Improving Online Accessibility for the 'Silver Surfer'

texthelp®

Executive Summary

1 in 4 aged over 50 have faced problems accessing products and services online during lockdown. Despite this, over half (56%) plan to continue using online services as much as they did during lockdown.

Of those that experienced a problem almost a third (31%) **had trouble knowing what to do / click on**

18% of those between **55 and 59** found **icons and buttons on websites too small**

75+ had the most difficulty understanding online (16%)

Simpler visual layouts were the most requested feature to improve a website (63%)

Those aged **60-69** said that **broken links (53%) were the main issue they faced** accessing information and services online

20% of respondents wanted **bigger text**, and **22%** wanted words and instructions that were **easier to understand**

COVID-19 has changed the way that older people engage online, yet many are 'locked out' of critical services

The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown has changed many aspects of our lives, from work, to shopping, to socialising. Arguably, it has the most significant impact on the youngest and oldest in our society. Older people, who may have been hesitant to go online, have had no choice. Today, it is hard to navigate the physical world without successfully navigating the virtual world.

Despite the older population using online channels more regularly, our research has shown that it hasn't been easy. More than one in four aged over

With an aging population, and public and private companies predominantly 'digital-first', online accessibility matters

It is widely documented that the population of the UK is aging. ONS data shows that the UK will have an extra 7.5 million people aged 65 years and over by 2059. Older people are more likely to face problems with online services or information. This can be down to low vision or hearing loss as well as other health problems that make accessibility harder.

As technology becomes more sophisticated, there has also been a shift towards 'digital-first' strategies. To make sure that the older generation

> **❝ More than one in four aged over 50 have faced problems accessing products and services online during lockdown. ❞**

50 have faced problems accessing products and services online during lockdown. Without tackling this problem of online accessibility, we risk leaving these people 'locked out' of critical services.

are not locked-out of critical services, accessibility has to be prioritised. This means making sure that content is easy to understand, and the user experience is simple and enjoyable.

The over 50s and over 65s are increasingly buying products and accessing healthcare, financial services, and public services online

Internet usage among the older generation has been rapidly rising. ONS data shows that recent internet users over 75 has nearly doubled since 2013, from 29%, to 54% in 2020. This is supported by our own data looking at internet usage when accessing products and services online during the pandemic.

Over three-quarters, **(76%)** of respondents used online services for **healthcare.**

85% of respondents used online services for managing their **personal finances.**

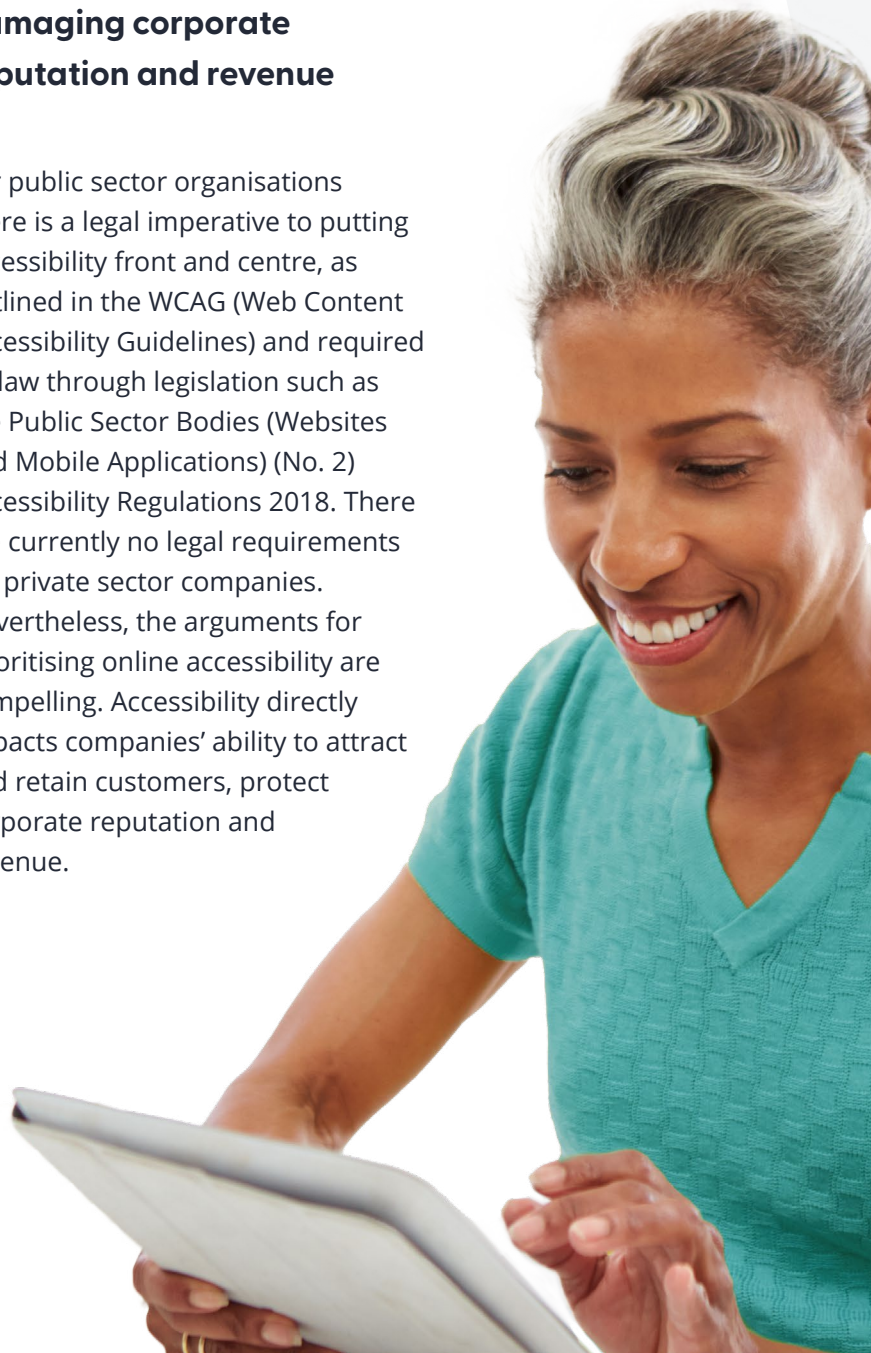**67%** used online channels for **public services**.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the number of respondents going online to buy **goods, such as groceries**, was highest at **95%**.

