

Charities in Need: The State of Website Performance in the Third Sector

An audit of over 400
small and mid-sized
charities in the UK

2020

Foreword

Chris Flood, Content & Search Lead, Cancer Research UK,
Co-chair of the BIMA Charities Council

As we write this foreword in August 2020, it's safe to say that the charity sector has never faced a crisis like it's going through today.

Fundraising events across the country have been cancelled, income is down, and even the act of delivering core services has a level of complexity that would have been unthinkable 12 months ago.

The effect of coronavirus on the sector means that, especially for medium-sized charities, the digital experience is more important than ever. So it's all the more surprising how little research has been done into the quality of experience these charities deliver online.

This report from Pixeled Eggs, in partnership with ENGINE and the BIMA Charities Council, goes some way towards addressing this gap. Taking a sample of 411 charities, with incomes ranging from £100k to £10m, it contains a clear, robust and repeatable methodology to assess their usability, technology and platforms.

Above all, it demonstrates the need to look beyond technology choices in building outstanding digital experiences. And it highlights the importance of getting those experiences right, whatever your size.

The findings in this report are just one step on a longer journey charities will need to take to review their digital journeys in light of the pandemic. Some findings will be a wake up call to charities who have neglected digital in the past, and some findings will read as a pleasant surprise to those charities that have got it right.

But however charities use this report, our ultimate hope is that it can be a helpful and practical resource for a sector that has continued to do amazing work even under intense pressure. As part of the sector, and as members of the BIMA Charities Council, we look forward to using these findings to support charities in making the most of the opportunities in the coming weeks and months ahead.

Supporting Partners:

Methodology, Audit and Narrative by:

pixeledeggs

Design, Copy editing and Publishing by:

ENGINE

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Executive Summary

Why the charitable sector needs a digital revolution

Mark Iremonger, Chair of Pixeled Eggs and BIMA Charities Council Member

“If you can’t measure it, you can’t improve it.” It’s a much abused and overused quote often ascribed to Peter Drucker. Wherever it came from, it applies here.

There are about 170,000 registered charities in England and Wales who share about £77bn of income.* To put this in perspective, the automotive manufacturing industry has about 3,000 companies with a turnover of about £80bn.

The very biggest charities (1.3%) account for the vast majority (72%) of income. At the same time, the vast majority of charities (72%) have an income of less than £100k. In the middle of these polar extremes of very big and very small income charities, sit the remaining 33,000 (20%) who have an income of £100k-£10m, and share £28bn (36%) of income.

There is little research into how successful charities are at creating best practice websites. However, there is some up to date research into the digital skills and capabilities that charities have. The Skills Platform Charity report revealed 35% of respondents did not have a strategic approach to digital, 53% recognised a lack of digital skills in their charity, and 33% considered trustee understanding of digital to be a blocker.

At Pixeled Eggs, we decided it was time to address this knowledge gap. We have many years’ experience working with charities to create websites and are delighted to partner with BIMA to make this report a reality.

We have designed an audit that we believe strikes the right balance between rigour and utility. It defines the qualitative and quantitative dimensions of what creates a great digital experience for charity websites and explains our methodology in detail alongside our findings. The report examines 411 randomly selected charities with an income between £100k and £10m.

The results do not make great reading for the charity sector. Only 2% of audited websites achieved the highest standard. 11% did not have a website or had one with fatal errors in it. While a worrying 41% of websites ‘failed’ the audit reaching only Poor or Terrible standards. These results shine a light on the need for a better digital experience as, at present, beneficiaries are not getting what they need from charities online. As a result, they may be losing income.

The report also dispels a number of myths — better funded charities are not more likely to create better web experiences, whereas smaller charities are more likely to use themed websites — and reveals digital challenges charities may wish to prioritise. For example, the user experience of many technically competent websites is terrible, and the mobile experience of many others is worse still.

We hope this investment in understanding charity website performance will play a role in raising standards and reveal how charities can better unlock the potential digital has to support their work. We hope it will stimulate charities, and their digital partners to review and prioritise more effective next steps. And we hope that, next time we perform this survey, the sector will be in a far better position. The people who benefit most from our charities are counting on it.

*charitybase.uk

Key Findings

Overall

- Less than 2% of audited charities achieved an overall grade A (Excellent).
- Only a quarter of websites achieved a B or higher (Excellent or Good).
- 41% received a D or lower (Poor or Terrible).
- 11% had no website at all.
- 5% had fatal issues with their website (e.g. under construction/server errors).

Usability

- The user experience of websites varies enormously. This suggests user experience is either a low priority or a knowledge gap for website partners and the charities themselves.
- Low income charities had the highest amount of As and Bs (27%) for Usability.
- Smaller charities seem better equipped to deliver an excellent or good user experience.

Technology

- One third of charities received a D or lower (Poor or Terrible), with three times more charities receiving an F (Terrible) than an A (Excellent).
- There is a clear emphasis on SEO (over 50% scored an A) and Accessibility, with Best Practice, and Performance lagging.
- Only half of charities managed to score over 80% for Technology.

Platform

- It was a surprise to see SaaS and Themed websites represented in all income groups, rather than just smaller charities.
- In the higher income group of charities (£2.7-10m) 10% had websites classed as SaaS or Themed websites.
- Proportionally, SaaS websites were most likely to be without a mobile version (23%), compared to 10% for Bespoke and 9% for Themed.
- Bespoke websites had the highest ratio of good performance in overall scores, with 25% achieving an A or B (Excellent or Good).
- Bespoke websites outperformed SaaS and Themed websites for technology scores.
- Bespoke build had the largest proportion of charities evaluated with B or A technology grades.
- More than half of Themed sites were evaluated as D or F for Technology.
- SaaS had the lowest variation of the results, with very few Fs and As for technology.

Device (Mobile and Desktop)

- Mobile underperforms desktop across all measures by about 10%.
- 76% of all F grades (Terrible) were assigned to mobile websites.
- 73% of all As (Excellent) were assigned to desktop websites.
- 9% had no mobile version of their website. This means that a user landing on their website via a mobile screen, saw a desktop version not adapted for smaller screens.

Method

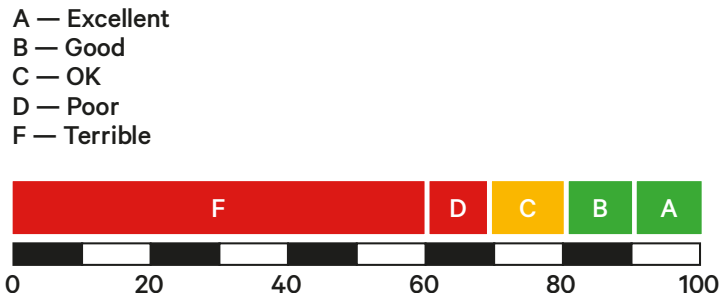
Our objective was to get a thorough understanding of how close charity websites were to meeting best practice standards. In order to do this, we started with a randomly selected dataset drawn from charitybase.uk of 800 charities (from a total population of 33,000) with an income of between £100k and £10m.

We edited this to remove religious (e.g. diocese, mosques and missionary objectives etc) and educational (e.g. independent school trusts etc) charities not relevant to our research, ensuring that we had a broad set of cause-based charities. 16% of these remaining charities were excluded because of either a fatal issue (5% were under construction, presented server errors or similar) or no website at all (11%).

Scoring and Grades

Charities were manually classified by Platform, and then scored from 0 to 100 for Technology and Usability performance by device. These were combined to create an overall score. (see Appendix for more detail.)

These scores were used to grade the charities based on the following scale:



Measurements of Success

Usability

How well are charities meeting user needs on their websites? This was a qualitative audit using a modified SUS approach (see Appendix). We looked at usability through four lenses:

- Information seeker (general) journey - what does this charity do?
- Beneficiary journey – how do I access support from this charity?
- Supporter journey – how can I support this charity?
- Overall usability – how easy is the site to use?

Technology

How well implemented are charity websites? We used Google’s Lighthouse tool to assess each website. Lighthouse is an open-source, automated tool, built to improve the quality of web pages. It can be run against any web page and measures the following (detail in Appendix):

- Performance. Tests response speed in different stages of page load, and measures how quickly a site responds when interacted with.
- Accessibility. Highlights opportunities to improve the accessibility of your web app. This currently tests against WCAG 2 rules.
- Best Practice. Tests a variety of requirements, such as correct use of libraries, page setup and other technical aspects of the site.
- SEO. Ensures that your page is optimised for search engine results ranking.

Platform

What approach to Platform are charities adopting? Is there a correlation between the Platform used and the site’s success in our Usability and Technology audits? We classified the websites into one of three groups:

- Themed – a website that uses a WordPress theme ‘out of the box’.
- SaaS – a website using a third-party web-builder service (like Wix or Squarespace).
- Bespoke – a website that does not fit in either of the above.

Device

We looked at the above through both desktop and mobile perspectives.

Research

Sample Size

We included 411 cause-based charities in our audit (N=411), having first eliminated faith and education-based charities from a larger sample of 800.

From 411, some were excluded because:

- There was no website associated with the charity (N=45).
- They had technical issues, e.g. website ‘under construction’, server errors etc. (N=22).
- We used the full remaining sample (N=344) when analysing Overall and Technology performance.

Charities that did not have a mobile version of the website (N=38) had their mobile Usability score defaulted to 0. However, when analysing the Usability performance and Technical & Usability

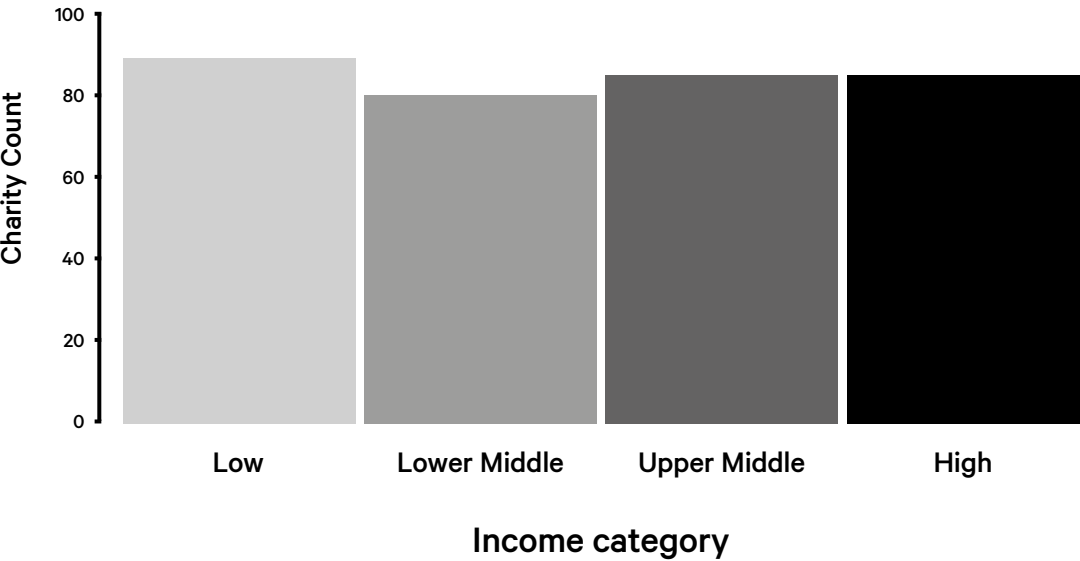
relations we excluded these charities (adjusted sample size N=306) to prevent our results being skewed.

Charity Income

Our sample set of 411 charities was split into four groups by income:

- Low - £100-310k
- Lower middle - £310-760k
- Upper middle - £761k-2.7m
- High - £2.7m-10m

Income Spread



Platform

The vast majority of charities are using bespoke website platforms rather than relying on ‘out of the box’ solutions.

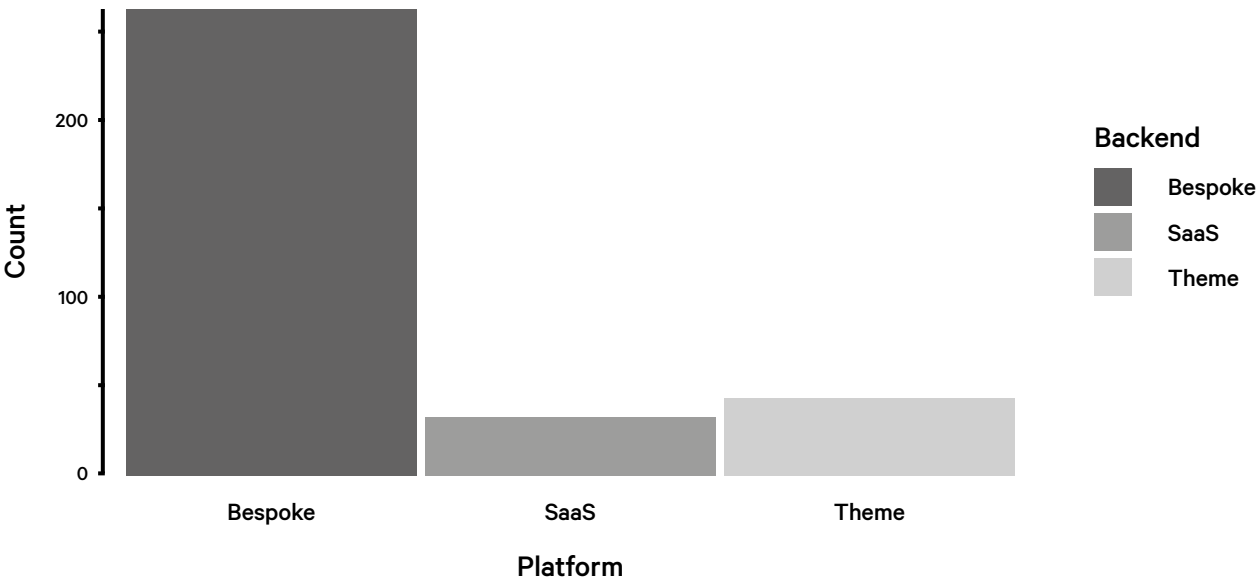
Each charity has been assigned a class based on their Platform/CMS set-up using the following rules:

- SaaS (Site as a Service). The CMS is either Squarespace, Wix, Duda, Webflow, Weebly, or Raising IT.
- Themed. Uses a WordPress CMS, and the theme used is “out of the box”.
- Bespoke. If none of the above applies.

