It's great to be back.

I was one of the original organizers of

the Kent Digital Accessibility Conference way back in 2019,

back when I used to work for Kent County Council and Kent Connects.

I can't believe it's been two years already,

and we're now on the third one of these conferences.

Since I left KCC,

since I moved along,

we've been doing quite a lot of different things.

I work with the central government now.

I started my own company along with others called All Able,

in which we do quite a lot of accessibility consultancy work.

One of the things that we've been doing over the last few months is working

with a visual impairment charity called the Thomas Pocklington Trust,

looking at the student support around

accessibility in further education institutes,

so quite specifically colleges.

I'm really pleased that my talk is coming in after Dan's now

because I think we've got many of

the same kind of results coming out for further education,

as Dan has been seeing in HE as well.

To tell you a little bit about the research,

what have we been doing,

it's still ongoing.

It's still a piece we're working on.

The aim is to get information that we

can then put back into white paper suggestions for governments.

The aims were to look at how do blind and partially sighted students access

teaching, learning, and assessment resources,

and assistive technology while studying in FE colleges,

what are the barriers for accessing learning and

information materials and assistive technologies in FE colleges,

and what are some areas for good practice in FE colleges,

and where are they found.

What have we done so far?

As I've said, this research is still ongoing.

It's still in the early stages.

What I want to talk to you about today is

some indicative findings that we've already seen through a few of the actions.

Once again, for many of you who know me previously,

I'm quite well-known for complaining about

accessibility statements under the new regulations.

As Dan said, with his very succinct,

very well done explanation of the new accessibility regulations,

I say new, particularly as Dan pointed out,

they've been around since 2018.

We had a two-year grace period.

That was nine months ago,

so people have had two years and nine months to write an accessibility statement.

I'm going to talk to you about how well some of the colleges have

done on that in a minute because once again,

I've looked at 427 colleges,

and whether they've got immediate accessibility information

available on their websites.

We've done a little bit of mystery shopper engagement,

which if we've got any people who work for

colleges in the audience might be surprised to learn.

We've been trying to see what the initial engagements

are from colleges when contacted by a vision impaired student,

asking who to talk to about student support,

who's the SENCO?

Do they have any advice on accessibility in terms of their platforms?

What VLE are they using?

All questions that we've checked with students and can

reasonably expect people to be asking about whether they

know they're going to be able to use the platforms if they go there,

especially now, as Dan said,

where everything is virtual.

We've been doing some research on the virtual learning environment,

market coverage, which is really interesting, I'm sure.

I know there's a couple of people in the audience who will find that quite interesting.

We've launched a survey to get further engagement with sending

an ALS staff to get more good examples of what's going on,

how people are dealing with the change to accessibility requirements,

how people are supporting students or not, in some cases,

and what problems and challenges some of these staff have faced with this big push,

and has the level of support for them been there to enable these students correctly.

Time to get onto me complaining about statements because that's

the bit that I'm sure everyone waits for.

Once again, I'm going to highlight the fact that colleges, as a group,

have been, I would say, relatively left behind in terms

of compliance when it comes to delivering accessibility statements.

I've been sitting on my high horse and judging

accessibility statements of people for a good couple of years now,

and I've come up with a relatively robust framework to judge that based on compliance

against the regulation requirements and the standards

which the Central Digital and Data Office, part of Cabinet Office,

have laid down.

Sadly, over the last two years,

colleges have fallen behind time and time again in terms of compliance.

Local government and higher education are two of the

best-performing with nearly 50 percent,

or I think in local government's case,

more than 50 percent of all organizations

having a good or compliance statement, which is fantastic.

But the results that I've got here show a very different story for colleges.

Even right back at the beginning, 2019,

a vast majority of the colleges that I looked at,

I think it's around 220 colleges,

had no information on their website at all about accessibility,

about whether students who were applying might have issues with their application forms,

with their prospectuses not being in accessible format,

no information whatsoever.

A significant amount of poor information there and very little moving towards

what is now expected as a minimum standard

when it comes to providing accessibility information.

Sadly, that trend is slow in moving.

Up to the latest results, which come from April this year,

again, we have seen a drop in no information whatsoever,

down to around 125 now.

A massive increase in poor information,

which is a real struggle for me because it concerns

me that people aren't getting the support they need to

understand what information they need to provide to students, to staff.

So they're going into this

without the level of knowledge required to provide

this information in a sensible way.

Although, I will also comment that we are slowly seeing

rises in the good and compliance statements as well.

We are getting there, but it is a slow process.

I really, really encourage,

if there are any people working for colleges in the audience

and you haven't got an accessibility statement,

it's been two years and nine months to write one document.

I think you can probably get there by now.

Complaining about statements over,

now to talk about some of the other really, really interesting findings

that we've been receiving out of some of

the mystery shopper and other engagements we've been having with many colleges.

The mystery shopper stuff, as I mentioned very briefly a minute ago,

is really all about us finding out what the,

as true as possible,

initial engagement with a VI student asking questions,

asking for support, asking for the right contact,

what that is like when they contact a college.

We've done this with 382 colleges so far,

so there's a good chance that if you work for a college, you're in here.

It's not all, but we're getting there.

Some really, really, for me, quite concerning results,

one of the biggest things I think is really saddening actually

is 175 of these colleges that we contacted, as a visually impaired student,

asking who the student support contact is,

and asking a couple of questions about the platforms,

175 of these colleges did not respond at all to this VI user,

which is really quite shocking because the way in which we

engage was through generic mailbox contacts,

their main marketing contact,

through their form on their online website.

