

Influencing government web accessibility policy: advocacy vs. militancy

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Hello!

Overview

- Personal, simple-minded, external view
- Focussed on output
- Not wholly pejorative
- Intended sting is now a twist



This is a personal view based on events over the past 2 years and many years' experience before that.

Focussed on real-world outputs and real-world comparisons. Not planning to crawl over the detail of policy and guidance.

Want to acknowledge contribution made by Cab Office/COI (more to come).

Not wholly pejorative – attempts to be constructive, offer ways forward.

But there have been failings at a policy level and we should try to learn from them.

Delighted to say the intended sting in the tail of this presentation is now more of a twist.

Hands please

Who is aware of this document?

“Delivering inclusive websites:
user-centred accessibility”



To help me judge how to deliver this presentation, it would be helpful to know how many of you are aware of the COI's consultation document issued on Tuesday.

If lots do I'll just cover now, if not I'll leave it until the end.

Government policy drivers

- DRC formal investigation 2004
- UK EU presidency research 2005
- Disability Equality Duty
- PAS 78
- W3C WAI WCAG
- Advocacy? Militancy?



So what's driving the government's web accessibility policy?

Government policy

- Digital Inclusion Strategy 2006
- Handbook for Web Management Teams
- Code of Practice for .gov.uk domains
- EU Resolution 2002/0325
- Riga eInclusion Declaration 2006



And what is the policy exactly?

Various provision in:

Digital Inclusion Strategy

Web Management Handbook

Code of Practice for withdrawal of .gov.uk domains

eEurope 2002: Accessibility of Public Web Sites and their Content

Riga eInclusion Declaration

Ambitious targets

Recent web accessibility conformance deadlines include:

- EU & member states by end 2002
- EU & member states during 2003
- Priority Outcome G20 - December 2005
- Digital Strategy - “make significant inroads by 2008”
- Riga - 90% by 2010



Many deadlines have been and gone in the past decade for the accessibility of public service websites.

In February 2001 Patricia Hewitt, the UK's first “e-Minister”, made a commitment that all new UK government websites would be accessible.

Almost all set targets of AA conformance by a specific date.

None got close to being achieved, many had no impact whatsoever.

Disappointing results

Research consistently shows a massive gap between aspirations and reality:

- DRC Formal Investigation 2004
- Cabinet Office 2005
- Southampton University 2006
- SOCITM Better Connected



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So why do we keep repeating the same pattern?

“Keep doing what you’re doing you’ll keep getting what you’re getting”

Can guidelines, cajoling and encouragement really get us where we want to be?

The DTI - a worked example



Let's look at a real-world example. This is my blog, Blether. Started in 2005, don't post much now.

Posted observations on new .gov.uk websites, which were almost always inaccessible and strictly speaking illegal.

Visa4uk, Zanzibar, the OPSI, Supply2, Blaze Aware. All of which are still just as inaccessible today.

My advocacy platform – didn't do much good!

In May 2006 the DTI (now the BERR – Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform) launched their new website.

“DTI achieves new low”

BLETHER

I DON'T BELIEVE IN GOD, BUT I'M AFRAID OF HIM



Articles

Coming soon...

6'6"

Categories

[Accessibility](#)

6'0"

[Books](#)

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[Events](#)

[Gaming](#)

[General blether](#)

5'0"

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4'6"

[Revisish](#)

[Usability](#)

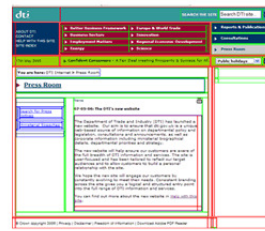
[Web Standards](#)

4'0"

DTI achieves new low

17 May 2006 @ 10:56 PM

Usually it's accompanied by a feeling of disappointment, resignation and perhaps mild surprise. This week though I'm truly shocked by the mind-numbing, soul-crushing, bile-inducing awfulness of a new UK central government website. I've checked the date on [this news release](#) at least half a dozen times in the hope that it says May 2000 and not May 2006, or will reveal itself to be a sick joke. But no luck, it's a fact, the DTI's newly revamped website is about as shit as it's possible for a large, corporate website to be.



