

# **Volleyball England Conference**

## **Building Free Websites workshop**

27 July 2019, Loughborough

Delivered by Joke De Winter

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Hello, and welcome.

My name is Joke De Winter and I am a web designer.

For the past 10 years I have run a tiny one-person web design company here in Loughborough, designing and building websites for a variety of small businesses, organisations and individuals. The last few years I have also discovered a taste for teaching web development and passing on my knowledge.

In this workshop I'll guide you through the challenges of creating and maintaining a website when being a web designer is not your day job.

I will cover the following topics:

- How do you go about creating and maintaining your club website?
- I'll give an overview of popular website builder platforms with their pros, cons & costs.
- What about social media as an alternative to having a website?
- Tips on choosing a template design.
- Examples of club websites showing the challenges you face.
- A checklist of 7 things you can do to improve your existing website.
- ... and time permitting I will answer any questions you may have.

## **1. You're in charge of the club website.**

Now what?

The first challenge you face is deciding what you are going to put on the website. A mistake often made is starting with what you want to say on your website. But even though your website is yours, it is not for you. It's for your members, anyone with an interest in the club or people wanting to become a member.

Start with asking yourself what information they want to find on your website.

For your club website that may be things like:

1. How do I join?
2. What teams do you have?
3. Where do you train?
4. When and where are the matches?
5. How do I get in touch with the club?

Use this list to create a page structure for your website. Group things that you feel belong together. Aim to end up with no more than seven groups. Less is better.

These groups will become the main menu on your website.

Good labelling will make it easier for your visitors to find what they need. And it will be easier for you too. When you add an extra page down the line, it will be obvious where it needs to go.

Here is an example of how your structure might look.

It consists of six groups:

1. About
2. Teams
3. Fixtures/Results
4. Membership
5. News
6. and Contact.

Each group is then divided further into child pages with related content.

1. About the club <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• History</li><li>• Staff</li><li>• Facilities</li><li>• Sponsorship deals</li><li>• Policies</li></ul>	4. Membership <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How to join</li><li>• Renewing membership</li><li>• Special perks for members</li></ul>
2. Teams <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Men</li><li>• Women</li><li>• Youth</li></ul>	5. News
3. Fixtures & Results <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Calendar</li><li>• League Tables</li><li>• Archive of results</li></ul>	6. Contact <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Location / Venues</li><li>• Email</li><li>• Phone</li><li>• Social media</li></ul>

Writing content for a website is the least favourite part of most website owners.

If writing is not your thing, find someone to help you. The quality of your writing can affect how people and search engines perceive your club.

You don't need to write essay length pages. It's better to write bite-sized content with section titles so people can scan a page to find what they need.

With images, always try and write a caption as well. They are a crucial part in making a website accessible to EVERY user. As a bonus, search engines like them too.

An important thing to watch out for with images is their dimensions and file size. Images taken with mobile phones can easily have widths much larger than the average website size on a desktop computer.

An image with large dimensions often translates in a large file size as well. The bigger the file size, the more time it takes for a browser to download the image. This slows down the load speed of your website. Nobody likes to wait for a website to load.

Try and reduce your image dimension and file size before you upload them to your website. Aim for files less than 1Mb, but it depends on the original

image if that is achievable. There are various online services available that can help you with optimising images.

The challenge with websites is that you need to keep them updated. Because you have limited time, you need to be smart. Delegate content generating amongst club members. Create a content army.

For example:

- Each of your teams can have someone responsible for creating team related news.
- Ask club fans or members, who attend matches, to supply match reports and images.

Whoever you ask to help should not expect to report back every week. But once a month. Nor should they write long articles or provide folders full of images. A few paragraphs, two or three, and a few pictures is enough.

With as few as 5 people you can have enough content to fill an entire year. For this your team of content soldiers needs to supply two paragraphs of text and one image per week between them.

Once you have set up a regular supply of content, set aside 10-15 minutes every week to add this to the site. Do this on the same day every week. This creates a routine for you, and a routine for your visitors to check out the new content. This is especially helpful if you also post on social media. A regular posting schedule will get noticed by your followers.

