

# Digital Comms in 2020-21

What the CharityComms Digital  
Benchmark tells us about charities'  
digital response to the coronavirus

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“Investing in digital has been a huge focus for many organisations over the past year, with an increase in a digital-first approach to communications.”

**Sarah Clarke**

Head of Membership, CharityComms



## WELCOME

# Investing in Digital

The Digital Benchmark has grown from strength-to-strength over the past eight years and we were delighted that the dedication of our partners Uprise Up and Bertie Bosrédon and the CharityComms team was recognised in 2020 with a Drum Digital Advertising Award for Best Use of Data.

Investing in digital has been a huge focus for many organisations over the past year, with an increase in a digital-first approach to communications. In April 2020, [Media Trust](#) and [CharityComms](#) partnered on a sector survey to better understand the key comms challenges that charities were facing as a result of COVID-19. Producing digital content and supporting users who would usually have access to face-to-face services were among the top challenges listed. Encouragingly, an updated survey from February 2021 revealed that 50% of people feel their ability to communicate effectively with stakeholders has improved since last year, and more than 60% have improved confidence in their organisation's digital skills.



Charities have had to reprioritise, adjust and adapt their communications and marketing rapidly to meet a changing landscape and provide a very different type of support to their communities. This has also been reflected in the wider marketing world, with a strong customer experience emerging as the most important [customer priority](#). With [77% of charities](#) having made greater use of digital and

technology during the pandemic, investment in digital will continue to grow and expand on making services more accessible and sustainable. But how has this been reflected internally, in upskilling, improving processes and ways of working as well as providing a more effective service externally?

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“Charities have had to reprioritise and adapt their communications and marketing rapidly to meet a changing landscape”

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A recent CharityComms [salary survey](#) told us that just under 72% of those working in charity mar/comms feel that a current need for them to work increased hours is because of a continuation of stretched resources that's not necessarily due to COVID-19, with a lack of digital skills and experience across teams cited as one of the reasons.

**60%**

Of people have improved confidence in their organisation's digital skills

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**31%**

Increase of senior managers or people at board level reporting a 'good understanding' of digital

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**77%**

Of charities have made greater use of digital and technology during the pandemic

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The ability to advocate for an increase in digital skills and long-term investment is vital if the sector is to continue to develop their amazing achievements of the past year. The importance of including digital in business plans and strategy is also reflected in our survey results - those who feel that senior management or board levels have a good understanding of digital has increased, up almost 9% to just under 40%.

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“87% companies are concerned that they have skills gaps, or expect to encounter one within a few years”

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CharityComms recently produced a series of blogs and resources with the help of partners RandallFox around organisational structure and its impact on [building a healthy comms culture](#). That research highlighted some new roles emerging along with a focus on more resources dedicated to strategic overview, planning, content and insight, digital marketing and internal comms. Internal comms and training continues to be vital in lessening the digital skills gap, as working from home has proved - a [recent report](#) by McKinsey suggests that 87% companies are concerned that they have skills gaps, or expect to encounter one within a few years.



**Sarah Clarke**

Head of Membership, CharityComms


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A key aspect of our continued development of the Digital Benchmark is to give participants the ability to use their own data to advocate for increased investment in digital at all levels. By more clearly demonstrating the effectiveness of their digital performance, our members can offer insights for improvement across their fundraising and comms work, set KPIs, track progress and better embed digital throughout their organisation.



We are delighted to be able to launch an updated dashboard for 2021 and look forward to continuing to support our fantastic digital community and reporting on your wonderful achievements over the coming year.





“I was bowled over  
by the fantastic  
idea; benchmarking  
performance against  
the sector to be able to  
spot opportunities and  
raise standards.”

**John Onion**

Managing Director at Uprise Up



# Development of the Benchmark

I first heard about the Digital Benchmark at Barnardo's office, almost 8 years ago. I was bowled over by the fantastic idea; benchmarking performance against the sector to be able to spot opportunities and raise standards. Then, as now, it relies on considerable openness on behalf of all the members.

**The benefits to those charities (and their causes) for taking this brave approach are immense. It also helps to pick up the sector as a whole. The Benchmark supports charities in:**

- Comparing performance to peers
- Setting realistic goals
- Making a case internally for increased digital investment
- Reporting on improvements to digital performance

Three and a half years ago we were delighted to have been invited by CharityComms to develop a DataStudio dashboard that would improve the Benchmark's usability, whilst reducing the resource needed to continuously update the spreadsheet format it was in.



Since then we've been on a journey of continuous improvement. The dashboard updates frequently, meaning that members can access the data at

any time and choose the time period that interests them, rather than waiting for a fixed monthly report. Data quality is now more accurate, as traffic data across members are reported in a consistent way. Functionality and usability has improved too, making continued use of the improvements to Google's DataStudio itself.

The Benchmark achieved high recognition in 2020 by winning the European Drum Award for 'Best Use of Data'. Other finalists for the award include corporates such as John Lewis, NFL and ITV. We were up against big organisations with some major budgets!

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“As a result of its success, more members have joined the Benchmark, and this has improved the sample of data we have”

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As a result of its success, more members have joined the Benchmark, and this has improved the sample of data we have. An increase in membership also caused the Benchmark to slow down considerably, so our most recent focus has been developing a secure database to hold all the information we need. This move has reduced the processing requirements of 'querying' each member's Analytics account separately. For anyone who hasn't accessed the Benchmark recently, I would encourage you to take another peek - it's much faster.

## The future

Soon we plan to display ecommerce transactional data within the Benchmark reports. We also want to develop other conversion metrics, though the challenge we face is ensuring all recorded data is consistent across the many member websites. The advantages of understanding more about the traffic that actually converts for charities are considerable.

Also, with GA4 (Google Analytics latest version) being released recently and many changes to how cookies operate, 2021 is set to be another busy year!

There is still a lot more that we can do. It is important for us that we make the report useful for participants. We love displaying fun graphs and interesting data, but we want to make the Digital Benchmark as helpful as it can be to you.