Online usage among this age group of over 50s and over 65s may drop off slightly after the pandemic. However, over half of respondents (56%) plan to

continue using online services as much as they did during lockdown. To keep users engaged, websites need to make sure that accessibility is a focus.

Organisations that don't prioritise online accessibility risk delivering a poor user experience, losing consumers, damaging corporate reputation and revenue

For public sector organisations there is a legal imperative to putting accessibility front and centre, as outlined in the WCAG (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines) and required by law through legislation such as the Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) (No. 2) Accessibility Regulations 2018. There are currently no legal requirements for private sector companies. Nevertheless, the arguments for prioritising online accessibility are compelling. Accessibility directly impacts companies' ability to attract and retain customers, protect corporate reputation and revenue.

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An Introduction

with Martin McKay – CEO and Founder, Texthelp

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, many older people were resistant to buying products and accessing services online. Time spent on devices – whether to work, order groceries, or speak to a doctor – has increased.

Research released from Ofcom found that UK adults spent an average of six hours and 25 minutes on their phones, TVs and laptops every day. This results in 45 hours of screen time each week, **almost half of their waking hours.**

Businesses and organisations have, understandably, increased their digital presence, moving more products and services online. For those that rely on laptops, mobile phones and tablets, this is good news. It makes our day-to-day lives that little bit easier. But increasingly, products and services are no longer available in bricks and mortar locations. This causes huge problems for the digitally illiterate.

aged over 65. At the same time, the ONS also revealed that 54% of over 50s - known as 'silver surfers' - are now using the internet at least once every three months.[1] This figure is up from 47% in 2019.

This is supported by our own research conducted by YouGov. We found that over half (56%) of respondents would continue to go online as much as they

66 **Increasingly, products and services are no longer available in bricks and mortar locations. This causes huge problems for the digitally illiterate.** 99

Take foreign exchange as an example. Many fintech companies offer considerably lower rates than high street banks but lack a physical presence. Consumers that want to access these services must register and exchange only online. Older people and those with disabilities can be locked out of these services if the business fails to make their services easy to access online.

The population of the UK is aging and that is aggravating this issue. ONS data from 2019 reveals that in 50 years time, we will have 7.5 million more people

had during lockdown. While this seems encouraging, our survey also revealed barriers that may make continued online access a struggle. One in four of those aged over 50 faced problems accessing online services when they wanted. The main problems included text size and visual layouts or designs that were hard to navigate (22% and 63% respectively). **Barriers like this could be the reason why almost half of the over 50 population is still not online.**

[1] April 2021, from a poll conducted by ONS as part of its Labour Force Survey

What does this mean for businesses and private sector organisations today?

Put simply, core products and services must be accessible, use straightforward language, and a user experience (UX) that's understandable. There is a clear moral case - with an aging population and online-only services.

There's an economic case as well. The highest-spending households, ranked by age are the 30-49 group (£666 a week). The 50-64 group have only slightly less spending power (£633), followed by the 65-74 group (£506) and tailing off at 75 plus (£336).

For the public sector, there's also a legal obligation. Local councils and GP practices, for example, must make their websites understandable to everyone - regardless of age, neurodiversity or health condition. The business case for the private sector is less clear, but in the end, it comes down to brand reputation. It would be seen as unacceptable today for employers to not have disabled access for employees or consumers. Yet, online accessibility is still not addressed at C-Suite level. Companies that fail to make their (online) shop window inviting, face a reputational and financial impact on their business.

This whitepaper sets out why accessibility matters in an increasingly digital-first economy.

It examines the implications of not putting accessibility front-and-centre of your business strategy. We explore this topic in a number of industries that are rapidly transitioning to online-first: from government to financial services. Lastly, we explore the practical steps of online accessibility and how to apply it to your organisation.

Martin McKay
CEO and Founder, Texthelp

The over 50s represent **more than 25 million people in the UK** population.

According to ONS, the **highest-spending households** include those aged 65-74.

But, almost half of the over 50 population is still not online. Accessibility barriers could be one of the major reasons why....

65-74

1 in 10 65-74 year olds (10.02%) wanted websites to have **words and instructions that are easier to understand**

75+

Almost 1 in 10 of those aged 75+ (9.84%) want websites to **include functionality that allows them to make text bigger**

Why It Matters

Few organisations have come out of the COVID-19 pandemic unchanged. Whether it's managing staff on furlough, maintaining company culture, or adapting the business model, it's not been easy.

Unsurprisingly, digital accessibility - the way in which the user experience (UX), readability and interactivity of a digital space is for a user - may not have been a key consideration during this time.

