HOW TO DRAMATICALLY IMPROVE ACCESSIBILITY IN THREE MONTHS WITH A SMALL TEAM
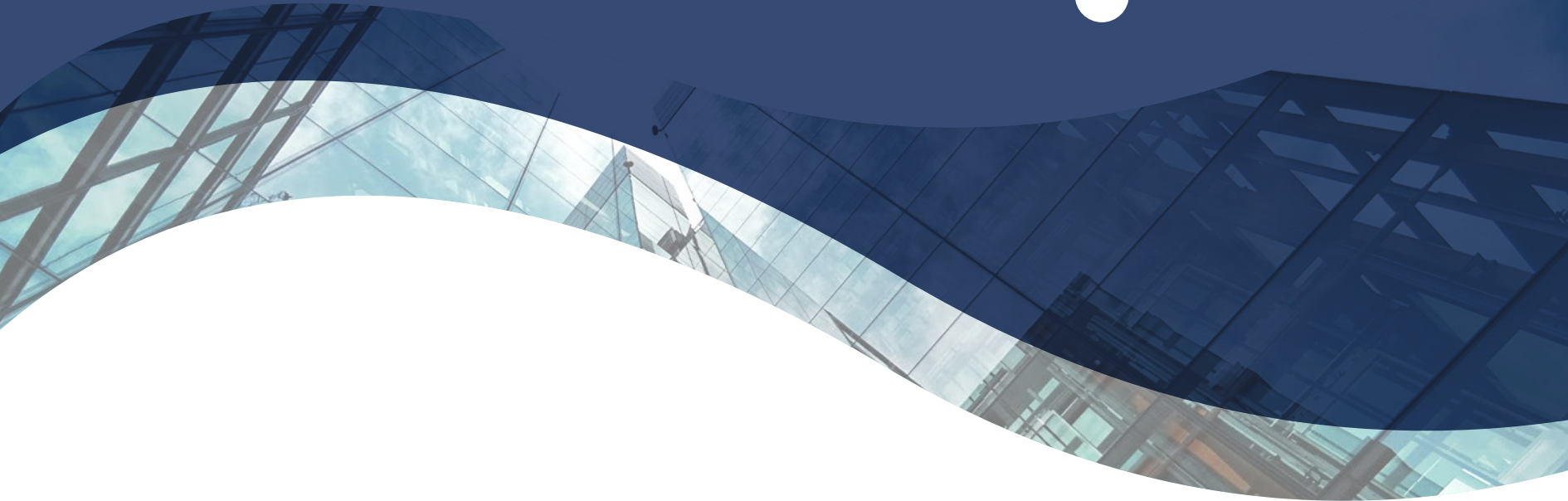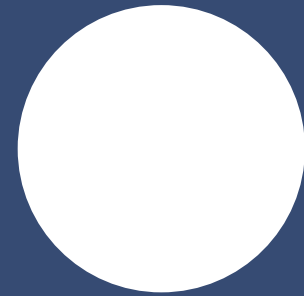
CHESTERFIELD
BOROUGH COUNCIL

TRANSFORMING ACCESSIBILITY

Chesterfield Borough Council is a local government authority based in Derbyshire in the United Kingdom. The council operates various digital channels that deliver critical information about services to local citizens; of these the main council website is the most important.

In preparation to meet the demands of the EU directive that requires compliance with accessibility regulations for all public sector websites by 22 September 2020, the digital team instigated a project to dramatically improve accessibility on the main council website. This has been on the council's "to do" list for a while, but other priorities had prevented progress.

With a small team of two and using Sitemorse for web accessibility testing, Chesterfield Borough Council has experienced spectacular results in just three months, jumping from position 399 to number six in Sitemorse's Quarterly INDEX; this benchmarks UK local government websites. This leap of 393 places reflects not only dramatic improvements in web accessibility but also other significant improvements in content quality, such as a reduction in broken links.

This client statement explores how Chesterfield's digital team has delivered this transformation through a combination of testing, measurement, a clear process and a "roll your sleeves up" attitude.

THE DIGITAL TEAM

The team managing the council's website accessibility includes two members of staff, these being a Digital Content Editor, who is responsible for content, and a web developer in the Council's ICT service, who looks after technical aspects.

The Digital Content Editor is currently seconded to the wider Digital Transformation programme that is using digital technology to improve services, enabled by introducing Salesforce, but also aims to deliver improvements to accessibility.

