of a home computer can make retrieving information from the web very difficult.

The socially excluded

A proportion of the public does not have the means to purchase a home computer.



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Computers with different hardware and software platforms in local libraries, Colleges and Internet Cafés may be the only resource available to this sector of the population.

Non-English users

Although English is the most commonly used language on the Web (nearly 100,000,000 web pages use English), there are many people do not use English as their first language. Extra care should be taken to ensure that the English used on our web pages is clear and simple to understand. The Council website has a dedicated homepage feature which links directly to Interpreting Services, a service provided by the Stockport English Language Service. The information contained within these pages represents the online version of the English translation panel that is associated with all of the Council's printed material.

Older users

Users of advancing years may have one or a combination of disabilities listed below

Physical Impairment:

Recent disability figures for the UK suggest that there are:

- over 8.54 million people registered with one form of disability or another;
- of these over 2 million have a visual impairment;
- eight million people suffering from some form of hearing loss;
- one million people with a form of learning difficulty;
- over seven million people with a literacy problem.

Visual impairment:

The web is superficially seen as a visual medium, but as the majority of information in a website is in text format there are many ways in which this data can be manipulated. Screen reader software reads a web page one line at a time, horizontally across the screen. The text is spoken using a speech synthesiser or alternatively sent to a retractable Braille display or to a fixed single line display. Screen magnification software is used to magnify portions of a screen using a zoom feature. Many people who have visual impairment still have a degree of usable vision.

Hearing impairment:

Many people with auditory disabilities have little difficulty in using Websites unless streaming audio and video files are used. This can be overcome simply with the use of text captioning. This also assists those non-English speakers who may find written language easier than spoken.

Motor impairment:

Many diseases and physical conditions can cause a person to have a loss or limitation of function in muscle control or movement, which can mean difficulty in using a conventional keyboard or a mouse. Software such as Sticky Keys can make difficult keystrokes more accessible and the W3C Web Accessibility Initiative offers the ability to assign hotkeys to navigation elements. The use of speech recognition systems allows the user to speak commands to their computer. Other alternative input devices include pointer devices and eye scanning systems controlled by mouth or head movements.

Cognitive disability:

Reading difficulties such as dyslexia and limited mental agility can all limit the understanding of information. Users may have problems with memory recall or text recognition; they may also have problems entering information correctly, such as querying a search facility.



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Selective Disturbance:

Flickering and flashing text or images can trigger epileptic seizures in some individuals and do not encourage usability among the visually impaired.

RE-LAUNCH FOR ACCESSIBILITY

The project to re-build from scratch, and re-launch the Stockport site was undertaken in partnership with RiverInteractive, a local design agency with specialisation in usability and accessibility. On their recommendation and after further investigation, we purchased the Mediasurface Council Site Pack, a ready-to-roll, citizen-focused, local authority, content management solution, designed to be fully compliant with all government standards and regulations. We also bought the Knowledge Management Module, an advanced search and publishing tool that offers greater access and usability for users. For example if a citizen is

searching for 'rubbish', the system will automatically know to connect this to information about our litter and street cleansing services.

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The council's officer project team at Stockport took what can best be described as a bold decision – any content from the old site not ready to be migrated to the new system within the deadline would not appear on the new site. And with a deadline of less than 12 weeks, minds were certainly focused. We alerted all senior management teams by way of personal meetings carried out by our Operational Head of e-Services, the project manager Andrew

Kirkham, and were then able to remove those pages where content hadn't been converted so there would be no dead links.

Services available through the site include paying council tax online, traffic and travel information, business directories, information on council services and local events. The site will eventually provide on-line access to hundreds of the authority's services.

The Mediasurface Council Site Pack has meant that we are fully compliant with current government regulatory standards. The system we're running places content into consistent local authority information categories. There were certain aspects that we needed to have on the site such as an A-Z of services and a news section; the Site Pack delivers all of this in an already compliant package. It has provided our community with a unique level of accessibility for all users. We can now manage content and update rapidly and efficiently.

In terms of accessibility, the new website goes well beyond the DRC requirements, using Browsealoud software to offer speech-enabled browsing to the visually impaired, access keys to enable easy browsing, skip navigation, making it easier to function within text only browsers, as well as offering a text-only version of the site with high-contrast text and background. It is also the little things that make a big difference, the positioning of the menu bars, logos and news areas were all placed where we feel people would most expect to find them – the result of numerous usability research reports. Another area where many sites fall down is providing clear explanations on links – instead of just putting "click here" as the link, putting in a bit more detail such as "map to our offices". People operating text only or voice browsers will then feel less disorientated. RiverInteractive proved to be invaluable in assuring we got this right but we will be using feedback from users to make adjustments.



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The new site means we are able to publish and manage the vital information that ALL of our citizens need, in a timely and effective manner. This achievement has been all the more remarkable as the redesign of our extensive web site was completed in just 10 weeks, making it not only one of the most accessible sites in the UK but also one of the fastest deployed.

Plans are also in place for further testing of the Stockport council with disability user groups, the Royal National Institute for the Blind, and we'll be seeking guidance from the Society of Information Technology Management (Socitm). We feel it's a great site, but we don't want to just leave it there, by striving to continually improve it, we wish to make it a model of on-line excellence.

This achievement has been all the more remarkable as the redesign of our extensive web site was completed in just 10 weeks.

As pleased as we are, we are certainly not complacent and the whole team is already fully committed to developing a plan for Phase II, which will take our site to a new level, such as repurposing the content to our wider audience. The Mediasurface content management system we are using can take this information and put it into multi-channel templates such as Digital TV and WAP enabling the site to reach further, thereby not excluding citizens without PC internet access in their homes. We have embarked on a Digital TV pilot project.

Also as well as PC ownership, we've seen other shifts in society and lifestyle; in particular mobile phone technology and digital TV, which we see as having greater appeal to much of the younger generation as well as the wider population who find this technology easier to get to grips with. If you noticed a blown streetlight on your road for example, you might think that you would call to report it to the council the next day; ultimately you may forget by the next morning, as it would not be obvious in the light of day. However, if you were able to report it via your digital television at that moment (or in the advert break) many more people would probably get involved and services would improve as a result.

Part of all this will mean our continued use of the best technology for our needs and, of course, on-going consultation with those we are trying to communicate with – the people of Stockport.

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