And for that we need your continued help: What would you find useful? Where can we improve things? Despite the value of this tool, now that we have it running smoothly from a database, it can do much more. It feels like we aren't even close to hitting the ceiling of what is possible, so the sky's the limit..

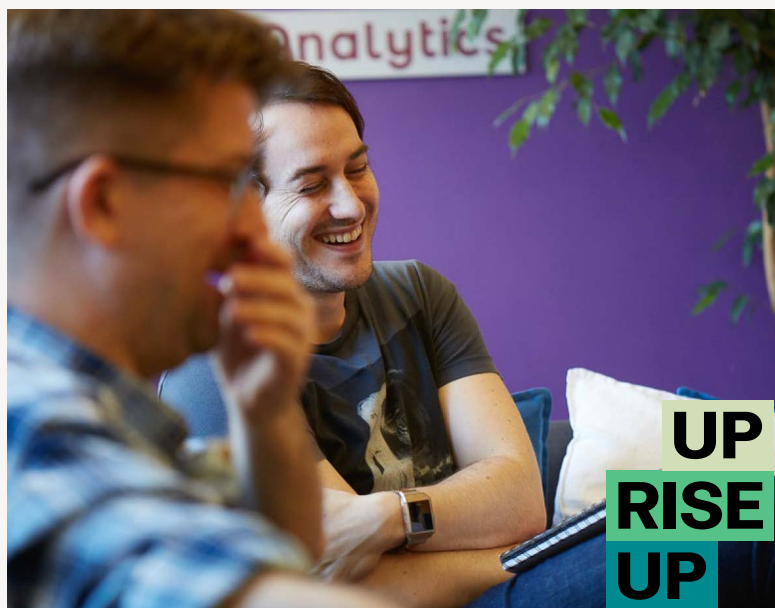
As members who use the information, the more you can let us know what you need, the better it can become!



**John Onion**

Managing Director at Uprise Up

✉ [john.onion@upriseup.co.uk](mailto:john.onion@upriseup.co.uk)



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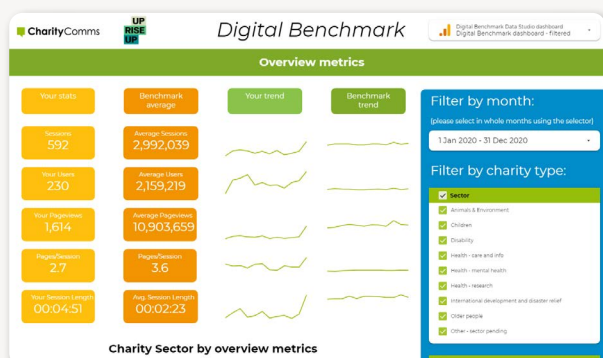
## BENCHMARK

# CharityComms Digital Benchmark

The CharityComms Digital Benchmark is only possible thanks to the group of charities that agree to pool their digital data, and we'd like to thank you for being part of that. Pooling the data in this way allows us all to compare and evaluate online performance and ultimately to deliver better results for everyone.

### What is the Digital Benchmark?

The Digital Benchmark is an interactive dashboard in Google Data Studio, in which participant charities can see how their digital performance compares to their peers. Data can be broken down by multiple dimensions, including sector (e.g. health charities, or international development), digital team size, income amount, user devices and traffic source.



The Digital Benchmark takes Google Analytics data from across the member charities to show trends as well as what does and doesn't work for charities in the UK. This can then be used to inform your digital strategy going forwards.

The Benchmark is a constantly evolving entity, with new pages and new data being developed all the time. We want to be constantly updating the data to be able to answer any new questions that you are asking (consciously or not), so if there is anything here that you need or would like built upon do let us know.

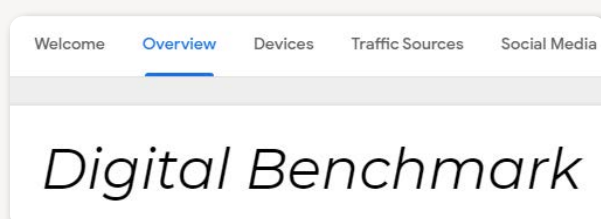
### How does the Digital Benchmark work?

When you become a participant charity, we will establish a "CharityComms" view on your Analytics that follows the same setup as all other charities in order to ensure the data is consistent. Your data is then pulled into a secure database, from which we can run queries to populate the dashboard (these queries are run overnight, adding the previous day's data to the Benchmark).

"The Benchmark is a constantly evolving entity, with new pages and new data being developed all the time"

### What does the Digital Benchmark measure?

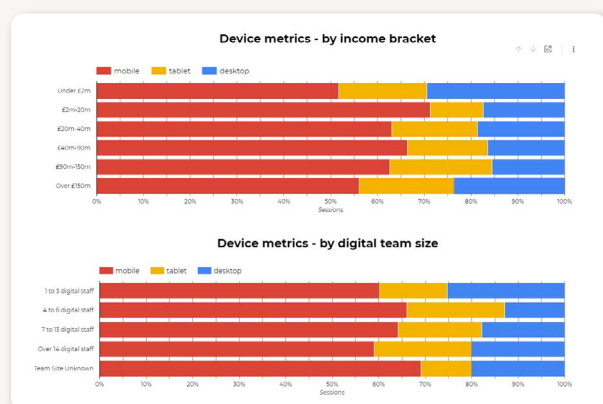
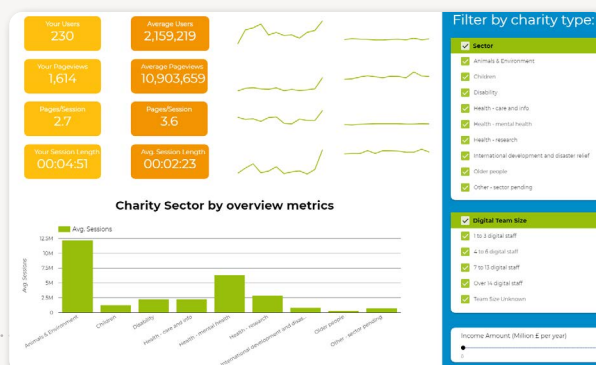
The Digital Benchmark tracks a number of metrics which are divided into four tabs in the Benchmark: Overview, Device, Traffic Source and Social Media.



