

# Tunbridge Wells Borough Council

## Meeting accessibility regulations deadlines in the midst of a pandemic with Learning Pool Platform

### Background

How do you support organizations to meet accessibility regulations deadlines in the midst of a pandemic, which conversely restricts access to training? This was the challenge faced by Smarter Digital Services, a team from Tunbridge Wells Borough Council working with public-sector organizations across the UK. To ensure public-sector organizations could meet fixed digital accessibility targets on time and in compliance with a legal duty, they would need to work at pace to find a new training method.

### Meeting accessibility requirements

There are 333 local authorities and over 10,000 local parish, town, community, and neighborhood councils in England. These councils work hard to provide services that meet the needs of their residents and improve community well-being.

Each of these councils is accountable for ensuring its website and service details are accessible. This includes all documents

that are published on the website, such as council policies, neighborhood plans, public notices, etc.

Regulations regarding website and mobile app accessibility came into force for public-sector organizations on 23 September 2018, with a deadline to make all existing websites accessible by 23 September 2020, and all mobile apps compliant by 23 June 2021.



**333**

Local authorities



**10000**

Local councils

UK government guidance states that:

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“People may not have a choice when using a public-sector website or mobile app, so it’s important they work for everyone. Accessibility means more than putting things online. It means making your content and design clear and simple enough so that most people can use it without needing to adapt it, while supporting those who do need to adapt things.”

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For any council, large or small, this task is a daunting one.

Launched in 2013, Smarter Digital Services is on a mission to improve digital experiences by helping public-service organizations become digitally accessible. Since the government announcement in September 2018, the Tunbridge Wells-based team has been working with local authorities and public-sector teams to:



Raise awareness about the importance of digital accessibility.

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Provide training on how to create accessible content and documents.

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Conduct website audits to identify accessibility issues that need to be addressed.

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Draft and review website accessibility statements.

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Create accessible template documents and fix inaccessible documents.

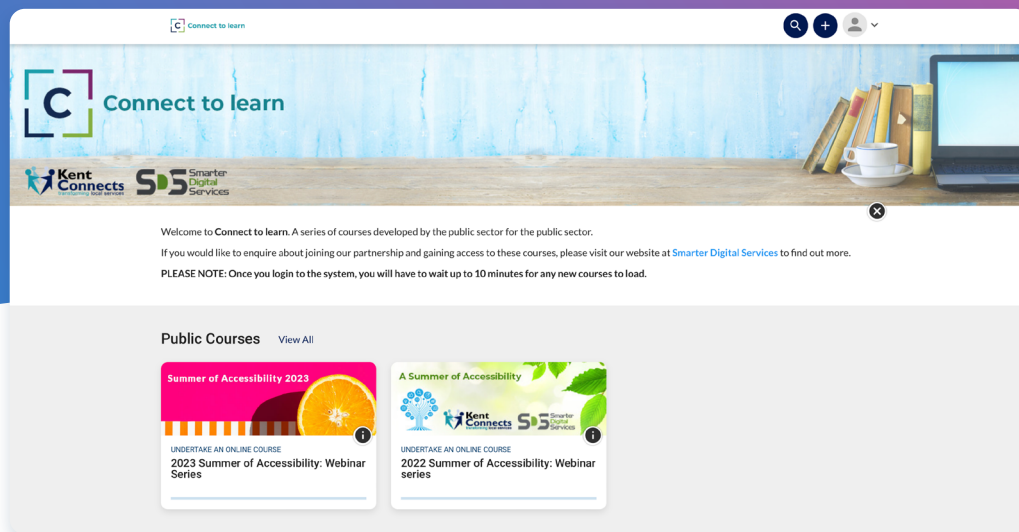
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Run surgery sessions to help teams finding digital accessibility challenging.

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In the midst of these engagements, however, COVID-19 reached the UK.



## Pivot!

The ability to pivot became the clarion call for businesses to thrive in the pandemic. COVID-19 restrictions meant that face-to-face training, which had formed the basis of Smarter Digital Services' offering, was no longer an option. Suddenly, they had to rapidly pivot and find a solution to deliver training remotely online.