76.74% were classed as Bespoke, 13.37% as Themed and 9.88% as SaaS.

Proportionally, the highest ratio of websites without a mobile version was among SaaS sites, of which 23.5% had no mobile version. For comparison, Bespoke had 9.8% and Themed 8.6% ratios. However, this insight should be treated with caution due to the comparatively small SaaS sample size.

Backend Frequency

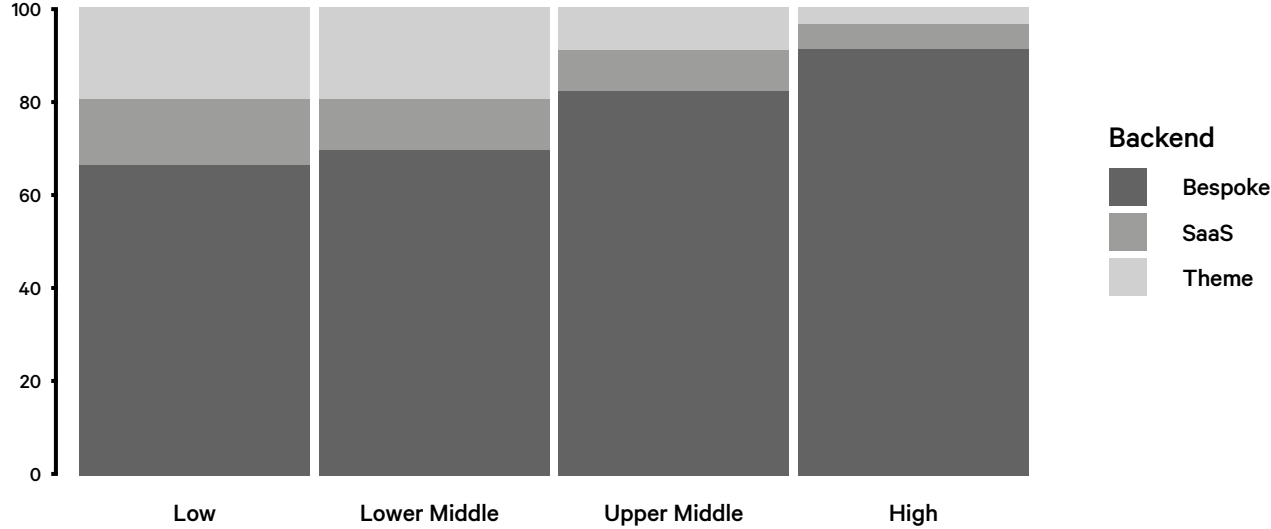


Platform and Income

Higher income charities are more likely to apply a Bespoke approach to creating their website. ‘Out of the box’ solutions are more popular among lower middle- and low-income charities.

N.B. Again, this insight should be treated with caution - both SaaS and Themed sample sizes were significantly smaller than Bespoke.

Backend distribution based on charity income



	Bespoke	SaaS	Theme
Low	59	13	18
Lower Middle	56	9	16
Upper Middle	70	8	8
High	78	4	4

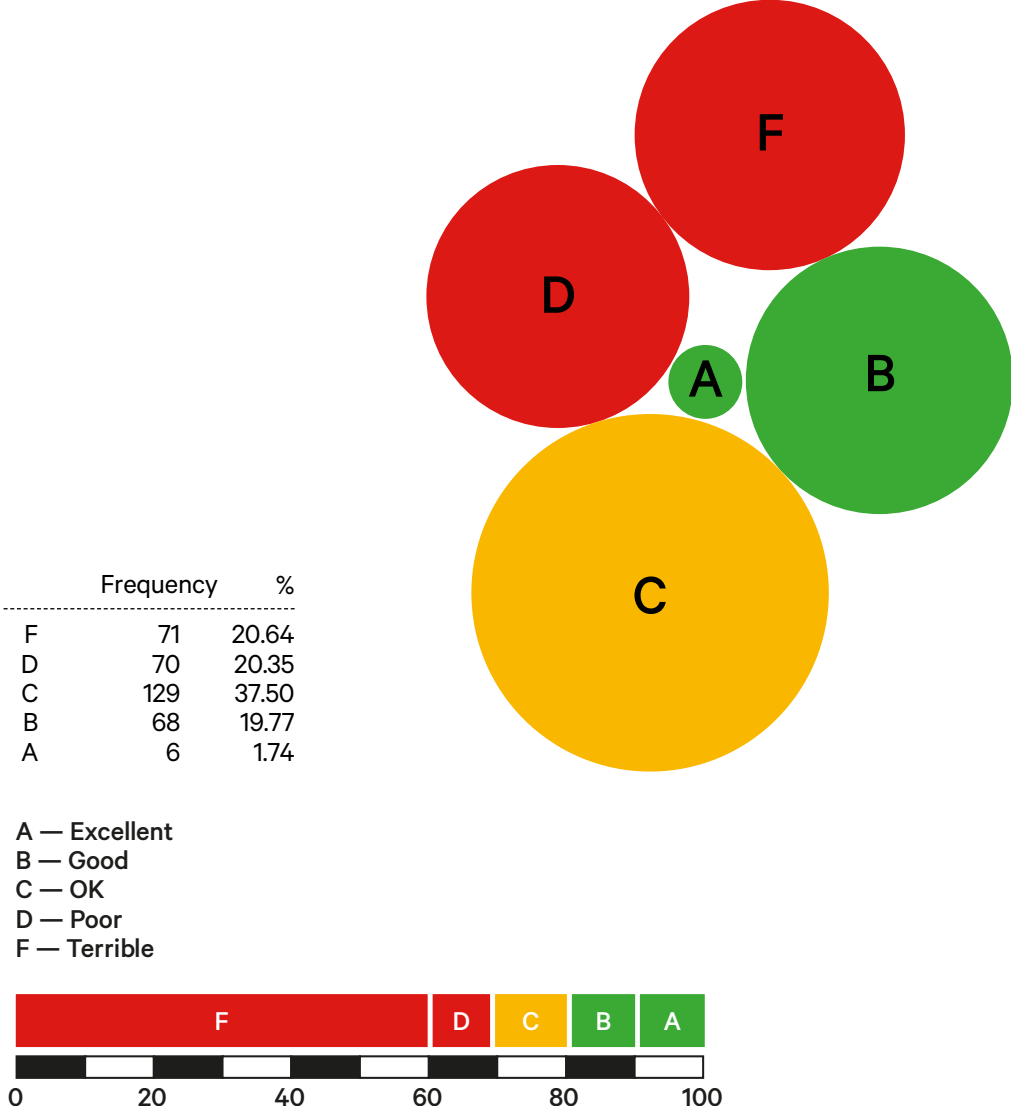
Overall Grades

About a fifth of websites achieve A or B (Good or Excellent).

Less than 2% of charities achieve an overall grade A. However, when we include websites that have achieved grade B, this number rises to a more encouraging fifth of websites classed as Good or Excellent. 41% of websites fail with a Poor or Terrible overall grade.

- 21% of charities achieved an A or B.
- 37% received a C.
- 41% received a D or F.

Distribution of Overall grade



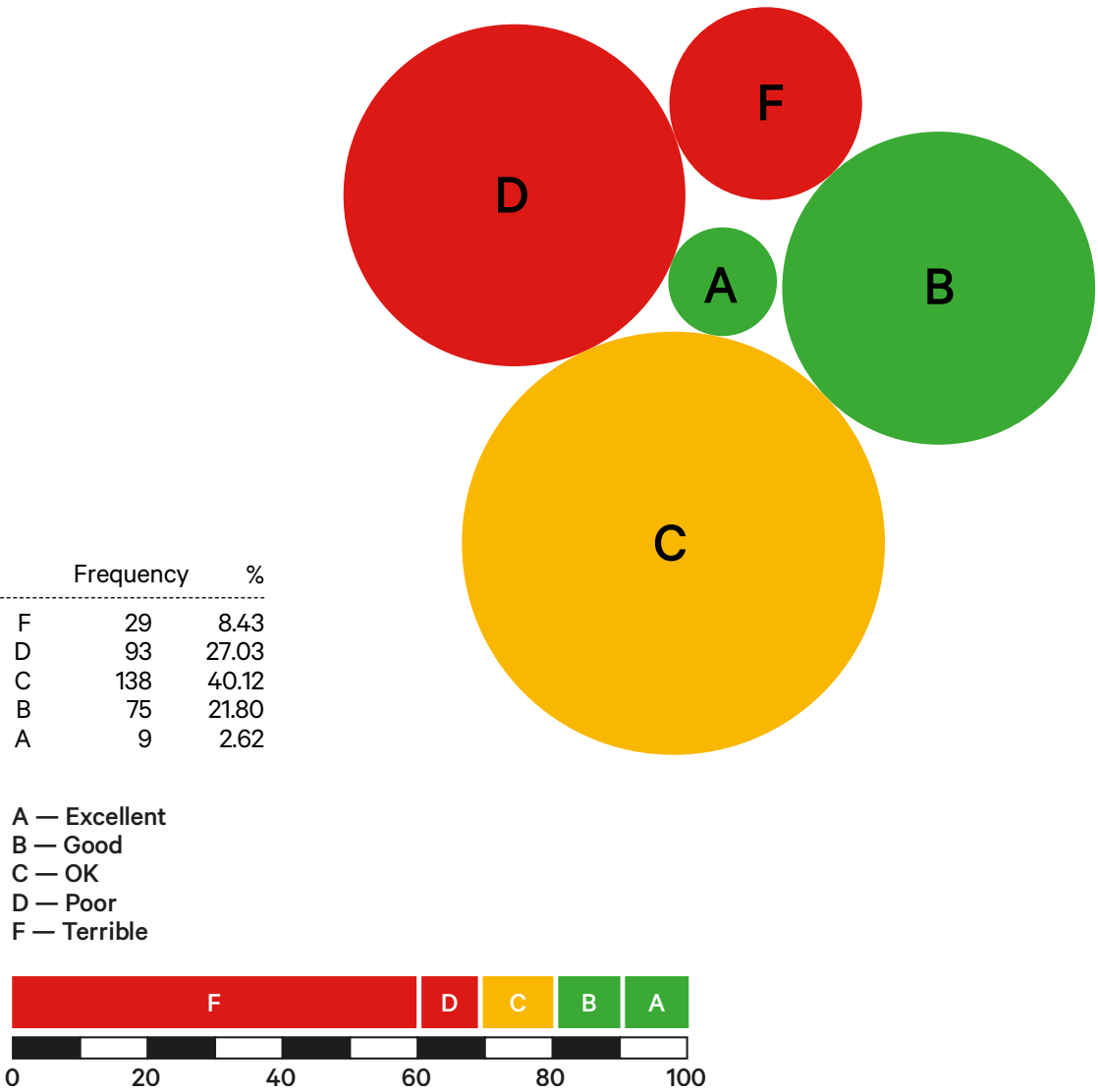
Technology Grades

24% of websites achieve A or B (Good or Excellent).

Only 3% achieve grade A. When we include the Bs, a quarter of charity websites achieve a Good or Excellent grade. Combined with Cs 64% of charities are getting enough points for their technology to achieve OK and above.

- Majority of charities (40%) achieved a C.
- 3 times as many charities achieved an F than an A.
- 50% of charities scored above 74.

Distribution of Technology grade

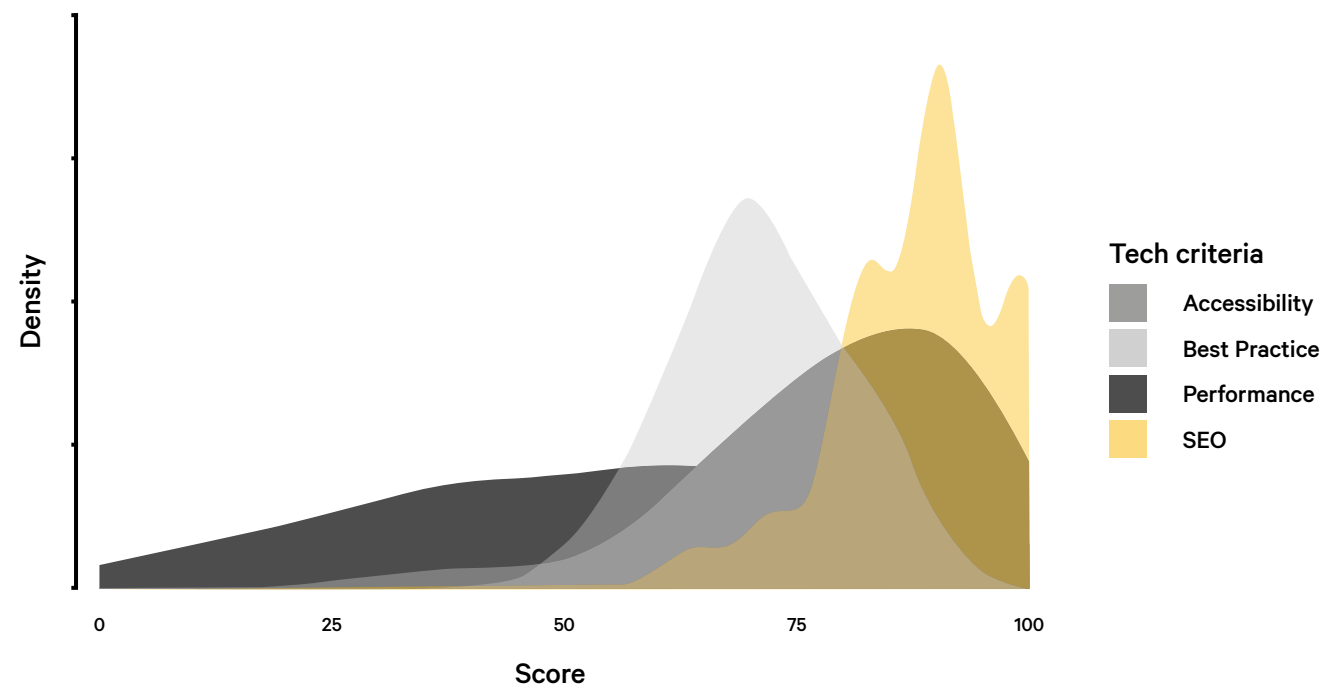


Technology: Detailed Breakdown

- Accessibility (A) achieved an average score of 80.
- 50% of all scores were between 61 and 81.
- Best Practice (BP) had an average score of 71. The maximum score was 93.
- 50% of the results were between 64-77.
- SEO had an average score of 88.
- Over 50% of websites scored higher than 90. The lowest score was 59.
- Performance (P) had the lowest average - 55. The results are very dispersed (SD = 25.65).
- 50% of results were spread from 36 to 73.