But now that the world is opening up, it's time for business leaders to prioritise this for all users. With the pandemic increasing how people engage with organisations online, **making sure your business is speaking clearly to users is vital.**

Imagine a world where everything is within your grasp, but just out of reach. You struggle to access a single piece of information, and every service you need is closed, every single day. For some, this has been the reality of the past year. COVID-19 has made the problem of accessibility more acute as services moved online and accessing information

According to ONS data, **the over 50s represent more than 25 million people in the UK population**. It's no small number to ignore. This age group also has a lot of spending power. ONS data from 2018 showed that the highest-spending households include those in the 65-74 group. To make it hard for this group to access your

> ❝ **Businesses – both in the public and private sector – expect users to do more digitally now than ever before.** ❞

became harder. Businesses – both in the public and private sector – expect users to do more digitally now than ever before. It's unsurprising therefore that some people are being left behind. That's why web accessibility is key.

The demand is in the data

Our research has found that the online habits of silver surfers are unlikely to change after COVID-19. **Only 3.6% said they will use online services less than they did during lockdown**. Based on this, metrics in terms of unique users, dwell time and online purchases seen during lockdown will likely stay the same even when restrictions have ended.

website can limit revenue from one of society's wealthiest groups.

Online accessibility for older generations is not just restricted to one specific region in the UK or age bracket. While the oldest users faced the most problems understanding online content, younger groups faced difficulties as well.

Those aged 55-59 were the largest group to report **button icons being too small (18%)**.

Those aged 60-69 reported that **broken links (53%) were the main issue.**

These findings should be alarming for businesses looking to keep existing users and present a good impression to prospective users. The presence of broken links and the size of buttons affects everyone's user experience – regardless of age.

The results also revealed some interesting regional findings. Londoners faced the most problems understanding content and navigating websites (13%), with those in Wales and the South facing the fewest challenges. Given that London is a region dominated by quick adoption of new technologies – such as contactless payments or on-demand transport services – the fact that older users in this region are the largest group with accessibility issues shows that **location isn't a huge factor in how brands present themselves online**. With an aging population, it's more than likely that these problems will only increase in the years to come.

Retaining those customers

Improving accessibility goes hand-in-hand with higher engagement. Look at indicators such as dwell time on your website or increased sales from returning users. Regardless of the industry, most websites are at the mercy of people finding your site via search engines. While you can invest heavily in SEO or adverts, **if your website isn't up to standard, users will just return to the search results** and try again.

This ease of choice means that first impressions are vital. If your brand sells a product or service, check-out highlights the importance of improved accessibility. If this step is slow, has confusing layouts, or poorly written instructions, customers will be turned off. If you're lucky, some may complete the transaction – but the chance of them returning again is low. The investment customers are willing to make in your company is there – data from the The Click-Away Pound Report found that

75% would pay more for a product from an accessible website, than buy the same product again from one that was less accessible.

Creating a frictionless process is the goal of accessibility. And with less friction, comes higher engagement, with more users spending time on the website and interacting with your business. Regardless of what's on offer, customers will be more likely to see the transaction through to the end, and return the next time they want to engage with the brand.

The importance of accessibility should not be underestimated. While our data has stressed the importance of improving websites for older generations, it also brings value for all audiences.

Being compliant with accessibility legislation

Given the popularity of online services post-lockdown, businesses should be doubling down on accessibility. But user numbers and dwell time are only one reason why online accessibility is important. There is a legal imperative to sit up and take note of the importance of digital accessibility. The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) are a set of rules aimed at improving

accessibility for users. The primary focus is to improve accessibility for people with disabilities. However, the guideline is designed to address accessibility challenges associated with specific devices, such as navigation and layout on mobile versus desktop.

Originally published in 1999, WCAG has been constantly updated. The latest version – WCAG 2.1 – released in 2018, is broken down into three different levels: A, AA and AAA. Each one outlines elements that websites must meet to be accessible. With each level, the criteria are more stringent but meeting each extra level makes your site accessible to more people. The criteria cover everything from technical information to on-page content, both of which affect how well users can access and understand your content

WCAG is used across the world and is a legal requirement in the UK public sector.

> **There is a legal imperative for public sector organisations to sit up and take note of the importance of digital accessibility.**

From 2018, all UK public sector organisations were required to make all online channels accessible. The guidelines inform the international standard for web accessibility and legislation such as the Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile

the user experience of your website will show in tangible terms, the company's commitment to digital inclusion. Users, more than ever before, value honesty from the brands they buy from and this commitment to inclusion will go a long way to achieving that.

66 Online accessibility isn't something the private sector can ignore. 99

Applications) (No. 2) Accessibility Regulations 2018. **This requires organisations to comply with WCAG 2.1 Level AA standards at a minimum**. Other nations, such as the USA, require both the public and private sector to comply with accessibility standards – having first focused on the public sector. The UK is likely to follow suit, meaning that private sector businesses that aren't prepared to improve their websites will eventually risk non-compliance

The brand impact

We have outlined the economic, moral and legal case for accessibility. **In this section we outline the reputational risks** of not addressing accessibility for your brand. If your brand is more accessible, you'll not just improve the experience of those with a disability or neurodiversity - you'll improve the 'pull' of your brand. Sharing the beliefs, ideals and values of consumers is powerful in building a positive brand image. Taking measures to improve

By prioritising user experience and accessibility, marketers can build a stand-out brand that becomes an industry leader. Your customers will recognise the time and effort invested in making the online experience as inclusive as possible. Increasing accessibility for older users will have positive knock-on benefits for the rest of your audience.

In contrast, those organisations that have failed on digital accessibility have suffered the consequences. Most notably, pizza giant **Domino's faced a lawsuit in 2019 for failing to give accessibility considerations to a blind user**. This just shows that even the most established brands can be at risk if their website is not up to standard.