To make matters worse it's clear that they either don't know how shit it is, or don't care. Take

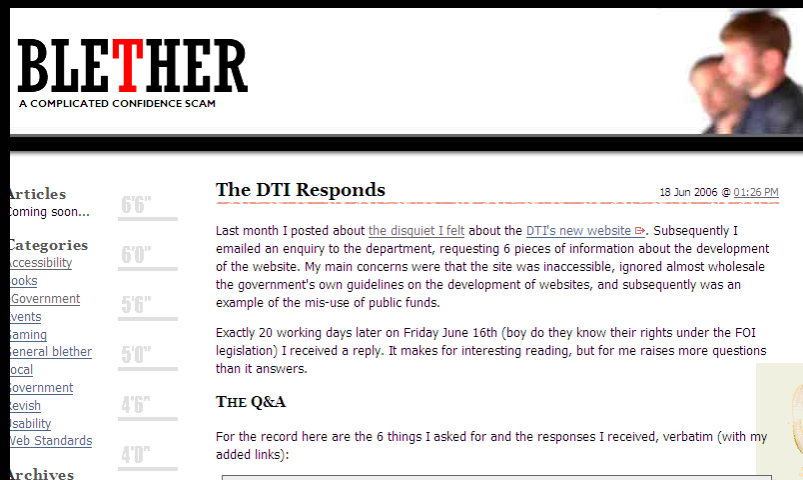
It was truly appalling with almost no redeeming features.

Not a single solitary heading across the entire site of thousands of pages, deeply nested tables for layout, the use of tags, the list just went on.

And it claimed WCAG AA conformance!

I'm a pretty mild-mannered easy going sort of bloke but this made me seriously angry.

FOIA, the militant's friend



Decided to do something about it for a change instead of just moaning, so I fired an FOI inquiry off to the DTI asking a few searching questions...

20 working days later they responded, and we discovered a few things about their new site.

By this time working with Bruce Lawson.

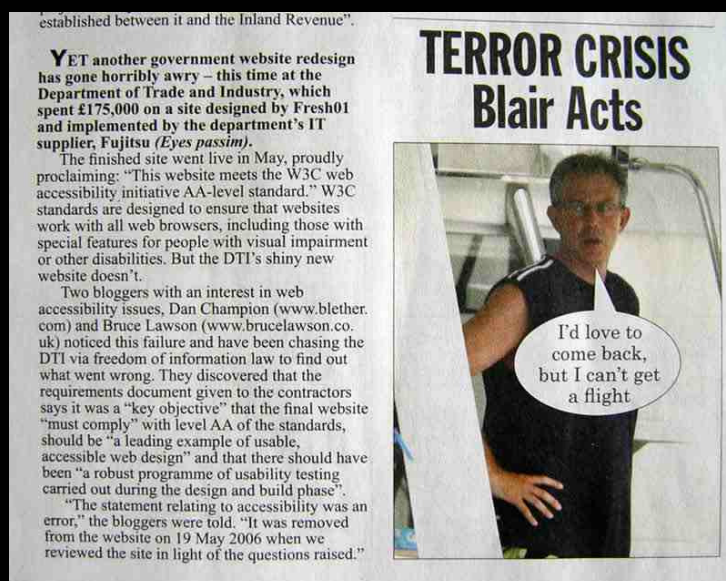
DTI site cost £200k (not that worried about that really).

The requirements document provided to tenderers and the successful supplier clearly specified AA conformance as a key objective.

No user testing had been undertaken on the site despite it being specified in the requirements document.

Gap between requirements and delivered product.

Closet militancy is best



Not totally satisfied with the DTI's response Bruce and I put together some follow-up questions and fired off another FOI inquiry.

In the meantime through our blogs and other channels (Bruce wrote to his MP for example) we got a bit of publicity and ended up in Private Eye.

This wasn't as good as it sounds. In the end 9 different people submitted FOI inquiries about the DTI website, and in a perverse turn of events the DTI was able to knock back the inquiry because it would cost too much to answer all 9.