See graph below for context.

Detailed Technology Scores

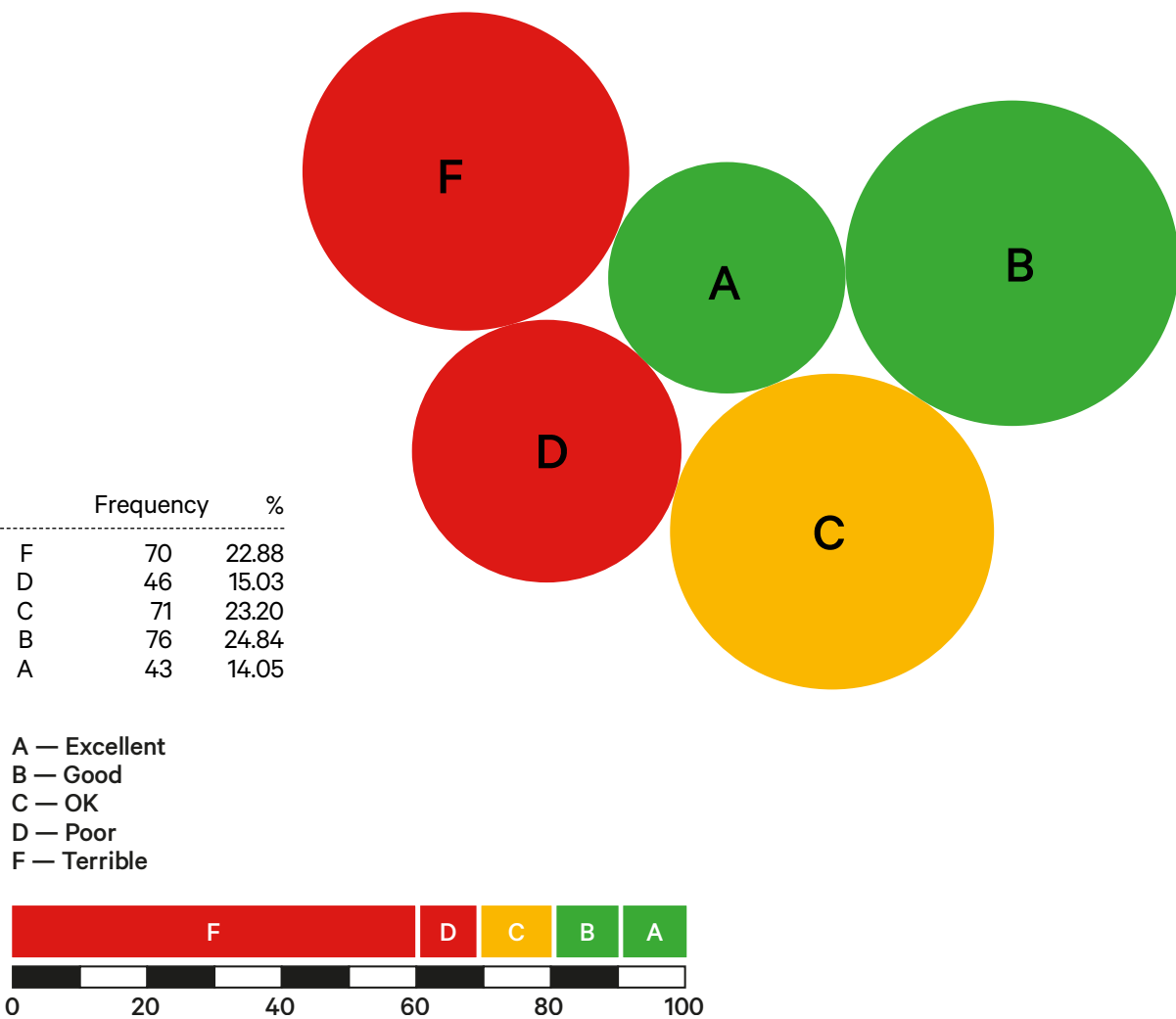


Usability Grades

38% receive D or F (Poor or Terrible). Usability grades appear better than Overall and Technology because they have more As and Bs. However, it is worth noting that there is a much larger group who have achieved very low scores, with 23% receiving an F. This is particularly worrying as it closely represents the user experience of the website, which relates directly to how well user needs are met, and how engaged visitors are likely to become with both the website and the charity.

- 38% of all websites received D or F.
- 39% achieved A or B.
- 23% received a C.

Distribution of Usability grade

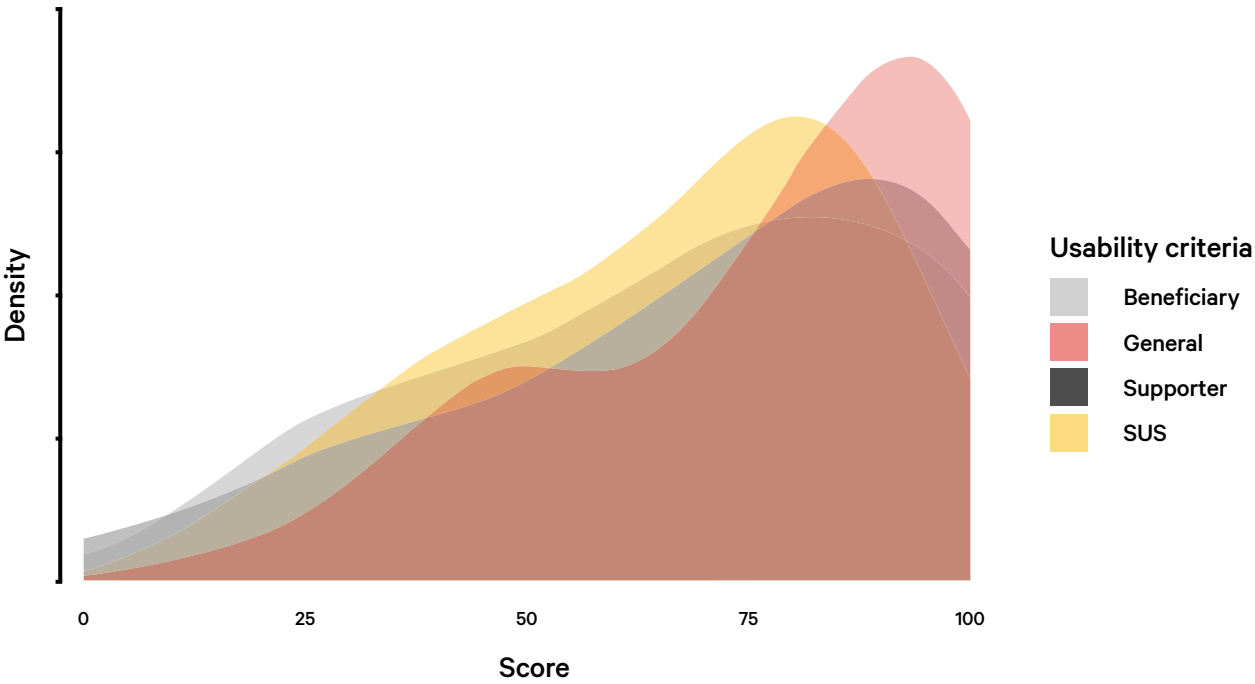


Usability: Detailed Breakdown

The wide dispersion of these scores indicates a wide variance of results. It should be expected the General journey will score highest as it is a simple Information Seeker need.

- All results are widely dispersed (SD > 20).
- SUS (Usability) had an average score of 66, a middle D, indicating a Poor experience.
- 75% of users scored more than 50.
- 50% scored 50-84.
- General had an average score of 77. Nevertheless, it had the highest scores with 29% scoring 100/100.
- Beneficiary had an average score of 67. 50% of all users scored above 75, while only 3% scored less than 24.
- Supporter had an average score of 70. 50% of all users scored above 75, while only 3% of all users scored less than 21.

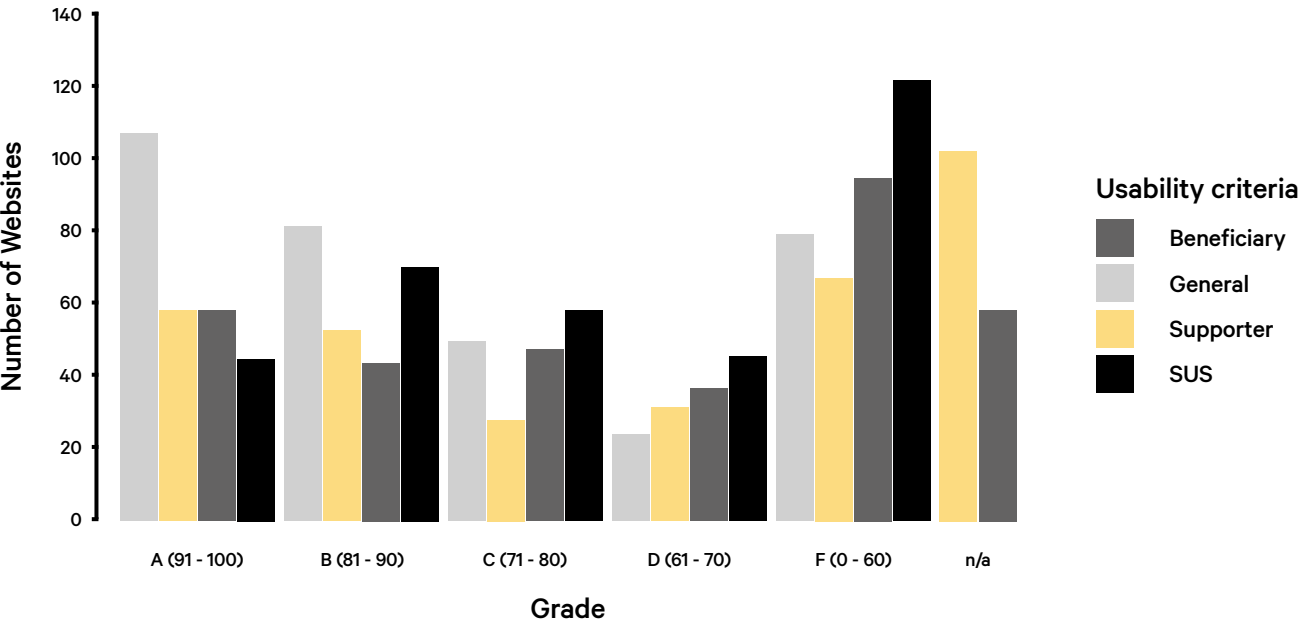
Detailed Usability Scores



Average User Journey Grades

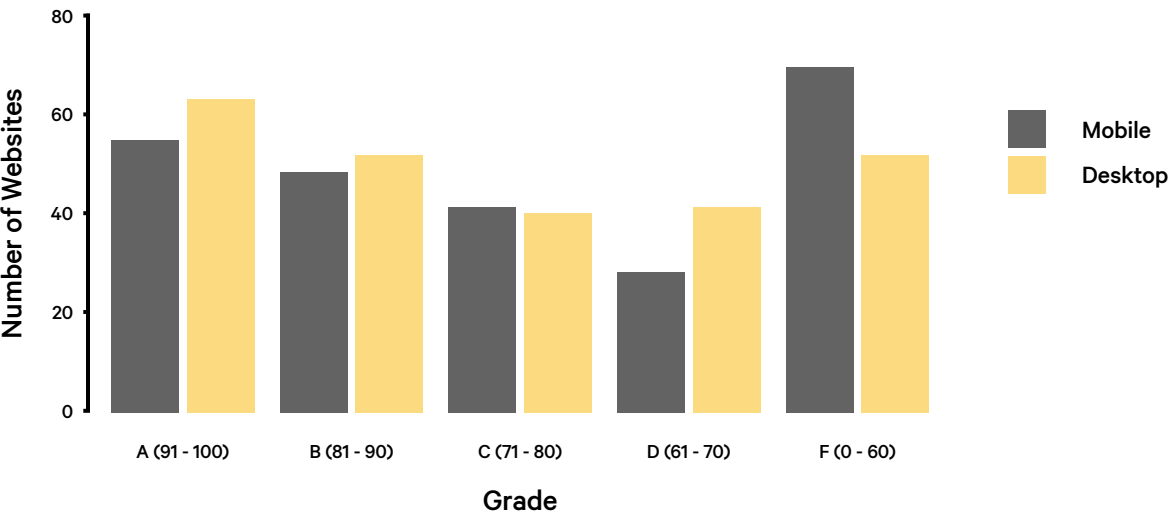
This graph shows average mobile and desktop scores. Supporter Journeys are marginally better supported than Beneficiary Journeys, which might suggest charities see digital as a fund-raising and engagement opportunity rather than a chance to support beneficiaries. Many charity websites scored an F, which means they offer a Terrible online user experience.