Online accessibility is not something the private sector can ignore. While there are currently no legal requirements for the private sector, **failing to prioritise user experience and accessibility opens up your business to unnecessary risk.**

After all **COVID-19 restrictions** in the UK are lifted;

Only 3.6% of respondents said they will use online services less

Almost a third (30.93%) will continue to use online services for accessing healthcare

40% will continue to access information from their local authority online

Almost a third (31%) will continue to buy groceries online

Almost two thirds (64%) will continue to access banking or financial tools digitally

44% will continue to browse and buy lifestyle goods online

Industry Spotlights

Despite the challenges faced by the Silver surfers, **over half (56%) plan to continue using online services as much as they did during lockdown**. Accessibility problems must be addressed by every organisation, **across every industry**.

Here, we shine the light on accessibility in the **Finance, Health, Government and Retail sectors**. With special thanks to our friends and fellow accessibility advocates for their input and insights into this paper.

Citizens Online   monzo   NHS Hull University Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust   Patient Information Forum   Department for Work & Pensions

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Industry Spotlight

Financial Services

with **Sophie Koonin** – Monzo

The financial services sector has undergone a major shift over the last few years. An industry dominated by traditional, and often archaic processes, it has seen change from a number of challenger banks and financial technology companies (fintechs).

These brands are offering easier methods of managing money. **From online trading, to money management apps, the industry has changed dramatically.**

64% of older users plan to use online banking even after lockdown.

but **accessibility has rarely been a top priority**.

The old world of finance has been forced to work more with the challenger market. Since the introduction of the Payment Services Directive 2 (PSD2), traditional banking has seen digital innovation – including improvements to accessibility online.

The data from our research shows that using online banking was important to older generations during lockdown. During the pandemic,

85% of users accessed online services for **managing their personal finances**.

Over **40%** of respondents **viewed bank statements online** .

Nearly a third **(30%)** used online banking for **moving funds**.

Making things better

There is still work to be done. Sophie Koonin, Senior Web Engineer & Web Discipline Lead at Monzo Bank summarises the problems: "Many companies don't build accessible websites because a lot of the time they don't know how." Many sectors – especially financial services – have never had to consider accessibility online. It may be down to online banking being a relatively new process or traditional practices still being the default option,

Previously, online banking may have been uncomfortable for older generations, due to concerns about privacy or familiarity with the platform. However, **the closing of high street banks during lockdown has encouraged many to make the switch**.

> ❝ **Many companies don't build accessible websites because a lot of the time they don't know how.** ❞

Sophie's work shows how far the sector has come. She says: "We work very closely with design as part of our web development. **We want to come up with something that ticks all the boxes and makes sure we're at least AA compliant for WCAG.**" This process involves many different stages. "At Monzo, we're always doing our best to improve. We make sure our Quality Assurance (QA) testers go through every

"It's important to remember that there is no such thing as 'normal' and we need to stop approaching product design from that standpoint. Instead of approaching website development from what 'normal needs', we need to think about it from other points of view. How would this look to someone with poor internet, poor eyesight, or even a migraine, are considered when making updates to our website."

> ❝ **There is no such thing as 'normal' and we need to stop approaching product design from that standpoint.** ❞

page trying to find bugs. Do the screen readers read everything out? Do things happen in a sensible, logical order? Those things need to be done to make sure we're getting everything right.

"A lot of people just jump to low vision or disabilities when they think about accessibility. While that's a key area, and something we've worked on – **interviewing as many people as possible to know how usable our designs are** – the reality is far more complex. Even something as simple as a parent holding their child while viewing our site needs to be factored in as an accessibility challenge.

Balancing design and substance

Sophie emphasises the growing need to balance the visuals and design of a bank's website with the user experience and accessibility. "You can't just have all style and no substance," she says, "It may look very nice, but if people struggle to know what buttons to press then it's all for nothing: **a design isn't good if it isn't accessible**." She also highlights that old fashioned websites can also fall into this trap – often suffering from confusing layouts, or too much text.

The financial services sector needs to approach accessibility in two very different ways.

The first step is **focusing on readability** in the form of bank statements and web pages.

The second is **making sure user experience is simplified** to make managing money or moving finances as simple as possible.

Lessons to learn

With a huge proportion **(64%) of older people planning to use online banking even after lockdown** – the biggest response from all the sectors profiled – financial institutions should prioritise their accessibility online in order to maintain the engagement from this user base and avoid losing customers.

On a practical level, Sophie suggests financial services companies start small: "The best thing you can do

> ❝ **Creating an accessible website is quite straightforward if it's factored in at the start, but it's so much harder to do it after the fact.** ❞

Fortunately, from Sophie's point of view, there is an appetite to learn. "From experience, designers are keen to learn more about accessibility online. But now, there's not enough information out there to link design and development with accessibility. What this often means is that **accessibility often becomes a consideration after the website is designed**. Creating an accessible website is quite straightforward if it's factored in at the start, but it's so much harder to do it after the fact."

is progressive enhancement. **Design something that works for everyone first**. Then you can add in the nice bits. If you build the very basic stuff in a cross-compatible way – meaning that the accessibility is not reduced by using a phone or different browser – then you have a strong foundation to work from. Semantic HTML tags can also help as part of the design – meaning that even on the most basic browser, users can still understand."

Industry Spotlight

Healthcare

With **Sophie Randall** – Patient Information Forum
and **Bonnie Gray** – Hull University Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust

Without a doubt, the healthcare sector has faced immense challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. The increase in patient numbers, as well as the need to make sure people stay safe from transmission, has created a lot of pressure for both the NHS and private healthcare providers.

66 If you can't access information or don't understand it, it also leads to a mistrust of clinicians. 99

As the vaccine was rolled out, the healthcare sector needed to make sure everyone was aware of how to sign up, where they could go and when their appointment was.