# CharityComms Digital Benchmark

## Overview

The overview tab allows you to see how your audience stacks up to your peers' by comparing Sessions, Page views, Pages per Session, Average Session Duration, Bounce Rate and New vs Returning traffic.

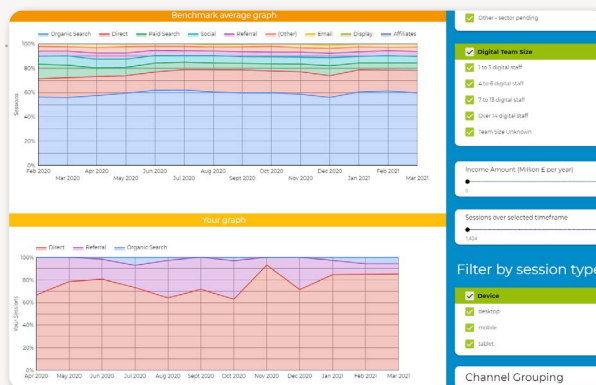


## Devices

This page breaks the data down by devices (mobile, desktop and tablet) first. Showing device usage across time, as well as devices across other dimensions such as digital team size, income bracket and charity sector.

## Traffic Sources

This page focuses on traffic sources as the primary dimension, providing an illustration of traffic levels by channel, which can be broken down further against all other metrics.



Social media - by income bracket					
Income	% Facebook	% Twitter	% LinkedIn	% Instagram	% YouTube
Under £20k	84.6%	2.0%	4.2%	1.4%	6.8%
£20k-£30k	76.6%	12.8%	2.8%	1.9%	5.9%
£30k-£40k	62.8%	5.7%	0.8%	1.9%	0.3%
£40k-£50k	84.8%	6.7%	1.3%	3.7%	0.2%
£50k-£60k	70.6%	10.9%	0.9%	1.4%	1.5%
Over £60k	88.1%	7.9%	5.7%	14.8%	0.4%

Social media - by digital team size					
Digital Team Size	% Facebook	% Twitter	% LinkedIn	% Instagram	% YouTube
1 to 3 digital staff	85.6%	8.7%	1.8%	1.7%	0.8%
4 to 6 digital staff	78.7%	8.7%	1.9%	3.9%	0.3%
7 to 10 digital staff	86.3%	6.7%	1.9%	2.7%	0.3%
Over 10 digital staff	70.4%	7.9%	1.9%	1.7%	0.4%
Team size unknown	81.1%	7.9%	2.1%	4.7%	0.7%

Social media - by charity sector					
Sector	% Facebook	% Twitter	% LinkedIn	% Instagram	% YouTube
Animals & Environment	84.3%	5.7%	0.3%	1.7%	0.8%
Children	78.7%	8.7%	1.9%	3.9%	0.3%
Disability	87.1%	10.9%	4.7%	0.3%	1.4%
Health - care and info	72.8%	9.7%	1.9%	3.2%	0.2%
Health - mental health	64.0%	18.2%	3.3%	2.2%	1.7%
Health - research	84.8%	1.9%	1.9%	0.3%	0.3%
International development and disaster relief	95.9%	2.1%	0.7%	0.7%	0.7%
Other people	78.2%	18.8%	10.2%	<0.0%	0.4%
Other sector pending	60.7%	15.3%	6.0%	15.3%	0.9%

## Social Media

On this page we look at Social Media, and the traffic levels coming from each social media channel. We then break down the social media traffic into percentages from each of the key social media networks.



# CharityComms Digital Benchmark

### Interrogating the Digital Benchmark data

We believe that the Digital Benchmark should create actionable insights for the digital teams that use it. There are a multitude of ways that participant charities can interrogate and understand the data in the Digital Benchmark to deliver different outcomes.

#### Participant charities have reported that they use the data to:

- Understand online performance
- Set high standards
- Maximise your marketing ROI
- Make the case for additional resources

### Ask the right questions

To make sure you're getting the most out of the Digital Benchmark, you first need to establish that you are asking the right questions for your charity's goals. For example, do you want to use the Digital Benchmark data to help you divide resources between social media platforms? Or perhaps to discover how your organic traffic is performing against your peers?

### What data is needed

Knowing that you're asking the right questions of the Benchmark will help you to work out what data you need from it. For example, if you want to work out how to divide resources between social media platforms, you will want to look at social media data across the Digital Benchmark and within your charity's sector. To work out whether your organic traffic is performing against your peers you will need to filter the Traffic Sources tab by charity sector.

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“For example, we've discovered that charities for children receive, on average, 11.4% of their traffic from social media. Those working in digital comms for a children's charity can use this as a benchmark for their own social media results. This will help you to set clear and realistic targets, as well as measure your own success.”

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# CharityComms Digital Benchmark

## Investigate the data

Once you know what data you need, it's simply a case of investigating and analysing the data. Looking at 'Social Media by Charity Sector' will tell you which social media platforms get the most traffic, and deserve the most resources dedicated to them.

For example, the data below shows that animal or environmental charities typically have above-average success on Facebook, but below-average success on LinkedIn.