This is really, really shocking.

If this is the main route that you're suggesting

general inquiries come through and someone's needing to

getting in touch about your college,

they use your web form,

and 175, around half of the organizations

that we contacted, just didn't even respond.

That is a really shocking result and something

that we're going to be looking into more as to why this has

occurred because that's really, really

worrying that people can't even get through the first hurdle.

We got a number of other responses, which, again,

were somewhat disheartening.

Fifteen organizations said, 'Oh, yes, here we are.

We forwarded it onto the appropriate contact in student support.'

Again, no further follow-up from that,

and 39 just would not answer in writing at all.

A very simple question, who is the SENCO,

what VLE platform are you using?

Is it going to work with the AT that I use?

Would not answer in writing at all,

which I think leads on nicely to some of the stuff I've got on

the left-hand side of the screen about some of

the other feelings we were getting from some of the responses.

One of those being suspicion.

I think a lot of people were nervous in putting some of this down in writing.

I don't know why that would be, maybe it's because they're admitting to not

having the levels of support that would be expected or in

some cases not meeting the regulation requirements.

The oddest ones is we had a few SENCOs,

which are the staff members responsible for special educational needs support,

special educational needs support coordinators,

provide it back to the VI user

who specified that they only use a screen reader.

They provided back screenshots saying,

'Oh, you can find all of this information

in our equalities policy on the website,

and you can find it here,' using screenshots with no alt texts whatsoever.

So there's some concern there that some people who've been given

the SENCO responsibility may not

be appropriately qualified to be dealing with some of these queries, if they're failing

some of the most basic things like sending a screen reader user

screenshots with no alternatives to actually be useful.

Several rude or poor professional etiquette engagements, which was

quite a shame when you see people talking to a prospective student in

a way that is not respectful, is quite demeaning.

That was quite hard to see as

well, and we're definitely going to be following up on some of this.

Many didn't know anything about the accessibility regulations when

further communication got down to that,

which, again, is really quite telling, I think,

of the situation wherein as shown by the accessibility statements,

research and a lack of initial individual engagement as well.

People didn't want to jump in and find out what were

the user's requirements

or they just pass people off, again, as I mentioned,

to equalities, policies and things on the website,

which, in my view again, was particularly dismissive,

given that many of these equalities policies have

one or two lines on accessibility that then say,

'We're going to make everything fully accessible for everybody.

No need to question further,

no need to ask whether it actually works for you or to

see any kind of true evidence of this on an individual level.'

It was all very dismissive, very, 'Oh, yes, we're all covered,'

rather than actually looking to address some of these challenges.

Some really, really interesting results of that

that we're going into a lot further for the final report,

and this is going to be backed up by stuff we see in the survey,

follow-up communications as well with some of these colleges.

So that's a really interesting piece.

On the other side of things,

some initial findings from the VLE atmosphere,

and I think this is particularly interesting, given what Dan has just

said as well about the kind of expectation

that everybody who's on the digital side of things,

everyone who's been working on VLEs and encouraging the use

of Teams and everything or whatever your other video platform is,

have been waiting for this, waiting for a culture shift where we're

now really encouraging remote working and everyone receiving the same digital experience.

In some ways, that is true,

but I think I absolutely agree with Dan

that there are far more challenges to it than that.

Some of the responses we received on VLE,

I don't know, surprisingly or unsurprisingly, Moodle.

Moodle was the most common platform that we heard back.

So 78 organizations are using Moodle,

50 organizations using Office 365,

Teams, SharePoint, stuff like that,

16 with Google Classroom, 12 for Blackboard,

12 for Canvas, and four single example outliers.

A few of the most interesting things out of this

is many of the organizations that we spoke

to responded that they've got multiple VLEs,

and this was really interesting when we looked into the reasons why.

Some have different VLEs,

depending on which course you're going to or which campus.

It can be assumed that this is because colleges have merged, split apart,

changing over platforms and things.

So there's a whole number of reasons why

organizations might be currently in the transition stage.

What was very interesting is that that transition stage at the moment

looks to be, in many cases, moving away

from those traditional VLEs that we've all come

to have interesting relationships in using,

moving towards more use of Office 365 and Google Classroom.

We've had many, many organizations come back and say that they are

moving away from their VLE and moving to

an Office 365 solution because of the interlinked ability to share files

through Teams to the SharePoint back-end and to do

all of their lecture recording and everything else.

It's a really interesting shift in the technology at the moment.

Another sad thing is a distinct lack of

any accessibility guidance on VLEs from respondents.

So when asked did they have any guidance that they can provide on whether

the VLE would work with a screen reader,

would work with any other assistive tech,

the ability to point to any guidance or any other support was quite lacking.

Probably I'm running over time,

so I'm sure I'm about to get the bell.

I was going to just say, George,

if you can bring it to a close, it's really fascinating.

No problem.

Sorry, I will wrap up.

We've got a few next steps going on,

more stuff on the survey.

Lots of student interviews coming up.

We've engaged with many colleges.

We've got some initial recommendations going back

early July and then full recommendations going back later on in the year.

If you want to get in touch, if you work for a college,

if you want to take part in the survey, there's the link,

or if you want to contact us directly, use info@allable.co.uk.

If you want to get in touch in any other way,

please feel free to contact myself,

to contact All Able, or to contact the Thomas Pocklington Trust,

who's been instrumental in helping us move forward with this research.

Okay. Thank you very much. Thanks for listening.

Thank you.