Average User Journey Grades

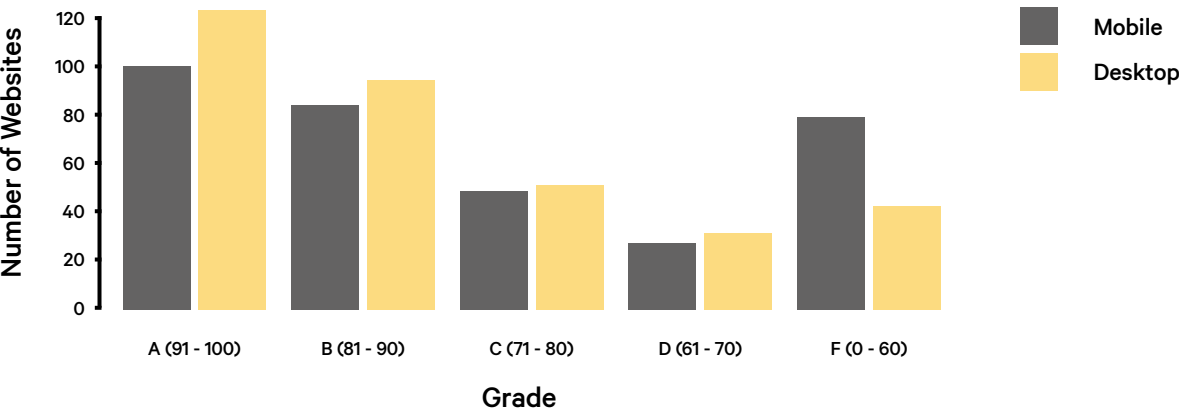


Usability Journey Grades

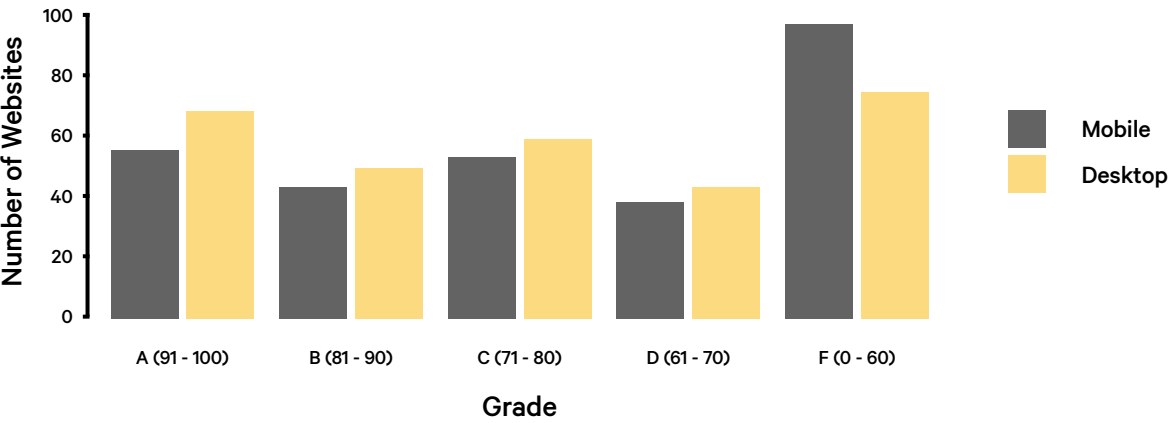
Supporter Journey



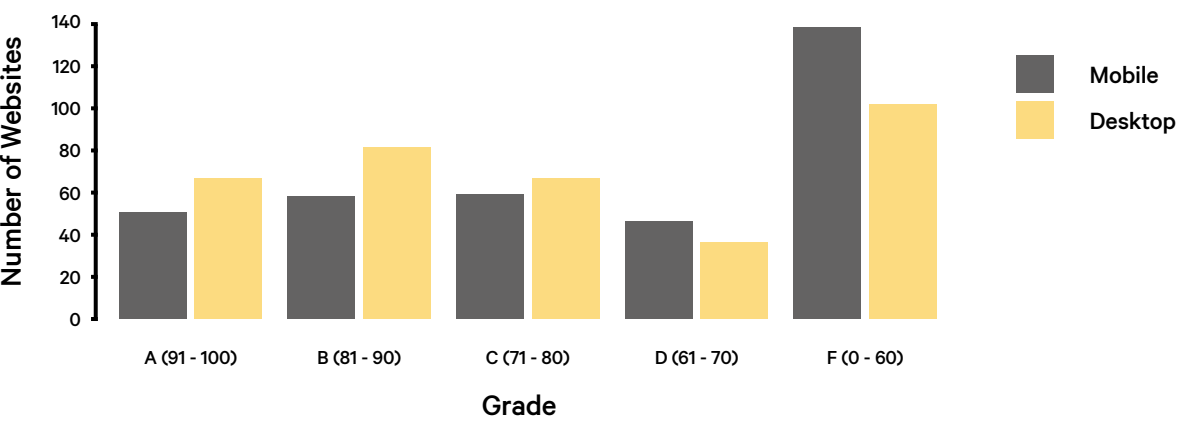
General (Information Seeker) Journey



Beneficiary Journey



SUS Score



How platform choice affects grades

Overall, Bespoke websites performed best. The data suggests this is mostly achieved through Technical performance rather than scoring high for both Technical and Usability. Similarly, we note that poor Themed Technical performance is supported by the best Usability scores in the audit, bringing it in line with Bespoke in terms of overall scores.

Overall

- Bespoke had the highest ratio of good performance, with 25% achieving A and B.
- No Themed website scored A.
- SaaS had the largest proportion (45.6%) of grades D or F.

	F	D	C	B	A
Bespoke	99	117	179	116	17
SaaS	14	17	29	6	2
Theme	21	18	40	13	0

Technology

- Bespoke had the largest proportion of charities that scored an A or B grade.
- More than half of Themed sites scored a D or F.
- SaaS had the lowest variation of results, with very few Fs and As.

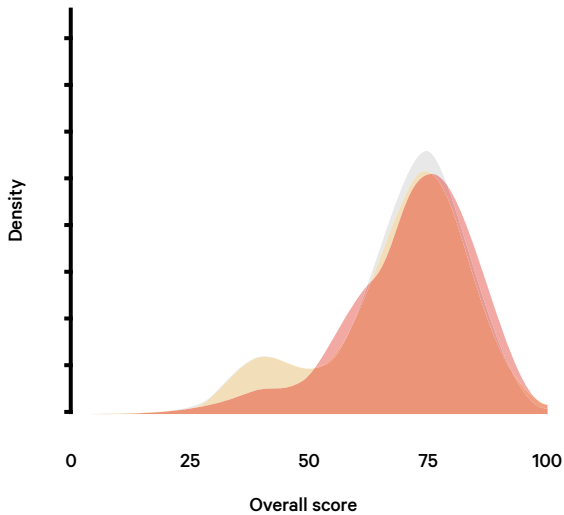
	F	D	C	B	A
Bespoke	56	127	179	149	22
SaaS	3	21	27	15	2
Theme	20	32	25	14	1

Usability

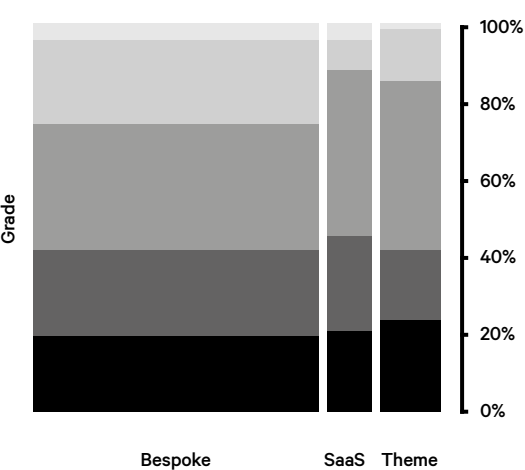
- Bespoke (42.2%) and Themed (39.3%) had similar ratios for F and D.
- Themed had the highest ratio of B and A (41.6%).
- 51.9% of SaaS websites were graded D or F.

	F	D	C	B	A
Bespoke	129	72	106	107	62
SaaS	14	13	12	5	8
Theme	20	13	16	27	8

Overall scores distribution by backend



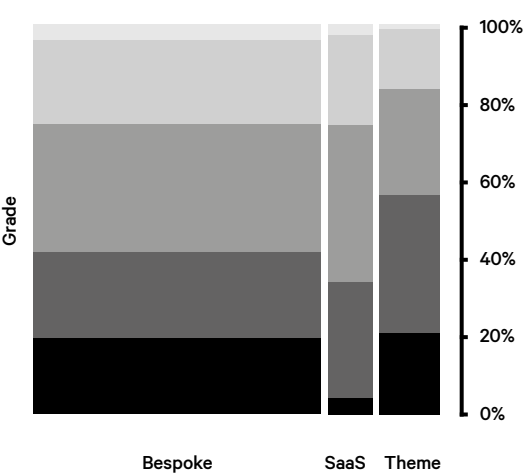
All grade and Backend



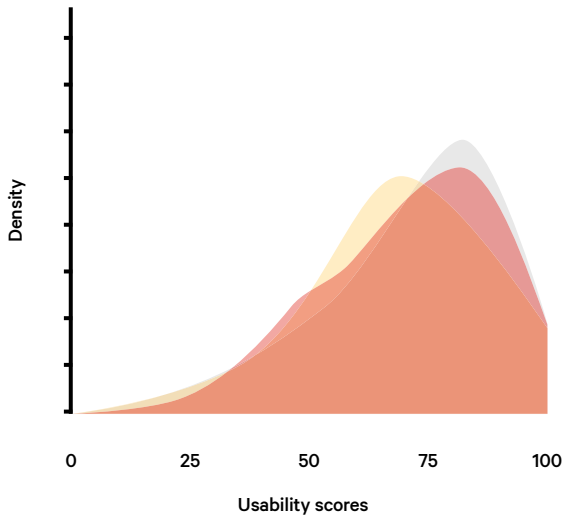
Tech scores distribution by backend



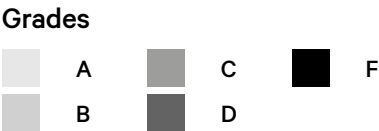
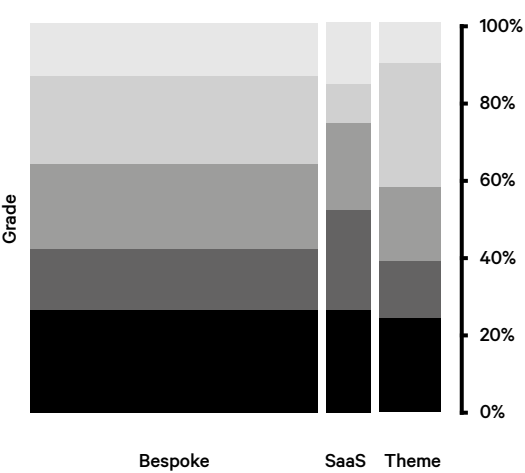
Tech all grade and Backend



Usability scores distribution by backend



Usability all grade and Backend



How charity income affects grades

The most notable finding is that the low-income category outperformed all others for Usability, achieving 46% of all A or B grades. There is very little variation in the proportion of D and F grades for each income category, which suggests all income categories are struggling in this area. While Tech grades are slightly higher, and Usability lower across all groups, we still see 41% of all charities fail Overall.

Overall

	F	D	C	B	A
Low	42	34	55	40	9
Lower Middle	23	42	66	27	4
Upper Middle	38	33	66	32	3
High	30	43	60	36	3

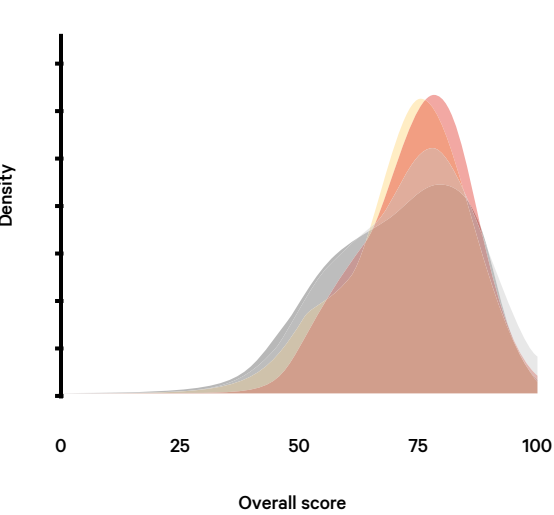
Technology

	F	D	C	B	A
Low	23	47	60	42	8
Lower Middle	19	39	55	46	3
Upper Middle	25	41	50	49	7
High	12	51	61	41	7

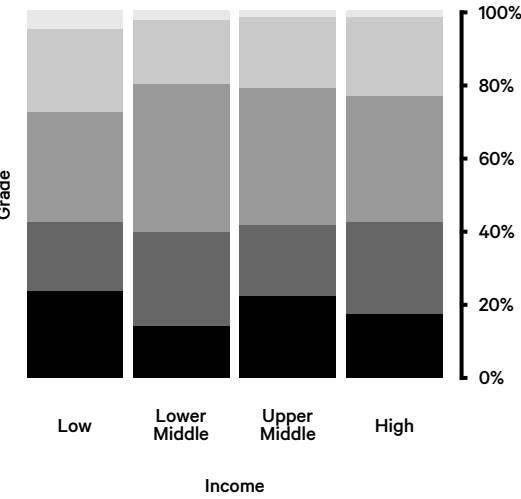
Usability

	F	D	C	B	A
Low	35	19	24	35	33
Lower Middle	28	25	35	33	17
Upper Middle	44	28	38	33	13
High	55	26	36	38	15