Social media - by charity sector

Sector -	% Facebook	% Twitter	% LinkedIn	% Instagram	% YouTube
Animals & Environment	81.5%	7.0%	0.3%	2.6%	0.7%
Children	85.6%	8.5%	2.8%	1.7%	0.2%
Disability	75.5%	13.3%	5.4%	1.1%	1.6%
Health - care and info	79.3%	11.0%	1.6%	4.0%	0.3%
Health - mental health	49.1%	21.2%	6.0%	10.2%	2.0%
Health - research	84.4%	8.0%	2.6%	2.4%	0.6%
International development and disaster relief	91.1%	3.0%	2.2%	1.0%	1.7%
Older people	6.4%	87.1%	6.1%	+0.0%	0.2%
Other - sector pending	53.7%	14.3%	14.4%	13.8%	0.5%

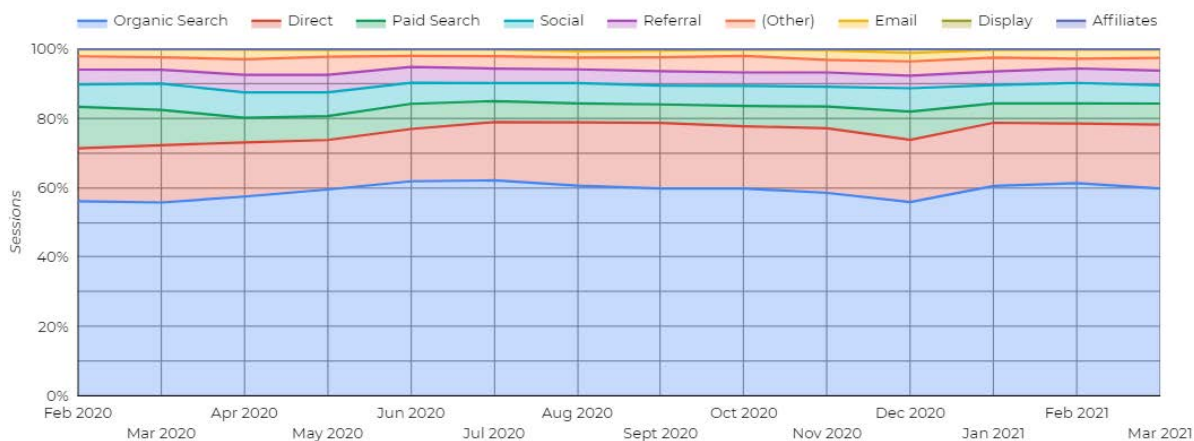
By investigating 'Traffic Sources by Charity Sector' and comparing the information to your own, you can get a broad overview of whether your charity stacks up against its peers in terms of organic traffic (or any other traffic source, for that matter).

Traffic sources - by charity sector

Sector -	% Organic	% Paid	% Direct	% Referral	% Social	% Email	% Display	%(Other)
Animals & Environment	61.1%	5.3%	22.4%	2.7%	5.0%	1.9%	0.3%	1.3%
Children	46.9%	11.8%	14.5%	8.3%	7.5%	6.7%	0.5%	3.8%
Disability	58.5%	5.8%	16.3%	7.3%	3.8%	3.3%	+0.0%	4.9%
Health - care and info	60.7%	5.1%	12.5%	4.5%	7.0%	2.7%	0.1%	7.5%
Health - mental health	69.4%	3.6%	16.9%	6.7%	2.7%	0.3%	+0.0%	0.3%
Health - research	72.6%	5.6%	9.4%	4.0%	2.8%	0.5%	0.1%	5.0%
International development ...	31.3%	11.9%	17.2%	3.1%	20.5%	8.8%	4.3%	2.9%
Older people	19.7%	6.8%	34.1%	6.3%	28.7%	4.3%	-	+0.0%
Other - sector pending	34.2%	10.9%	21.5%	6.2%	6.3%	6.0%	0.9%	14.0%

There is also a Benchmark average graph that shows the share of each traffic source. You can filter this graph by your charity sector, for example, to see how your charity's organic traffic performed over the Christmas period against similar charities.

Benchmark average graph





# CharityComms Digital Benchmark

## The future of the Digital Benchmark

To ensure the Benchmark continues to deliver valuable and actionable insights, we routinely update the types of data and the metrics against which you can measure your performance.

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“The Benchmark is always evolving, including the introduction of new data visualisations and feedback loops.”

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With the increase in membership, the Digital Benchmark had become too slow, which reduced the information we could display. Last year the majority of our efforts went into running the queries from a database which has sped things up substantially, which means that now we can develop the Benchmark further, providing more information that could be of use to you.

To make sure we're involving the right types of data for your charity, we invite all participant charities to take part in the annual Digital Benchmark Survey. This gives everyone an opportunity to give feedback about how the Benchmark is used, and what features you would like to see in the future.

**However, there's no need to wait for the annual Benchmark Survey to give your feedback. If you can't find the information you are looking for when using the Benchmark, and you think it would be useful, please let us know and we can add it to our list of planned improvements. We run a Slack channel for all charity participants where suggestions and requests can be made. You can also email your suggestions to Uprise Up at [jasmine.allen@upriseup.co.uk](mailto:jasmine.allen@upriseup.co.uk).**



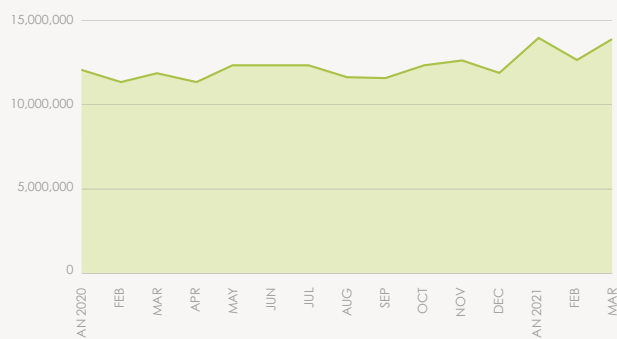
# How did charities fare in 2020?

The charity sector has been hit harder than most by the COVID-19 pandemic. The crisis created an increase in demand for many charities, combined with a decrease in fundraising opportunities. Charities were facing a difficult year, with [84% of organisations](#) reporting a decrease in their total income and speculation that [60,000 charity jobs](#) could be lost. However, digital has stepped up during this period and given the sector a much needed boost.

### Charity digital comms over 2020

As many traditional marketing and advertising activities faltered over the year, digital comms flourished. The CharityComms Digital Benchmark shows us that website traffic from all channels steadily grew throughout the year.