Looking at the numbers

Sophie Randall, Director at the Patient Information Forum, highlights some of the problems with communicating in healthcare. "**Around five million adults find it really hard to find the relevant data in standard health information** while 1.7 million struggle to explain their feelings and symptoms over the phone and one million are unable to follow a letter from a GP surgery or hospital department. Additionally, we found that nine million people are unable to use digital tools unaided."

Even with these barriers, there is an appetite for using online healthcare services among patients. Our research found that during lockdown:

Over three-quarters **(76%)** of respondents **used online services for healthcare**.

As part of the public sector, healthcare sites have likely received this high level of engagement in part because of WCAG compliance.

Sophie highlights the importance of maintaining low barriers to entry for users. "**Lack of healthcare accessibility leads to increased health inequalities and a reduced ability to self-care**. If you can't access information or don't understand it, it also leads to a mistrust of clinicians." Sophie emphasises that this can lead to a rise in preventable ill health, as patients are unwilling to raise concerns with doctors.

This mistrust poses a potentially huge problem as users come out of lockdown.

Over a third **(36%)** of respondents to our survey revealed that they relied upon websites to **order prescriptions**.

13% used online services to **book appointments**.

If these statistics were representative of the wider aging population, it would account for **8.25 and 3.25 million users respectively**.

Medical jargon and complex designs

Improving accessibility is a challenge due to the complex language that surrounds medicine. While the technology itself may be effective, the actual comprehension of the language can prove to be the barrier.

trusted information reduces people's concerns about their health."

However, simplifying the language is only one part of improving accessibility in healthcare. Software also presents many challenges. Bonnie Gray, Digital Communications Manager at Hull University Teaching Hospitals NHS

> 66 **While the technology itself may be effective, the actual comprehension of the language can prove to be the barrier.** 99

Sophie references the problems met when using waiting room booking software. "People found it really hard to locate the waiting room because the medical language used to describe it was pulled directly from the hospital's appointment system in the back-end. So rather than being able to find a service, like children's eye care for example, the waiting room would be labelled something like 'paediatric ophthalmology'.

"**Language is a real barrier for people**," Sophie adds. "All public sector organisations should be implementing the accessible information standard, so that you're making sure people who've got particular needs related to hearing or sight loss, or other issues, are able to access your information. **Access to**

Trust highlights how the back-end of a website can have a huge impact on the user experience. "A lot of functionality can be lost from the overreliance on plugins. It may make something flashy from a design point of view, but have an impact on how easy it is to understand."

Improving the software element of websites requires improved consistency with the people that edit and update the content online. Bonnie says: "Consistency and clarity is a challenge. You may have a bunch of people trained to create content, but they can all approach things differently. Even if it's something as small as changing the font, colours or going outside the brand guidelines, **these inconsistencies really have an impact on how accessible content is**."

With the older population representing some of the most vulnerable people in the country, **these barriers can be a risk to their ongoing health and medical support.** Our research found:

Following lockdown easing, **30% still plan to use healthcare services online** despite the challenges being faced.

Upskilling older generations

For older people however, Sophie recognises additional challenges to improving digital access. "What we found from older people is that their barriers included skills. Although they had some training they felt they needed repeat practice. This affected their confidence to take part. There was a clear message from that group that older people need repeat support to use both the app and the care plan."

In improving the healthcare sector's approach to accessibility, Bonnie says: "It doesn't have to be a big thing. Something as simple as changing PDFs of documents into a HTML format can give the flexibility for users to increase the size and font of the content – improving accessibility. Those in the industry should focus on self-education. Read the WCAG, join groups, listen to podcasts and read the resources available. There is also a Government Accessibility Community email group which keeps people in the industry informed about best practice and the latest information."

Overcoming legacy issues

Sophie adds that the industry also needs to overcome some long-standing barriers. "Health and digital literacy is a systems issue and it's incumbent upon the public sector to provide accurate health information and services that

> ## 66 Those in the industry should focus on self-education. 99

There was also an issue around motivation. "Users valued the relationship with their doctor and they'd rather see them in person than via a digital platform. So, if they'd heard something negative about the app - such as it being difficult to download or understand - they might not bother even trying."

people can easily find, understand, and use to inform their decisions about health. We'd encourage all organisations to look at the impact of their digital tools in the broadest sense and make sure they are up to standard."

Industry Spotlight

Government

with **Craig Abbott** – Department for Work and Pensions
and **James Beecher** – Citizens Online

WCAG 2.1 is a requirement for the public sector. The demand for compliance suggests that these institutions will be far more adept at meeting the accessibility needs of their users.

Craig Abbott, Head of Accessibility at the Department for Work and Pensions, says the sector has come a long way in such a short time. "The public sector bodies accessibility regulations in 2018 created more awareness of it."

However, Craig also emphasises that more work needs to be done. "The standards are very verbose and technical which is daunting for people. The regulations are not really understood – people don't exactly understand what it means to be 'inaccessible'. They don't know how to test it aside from doing very simple things such as look at the colour contrast. **Industries want to be accessible but may not have the skills to understand what they need to do**."

The needs of older users

Craig's advice for accommodating the needs of older people is to think ahead and plan for conditions they may develop. "Accessibility is a really interesting thing for older people. The probability of developing a disability goes up the older you get, but users may not consider themselves to be disabled. They may not know they need things, but developers need to consider these problems ahead of time.

66 The standards are very verbose and technical which is daunting for people. 99

James Beecher, Research and Development Manager at Citizens Online agrees. "Lots of things have improved – particularly in the public sector. But **we still come across a lot of accessibility problems** including whether people have access to the assistive technology they need." This insight complements our findings about the use of public sector websites during lockdown by older generations.