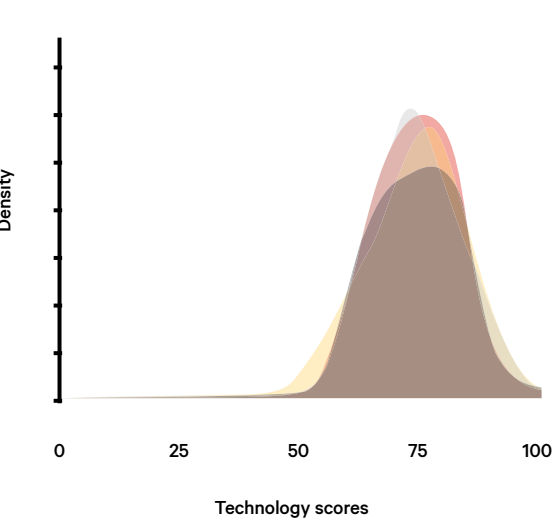
Overall scores distribution by income



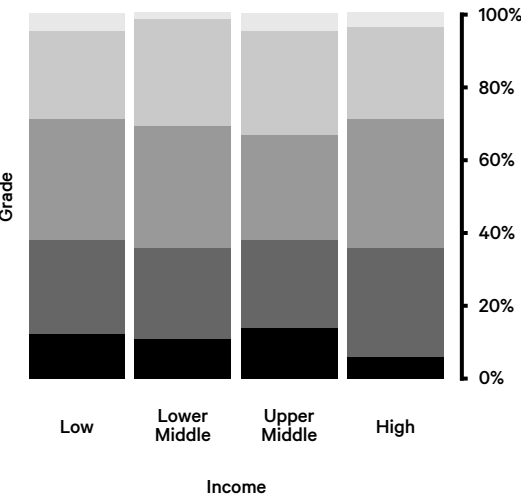
All grade and income



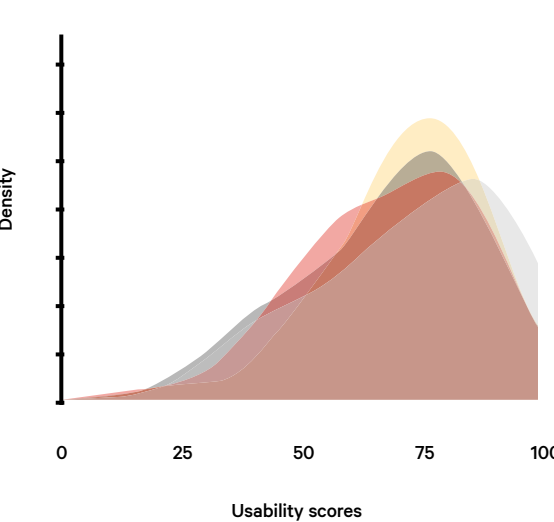
Tech scores distribution by income



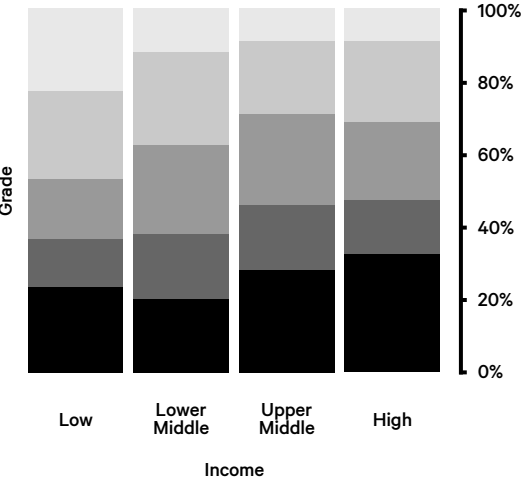
Tech all grade and income



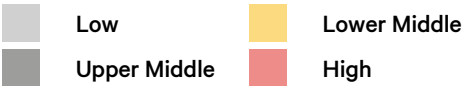
Usability scores distribution by income



Usability all grade and income



Backend



Grades



How technology and usability relate

While Technology and Usability scores tend to reflect overall scores, they illustrate how far behind mobile websites are compared to their desktop counterparts.

76% of all Overall F grades were given to mobile websites, while 73% of all As were assigned to desktop.

Overall

	Device	Mobile	Desktop
F		102	32
D		90	62
C		113	135
B		34	101
A		5	14

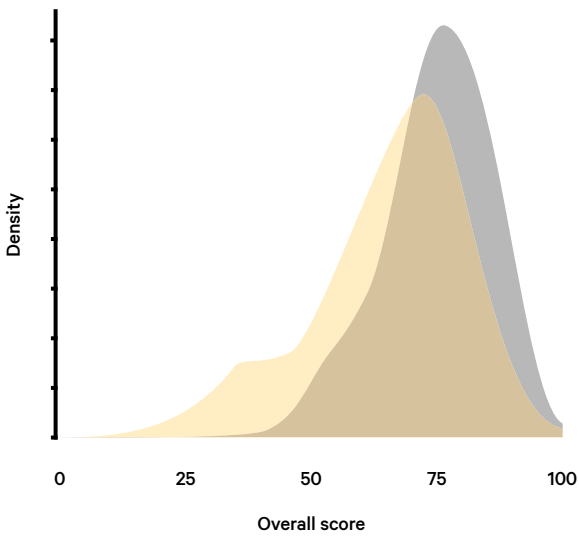
Technology

Device	F	D	C	B	A
Mobile	60	122	111	47	4
Desktop	19	58	115	131	21

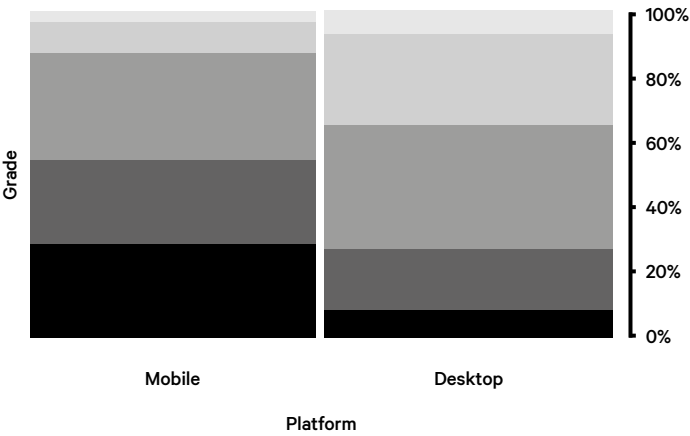
Usability

Device	F	D	C	B	A
Mobile	97	58	62	60	29
Desktop	66	40	72	79	49

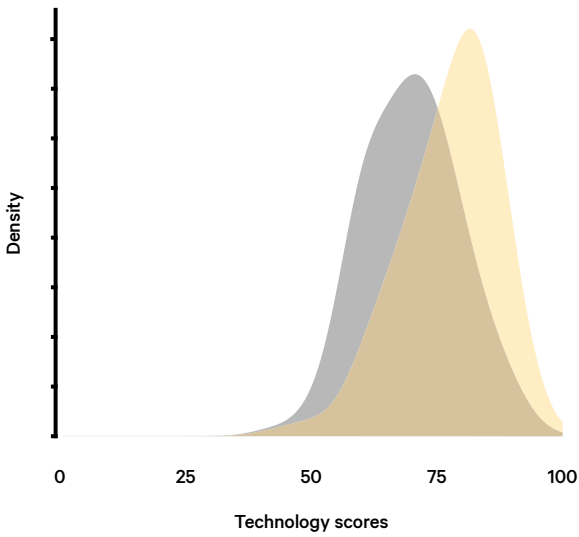
Overall scores distribution



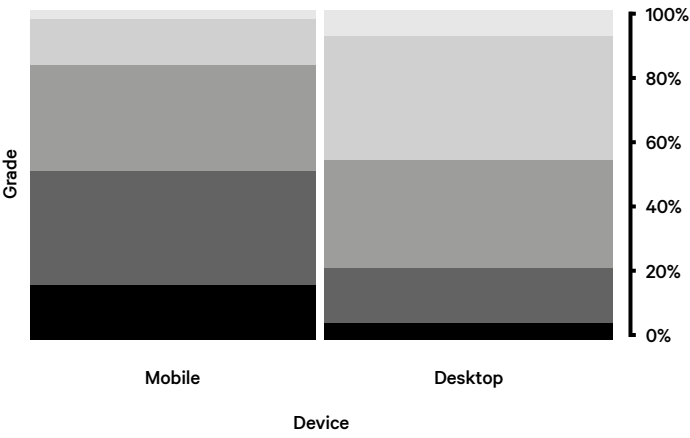
All grade and platform



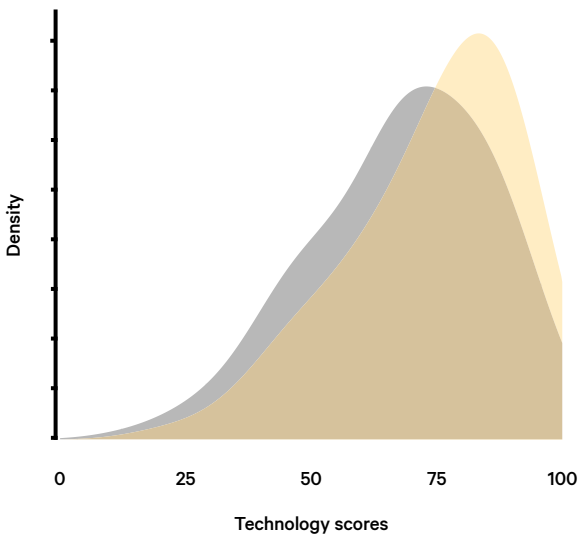
Tech scores distribution by Device



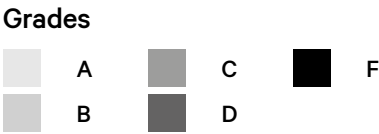
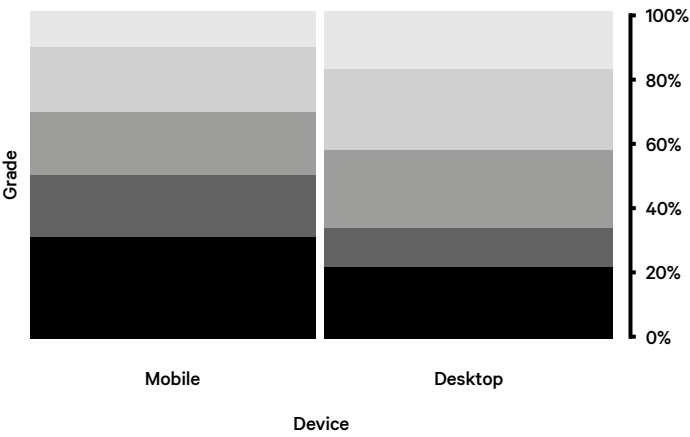
Tech all grade and platform



Usability scores distribution by Device



Usability all grade and platform

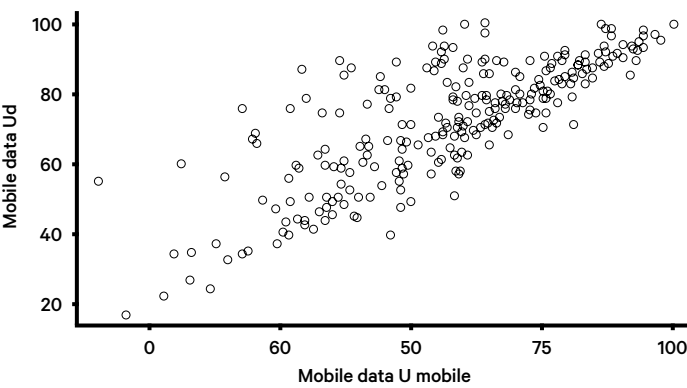
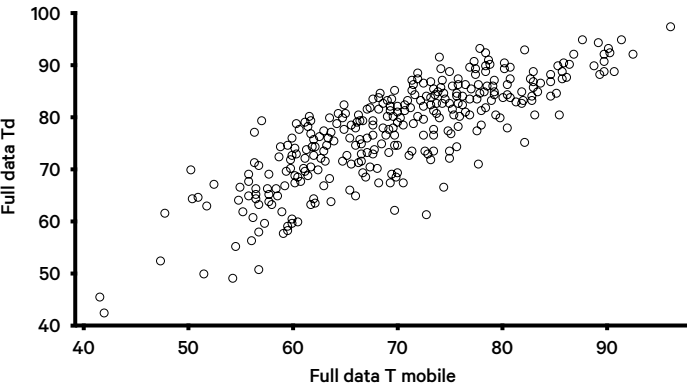


Further Relations

Mobile and Desktop score relation

Consistently lower mobile performance for both Technology and Usability criteria can be expressed through linear regression (based on strong correlation $R > 0.8$ between Usability mobile and Usability desktop, and Technology mobile and Technology desktop scores).

Relation between Technology and Usability scores



Linear regression models can be expressed as:

- Usability: $y = 5.89 + 0.84x$, where x is desktop value, and y is mobile value, with 15% of prediction error (adjusted $R^2 = 0.651$).
- Technology: $y = 6.93 + 0.81x$, when x is desktop value, and y is mobile value, with 7.8% of prediction error (adjusted $R^2 = 0.665$).

This proves that usability and technology scores are consistently higher for desktop:

- For every technology score on desktop we expect a 12.7 points lower score on mobile.
- For every usability score on desktop we expect a 10.11 points lower score on mobile.

Please note that this model explains 65% of all results.

Themes

Usability lags behind Technology

When reviewing Technology and Usability scores separately, we can see that Technology scores tend to be higher, while Usability scores are more varied.