CharityComms Digital Benchmark Data:  
Total traffic over 2020 and into 2021



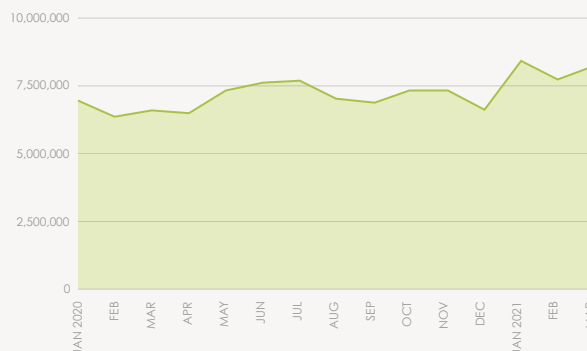
There are a number of reasons for the relative success of digital channels. Firstly, an increase in screen time during the pandemic as people entered lockdown resulted in an [all-time high](#) for internet usage in the UK.

“Charities were responsible for sharing crucial coronavirus information to their audiences, leading to an increase in organic search traffic overall as users searched for relevant COVID-19 advice”

### Organic search traffic in 2020

Charities were responsible for sharing crucial coronavirus information to their audiences, leading to an increase in organic search traffic overall as users searched for relevant COVID-19 advice.

CharityComms Digital Benchmark Data:  
Organic search traffic over 2020 and into 2021





# How did charities fare in 2020?

“Although there was a general upwards trend in traffic across all charities over 2020, looking at the channel mix for all sessions gives us an indication of user behaviour, as well as how charities approached this challenging year by adjusting their digital channels.”

## The year at a glance

**Q1 2020** saw the lowest amount of overall traffic for 2020, but the highest amount of traffic from paid search - accounting for 11.6% of all traffic, while organic accounted for 56.5%.

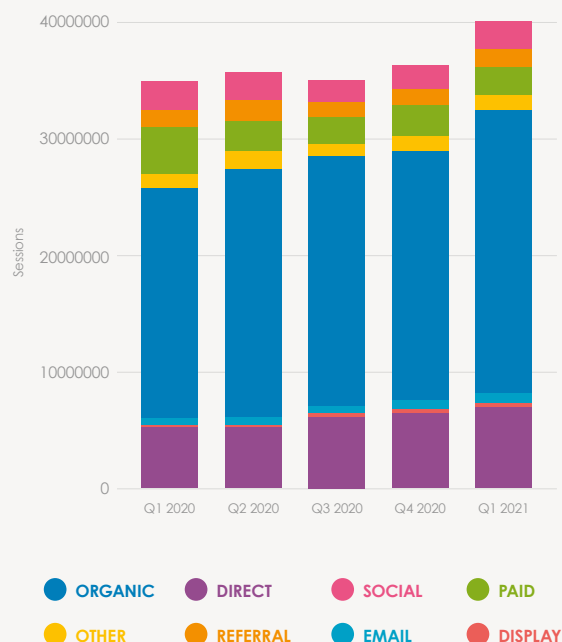
**Q2 2020** brought an increase in organic sessions, which accounted for higher traffic overall across all charities, despite a fall in traffic from paid search. The rise in organic search (now 59% of all traffic) highlights the increased need for services and information from charities during the first lockdown.

**Q3 2020** resulted in a further decrease in paid search, with charities now receiving less than half of the paid search traffic seen pre-pandemic. However, a further rise in organic and direct sessions made up for this fall, with these two channels representing 78.7% of all traffic in Q3. It's interesting to note that we don't see a [summer drop](#) in traffic of the usual severity in 2020.

**Q4 2020** saw organic and direct traffic remain relatively stable in comparison to Q3, but for the first time in 2020 there was a slight increase in traffic from paid search, resulting in the largest amount of traffic all year.

**Q1 2021** delivered the highest amount of total traffic by some margin, showing a surge in traffic which could be attributed to the January lockdown. Again, the largest gains were a result of increases in organic and direct traffic

CharityComms Digital Benchmark Data:  
Channel mix for all charities by quarter over 2020.

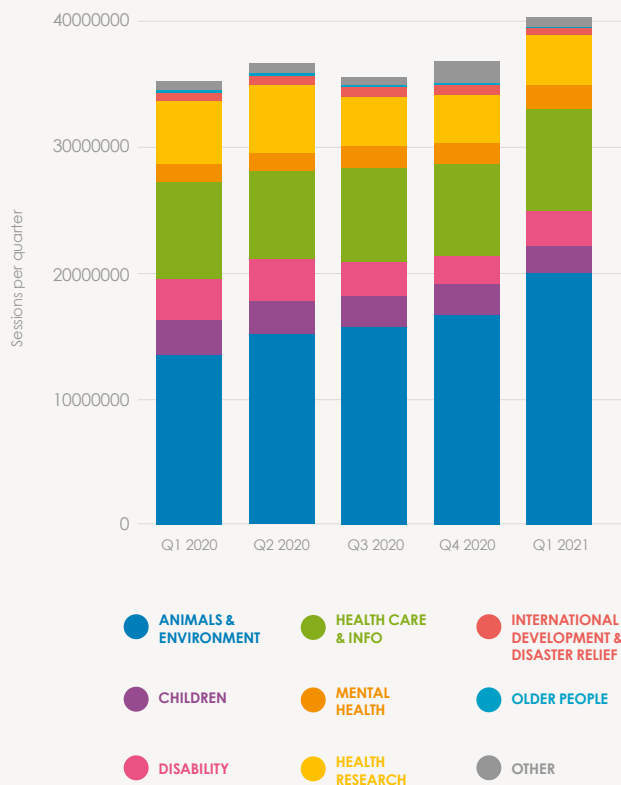


The charity sector provides vital information and advice via digital channels even in “normal” years, which often cannot be found elsewhere. The amount of direct and organic traffic to charity websites in 2020, which grew throughout the year, lays bare the growing need users had for relevant information in trying times.

# How did charities fare in 2020?

“By looking at traffic by charity sector, rather than channel, it becomes clear that the sector a charity operated in was a factor in their digital success over 2020.”