## **2. Website builder platforms**

When it comes to building your website you need to decide what platform you are going to use. If you have limited funds you need to look at alternative DIY options - and there are many available.

To choose a platform you need to pay attention to:

- Functionality,
- Cost,
- Ease of use,
- And customisation.

### **Functionality**

Ask yourself what kind of features do you want or need on your website?

- A blog/news section?
- Photo galleries or videos?
- Will you be selling products?
- A booking system?

The platform you choose will need to offer whatever features you need.

### **Cost**

There is no point in looking at platforms that exceed your budget. And the cost of a platform may include the following:

- The monthly fee or hosting cost.
- The cost of a commercial template.
- The cost of a custom domain name.

### **Ease of use**

Every new system will come with a learning curve, and whether a system is easy depends on your skill level. The more time needed to learn something new, the less time to do all the other things you have on your plate.

But a platform that is easy to use may also have limitations in how much you can do with it.

## **Customisation**

Look for a platform with a choice in design templates you can customise to reflect the team branding you already have.

Some platforms offer a limited amount of templates, others have far too many. Neither is ideal, but it comes down to how ambitious you want to be in how your website looks.

## **The overview of five platforms**

With those points in mind, I'll cover the pros and cons of five of the major website builder platforms available.

- WordPress.org
- WordPress.com
- Wix
- Weebly
- And Google Sites

I chose these, based on a list of 208 volleyball club websites I checked. And these 5 are used the most.

The list breaks down as follows:

- 19 link to a volleyball page on a university or school website.
- 21 link to a social media profile.
- And 167 have their own website.

Before I go through the pros and cons of each, I have to tell you I am biased towards WordPress. Most of the sites I have designed and build in the past ten years were self hosted WordPress.

But I have experimented with the others to get an idea of how they work, and what is good and not so good about them.

## **WordPress.org**

WordPress started as a blogging platform in 2003. It has since grown to be capable of creating any website you want.

It is also the world's most popular website platform, powering over 34% of websites.

### **Advantage**

- It give you complete freedom over design and functionality.
- Large collection of templates, nearly all mobile optimised.
- Large collection of plugins to extend the functionality of your site.
- Large community of users where you can find help.
- Excellent for Search Engine Optimisation (SEO).
- Good import and export facilities for your content, if you want to move to, or away from WordPress.

### **Disadvantage**

- You need website hosting and a domain, where you can install WordPress. However many hosts offer dedicated WordPress hosting making installation easy.
- WordPress is software and has regular updates. These are a matter of clicking a button, but failing to keep up can cause problems down the line.

### **Price**

- The WordPress software is free.
- Dedicated WordPress hosting from a good host is around £10/month.
- A co.uk domain name costs around £5/year.
- A good commercial theme or template costs around £50.

## **WordPress.com**

This is the simpler version of WordPress. Like the .org version it includes a lot of features, but some may come at a cost.

### **Advantage**

- A hosted platform, no need to install software.
- Large choice of templates with customisations via widgets.
- Good export facilities if you want to move away from WordPress.com, perhaps to a WordPress.org solution.

### **Disadvantage**

- Most templates focus on blogs.
- The Basic plan is free, but limited.
- Installing plugins, templates or adding a custom domain requires a paid plan.

### **Price**

- Free with WordPress branding and using a WordPress domain name.
- To remove the branding, use a custom domain and add extra functionality and customisation options the cost is between £2.25 to £36 per month.



## **Wix**

Drag-and-drop web page builder, with integrated hosting.

It includes an artificial design intelligence tool that helps you build your site. I tried this and it's nifty, but I found it quite limiting, because you're stuck with what it gives you.

### **Advantage**

- A hosted platform, no need to install software.
- Large library of templates.
- Drag-and-drop page builder.
- And lots of free apps you can install to extend the functionality.

### **Disadvantage**

- Changing template, means rebuilding your entire website.
- Not all templates are mobile optimised.
- Difficult to move your website content to another platform.
- Not great for Search Engine Optimisation or page speed.