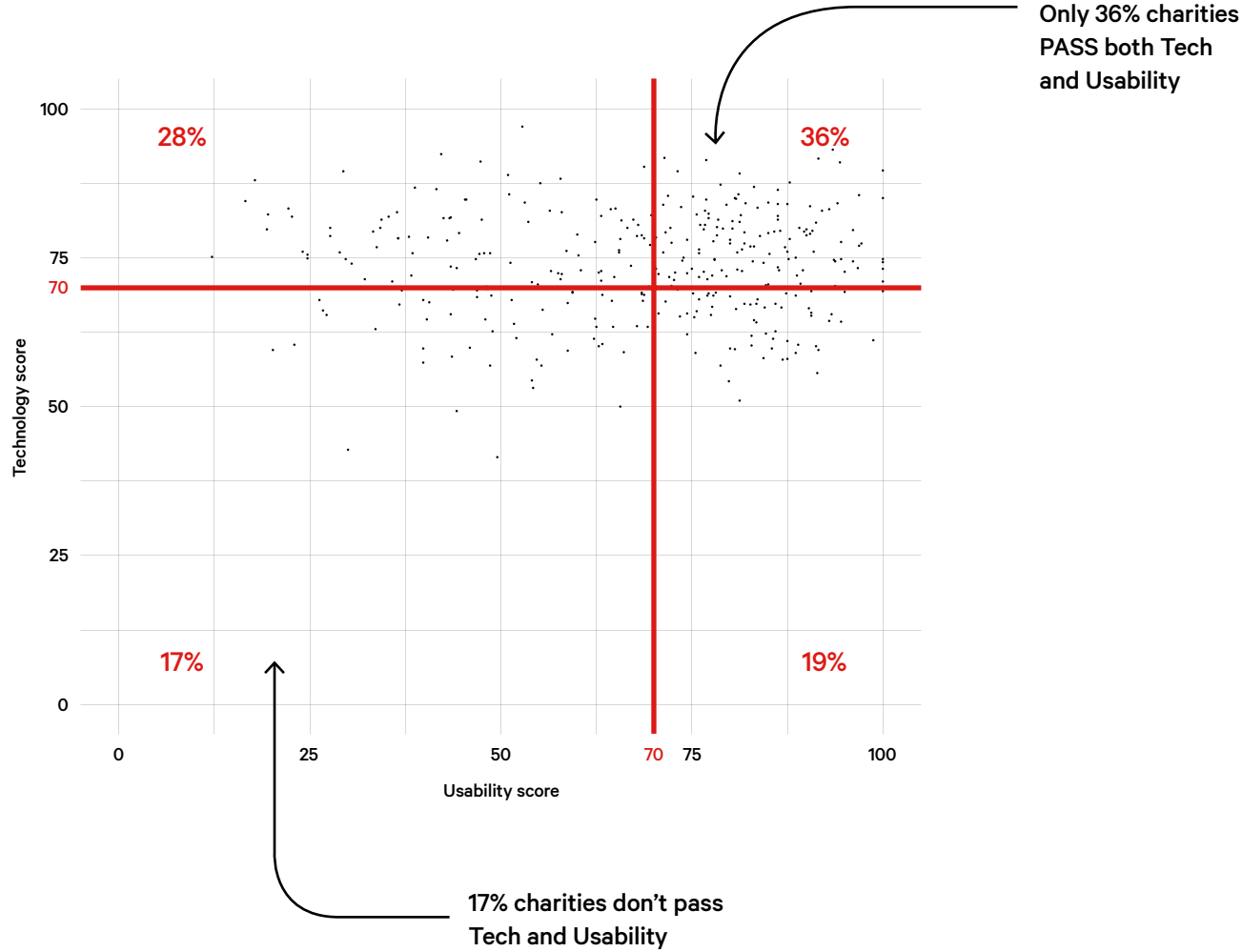
This tells us that charities have better addressed Technology standards, and as a result there are fewer poorly performing websites.

However, Usability scores show that there are plenty of websites offering a sub-optimal experience.

There is no linear relationship between Technology and Usability performance. This means that you cannot improve one and expect the other to automatically improve too.

Both Technology and Usability need to be addressed equally and individually. It seems that Charities are either prioritising Technology, or they better understand best practice for Technology than for Usability.

Charity performance based on Technology and Usability score



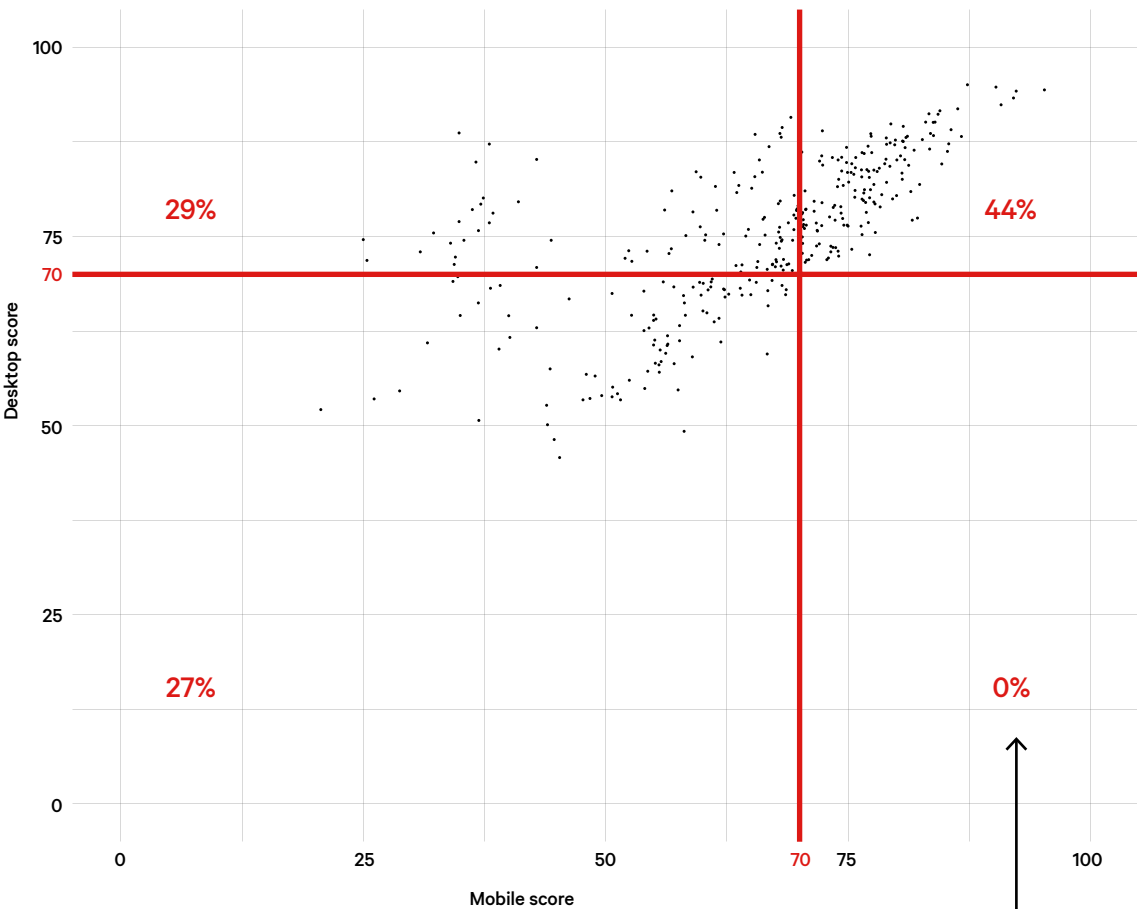
Themes

Mobile consistently underperforms desktop

Mobile websites consistently underperform across Technology and Usability scores.

There were no instances (0%) where the mobile score was positive and desktop score was negative. Not only that, there was a 29% chance that even if your desktop score was positive, your mobile score would be negative.

Charity performance based on Desktop and Mobile scores

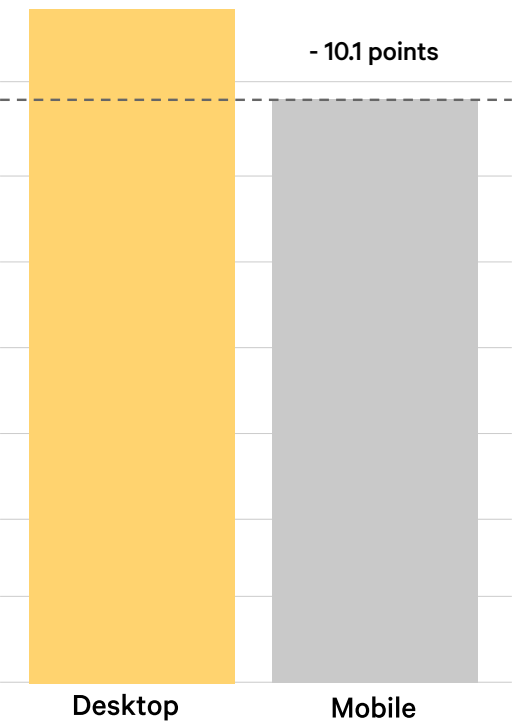


No charities failed Desktop while passing Mobile

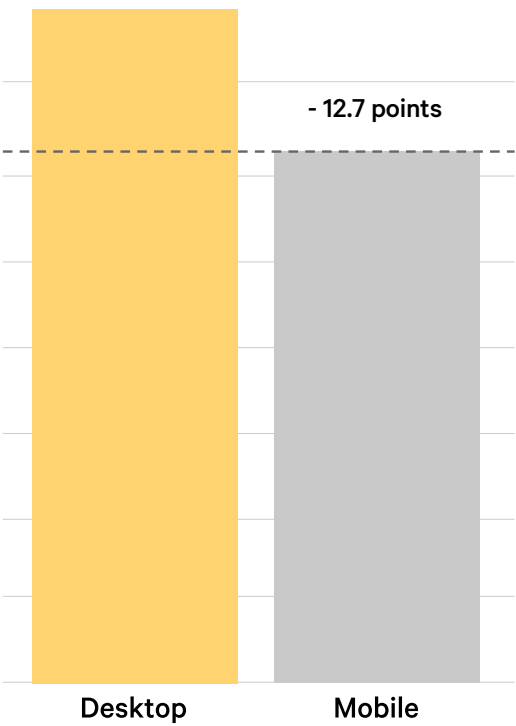
We used a linear regression model to better understand how mobile and desktop scores are related and can confirm that:

- For every Technology score on desktop we expect a 12.7-point lower score on mobile.
- For every Usability score on desktop we expect a 10.1-point lower score on mobile.
- For every website we expect...

Worse mobile tech performance



Worse mobile usability

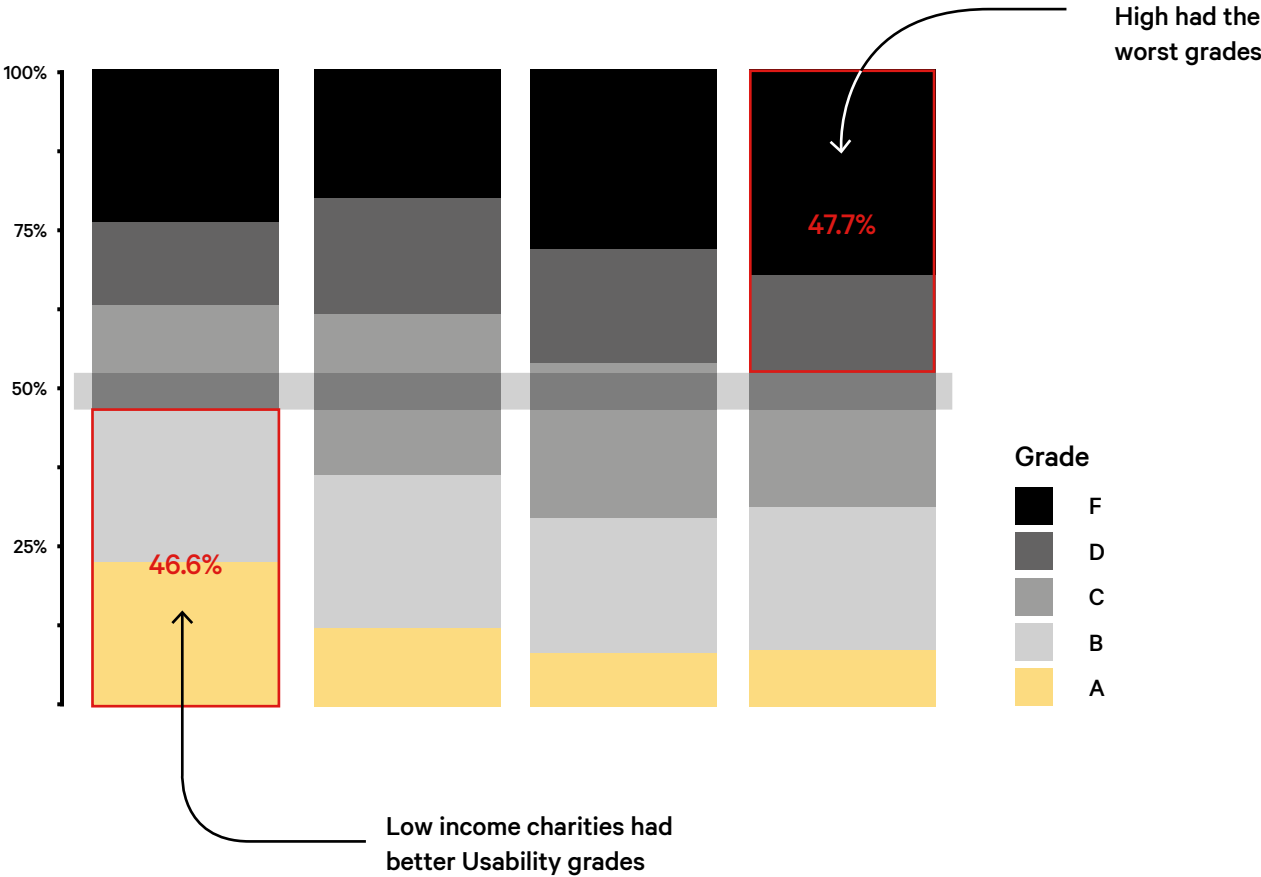


Themes

Low-income charities achieve higher Usability scores

Low-income charities outperformed all others when it came to Usability, with 46.6% achieving an A or B, while high-income charities achieved only 31.2%.

Income and Usability goals



There is no reason to expect that a charity’s income will impact its digital experience ($R<0.1$). However, when we look at performance we see a more complex relationship. The more a charity earns, the more likely it is to use a Bespoke platform. “Out of the box” solutions appear more popular among lower middle- and low-income charities. This adds to the complexity surrounding how income may affect a charity’s overall digital experience.





Summary

Overall charity performance is average. However, looking at Technology and Usability separately, a different picture emerges. Most of the charities achieve an average score for Technology, while Usability has much more varied results.

Charities should seek to provide high quality technical and usability performance, rather than compromising on one or the other.

Similarly, charities should find solutions that can satisfy both desktop and mobile user needs. It is unacceptable to neglect mobile users in a world so dominated by mobile devices.

Whilst income influences the overall performance, usability, and what platform the website has been built on, further research is required to understand how they are related.

In conclusion, charities need a solution that does not compromise - all users deserve access to support or to get help from their charity, no matter what device they use.

Re-writing the digital DNA

Giulia Merlo,
Head of User Research and Design, Citizens
Advice, Co-chair of the BIMA Charities Council

When we started the Charities Council, it was with a very specific definition of ‘digital’ in mind. Digital should mean so much more than just getting better at email marketing and social media. True digital transformation fundamentally rewrites an organisation’s DNA, changing its ways of working, mindset and culture.

This report shows there’s still a gap in how charities are approaching digital, with many organisations treating building a website as an end point to their digital journey, rather than the first part of a long-term process.

