Briefing: Opportunity for Everyone: AI for Accessibility

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To demonstrate how AI can provide immediate, tangible benefits in accessibility, fostering independence, inclusion, and dignity for individuals with disabilities and older adults.

The Case for Action

Artificial intelligence (AI) represents not just a technological advancement but also a significant opportunity to enhance the independence and dignity of millions of individuals. In the UK, over 14 million people live with a disability or a long-term condition, and this number is expected to increase sharply due to an ageing population. When designed with inclusivity in mind, AI can help individuals manage their daily routines, access essential services, and participate fully in society.

The government's AI Opportunities Action Plan presents an ambitious agenda for the future; however, it does not specifically address issues related to accessibility, disability, or ageing. By incorporating these priorities into the UK's AI strategy, the government can enhance domestic implementation and position the UK as a global leader in inclusive innovation. This approach would demonstrate that economic growth, fairness, and leadership can progress together.

The Opportunity

AI can enhance independence and inclusion in four keyways:

1. **For visually impaired individuals:** AI can convert digital content and physical environments into accessible formats.
2. **For those with cognitive conditions (such as dementia and ADHD):** AI can provide reminders, help manage routines, and offer prompts to aid daily living.
3. **For people with dyslexia and learning disabilities:** AI-driven reading and transcription tools can improve access to education and employment opportunities.
4. **For the 7 million adults living alone:** AI can help reduce feelings of isolation by providing companionship, safety alerts, and emergency support.

Current gaps in the UK's AI policy discussions and investment priorities include a lack of focus on accessibility. Public procurement processes do not currently mandate inclusive AI design standards. Additionally, there is no structured program in place to pilot and evaluate AI accessibility solutions on a large scale.

Policy Gaps and Missed Opportunities

1. **Omission in National Strategy**

   - The **AI Opportunities Action Plan** outlines 50 recommendations, emphasising economic growth, AI adoption, and public services, but it **does not explicitly mention** "accessibility," "disability," or "ageing" [1]

     1. [Burges Salmon+11GOV.UK+11GOV.UK+11](#)
     2. [Ada Lovelace Institute+4Burges Salmon+4Shoosmiths+4](#)
     3. [edwincoe.com+11Ada Lovelace Institute+11How to Crack a Nut+11](#).
     4. [Burges SalmonThe Guardian](#)
     5. [The Guardian+1](#)

- The persistent omission of accessibility-related terms confirms the statement that accessibility is largely **absent** from UK AI policy discussions.

2. **Procurement Standards Not Inclusive by Default**
   - The action plan proposes a streamlined "scan → pilot → scale" procurement approach and touches on quality standards and interoperability, but it **does not mandate inclusive design** or accessibility-specific requirements for AI procurement. [2]
   - Additional guidance highlights improvements for AI procurement in local government yet still lacks **clear accessibility mandates.** [3]

3. **No Accessibility Focused Pilots or Evaluation Mechanism**
   - The Action Plan supports piloting AI across sectors, but **no pilots specifically focused on accessibility solutions are noted.** [4]
   - While some AI proofs of concept (e.g., in welfare services) have been run, these projects, and their discontinuation, highlight a gap in **sustained, structured accessibility initiatives.** [5]

Policy Proposals

1. Mandate Inclusive AI Standards in Public Procurement

- **Lever:** Government procurement frameworks.
- **Action:** Require all public sector AI contracts to demonstrate compliance with accessibility design standards.
- **Benefit:** Ensures that accessibility is incorporated into all new AI systems from the beginning, rather than being treated as an afterthought.
  - **Practical Example:** AI chatbots used in public services must be fully compatible with screen readers and voice input to support users with visual impairments.

2. Fund AI Accessibility Pilot Schemes

- **Lever:** Provide targeted funding for innovative pilot projects.
- **Action:** Initiate pilot schemes in healthcare, transportation, and social care to evaluate real-world applications of inclusive AI.
- **Benefit:** This approach will generate evidence of impact, such as improved independence, cost reductions, and increased user satisfaction, while also identifying scalable solutions for broader implementation.

3. Establish an Inclusive AI Innovation Hub

- **Lever:** Cross-sector coordination led by DSIT and partner departments.
- **Action:** Create a central hub that brings together government, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), charities, and academia.
- **Benefit:** This initiative will accelerate the development and adoption of inclusive AI solutions by sharing best practices, establishing standards, and supporting innovation.

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Calls to Action

Intended for UK Parliamentarians, Civil Service AI Policy Units, and Strategic Advisors overseeing national AI and procurement strategy.

- **Within 6 months:** Issue updated **procurement guidance** requiring all new government AI contracts to demonstrate compliance with inclusive design standards. *Outcome: Accessibility built into AI systems from the outset.*

- **Within 12 months:** Launch **three pilot schemes** in healthcare, transport, and social care to test inclusive AI applications. *Outcome: Evidence of impact through improved independence, reduced service costs, and higher user satisfaction.*

- **Within 18 months:** Establish and fund the **Inclusive AI Innovation Hub** with government, SMEs, charities, and academia. *Outcome: A permanent engine for setting standards, scaling pilots, and driving inclusive AI innovation.*

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