CharityComms Digital Benchmark Data:  
Channel mix for all charities by quarter over 2020.

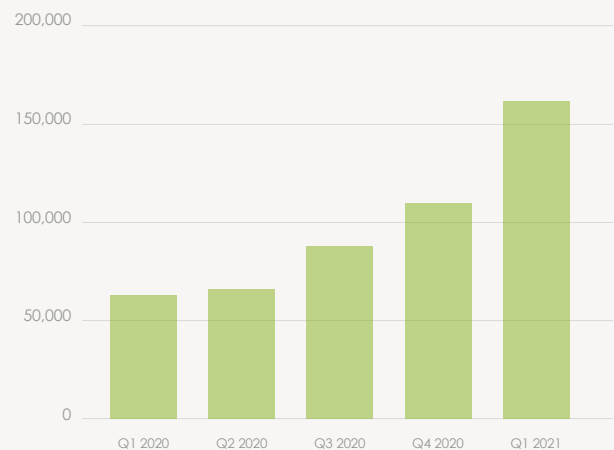


By looking at traffic by charity sector, rather than channel, it becomes clear that the sector a charity operated in was a factor in their digital success over 2020.

We saw traffic rise for some charity sectors more than others, with the largest gains in total number of sessions (perhaps surprisingly) coming from the animals and environment sector.

Other, smaller, sectors such as charities for older people also saw tremendous gains (see below) over the year, more than doubling their total traffic.

CharityComms Digital Benchmark Data:  
Sessions per quarter for charities for older people.



## CASE STUDY

# Responding to COVID-19: National Autistic Society

The National Autistic Society is the UK's leading charity for people on the autism spectrum and their families, providing support, guidance and advice. The society also campaigns for improved rights, services and opportunities for autistic people.



We spoke to **Tom Purser**, Head of Campaigns & Public Engagement, and **Chrystyna Chymera-Holloway**, Head of Insight and Strategic Marketing, at the National Autistic Society about how the organisation adapted to the changing digital landscape during the COVID-19 outbreak.

### How did COVID-19 affect the National Autistic Society over 2020?

Like most charities, the National Autistic Society experienced a big shift in the needs of their audience, as people began looking for information, resources and advice about the pandemic. Tom explains that autistic people and their families often found the new rules confusing, and the frequent changes were particularly overwhelming for those on the autism spectrum.

The National Autistic Society needed to react quickly to their audience's requirements, especially as the autism-specific information and exemptions were not typically being shared by the government themselves.

As well as responding to the coronavirus pandemic with increased awareness-raising and informational activities, the National Autistic Society's service provision also moved to digital channels. At the same time, policy and campaign colleagues worked hard to get exemptions in the rules for autistic people and to make sure their needs were being considered by the government.

### How did the National Autistic Society respond to coronavirus?

The National Autistic Society responded to the pandemic and nationwide lockdowns by developing a new section of their website - the [coronavirus hub](#) - in order to provide specific and up-to-date information on autism and coronavirus. For example, autistic people and their carers were

exempt from the once-per-day exercise rule, and were able to exercise outdoors as much as needed during the lockdowns. Similarly, some people with autism find it too hard to wear a face covering, and are exempt from wearing them. This information was not being widely shared by the government, so the National Autistic Society stepped in with the resources required.

As well as the coronavirus hub, the team at National Autistic Society also created a downloadable "I am autistic" card to give peace of mind to autistic people who were concerned about being challenged about their adherence to the coronavirus restrictions.



The National Autistic Society had been running their online Facebook video series [Spectrum Live](#) in a studio prior to the pandemic, but switched to a working-from-home model during the coronavirus. They also released a series of episodes about the impact of the coronavirus itself.



# Responding to COVID-19: National Autistic Society

### What were the results of your coronavirus digital communications?

The team at the National Autistic Society created a dashboard in Data Studio to track real-time data on how people interacted with their coronavirus content. This helped them to create the content that their users needed quickly.

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“Creating this new section of the website really showed the value of capturing real-time insights from our audience. By tracking data in a Data Studio dashboard we were able to see what information and topics our users were looking for. This will no doubt affect how we use real-time data into the future.”

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By taking this data-led approach to their coronavirus digital comms, the National Autistic Society was able to react to the shifting needs of their audience in real-time. For example, the society was able to quickly release information for autistic people who needed to adjust to working from home.

**“We hadn’t been in the space of needing to be reactive and agile before, and this is something that’s going to stay with the organisation long-term.”**

### Results:

Since the advent of the pandemic over 500,000 people have visited the coronavirus hub to access the information and resources there. As with most of the National Autistic Society’s traffic, users were coming to the coronavirus hub mostly via organic search. At the time we spoke, ‘autism coronavirus vaccine’ was the leading query leading to the National Autistic Society’s coronavirus hub. The influx in organic users to the coronavirus content on the

society’s website shows the importance of creating content that is optimised for what their users are searching for.

**“There are times when we wonder if the coronavirus hub is still needed, but being able to see that we still receive hundreds of new users per day to this content shows us that there is still a need for autism-specific coronavirus information.”**

Some of the infographics that the National Autistic Society created for Instagram in order to spread autism-specific information during the lockdown have had some of the highest levels of engagement of any of the organisation’s content in the past. This has shown the society that they can deliver a lot of value to their audience by creating clear social assets that turn information into clear guidance.

## Over 500,000

People have visited the coronavirus hub to access the information and resources there

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## Up to 15,000

Viewers per Live Spectrum video episode

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## Over 500,000

Download of the “I’m Autistic” card

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Throughout the pandemic, the Spectrum Live video series still averaged around 10,000-15,000 viewers per episode, showing that there was a real need within the autistic community for video content during the pandemic.

When surveyed, the National Autistic Society’s user base gave some great feedback, saying they found the society’s informational content really useful. The “I’m Autistic” card was also very useful to their users, and was downloaded over 50,000 times.