So if you're going to do this, keep it quiet until you've got everything you want.

Requested internal review, knocked back again. By this stage the DTI had posted a message on its site saying it was undertaking a review of the site, so I took it no further.

Good & bad consequences

- By July 2007 DTI site much improved
- Raised profile of web accessibility

But...

- Cost an additional ~£200k
- Embarrassed department
- Made few friends

Outcome was good in terms of the DTI website

Much improved accessibility

Raised profile of web accessibility in government and amongst suppliers

But cost a lot of money (who should have paid is another issue)

Embarrassed the department, when the real embarrassment should have been the suppliers'

Didn't endear us to many people

But how else would it have changed? If we hadn't made a stand it is highly likely the DTI website would be in the same state today it was in May 2006 – look at the other websites called out for accessibility on my blog and others like it.

Advocacy and cajoling just does not produce results.

What lessons?

- Guidelines alone aren't enough
- Targets don't work
- Advocacy is a war of attrition
- Good requirements aren't enough
- When there's no obvious carrot, reach for a big stick



The DTI and all of the research points to a failure of policy.

Guidelines aren't sufficient to effect change.

Even though the DTI understood the need, they were unable to verify compliance.

It's only when minds are concentrated by potential bad news that things have happened.

So, we need a different model.

Compare the built environment

- Finely detailed building regulations
- Submit plans before work starts
- Subject to inspection before habitation
- Serious penalties for non-compliance



If the DTI wanted to build a new office it would be subject to a great deal of building regulations around accessibility.

Yet on the web the only barrier is the .gov.uk domain (and even that's not essential).

Why is it different on the web? If the government is treating the web as a legitimate channel for delivering services it must be treated with the same seriousness as the built environment.

What's the answer?

Not that simple, but a few ideas:

- Inspection and enforcement for websites
- Control the .gov.uk domain space
- Require accessibility accreditation



Something has to change if we're going to make significant progress.

I don't have the answers, but here are some possibilities.

Create an inspection body for .gov.uk websites. Why should it have been left to 2 bloggers to call the DTI on accessibility?

In March 2006 wrote a blog post "Where are the gatekeepers?" about the failure of the Cabinet Office to enforce the code of practice for .gov.uk domains. It still applies today and is the single most powerful weapon the COI has in its armoury. While departments have total control over their own web budgets they will continue to commission and launch sub-standard websites, regardless of PAS78 or any amount of guidance.

Concentrate their minds with the real threat of withdrawing their domain names.

Require a recognised accessibility accreditation based on pan-disability user testing. RNIB with UseAbility or Shaw Trust.

Delivering Inclusive Websites

- New COI consultation document
- Closes November 2007
- New .gov.uk sites to be AA conformant
- Existing sites conformant by end 2008
- Explicit threat of domain withdrawal
- Who is going to measure and enforce?



On Tuesday COI released document for consultation.

Calls for immediate Level AA conformance of new gov websites.

Deadline of December 2008 for existing sites to be conformant.

Has more of an edge than anything that's gone before - has escalated the threat of withdrawal of the .gov.uk domain from non-conformant sites.

I give it a guarded welcome. The main questions remain – who is going to inspect these sites for conformance and are they really going to be empowered/willing to actually withdraw the domain of a departmental website? Unlikely.

But this consultation is an opportunity to influence the policy and encourage the COI to commit to an inspection and enforcement regime, so please respond.

Conclusions

- Advocacy effective at a low level
- Militancy can effect dramatic change at a cost
- Lobbying to change government policy is the most likely route to success
- Delivering Inclusive Websites is a gilt-edged opportunity to do just that



Advocacy is important background activity to keep awareness raised at grass-roots level

Militancy can effect dramatic change but at a cost

Lobbying is probably the most effective route – only government has the power to effect real change, if they are willing.

The COI consultation document is the ideal opportunity – the government's shown a more robust stance, we should encourage it.

Thank you.

Any questions or observations?

Dan Champion



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Thank you.