The need to react quickly meant their initial solution was to provide narrated videos of training slides. These were well-received, and learners liked having materials to refer to as opposed to face-to-face training, which could be hard to recall after a while. With this feedback, combined with the pandemic having no apparent end date and the approaching accessibility regulations deadlines, Smarter Digital Services joined forces with Kent Connects and made the decision to progress its offering and develop a more interactive e-learning program.

## Solution

As its range of e-learning increased, it became apparent that to fully reach its potential, Smarter Digital Services required a more sophisticated collection of tools to provide online content delivery. It, therefore, began researching possible solutions.

The Learning Pool Platform offered the course the editing and building abilities that the partnership needed to develop its e-learning content. Smarter Digital Services also understood that personalized learning, gamification, and performance support would engage and motivate learners further.

Smarter Digital Services quickly expanded on the digital accessibility course, adding programs such as 'Writing Plain English' for the digital world and 'Creating Good Content' to its e-learning offering. It was also able to refine this content depending on the audience, so learners only accessed subjects relevant to them.

## Sharing the solution

It became apparent that not all the organizations working with Smarter Digital Services had their own Learning Management System (LMS). Having already achieved success with course creation in the Learning Pool Platform, Smarter Digital Services and Kent Connects consulted with them to explore a solution to this new challenge.

The solution was to utilize the Learning Pool Platform’s browser-based user interface. With this, Smarter Digital Services was able to set up a subscription system that gave parity of access to learners across all their partner organizations – allowing access to their learning on any device, at any time.

## Response

### Smarter Digital Services feedback

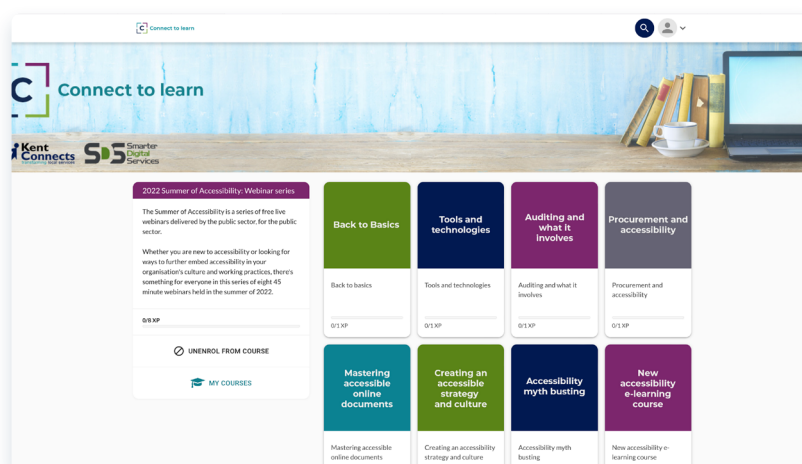
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“While many larger local authorities such as Kent County Council and Medway Council have adopted our courses for their own LMS, using Learning Pool Platform has meant that we have been able to share the courses with other organizations that do not have their platform. Users simply self-register to access the courses that we have made available to their organization. This has meant we have been able to share the courses with many more organizations, whatever their size”.

Catherine Bright  
Smarter Digital Services Manager

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## Learner feedback

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“This training is really good and the skills that we will be able to give to our colleagues will help enormously. Coupled with templates and wider support, we hope to make a difference for people who use our services”.



“I wasn’t sure the format would be as engaging or as effective as learning in a live environment but actually, I think it is better in a way, especially as you can repeat modules that aren’t as familiar to you”.

“I now feel 100% more confident to review/update our website taking what I have learned into account – though it won’t happen quite overnight!”.



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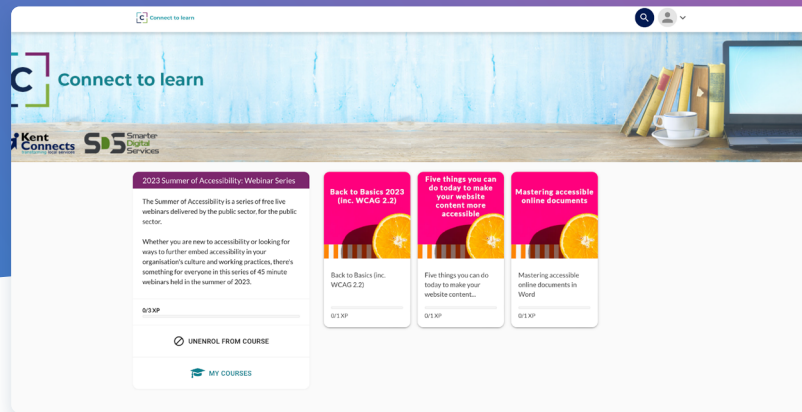
## Outcomes

### Raising awareness

To meet the government’s accessibility requirements, ‘public-sector bodies need to ensure their digital services can be used by as many people as possible, and that nobody is excluded’.