There are also some sobering reflections on the role of agencies, with too many bespoke website builds failing to deliver a high quality experience. This speaks to the need for agencies to really engage their charity clients, so they can improve the quality for everyone who uses that charity’s products and services.

The good news is this mindset shift isn’t necessarily dependant on a huge budget, or expensive tech. The report shows that small charities seemed better able to deliver a good user experience than their larger counterparts. This isn’t entirely surprising, since delivering an outstanding user experience involves being close to people using your services, really listening to their needs, and then delivering on them – even if it feels uncomfortable. And this is a set of skills smaller charities have in abundance.

When we started this report, it was very much in a pre-COVID world, but the findings still ring true. If nothing else, this pandemic has given all of us in the charity sector the opportunity to embrace new ways of working and reflect on how we build truly user-centric products and services.

For agencies the message is the same. It’s not enough to supply a piece of technology to a charity. A good agency will invest the time and effort to help charities understand their audience better and build the technology to fit those needs.

Whether you’re reading this as a charity or an agency, the opportunity for change is huge. Let’s not waste it.



A black and white portrait of a man with dark hair and a light beard, looking directly at the camera. He is wearing a dark button-down shirt. A red rectangular graphic is overlaid on the bottom left corner of the image.

The charity website model is broken, how do we fix it?

Zach Moss, Digital Manager at Dignity in Dying

In the charity sector, and for those working in digital (whatever that means these days) there is a lot of baggage attached to the term ‘new website’.

Utter those two words and you prompt an immediate wish list from everyone and anyone. This is natural, and it isn’t necessarily a bad thing — but chances are you’re starting down a risky path.

The traditional ‘big bang’ approach to commissioning, building and launching charity websites is fundamentally broken. I see it time and again in our sector, and the problem seems particularly bad with smaller charities.

The problem with this approach is that it focuses only on an output - a shiny new website.

There needs to be a big shift in approach, focusing much more on embedding a process than just building a thing. The current model encourages a ‘launch and leave’ culture - where lots of time, energy and internal capital is spent on delivering a website.

After launch day there is usually little thought or appetite for the hard graft of maintenance and improvement. Let’s focus more on the outcome - how might we re-balance the effort from initial research and design to a new, better way of working? How can we make maintenance and improvement as exciting as a new website?



Are smaller, perfectly formed websites the key?

Janet Thorne, CEO at Reach Volunteering

Creating a good user experience is key to a website's success. It relies on charities being clear about what they want to communicate, who needs their content and how they want to engage their audiences. To do this well, charities must focus on their users' needs, be able and willing to adopt a 'test and learn' approach and to develop trust in that process.

Coronavirus has meant that charities have had to move rapidly to put services online, so it is more important than ever that charities have a strong understanding - at operational and board level - of these digital approaches. As this report shows that less than 40% of charities achieved good user experience scores, there's clearly work to do.

So, it's fascinating to see that the smallest charities had the best user experience scores, especially given smaller charities have very limited digital budgets, and will often have no digital staff at all, let alone a digital team.

What makes this even more impressive is that this group also had the highest number of third-party web builds (which scored worst across all categories). It would be interesting to know why. In my experience, it can be easier for smaller charities to be more in touch with their users' needs, without the silos that can develop in larger charities. It can be easier to adopt a holistic, user-centred approach. And as this study demonstrates, it is encouraging to see that you can create a good user experience without a large budget.



How do agencies, charities and their trustees work better together to deliver the digital standards the sector needs?

Tove Okunniwa, Chief Executive, London Sport & Board Member, Sport England

One of the findings in this report that most interested me was the fact that smaller charities fared better than some of the bigger charities regarding their website performance. But actually it isn't that much of a surprise as often they have very little to invest and therefore sharpness of thinking is key – it has to be very targeted to deliver on expectations. As the report says, smaller charities are often much closer to the end user, giving them the understanding of their needs that helps them deliver. When resources are scarce the need to get it right is crucial.

Losing focus in a larger organisation can be a risk. The website becomes a repository for everything - a catch-all which can sometimes lose clarity. A lack of ownership can often mean that it fails to deliver a consistent narrative.

In larger charities, culture can also be a challenge, with many worried about spending money on end user delivery. Digital spend may be cut right back as there isn't always an obvious return to the end user.

So the issue charities face isn't one of awareness of digital capability. The problem is budget, ROI and sometimes a lack of digital skills – especially in the smaller charities that often have very limited resources.

That's so important because the pandemic has demonstrated the need to make digital services more relevant. At London Sport, it has brought our focus on digital to the fore. Our Sport Tech Hub, which is an incubator for early stage ventures working with physical activity products, has been particularly important. We've been working hard to support them.

As a trustee, it's important for me to emphasise the role we need to play in driving better standards in digital. When I was on the board of England Boxing, for example, we went through a total digital transformation of our membership

management, shifting from a position where everything was in paper format. My role was to support and challenge the team's thinking as they progressed. More generally, the role of trustees is to advise, share their expertise and ensure things are being done correctly. Connections are important here – I use my network to ask for help where needed and to share best practice from other projects outside the organisation.

It is also important to protect the morale of the team. Taking on a digital project is a challenge, especially for a team that have limited digital skills.

But this can't be one-way. We also need to recognise that digital agencies and the wider industry also have a large role to play in driving digital standards. I'd like to see the digital industry support charities and organisations such as BIMA in upskilling people, with agencies supporting charities to make a difference. Often smaller charities will look for pro bono or use volunteers to help them with digital. It is rare that they have the money to hire a consultant to help.

An agency working with a charity must absorb themselves in it – they must have the passion for the charity. Charity and agency must want the same thing. Agencies need to come on board and see the work of the charity – see the impact they are delivering and engage with end users. Without all this the website becomes transactional.

It's not going to be easy for agencies to invest the amount of time needed because the budgets are not there. But I would like to encourage more partnerships where agencies can really get to the heart of a charity and help them deliver high performing websites and digital experiences. Charities need your support. Even if budgets are low (or don't exist), think of the amazing case studies you will have to share.

Case study

My Life Films
mylifefilms.org
Digital Partner, Pixeled Eggs

How a user-centric web experience supports the growth of an innovative dementia charity.

Challenge

My Life Films is an award-winning social enterprise that uses the power of visual storytelling to enhance the lives and relationships of people living with dementia across the UK. Dementia can affect every aspect of a person’s life and the unique process of producing a biographical film creates a powerful experience for those affected to reconnect with their identity and loved ones.

With glowing testimonials from councils and care homes, My Life Films was recognised for its transformative work and won Outstanding Dementia Care Product of the Year in the Dementia Care Awards. This success created an opportunity to reach more people, which led to them re-assessing their existing website, which was template based. Although it worked fine, it had not been planned around user journeys, had an arduous donation journey and its technical platform needed to be updated.

The challenge was to create a scalable, user-centred website experience that supported beneficiary and supporter needs, amplified My Life Film’s creative passion, and reflected its person-centred approach.

Approach

Experience agency Pixeled Eggs started with a planning phase that defined the key user journeys that would be critical to the website’s success. Working collaboratively, they uncovered new ways to increase engagement, and bring the new brand to life through experience and visual design. Each section of the website would tell a part of the story through impact evaluations, imagery and video content, guiding the user to get in touch or to find out more.

The website was planned as a mobile-first experience built with components that would give My Life Films the flexibility to evolve the website experience, while retaining the key user journeys and overall user experience and visual identity. The technology is open-source, secure and hosted on the robust Google Cloud Platform. SEO tools are built into the platform to ensure the site is search friendly and generates new leads.

Results

With a best-practice donation process and a 20% increase in average time on page, the website experience has been transformed. It is now a compelling, narrative-led experience that inspires beneficiaries and donors to explore and take action. The flexible, modular approach means My Life Films can evolve their website as it grows and adapts, helping to future-proof this innovative dementia charity in challenging times.



“I hadn’t appreciated how different a website experience could be once we broke away from thinking about web pages, and started thinking about our users’ needs and experiences. The new website has made a big difference to our organisation with a significant increase in engagement and donations.”

Jörg Roth
Trustee
My Life Films

My Life Films					
Grade B (84 points)					
Technology			Usability		
85			82		
	Desktop	Mobile		Desktop	Mobile
Performance	60	60	SUS	81	88
Accessibility	95	95	General	100	100
Best Practice	86	86	Supporter	100	100
SEO	100	98	Beneficiary	50	50

Case study

Ellen Macarthur Cancer Trust
<https://www.ellenmacarthurcancertrust.org/>
Digital Partner, Studio Republic

How authentic storytelling can maximise visibility, engagement and support amongst multiple audiences.

Challenge

The Ellen MacArthur Cancer Trust helps to rebuild young lives after cancer. Through sailing and other activity-based trips, they help young people between the ages of 8-24, discover and rebuild their confidence. Whilst the charity benefited from Dame Ellen Macarthur’s name, they had previously struggled to effectively communicate the scale of the impact they have in supporting young people recovering from cancer through their website.

The challenge within the existing website was a lack of intuitiveness and usability. To engage with the site, potential donors, young people and parents had to navigate a highly complex digital journey. In addition to the information-led section of the website, was a basic donations funnel inviting people to make a small one-off donation. However, there was no way for them to make a regular online donation.

Our challenge was to design an intuitive, mobile-first website built on clear user journeys to facilitate the Trust’s two ambitions. The first was to make meaningful connections with more young people recovering from cancer. The second was to secure a diverse and robust income stream. The new website needed to communicate everything the Ellen MacArthur Cancer Trust offered, who benefited and encourage more people to donate or enquire about coming on a trip.

Approach

The biggest challenge users faced was figuring out how to navigate the abundance of information. While the brief highlighted eight key audience groups, we simplified this down to two; those interested in trips and those interested in supporting the charity (by donating, fundraising or volunteering).

Within these two key audience groups we created personas and mapped out task-specific user journeys. Each user journey empowered visitors to find information or take an action quickly and effortlessly. Having created a simplified structure through a UX-led wireframing process, we were able to design a user interface that expressed the energy and passion behind the Trust throughout.

We believed that telling a compelling story was crucial to creating a meaningful connection between the support people gave and the impact it had on young people’s lives. This insight flowed through every aspect of the site. We featured real-life, heartfelt stories on key pages, evolved the language used for calls-to-action and, within the donation process, explained how each size donation would support a young person going on a sailing or activity-based trip. We also added the ability for donors to give on a regular basis.

Results

The reimagined trip recruitment and donation website more than fulfilled the brief. With a user-centred approach, we effectively increased the charity’s visibility online, as well as the number of donations made through the site, organically. Since its launch and compared year on year, the charity has recorded a 121% increase in organic search, a 312% increase in donations and a 184% increase in the average size of donations.



“We had two really specific needs around recruiting more young people and removing some of the barriers around them joining us on a trip and like all charities, continuing to raise funds. Our new site has answered those two calls to action really well. We’ve ended up with a site that does exactly what we need and we’re delighted with it.”

Frank Fletcher
CEO
Ellen Macarthur Cancer Trust

Ellen Macarthur Cancer Trust					
Grade C (79 points)					
Technology			Usability		
81			77		
	Desktop	Mobile		Desktop	Mobile
Performance	81	36	SUS	59	59
Accessibility	89	89	General	100	100
Best Practice	77	77	Supporter	100	100
SEO	100	100	Beneficiary	88	88



Nat Gross
BIMA Co-President



Tarek Nseir
BIMA Co-President

Conclusion

A huge thank you to the team that produced this report. The Charity Council at BIMA is one of our newest communities and this study is a valuable insight into how the sector is performing from a digital and technology perspective. It will help set the agenda for where the Council focuses moving forward.

The report shows the size of the sector, the importance of its work and its contribution to the UK economy. It demonstrates how well charities are faring in adopting and utilising digital technologies to fulfil their campaign and business goals. It provides valuable insights - not just for charities, but for the many agencies, suppliers and providers that serve the sector. And it shines a light specifically on mid-size charities, potentially underserved by reports and advice of the sort provided here.

What is perhaps most troubling about this study is that it shows charities struggling at the most foundational level. That problems with basics such as mobile experiences exist at the scale illustrated by the report demonstrates a fundamental need – and looking optimistically, an opportunity - to make urgent changes.

In the months and years ahead, having an effective digital platform will be critical to charities' strength and survival. We hope this report will boost collaboration between charities, agencies, government and others, and help to support better, faster solutions for those in need.

We've seen through the likes of Shopify how a sector (retail in this instance) and the technology that supports it can be disrupted at scale in an affordable way. We should take the examples of Shopify and others as opportunities to show how change at scale can impact a sector and enable businesses to perform and compete. It is possible for organisations of all shapes, sizes and wealth to create fantastic experiences. We hope that BIMA and its membership can play an important role in this change.

To the report itself, some observations:

It seems there remains a disconnect between the website and the organisation – a lack of recognition that the two have become inseparable. It is critical that charities see the website as their organisation. Only through that lens will they truly begin to deliver messages and services that fulfil and inspire their multiple audiences in a 360 way.

It is clear that charities are still having to spend too much valuable time and resource on the foundations of their websites. Instead, charities need to place an unrelenting focus on their audiences' needs and the content and functionality that will deliver against those needs. That is what makes the experience of the website unique to a charity. Websites should not all be created the same, yet too much time is being spent on features and functionality that are common across most charities rather than on the 20% that is distinct to their own organisation, and which will really make a difference to their goals.

Lastly, the report shares some best practice in the form of case studies and insights from people working within the sector. This is probably the most valuable takeout from this report because it shows how and where to focus attention, and also offers moments of inspiration for charities looking to move forward.

The charitable sector is an essential segment of our country. It deserves a digital capability to match its importance. It is BIMA's desire to take these findings and, working through our Charity Council and wider communities, make things better for each of the organisations studied as part of this report.

Recommendations

1. Think of your website as a journey not a destination

A website is more like owning a building or garden that needs to evolve and be maintained over time. Adopting new best practice and adapting your site in response to user behaviour is the ideal.