Conditions such as problems hearing or poor eyesight can further heighten the accessibility issues these generations face."

According to our research, much of the content older users engaged with on public sector and local government websites was practical, such as:

The research showed that **67%** of respondents took advantage of **online sites for accessing public services**.

Confirming collection dates for bins (44%)

Checking COVID restrictions (18%)

Reviewing council tax (10%).

With less than one in five using local government websites for confirming COVID restrictions, it's clear that **older people are using government websites to access practical information relating to specific public services** rather than news or updates.

James agrees: "We found that those already online are doing more but there's not been as much of a shift from those who were offline before the pandemic as we might have expected. There are still a lot of people who haven't wanted to go online, and the vast majority of them have continued to avoid doing so."

Departmental challenges

Craig adds that accessibility online has its own unique challenges. "Each department will have its own level of accessibility and it may not be consistent across websites. **Users – not just older generations – expect their experience to be the same going from one department to another**, even expecting that their information will be transferred. You wouldn't expect this in other sectors – such as going from one online banking experience to another –

but within the local government and the public sector, people do."

As lockdown eases, **40%** of users **still plan to use local authority sites** to stay informed on developments.

Even with regulation encouraging these websites to be more accessible than other sectors, there is still work to be done. While compliance remains a factor, it does not mean that the site will be accessible. "A lot of people focus on WCAG and compliance, but that creates a situation where it just becomes a tick box exercise rather than it being about people," says Craig.

"The key word is inclusion. A lot of the complaints and backlash occur when you don't include people. Try to stop focusing on things being strictly compliant, and start focusing on making things work for people. People won't care if the website is compliant or not; they'll care if it's considered them as part of its development. If they feel included, they'll want to use the site more."

❝ The key word is inclusion. A lot of the complaints and backlash occur when you don't include people. ❞

" Lockdown really highlighted how many homes either didn't have appropriate devices or were forced to share a limited number. "

The wider context

James at Citizens Online emphasised that accessible design takes place in a wider context of issues affecting use of online services: "There's a range of things to think about to achieve digital inclusion.

"First: **do people have connectivity** – is the internet available, do they have appropriate devices and software? With the closures of libraries and increase in remote learning, lockdown really highlighted how many homes either didn't have appropriate devices or were forced to share a limited number.

"**Many people don't know about assistive technology** that can make the devices they do have easier to use, while there are costs associated with more bespoke tools."

"**Cost of data** is also an issue – even if users have devices and good connections, they may limit their use to keep costs down.
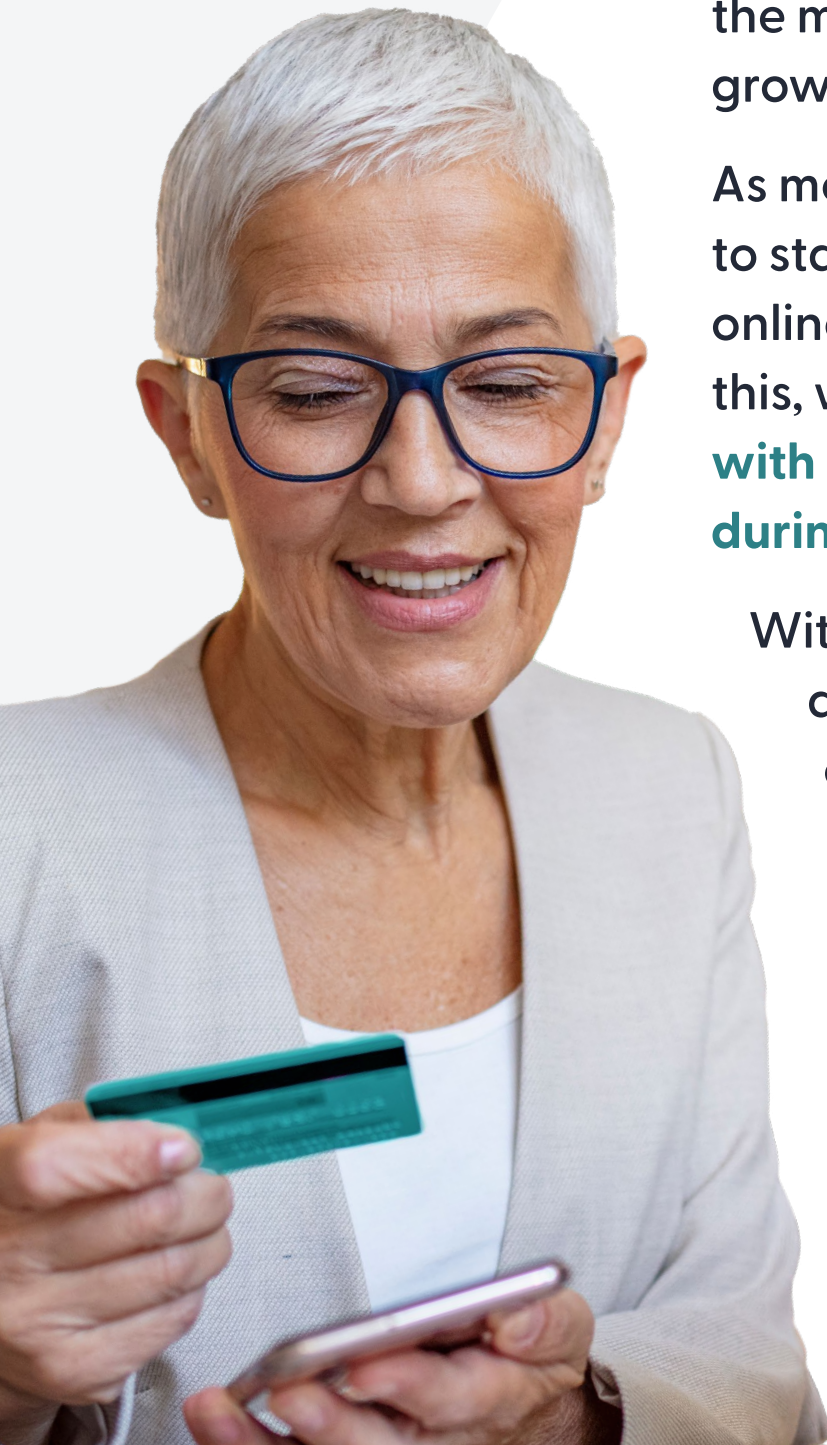
"**Privacy concerns and wider issues of trust** can also impact levels of digital engagement. Providing one-to-one support can help people develop their trust, awareness of the range of things they can do online, and build their digital skills."

