Thanks a lot, Julie. Hello. A very warm welcome from everyone at

Kent to what is now our third Annual Digital Accessibility Conference.

My name is Ben Watson,

and I'm responsible for all things accessibility at the University of Kent,

and with me today is James Church,

who is Kent County Council's resident digital accessibility expert.

Cheers, Ben. Really great to be here today,

and I'm really looking forward to it.

I hope you all are as well.

It's really surreal for me that we've

actually been doing these events now for three years already.

I hope to see a lot of

familiar faces that went to the first and second conference that we did.

It almost feels like the first one was in a different time altogether now,

because that was hosted in person.

Who remembers those conferences?

Where over 200 people turned up.

Even last year, at our second conference,

we had to make it virtual at the last minute due to COVID,

but we still had more than 2,000 people turn up,

which is really just staggering.

It shows the great levels of

interest and support that the subject gets within the community,

and I think ultimately,

just how committed we all are to

making our services better for those people that use them.

Yeah, it's brilliant. There's so many familiar faces,

who we've come to know and love over the years.

We really hope you enjoy today's sessions.

We've got a really good lineup, I think.

To start with, just wanted to give you a quick introduction to why we're all here today.

We all know that accessibility,

you know, why it's so important,

but we, particularly in Kent,

we found working collaboration and partnership with

other individuals and organization benefits all of us.

We hope to demonstrate that to you today,

as well as welcome you into the Kent community.

I think, to get into the mindset of a partnership working,

there needs to be some sort of outside realization and acceptance

from all parties that we're all here for the same reasons.

No matter how big or small your organization is,

we all want to do the right thing,

we all want to help our users and to

some extent, we also want to comply with the regulations,

but not stop there, we want to make sure that

everybody can use services equally and fairly.

I think, with that in mind,

Kent's approach to tackling accessibility has always been to collaborate

and to produce the resources that we can all share and use within the community,

as well as to share that knowledge and experience of trying things,

making mistakes, seeing where things work well,

and embedding that good practice.

We've done all of that within Kent over the last few years

with the support of Kent Connects,

which is our local public sector IT partnership,

and, as I'm sure you know, your host today.

We know from having done this for a few years

now, the benefits are really clear.

There's reduced workload because we're able to share what we're doing.

Definitely a safety in numbers.

I remember really in the early days it felt quite lonely

working out if your accessibility statement

was in the right kind of order, in the right format.

To generate assurance that we're moving forwards and

dealing with the regulations appropriately,

and just covering that little bit more ground that we

can do when we work together and share good practice.

I've gone a bit off script here,

but accessibility, I don't think anyone of us are in competition with each other.

If we can make things better for anyone across the public sector,

then that's the thing worth doing.

I think that's why it's such a lovely sector to work in because everybody is doing

this completely altruistically. But let's not mess.