Echoing its accessibility mission for customers, Smarter Digital Services needed to raise awareness of the existence of the training and platform to all of its partners’ end users. To overcome a common learning content engagement barrier, a series of targeted email campaigns was sent out to potential learners, accessible for everyone.

Dynamic groups and self-registration processes then streamlined Smarter Digital Services’ ability to enrol end users who were partner organizations’ employees.



## Summer of Accessibility

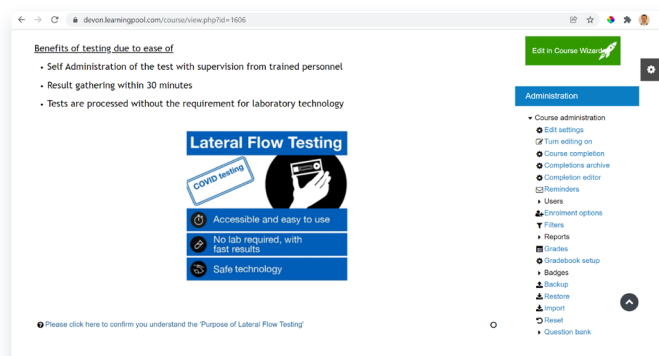
Following the lifting of pandemic restrictions, Smarter Digital Services can now run live sessions once again. However, insight from both organizations and learners has since shown that the success of the platform has led to a preference for hybrid training delivery.

Stretching its capabilities, Smarter Digital Services has found working with Learning Pool productive, as its responsive and adaptable approach allows the company to add items to its e-learning roadmap as needed.

Most recently, Smarter Digital Services and Kent Connects ran 'The Summer of Accessibility', which comprised an eight-week series of free 45-minute webinars for those new to accessibility implementation, and those looking to improve. Topics covered the following:

- Digital accessibility 'Back to Basics'.
- Accessibility tools and technologies.
- Accessibility auditing and what it involves.
- Procurement and accessibility.
- Mastering accessible online documents.
- Creating an accessibility strategy and culture.
- Accessibility myth-busting.
- New accessibility e-learning course.

In total, **783 people** attended the webinars, with an average of **90 people per session**. Attendees came from **130 different public-sector organizations**, plus various charitable/third-sector organizations across the UK.



## Attendee feedback

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“I’ve only just started working in Local Authority and this was a perfect intro for me”.

“Really engaging and gave me a positive feeling for moving forward a strategy for our organization”.

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## Wider impacts

In addition, the Smarter Digital Services team has seen:

- Cost, carbon, and time savings from moving from delivering F2F training sessions to digital, as a result of fewer journeys to partner organizations – 2022 saw a 94% cost reduction on mileage and public transport compared to pre-pandemic.
- Wider audience reach. Previously, partners were restricted by distance to the Southeast; now, however, Smarter Digital Services has new partners in Derbyshire, Merseyside and South Devon – two new partners and three new clients.
- The digital accessibility course is being used by 30 organizations, either on their own LMS or through Learning Pool Platform, and some organizations have made the course mandatory for all staff.

Now the regulations are fully in effect, embedding a culture of accessibility and improving customer experience continue to be ongoing areas of focus for Smarter Digital Services. Digital platforms are evolving and updating constantly, so public-sector organizations need to prioritize accessibility to maintain compliance with the legislation.

The ultimate beneficiaries of digital accessibility and the collaboration between Smarter Digital Services, Kent Connects and local authorities are the public accessing council services online – this is where the impact of this work is truly realized.

Moving forward, Smarter Digital Services is due to expand on this success and work with more public-sector partners, such as housing associations and local police forces. It will also deliver more training including ‘cyber security and accessible social media’, while sharing resources with other local authorities.

The future is looking exciting – and full of potential!