Industry Spotlight

Retail

with **Ryan Graham** - Texthelp

Online retail, in most areas of the market, has seen impressive growth during lockdown.

As more consumers were forced to stay at home, shopping online grew. Our data supports this, with **95% of users engaging with online retail services during lockdown**.

With certain activities – such as restaurants, bars and community venues – being closed during the pandemic, older users had evidently opted for other methods of entertainment, with online retail being the vehicle to achieve this.

66 Retailers can forget that their website is a virtual storefront, and as with a physical store, impressions count. 99

Not all retail is equal

Of all areas of the retail market, **grocery shopping saw the biggest online boom** with **34%** of users saying this was their main online retail experience. This is unsurprising, when transmission risks in physical stores are considered, together with the need to lower the number of people in-store. For older users, the choice to socially isolate and still get groceries delivered drove more engagement on supermarket websites.

Clothes shopping was a distant second with **14%** of respondents engaging with these stores. This data is unsurprising, given the online experiences many retailers have.

Ryan Graham, CTO at Texthelp, explains how the landscape has shifted: "Competition is high, and users have the freedom to choose who and where they shop. Most will discover these online stores through a search engine. **If the site isn't up to scratch, it's easy for them to look for an alternative**."

Leaving things in the basket

Accessibility for online retailers should be higher on the agenda than other industries - the shift towards online purchases due to lockdown has led many brands to examine how they communicate online. Ryan identifies the consequences for those that don't prioritise it. "**Most customers that face accessibility problems are likely to give up on the transaction**. This isn't just because the website is difficult to navigate, but also because users will have less trust that their order will actually be fulfilled. If the website doesn't look reliable, it's easy to assume that the back-end processing is the same."

The rise of online retail among older users will have a major part to play in driving customer retention and loyalty. "Retailers can forget that their website is a virtual storefront, and as with a physical store, impressions count. Customers who enter and feel confused or isolated, are not going to return. In the same way, your online store needs to be inviting, easy to navigate and attractive to be in. With more people opting for online retail, most of your customer interaction will now be focused online."

Online shopping post-lockdown

The popularity of online retail for those over 50 is set to continue post-lockdown.

Our data found that **31%** of users were planning to keep on using the internet for **grocery shopping**

while **44%** plan to use other online retail services such as **clothing and homewares**.

fluctuations." Ryan comments. "This sector also has a lot of people working at the same time to update and refresh various listings online. Even with the best training, there are bound to be mistakes and errors in the process. It's one of the reasons why **a digital solution to auditing your website is important.** Programmes can make sure things are consistent even with a wide range of users inputting into the website on a regular basis."

Ryan advises that auditing websites through the use of technology not only saves time, but also ensures consistency

> ❝ **Programmes can make sure things are consistent even with a wide range of users inputting into the website on a regular basis.** ❞

While retail, with the exception of groceries, scored low in the research, **it's clear that older users have grown used to online shopping**. The data suggests they feel more comfortable with the process and plan to continue using these services in the future.

"Retailers can struggle due to the structure of their site. **Retailers will generally have thousands of unique pages** with product and pricing information, all feeding into the back-end and informing on stock

across the website. "It's not only frustrating for users if the pages don't follow a similar pattern, but it also doesn't help your brand image. **If you want people to have a positive experience, they need to feel like everything is uniform and makes logical sense**. That's the value that a tech-solution can bring."

A Blueprint for Making your Online Channels Accessible

It's clear that digital accessibility should be a focus for all sectors. Not just for older users, but as best practice for everyone. However, it can be a challenge to know where to start.

We at Texthelp were not alone in this journey and had to recognise the issues present in our platforms. We took it upon ourselves to review what needed improving on our own website and have condensed this experience into a guide for making online channels accessible for everyone.

Our challenge

At the start of 2020, our working group decided that it was time to build a new website. **We had outgrown our site structure**. Some of our best content had become hard to find and we also had a lot of redundant pages. It's not an uncommon problem for lots of businesses across the globe. But it was far from ideal.

As a technology leader, it's important to make the information we share easily accessible for both current and prospective consumers. **Traffic to our site had increased by over 120% since the COVID pandemic**, so we had to be sure we were meeting the needs of all our users.

Our goal was to create a more efficient website, giving useful information to our audiences with a better experience. Our first step was to identify any big problems, areas for improvement and critical accessibility issues. From addressing this challenge, we identified some key steps that any brand can adopt.

Starting with the regulation

WCAG was the obvious place to start on improving the website. Addressing the regulation and aiming to get each page up to an **AA** or **AAA** standard is a demanding task, but it makes sure that accessibility is not only built into your website, but also that the website is compliant.