## CASE STUDY

# Responding to COVID-19: National Autistic Society

### How do you rely on the Digital Benchmark?

The National Autistic Society used the CharityComms Digital Benchmark on an ongoing basis over 2020 and they continue to do so. The Benchmark was crucial in measuring the performance of the National Autistic Society website during the migration to the society's new website. By comparing their data against that of that of the wider sector and the disability sector, the National Autistic Society were able to understand what impact COVID-19 was having vs. the impact their website migration was having.

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"This year, the Benchmark has been absolutely crucial because not only has covid changed almost everything we do and what our audiences do, but we also launched a new website which has changed a lot of our stats."

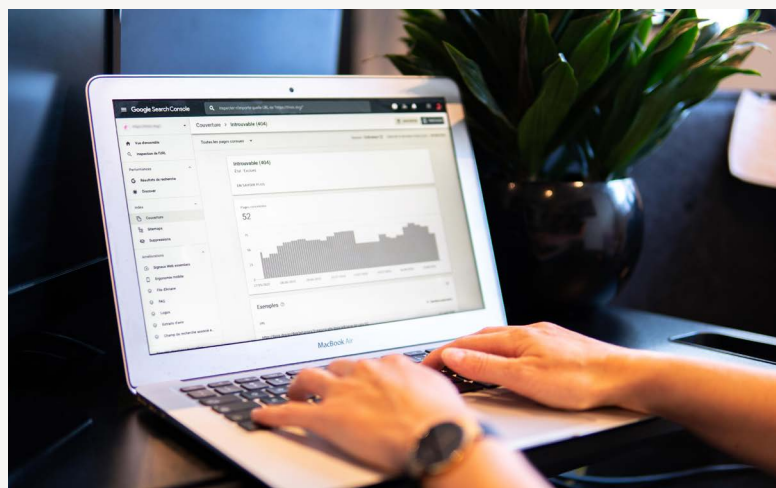
Chrystyna Chymera-Holloway,  
Head of Insight & Strategic Marketing

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For top-level reporting, the society uses the Benchmark to check how their website is performing in terms of visits against other charities; the results of which are then reported to the board. When detail is needed, the National Autistic Society team scrutinises different elements in the data, such as where referrals are coming from, in order to understand whether investments in different areas align with what other charities are doing and whether they need to.

### How do you see your digital strategy progressing in the future?

The National Autistic Society reported that they intend to make use of personalisation capabilities, ensuring these integrate better with other tools the society uses (such as their CRM and email system) and gathering all that insight into one data source which is segmented into multiple audiences. The society also intends to scan for further integration opportunities to support fundraising, such as with Facebook and audience management tools.



**"For digital information we see SEO as becoming even more important going forwards, as there is an ongoing and continued need for information amongst autistic people and their families, as well as a general curiosity and interest in autism for people who want to learn more about it. We know that it's on us to make sure we're scooping up that traffic and providing the information people need."**

**"We're also looking at presenting our content so that it works for voice search as well as optimising our content for featured snippets and 'people also ask' sections on the Google search engine results pages."**

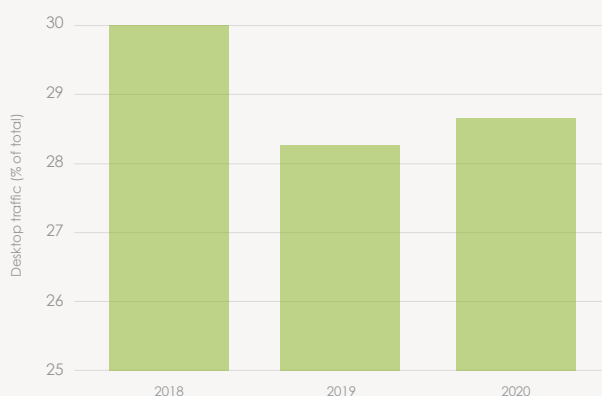
# Device traffic

Over 2020, mobile traffic continued to account for the majority of traffic to charity websites, representing 63.6% of all traffic, while desktop traffic accounted for 28.7% and tablet traffic was 7.7%. This shows a continuation of increased mobile internet usage year over year while tablet traffic decreases - in 2019 mobile accounted for 60.4%, desktop was 28.4% and tablet traffic was 11.2%.



## Desktop

We were surprised to see the increase in desktop traffic for 2020. However, the slight increase in desktop traffic is in-line with [data seen elsewhere](#), that shows users responded to being stuck inside by switching away from their small mobile screens towards more spacious desktop devices.



Digital Benchmark data: Desktop usage over time

## Mobile traffic

As mobile traffic continues to drive the largest amount of users to charity websites, it remains important that charities are taking a mobile-first approach to their website development and content strategy. In May 2021, Google plans to make the [Core Web Vitals](#) an official ranking factor for SEO, and we expect to see this have a further negative impact on those organisations which have not optimised their website for mobile.

“It remains important that charities are taking a mobile-first approach to their website development and content strategy”

At 71.75% (up from 66.75% in 2019) mental health charities received the largest percentage of traffic from mobile devices than any other sector. This can be attributed to the personal nature of mental health problems and queries, so users prefer to use a more personal device - their mobile phone - to access information and support.



# Device traffic

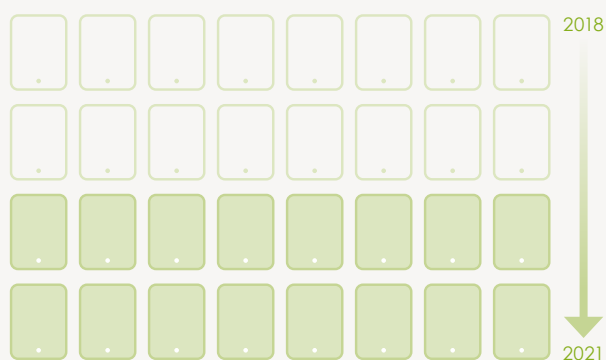
“With a more even split over device usage than any other charity sector, it's important that charities for older people make sure their online content is designed to work across all devices”

## Tablet traffic

Over the year, tablet device traffic steadily dropped month on month, going from 8.08% in January 2020 to 6.8% in January 2021 across all charities. This continues previous trends, as we have seen tablet traffic fall from 14.5% in 2018 to 11.2% in 2019, and finally to an average of 7.7% in 2020.