### **Price**

- Free with Wix branding and using a Wix domain name.
- To remove the branding, use a custom domain or add some extra functionality the cost is between £3 to £18 per month.

## **Weebly**

Another easy to use drag-and-drop web page builder, with integrated hosting.

### **Advantage**

- A hosted platform, no need to install software
- Good choice of templates.
- And it performed very well in limited page speed tests I conducted.

### **Disadvantage**

- The functionality Weebly offers is all you get. If you need something extra they don't have, you're stuck.
- Not all templates work on mobile devices.
- Not great for Search Engine Optimisation.
- If you want to move away from Weebly you can export your site as a zip file, but it will not include your blog. If your website includes sliders they won't work in the exported site.
- I found the admin area very slow, which made doing even the smallest thing take a long time.

### **Price**

- Free with Weebly branding and using a Weebly domain name.
- If you want to remove the branding, use a custom domain and add some extra functionality the cost is between £4 to £18 per month.

## **Google Sites**

A free website builder from Google, similar to Google Docs, Sheets and Slides.

Great for creating simple websites that are easy to manage.

### **Advantage**

- Integrated with Google products.
- Your site is saved in Google Drive, so you have a backup.
- Simple and straightforward to use.
- Drag-and-drop page builder.
- The templates are mobile optimised.
- Good for website page speed.

### **Disadvantage**

- Limited design options and functionality.
- Not that great for Search Engine Optimisation. Which is a surprise.
- Complex integration of other Google Apps may need a G Suite subscription.

### **Price**

- Free using a Google Sites domain.
- A GSuite subscription can be £4.60 or £9.20 per month, per user.

## **And that's all five of them.**

If you're unsure about what would be best for you, go and try them out and see how you like them. All these platforms, except for WordPress.org, allow you to create an account. You can then experiment without actually launching whatever website you have created.

If you want to know if WordPress.org is for you, the best way is trying out WordPress.com. They are for the most part the same, but WordPress.org has more possibilities.

### **3. Social media as an alternative**

Twenty-one of the club websites I looked at used a social media profile as their online web presence.

You have to ask yourself: Are they on to something? Because a social media profile is:

- free,
- easy to set up,
- almost no learning curve,
- and can reach a large number of people with less effort than a website.

Or, are they missing a trick?

Because you need to consider the downsides.

- You have to stick to the terms and conditions of these platforms. Generally they own all your content.
- The design options are limited. Your profile looks pretty much like all the other profiles.
- You are competing with everything else that happens on that platform.
- Access to a page on Facebook is restricted to people who have an account. You can still view a page if you don't, but you receive prompts to log in or create one.

If your only online presence is a social media profile, then have a plan to reach people who are not able to access that profile. Because there are people who don't have or want to have a Facebook account.

## **4. Choosing a template design**

Once you have decided on a website platform, the next challenge you face is choosing a template design.

### **Tips when choosing a design**

It's easy to feel overwhelmed when faced with this task. Ask yourself the following questions:

- What are you creating?
- Is there a template demo website to explore?
- How flexible is the template?
- Is it mobile optimised?

### **What are you creating?**

Look at your list of requirements:

- If you need a news section, your template needs to support blog functionality.
- If you intend to sell merchandise, your template needs to be e-commerce ready.

Also think about the future and how your site may grow, and if your chosen template can grow with you.

### **Is there a template demo site to explore the design?**

Quite often a template comes with a little website demo. Go through this and explore every page it has.

- Check if the navigation is intuitive.
- How are the template features used across the pages?
- Is the template still attractive, or even suitable, once you move beyond the home page?

## **How flexible is the template when you want to customise colours and fonts?**

Some templates will have many options to do so, others will not. Experiment and see how far you can push a template within these limitations, and if it is an issue if you can't.

## **And most important of all is the template mobile optimised?**

Website visitors from hand held devices have been on the increase in the past few years. So your website needs to look decent on whatever device someone views your website.

This is known as responsive design. The template you choose needs to be mobile optimised.