2. Don't assume digital is not relevant to your charity

A poor website can encourage a belief that digital is 'not relevant'. This is because the poor experience creates a barrier between your charity and its beneficiary and supporters. It also discourages search engines from promoting your site. Member organisations, partner charities, award case studies and charity-focussed digital partners can all help you better understand what the value of digital could be to your charity.

3. Learn to recognise a user-centric approach

Look for evidence of a user centric approach if you are working with an agency partner. The following should all ideally be built into the development process: workshops that include users, development of pen portraits (personas) that describe your key users and their needs, a method that develops user journeys as part of the design process, and user testing. If they are not included, create your own processes to ensure users are put at the centre of your website planning.

4. Don't let a limited budget limit your ambition

Understanding and responding to users' needs is not a budget dependent line item; it is a cultural and operational imperative. This survey has shown that small charities are better at delivering good user experiences. Focus on what is important – if you can't do everything you want to with your budget, do what's most important to your user/charity, and do that well, rather than trying to achieve everything.

5. Look for a partner not a supplier

If you use an agency treat them as a partner, not a supplier. Expect to challenge them and be challenged by them. Agree clear objectives for the website and clearly define how success will be measured. It can be helpful to think of a website as a single product that blends three key skills: design, user experience (UX) & technology. Find a partner that credibly blends these three pillars. This can be difficult as many small suppliers will have an emphasis on one or the other, and large suppliers may not be in reach of your budget. It might be helpful to think of the right partner as filling gaps in your own team's skill set.

6. Don't underestimate the content challenge

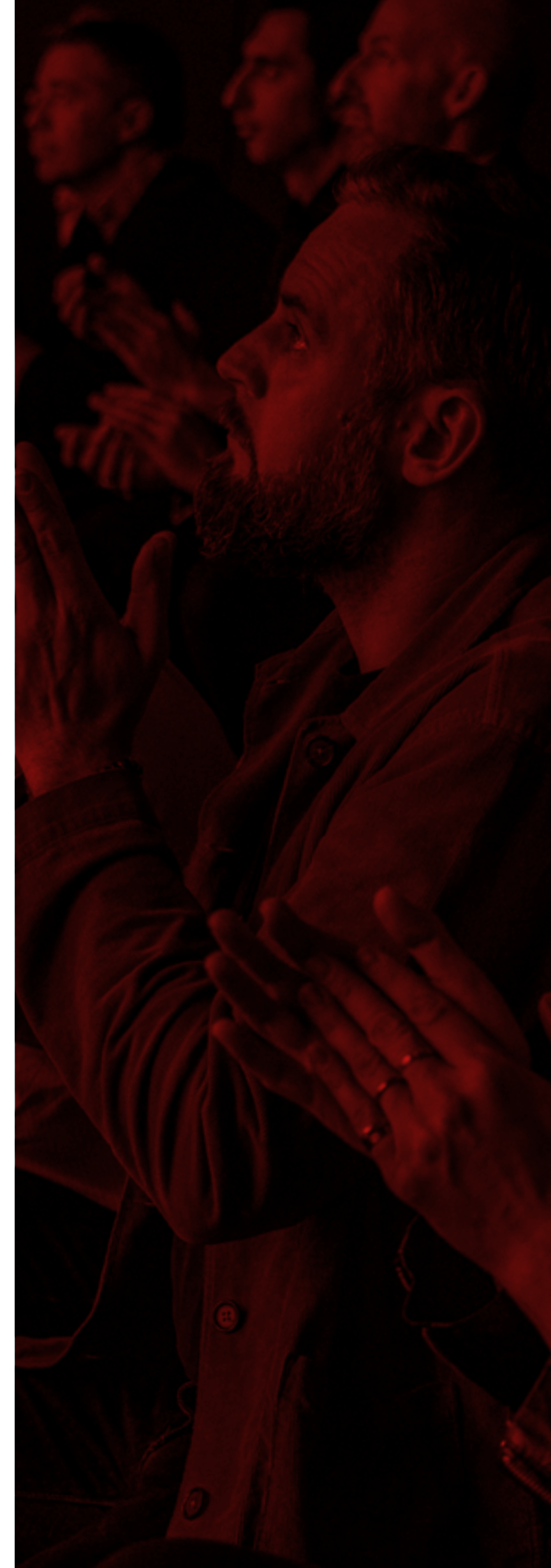
Content should be a significant part of a website project. Creating the website experience is easier than populating it with quality content that adds value to your users. Establish the role of content early on and be clear about how it should work. It is key to attracting traffic and should play a role in informing the user experience.

7. Remember the search engine experience

Search engines like Google look for simple, fast loading sites that put an emphasis on the mobile experience. Websites that feature popular design features like parallax video have slower loading times that adversely affect search performance. Most of the websites in this audit performed better on desktop than mobile which suggests there needs to be a shift in emphasis by charities, and their partners. The search engine experience of a website is as important as the user experience because it affects whether a search engine will promote your website.

8. Remember, technology will only get you so far

Website technology is mature and commoditised. Existing responsive frameworks can allow small charities to create a good website experience quickly and cheaply, using what is available rather than building something from scratch. This is particularly true for small charities that can adapt and re-use existing technology. Technology should complement and support your ideal user journeys, not define them.



Appendix

Objective

Develop a framework for consistent auditing that will enable assignment of a score-based set of criteria over a limited time frame.

What to measure?

A site may have many different attributes that can make it great. Over time, some of the criteria can become redundant. New trends may arise, and some may disappear.

Nevertheless, some criteria have always remained important. Based on this notion, we argue that to determine whether a site is of the highest standard, we need to measure whether its foundations - such as look and feel, tech solutions etc. - are strong.

Due to the nature of this project, we chose the following major categories for such assessment:

- Technical implementation. This includes performance, SEO, accessibility, best tech practices sub-categories.
- Usability. This includes a number of qualitative criteria that affect UX and the overall look and feel, focused specifically on charities.

How to measure?

To facilitate a reliable and consistent evaluation, the measurement approach must be robust. As a result, our main focus was to achieve:

- objectiveness in measuring qualitative criteria
- accuracy in scoring models
- efficiency
- accountability for industry level changes in standards over time

Technical Measurement

For technical implementation measurement we used Google’s auditing tool Lighthouse. Lighthouse is an open-source, automated tool built to improve the quality of web pages. It can be run against any web page and ratifies all the identified hurdles.

The tool assigns a score to key sub-categories for both mobile and desktop versions of the site in under one minute. It can also be used on any site without the site-owner’s permission and minimises any potential for human-error, as the process is fully automated.

The score provided is based on Google models that are well documented and maintained. This removes any additional complexity in evaluating different criteria in-house.

Finally, by using a tool developed and maintained by the tech industry leaders, we can be sure that we are benchmarking sites against the most relevant criteria at the highest standard.

We use scores produced for the following sub-categories:

- Performance. Tests response speed in different stages of page load, and measures how quickly a site responds when interacted with.
- Accessibility. Highlights opportunities to improve the accessibility of your web app. This currently tests against WCAG 2 rules (including 2.0, 2.1, A, AA, and AAA) and Section 508.
- Best practices. Tests a variety of requirements, such as correct use of libraries, page setup and other technical aspects of the site.
- SEO. Ensures that pages are optimised for search engine results ranking.

Limitations

Google highlights that some variability when running on real-world sites is to be expected as sites load different ads and scripts, and network conditions vary for each visit.

Usability Measurement

Usability measurement poses unique challenges due to its abstract nature. Put simply, usability is a measurement that reflects how user friendly any given site is.

For such purposes it has become a standard to use the System Usability Scale (SUS). SUS has been used to evaluate system usability for over three decades, with references in over 1300 articles and publications. Its scale includes 10 generic questions that auditors use to evaluate, from strongly disagree to strongly agree. All questions ask respondents to describe personal impressions of how easy the systems are to use, and how much effort it takes to understand how the system works.

While using a well-established scale is important, we recognise that in order to account for more accurate measurements within the charity sector our score should include questions addressing user journeys specific to key charity audiences - beneficiaries and supporters. As a result, we have combined both SUS and charity specific questions to achieve more charity-focused usability evaluation.

Our Usability scoring tool contains 14 questions, split into 4 distinct categories:

- SUS. We used 8 core SUS questions, where the word “system” was replaced by “site”. Each question was scored using a strongly disagree (0) - strongly agree (4) scale. These adjustments were made based on extensive research suggesting that questions 4 and 10 in the original scale can be removed if the system in question does not require assessing the ease of learning; and (b) that replacing word “system” with any other equivalent does not impact scales’ accuracy.

- General. Includes two questions aimed at assessing the success of conveying the charity’s core purpose in a clear and straightforward manner.
- Supporter. Includes two questions aimed at ensuring the supporters can identify all the different ways they can contribute to the cause with ease.
- Beneficiaries. Includes two questions aimed at ensuring beneficiaries can find information about the services available and easily access the services aimed at them.

Limitations

We assume that the qualitative data will be less likely to be as robust and objective as the Technical score. In the future we will aim to reduce the effect of auditor’s bias by defining scoring standards through usage-documentation. We will provide the auditor with visual examples of what should be evaluated at a highest/lowest standard, as well as some industry context around what key audiences may be expecting/looking for.

Scoring

The Technology score is the average score assigned to both desktop and mobile sites. Below is a detailed summary of the score:

$$T_{mobile} = \frac{Accessibility_m + Performance_m + SEO_m + Best\ practices_m}{4}$$
$$T_{desktop} = \frac{Accessibility_d + Performance_d + SEO_d + Best\ practices_d}{4}$$
$$Technology = \frac{T_{mobile} + T_{desktop}}{2}$$

The Usability Scoring tool consists of 14 questions that are split into 4 individual scores based on 4 key areas: System Usability Scale (SUS), general, beneficiary and supporter. Below is a detailed account on each individual score computation:

SUS score, where SUS is a set of values for questions 1 through to 8 within the Usability score tool:

$$SUS_{mobile} = \frac{\sum_{i \in SUS}^n}{n}$$
$$SUS_{desktop} = \frac{\sum_{i \in SUS}^n}{n}$$
$$SUS = \frac{SUS_{mobile} + SUS_{desktop}}{2}$$

General score, where G is a set of values for questions 9 and 10 within the Usability score tool:

$$G_{mobile} = \frac{\sum_{i \in G}^n}{n}$$
$$G_{desktop} = \frac{\sum_{i \in G}^n}{n}$$
$$G = \frac{G_{mobile} + G_{desktop}}{2}$$

Beneficiary score, where B is a set of values for questions 11 and 12 within the Usability score tool:

$$G_{mobile} = \frac{\sum_{i \in B}^n}{n}$$
$$B_{desktop} = \frac{\sum_{i \in B}^n}{n}$$
$$B = \frac{B_{mobile} + B_{desktop}}{2}$$

Supporter score, where S is a set of values for question 13 and 14 within the Usability score tool:

$$S_{mobile} = \frac{\sum_{i \in B}^n}{n}$$
$$S_{desktop} = \frac{\sum_{i \in B}^n}{n}$$
$$S = \frac{S_{mobile} + S_{desktop}}{2}$$

The Usability score will be based on an individual charity’s profile where the final score may consist of all 4 individual scores or fewer. To ensure we do not penalise charities which are not meant to be used by beneficiaries and/or supporters directly, we developed conditional scoring based on weights:

- If charity has beneficiaries and supporters:

Usability = SUS * 0.5 + G * 0.1 + S * 0.2 + B * 0.2

- If charity has only beneficiaries or supporters:

Usability = SUS * 0.5 + G * 0.2 + (B * 0.3 ∪ S * 0.3)

- If charity has no beneficiaries or supporters:

Usability = SUS * 0.7 + G * 0.3

The weights assigned to each case are based on the following assumptions:

- SUS score is the most accurate, therefore should have the highest weight.
- Beneficiaries and supporters are equally important if both are present.
- General questions have the lowest weight in all situations.

Overall Score

The overall score represents the average of both Technology and Usability scores based on our assumption that both Technology and Usability are of equal importance when it comes to the overall evaluation of any site performance.

Overall = $\frac{Technology + Usability}{2}$

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Full SUS scale

- I think that I would like to use this system frequently.
- I found the system unnecessarily complex.
- I thought the system was easy to use.
- I think that I would need the support of a technical person to be able to use this system.
- I found the various functions in this system were well integrated.
- I thought there was too much inconsistency in this system.
- I would imagine that most people would learn to use this system very quickly.
- I found the system very cumbersome to use.
- I felt very confident using the system.
- I needed to learn a lot of things before I could get going with this system.

Credits



Co-Author, Strategy and Planning
Mark Iremonger, Chair, Pixeled Eggs and BIMA Charities Council member

Co-Author, Research Methodology, Data Analysis and Auditing
Greta Sivickaite, Data and Behaviour Analyst, Pixeled Eggs

Website Auditing
Talia Flintoff, Quality Assurance, Pixeled Eggs

Audit Project Management
Nicola Barnard, Operations Director, Pixeled Eggs

Sponsor
Sepas Seraj, Founder & CEO, Pixeled Eggs



Production Project Management
Seb Roskell, Integrated Project Director, Engine Creative

Copy Editing
Scarlett Rushton, Content Editor, Engine Creative

Publication Design
Marina Suprunova, Designer, Engine Creative
Kate Harrison, Designer, Engine Creative
Tiago Sotinho, Designer, Engine Creative

Sponsor
Ete Davies, Chief Executive Officer

BIMA

BIMA Sponsors
Chris Flood, Content & Search Lead, Cancer Research UK, Co-chair of the BIMA Charities Council
Giulia Merlo, Head of User Research and Design, Citizens Advice, Co-chair of the BIMA Charities Council

Holly Hall, MD, BIMA

Thank you to the members of the BIMA Charity Council

For more information visit
<https://bima.co.uk/councils/charities/>

About BIMA

BIMA is the voice of digital and tech.

We represent a community of businesses, charities and academia across the UK. We drive innovation through knowledge sharing, showcasing best practice and developing talent. And we give our members the chance to have their voices heard and to make a difference.

Members of BIMA value innovation, the sharing of knowledge and best practice, and supporting the next generation of digital professionals. They are leaders in their field and committed to making outstanding digital experiences.

Discover more at
WWW.BIMA.CO.UK

Email us on
WEB@BIMA.CO.UK