With European Union Directive 2016/2102/EU, creating a set of standards for EU public sector bodies, it is now a requirement for all public sector websites in the UK to be compliant with relevant accessibility standards by 22nd September 2020. With Chesterfield Borough Council now recognising that improving website accessibility was an urgent priority, the council decided to invest in software that could help improve accessibility. In particular, they were looking for a tool that could give them an accurate picture of their level of accessibility, identify the actions they needed to carry out, and could continue to track progress.

Following a period of desk research and various product demos, four solutions including Sitemorse and Siteimprove, were identified for final review. Following rigorous evaluation involving a scoring framework and an accompanying procurement process, Sitemorse was selected, scoring highly for both its range of capabilities but also value for money.

THE APPROACH

In improving accessibility, the team has taken a highly pragmatic approach; rather than spending time developing a detailed project plan, they have focused their time on actively fixing accessibility issues. The team have dedicated one day per week – known internally as "Accessibility Wednesday" – to work through a huge list of issues. They then track progress on a weekly basis as they reduce the number of items to fix.

This approach involves:

·   Identifying the list of issues that need to be worked through
·   Prioritising those which are going to have the most impact in reducing the list, for example a style sheet issue can result in multiple errors
·   Prioritising those the team know how to fix easily and leaving more complex issues for later.

USING SITEMORSE

Sitemorse has proved to be a critical tool in supporting the project. Initially the team used Sitemorse's automated accessibility testing through the entire site, identifying a daunting list of 150,000 accessibility issues that needed to be fixed. They wanted to get a sense of the total number of actions that needed to be carried out across the whole site.

Starting with this they then went and worked each Wednesday through the list. Because Sitemorse incorporates intelligent prioritisation in its automated assessment, it can identity those issues which are priority fixes that will have the most impact. It also identifies which issues relate to coding and which relate to content, making it easier to identify which fixes are best actioned by the different members of the team. Overall, the combination of prioritisation and role-based issues and the clear reporting of this, has helped the team make faster progress through the list.

Explanations and instructional videos within Sitemorse that provide context to what a particular issue means, why it is important and how to fix it have also helped. With the team sitting together as they work thought the list, it also meant they could easily confer to answer questions when an issue appeared less straightforward.

MAKING PROGRESS

As an issue on a page is solved, the team used Sitemorse's convenient SMART**VIEW** capability to instantly check whether a page has been fixed from within the browser. This helped to drive efficiency, by ensuring that the team did not have to revisit a page to create a fix.

By working on the priority actions identified by Sitemorse that will have the most impact, as well as working efficiently, the team were able to make significant progress each week. To track this progress, they continued to use Sitemorse to measure accessibility on a sample of 2,500 pages – the tangible improvement each week that Sitemorse's detailed reporting revealed was important for team motivation and momentum. Seeing accessibility get better and making tangible progress gave the team confidence that they were taking the right approach and helped them to keep going.

Because Sitemorse also tests for many other aspects of digital improvement and performance the team have also spent time fixing additional issues such as broken links and spelling mistakes.

RESULTS

After three months of "Accessibility Wednesdays" the team has been able to reduce their initial list of 150,000 errors to less than 500, which is highly impressive. Some of these remaining issues are dependent on other changes that need to be made but are all due to be fixed.

Chesterfield Borough Council's exceptional progress is shown through Sitemorse's INDEX benchmarking service that ranks organisations across different sectors by aggregating different aspects of testing. The INDEX has been operating since 2006, providing an unrivalled data set relating to website benchmarking stretching back for nearly 15 years at the time of writing. Chesterfield Borough Council has risen from being number 399 – a relatively poor showing – up to number six during just one quarter in the league tables for UK local authorities. This is the highest quarterly climb in three years and one of the highest since Sitemorse started benchmarking.

The team are very pleased to have made such progress and are happy to now have a site which is far more accessible for all visitors and will meet the requirements of the EU directive, with the bonus of vastly improved content.

There are also other beneficial outcomes, including a much greater awareness of how to improve digital accessibility across the team as well as respective knowledge of coding and content issues gained by working side by side. They can also see future improvements that can leverage the power of Sitemorse, for example ensuring there is strong SEO, and ensuring other sites and channels run by thecouncil also undergo similar improvements to accessibility.

AN IMPRESSIVE ACHIEVEMENT

Lawrence Shaw, Sitemorse CEO and Founder, commented "Congratulations to the digital team at Chesterfield Borough Council. They are true digital rockstars. This is an inspiring example of how a small team can make massive improvements to accessibility by taking a consistent approach and working hard. It's a myth that you need a huge team and budget to make a real difference. Their admirable 'just do it' mindset has reaped rewards and seen one of the largest leaps in our quarterly INDEX benchmarking tables that we've seen over the years."

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