

## Press release – Smartbox Assistive Technology



Kellie has Cerebral Palsy and uses a mounted tablet with an eye tracking camera to generate speech. Kellie was one of the first people to try a new regional accent on her Grid Pad device, selecting a voice created with a Northern Irish accent, sounding more like her.

Kellie's quote: "My new local voice accent makes me blend in more."

### **Introducing new regional voices for people who use communication aids**

### **New regional accents in Grid AAC software are now available to help disabled people choose a voice that matches their region**

Disabled people across the UK and Ireland who use a computer to speak now have more choice to use a voice that matches their preferred accent, thanks to voice banking technology from Edinburgh-based company SpeakUnique, and Smartbox Assistive Technology.

The masculine and feminine accents are for adults who use Grid to speak and have been created following years of research and development to improve voice banking, using AI to create a new voice from audio recordings.

SpeakUnique, a company launched from a collaborate research project by the University of Edinburgh, have pioneered the use of voice banking, making it available for disabled people who use Grid software on a dedicated AAC (Augmentative or Alternative Communication) device or an iPad.

Over 1500 people donated their voice to help create new regional accents for those who do not have natural speech.

Smartbox and SpeakUnique have worked together to help raise awareness and improve voice banking services for people who need technology to speak, for example people diagnosed with Motor Neurone Disease (MND).

When people donate or bank their voice, they can opt-in to have their recording used to create new synthetic voices, based on a combination of regional accents.

Working with SpeakUnique, Smartbox have launched 30 new regional accents for people who are born with a disability or haven't had the chance to bank their own voice. Finally, people without natural speech will have the option to choose an accent that more closely matches their identity, sounding more like their family, friends, and community.

The new voices include accents that represent England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Previously, mainly English, or American accents have been available in speech generating apps, when people who use AAC select words, letters, or symbols using a touchscreen or eye tracking camera.

Andy Higgins uses Grid software with a personalised voice and works at Smartbox to help other people using their technology. He added:

*“Voices that are available for users of speech generating technology needn't be the robotic synthesised voices from the past. Today, the technology is readily available that allows every individual who has the need for a voice, to have the choice, and have control over the gender, tone, and regionalisation of their own unique voice.*

*A voice that is unique to them as yours is to you, a voice that identifies them with the community that they live in and is recognisable to others as their own voice. Today, we can create a voice from old recordings of your own voice or create voices from other people's voices when they have been donated.”*

Hannah Church, Customer Experience Director at Smartbox comments:

*“Our accents are an important part of who we are and what makes us feel connected to where we're from. We believe everyone should have the opportunity to have a unique voice and we are excited to now provide more choice for our customers.*

*Before partnering with SpeakUnique there were few voices available for many adults who want to be heard with their preferred accent. There is still so much more we want to do to improve the technology and options available for disabled people – this is just the first step, but a very important one.”*

Alice Smith, CEO of SpeakUnique added:

*“Our voice is an integral part of our identity and conveys a lot about who we are and where we're from. We're thrilled to launch this new range of synthetic voices which represent some of the diverse accents we hear across the UK.*

*This will allow disabled people who use communication software to have a wider choice of voices on their Smartbox device, empowering them to share the accent that more closely reflects their identity.*

*The voices were created thanks to voice 'donations' from people all over the UK – we'd like to thank these donors for their help, allowing us to offer this new technology.”*

End.

## Notes for editors

### About Smartbox

Smartbox create assistive technology that helps disabled people to communicate and be independent. Our flagship Grid AAC software has been designed to improve the lives of the thousands of people with disabilities, by giving them a voice so they can communicate with technology. Smartbox are a UK company with global reach, with people using their technology in over 40 countries and in multiple languages.

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# Smartbox

### About SpeakUnique

SpeakUnique develop state-of-the-art voice banking technology, allowing people to create high-quality, personalised synthetic voices. SpeakUnique are a multi-disciplinary team combining expertise in speech synthesis, human-computer interaction and speech and language therapy. The team have developed cutting-edge speech synthesis that is able to create personalised synthetic voices from only a short recording of an individual's own voice or designed based on a set of desired characteristics.

[www.speakunique.co.uk](http://www.speakunique.co.uk)



SpeakUnique