However, getting a website up to standard is one thing, maintaining it is another. Most company websites will evolve over time, likely having many content creators inputting various updates. It's important that once things are WCAG compliant, that they stay that way.

Monthly reviews, ideally with the help of an audit tool that limits human errors are a must. In our case, **we used our own ReachDeck auditor tool, recording WCAG errors, jargon words, readability and reading age**.

However, there is a fine balance between relying on technology and ignoring errors. It can be tempting to use third party overlays or 'widgets' to help automate and solve accessibility issues.

66 Getting a website up to standard is one thing, maintaining it is another. 99

But trusting in an automated approach without having human interaction has its risks. Technology may identify problems, but the nuances of language is something it is not always able

mind. In our case, we recognised that the social scheduling tool we used did not allow us to optimise images for all audiences. Fortunately, many platforms are recognising that accessibility is

> ❝ **Whatever technology solution is used, there needs to be human involvement.** ❞

to process. That's why whatever technology solution is used, there needs to be human involvement to verify and action the automated suggestions.

It's more than just a website

Digital accessibility goes beyond just making sure that your website is easy to navigate and understand. Looking at your social media profiles also needs to be a focus.

Something as simple as adding alt text to an image can make a huge difference for accessibility; allowing users to read a description of the image for added clarity. Social platforms are a common way for individuals to be introduced to a brand, so making sure your profiles are accessible will not only increase engagement but also improve click through to the main site.

If you're working with a social scheduling platform, it may be time to consider whether it is built with accessibility in

an important part of the UX and are making sure their offering accounts for options such as including alt text.

Beyond the scheduling software, it's important to consider the format of the posts themselves. **Any images we add to social posts use adequate colour contrast between text and backgrounds, and simpler layout with padding between text and visual elements**. This means that those with colour vision deficiencies, learning difficulties and low vision can still access our content. Combining this with easy to understand copy for the posts, as well as capitalising each word of a hashtag for extra visibility, will make your social content understandable to a wider audience.

Going multimedia

Your digital presence is more than just words - most websites and brands will have a range of different ways to communicate their messages. As such, videos and podcasts also need to have the same consideration as your website and social platforms.

Get everyone on board

Improving accessibility should not be a one-person job. Every employee should approach content with the same attitude. Staff training should include Accessibility and Readability guides as standard, meaning that no matter who is sharing content, the information

> **" Improving accessibility should not be a one-person job. Every employee should approach content with the same attitude. "**

Videos should include a transcript and closed captions on the recording. Technology can help with this process but, as before, automation can be inaccurate. Investing a bit more time into drafting the closed captions yourself gives people with hearing difficulties a better understanding – and a better impression – of the business.

Podcasts can be a bit harder, but including a transcript is an effective way to improve accessibility for this medium. In fact, **transcripts of audio also have a secondary effect on improving SEO**. By writing out the conversation, it will create more search terms for Google to identify on its results.

is relayed consistently. From our experience, this increased focus on staff training - including the onboarding process - has given everyone the same level of understanding, and significantly improved consistency.

It's important to also remember that training isn't static. Guidelines, best practices and even industry standards will change with time. As a result, your training should evolve in line with these changes. The overall goal will be to have every employee maintaining consistency with users and a more positive digital experience for everyone.

Maintaining a standard

Rather than becoming an occasional overhaul every few years, digital accessibility should be built into regular reviews and audits of the company. New products, initiatives or activities should follow this same process, maintaining consistency and building a strong reputation for your brand. **Everything from the instructions in a product, to a new microsite for the business, needs to have accessibility in mind**.

In the end, it goes back to remembering the readers engaging with your content. **By reducing long sentences and jargon, your company will be easier to understand**. Everything you communicate as a company – including emails, supporting articles and even board reports – needs to be easy to read. This will embed readability into the heart of the company.

Final thoughts

We've always known how important accessibility and readability are, especially when it comes to our website and marketing communications. However, we may not always have brought the whole organisation along with us. Accessibility and readability are not just contained to our website - they transcend everything that we produce.

We know that our website is only one channel through which we talk with our customers. **So it's just as important**

that our emails, our training materials, tech support, PR, videos and every other piece of communication follows best practice guidelines too.

This is just the start of our story. We'll be rolling out our own readability editing tool, the ReachDeck Editor, across the whole Texthelp Group. We'll also be going back over all of our web content and **running it through the ReachDeck Editor to check for readability, jargon and long sentences**. We started a big cultural shift across the organisation and, as a business, we've also formally announced our commitment to accessibility and inclusion. We have a roadmap of standards and improvements that we're committed to as the whole Texthelp Group grows and evolves into the future.

Our work understanding how accessibility issues affect older generations and different sectors is part of our commitment.

By knowing the individual challenges different groups face, we will be better able to advise, guide and improve accessibility for everyone.

Research Methodology

The findings in this whitepaper were gathered using an **online interview process**. Members of the YouGov Plc UK panel were invited to participate by YouGov in partnership with Texthelp. The survey, conducted in April 2021, sourced responses from 2,031 individuals aged 50 and over.

Of the respondents:
387 were aged between **50 and 54**, **347** were aged between **55 and 59**, **299** were aged between **60 and 64**, **584** were aged between **65 and 74** and **450** were **75 and over**. Respondents were all from the UK.

The online interview process involved sending an email invite to panellists selected at random from the base sample. The email invites them to take part in a survey and provides a generic survey link. Once a panel member clicks on the link they are sent to the survey that they are most required for, according to the sample definition and quotas.

Invitations to surveys don't expire and respondents can be sent to any available survey. The responding sample is weighted to the profile of the sample definition to provide a representative reporting sample. The profile is normally derived from census data or, if not available from the census, from industry accepted data.