## **Take your time**

Don't rush into choosing a template. Remember with Wix, changing a template means recreating your entire site.

Choose a template based on what you need, not on what you like.

It can be very tempting to choose a flashy template because it comes with all the bells and whistles. But these can be more than you can cope with. Complex layouts, cool sliders and parallax effects always look good on the template demo. Try and imagine these things with your own content. Will they still look good?

Try a template. Experiment with all the functionality. Check to make sure all your requirements are achievable. If it feels comfortable, then it could become a contender.

## 5. Club website examples

Lets look some examples of club websites. Each group covers an aspect of a website design.

The examples are a mixture of good and not so good. I am not showing them to name and shame. But because they are good examples of the challenges you face when you're not a developer.

For several I created mockups with possible fixes.

### Page titles

Page titles on websites are often overlooked. The only place they are visible is in the tab of your browser window. They may seem like a tiny detail not worth bothering about. But they are the first tangible bit of content a browser displays of your website. And they are the first thing a search engine reads. Spending some time fine-tuning these is never wasted.

Some platforms will place the name of your website in the page titles. Others go further and add the name of the current page too. But this is not guaranteed. Check your titles to see what happens on your website. If all your pages display exactly the same title, you have some fixing to do.

On the **Cardiff Volleyball Club** website, the page titles only display the page name. No reference to their club name. This is not ideal, but at least it changes as you visit different pages on the website.

If you want your page titles to be almost without effort than WordPress is going to be the most helpful. **Weymouth Beach Volleyball Club** is a good example of that. WordPress allows you to set what the last bit of your page title is going to be: this should be your club name. The first part will be automatically set to be the name of the current page or post you are viewing.

## Navigation

Your menu is how visitors explore your site. Regular visitors will learn where to go for what they need, but new visitors will need directions. It's tempting to go overboard and have a menu that includes every page on your website.

That is what must have happened on the **Rugby Phoenix Volleyball Club** site. Another problem is, the menu goes into several lines. The bottom line of links now sits in the light section of the background and is hard to read.

Rugby Phoenix use WordPress.com, and with WordPress some templates will have an option to create more than one menu. If this is possible with their theme, the solution is to create two different menus.

A main one with only the necessary items at the top, immediately fixing the readability issue. And a secondary one displayed somewhere near the bottom of the page with less important pages.

An all-round nice example of a menu sits on the **Tamworth Spartans Volleyball Club** site. It looks lovely, it's reasonably compact and gives you a clear sign of which page you are currently viewing. On mobile devices it slims down to a sexy menu icon that becomes a drop down menu once you click on it.

## Hero images

It's very fashionable at the moment to have a big hero image at the top of your home page. If you have a good image to use for this, go for it.

Often these large hero images have text displayed over the top. And this is where you need to be careful. First of all the text needs to be readable. Second you have a hero image behind it, so the text should not cover too much of it.

The **City of Bristol Volleyball Club** has it almost right. There is a nice hero image that doesn't distract from the text on top of it. But there is a lot of text.

It would work better if the history section sat below the image. The first line of the history quote can sit on top of the image as a welcome message to visitors.

Another example of hero images and text on top is the **Deep Dish Beach Volleyball** site. They also appear to have access to great photographs.



The white text is easy enough to read, but the blue text has issues. By changing the colour to pink and adding an opaque white background, the bottom line is now much easier to read.

## **Home page content**

What goes on your home page is an invitation to the rest of your website. You can keep it simple and leave it to your visitors to explore the menu and find their way around. But it is better to use the home page to “advertise” the rest of the website.

**Lincoln Cannons Volleyball Club** does a fine job of this. The hero image and text combination are excellent. There is a nice intro below that, followed by a call to action to view all matches.

Roughly in the middle of the home page is a section featuring the clubs social media feed. It includes Twitter and Instagram posts and looks very nice. But it's a shame that this section isn't showcasing their latest news posts from their own website.

Because they abandoned the news section in 2015 in favour of social media posts. This means 3 and a half years worth of posts no longer easily accessible to view, because they were generated on platforms where they don't own the content.

There is no reason why you can't have all the cake and eat it. Whatever you post on social media, you can also post on your own website. I know this increases the applications to post on. But there are solutions, like IFTTT, that can help with this.

Posting on social media isn't a bad thing to do, but don't risk losing all that good stuff when these platforms go down or decide to change their Terms of Service.

But back to this website. This site is wonderful. It's self hosted WordPress using a very customised commercial theme. The web designer is also the clubs Publicity Officer. Of course they're lucky to have someone in the club who can do this. But if you have web designers in your club, then approach them, they may be willing to help.

## News posts

We know that creating content on social media is easier than writing blog posts, but I did find clubs that do the blogging and creating news very well.

One of them is **Stockport Volleyball Club**. The news posts are often no more than a few paragraphs. And looking at the archives the posting is regular, with a rough average of once every other month. Still some work to do, but they are consistent.

## Responsive design

Your template needs to be mobile optimised.

Sometimes this is achieved by serving two different versions of a website. One optimised for larger viewports like desktops and laptops. Another optimised for mobile devices.

A better solution is one website that adapts to whatever device it is displayed on.

At the end of the day it doesn't matter what solution your website uses, as long as there is a solution.

I found three Weebly sites to show what can happen depending on the solution used.

**London Lynx Volleyball Club** uses a template that is not mobile optimised at all. The site looks exactly the same on desktop and mobile. On mobile it all becomes tiny and difficult to read and use.

**Leeds RGA Volleyball Club** serves two different versions of the website.

On a desktop the site has a dark design, on mobile the colours are reversed.

It's a better solution, but with the colour swap it feels like a different site. I find the mobile version easier to read. White text on a dark background may look cool, but the readability is not as good.

**Leicester Athena Volleyball Club** has a responsive template. This gives a continued experience on all device widths. When you make the browser window smaller, the layout will respond to the available width.

This is the kind of behaviour you want to look for in your templates.

## Plugin dangers

If you want to add functionality to your site without knowing how to code, you can make use of plugins or apps. With that comes a risk that things might either not work, or stop working at some point.

**Poole Panthers Volleyball Club** are using a Google Maps plugin. But the map appears with an error message from Google. This likely relates to Google changing the conditions for using their Maps scripts. You can still use it for free in most cases. But you need to give them your credit card details, in case you go over the free limit. It looks like Poole Panthers have not given Google their credit card information. I don't blame them. Google are being too intrusive on this, but in the meantime the Poole Panthers map looks a little off.

Another pitfall of using plugins is the **Plymouth Volleyball Club** website. It is a self hosted WordPress website. They are using what looks like a plugin to add a Facebook like button. But the plugin contains an error - through no fault of their own - and that error is taking down the entire site. If you know anyone at Plymouth Volleyball Club tell them to disable that plugin, it might fix the issue.

## Conclusion

From all the club websites I looked at, some would raise eyebrows amongst my colleagues. But there are a lot of sites that do look good.

I don't know what the web development expertise is of the people involved. But it proves that you can create good stuff using self builder solutions.

## 6. Checklist to take away

This brings me nearly to the end of this workshop. I hope you've picked up something useful to take away. To make sure you do, here is a list of things for you to check on your sites.

**Page titles:** Check they are different on every page, and follow the page name / club name pattern.

**Alt text on images:** Useful for visitors using assistive technology. They count on that description to experience the image.

**Image size:** Check file size and dimensions of images. And optimise before you upload the image to your website.

**Navigation:** Keep it simple and consider using a secondary menu in the footer of your pages.

**Contact forms:** Fill out your own form to make sure it works.

**Social feeds:** Remove and replace with something better. For example:

- a call to action to join your club,
- a list of recent news,
- or an introduction to your teams.

**Visitor counters:** If you do want a meaningful idea of who visits your website add Google Analytics instead.

And that's it all I have to say.

If you have questions, feel free to ask. I'll be around after the workshops and if you miss me, you can always get in touch at [joke@jokedewinter.co.uk](mailto:joke@jokedewinter.co.uk)