Tablet traffic was highest for charities in the animals & environment and older people sectors, which saw an average of 21.25% and 18.51% of all traffic via tablet devices respectively.

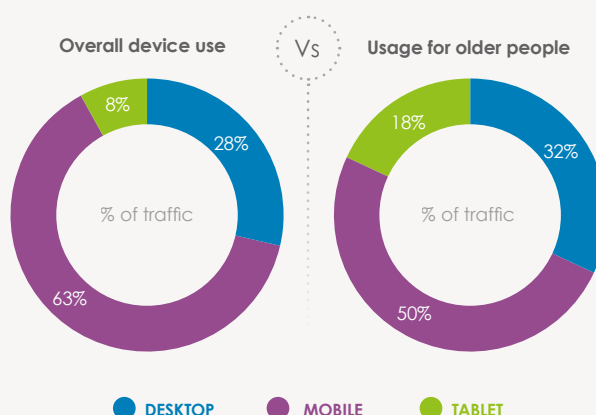
This device usage amongst older people is consistent with [ONS data from 2018](#) which showed that older people in the 65+ age bracket were more likely to use a tablet to access the internet.



Tablet traffic has halved since 2018

## Device usage: Charities for older people

Charities for older people saw the lowest number of mobile users visit their sites; although at 49.5% of all traffic, mobile remained the most popular device. These charities also received the highest number of desktop users visiting their site, at 32%.



With a more even split over device usage than any other charity sector, it's important that charities for older people make sure their online content is designed to work across all devices. These charities should also make sure that their device designs remain accessible for these older users who may have declining vision or trouble with motor control by ensuring there are large clickable elements and plain fonts.

The Web Accessibility Initiative by W3 is the leading authority in developing websites for accessibility. Their [best practices for writing, designing and developing web content](#) help organisations ensure their websites are accessible to older people and people with disabilities.

# Paid Search & Google Ad Grants

Paid search had a tumultuous year, as the COVID-19 pandemic led to an uncertain search space and many charities reduced their budget for paid marketing activities. At the same time, Google offered increased budgets for Ad Grant accounts, returning incredible results for charities that were able to maximise their account. These rapid changes over the year led to paid search data showing more variance than any other channel in 2020.

## Paid search & Google Ad Grant data over 2020

The effect of the COVID-19 lockdown is the most obvious change in the first few months of 2020. As the UK moved into its first lockdown, there was a significant change in the search space. Some searches began to dry up as user interest became more focused on COVID-19, and many charities needed to adapt their keywords and ads to respond to the quickly changing environment. As a result, there was a decline in paid search traffic.

“Many charities needed to adapt their keywords and ads to respond to the quickly changing environment”

In May, paid search traffic picked up slightly. This could be due to the additional budget granted to some Google Ad Grant accounts during the COVID-19 pandemic, accounts that were already maximising their grant to bring in more traffic. There was another spike in paid search traffic from October to December, which may be because the Ad Grant scheme received additional funding from Google over this period, in some cases doubling or even tripling the maximum budget available to accounts over this time.

The increases in paid search traffic could also be attributed to coronavirus-related content. As more organisations published content about coronavirus and promoted it via the Google Ad Grant, they were able to capitalise on increased user need for information on this topic. December's increase in traffic also had the additional uplift of Christmas campaigns and extra paid campaigns.

This increase in traffic meant that (unusually) December became the most active month for paid search across all charities in 2020. This is against the trend for most years, as the most active month is usually either January or November.

Benchmark Data: Paid Search Jan 2020-Feb 2021



# Paid Search & Google Ad Grants

## Paid search trends

Despite the increases in budget given by Google during this very strange year, the overall trend of 2020 paid search traffic was a steady decline, leading to a YoY drop of around 200k sessions by Jan 2021. This is likely an indication that many charities have found it hard to adapt to COVID-19 and have struggled to maintain the same levels of traffic as they did before the pandemic.

The trend in search data goes against Uprise Up's own data, which has seen an increase in paid search traffic for charities over this time. This suggests that there are opportunities that some charity participants are not taking advantage of, such as requesting an increase to the Ad Grant from Google or putting more effort into utilising covid-related content.

From this data pool, we can see the huge effect that extra Ad Grant budget in May, and again in October, has had on the ability to generate traffic. These results were achieved by making full use of new features available to the grants, such as responsive search ads and automated bidding strategies.

Google Ad Grant data from charities working with Uprise Up



## Google Ad Grant

The Digital Benchmark is currently unable to view Google Ad Grant data separate from other paid search data. However, from data gathered by Uprise Up (across over 60 charities), we can see that the Ad Grant typically makes up around 80% of paid search traffic over 2020. This means that the existing paid search data in the Benchmark is likely dominated by the Google Ad Grant.

Since 2018, the Google Ad Grants scheme has undergone several changes, which has affected the total traffic that organisations have been able to generate. Perhaps the largest of these changes occurred in January 2018, when Google introduced new requirements that organisations needed to adhere to in order for their account to remain active. The changes included a limitation on single word keywords and a 5% account-wide minimum CTR.

The largest impact at this time came from changes to the Ad Quality filter. As the other policies were implemented, Google adjusted the Ad Quality filter to limit how often Ad Grant ads were shown in comparison to paid ads. This caused a significant drop in traffic across the Ad Grant scheme, as many accounts lost up to 50% of their daily traffic.

However, a number of further changes have been implemented in the years following 2018 to improve the ability to generate traffic from Ad Grant accounts. Most recently, Google has offered extra budget for Grants during peak performance times, such as Christmas.

Google has confirmed they will continue to provide additional budget for periods in 2021, meaning there is an opportunity for charities to further capitalise on their grant.



# Crisis

During the 2020 coronavirus outbreak and subsequent lockdowns, Crisis UK had to adapt their service provision and digital communications to ensure people were able to access support and information. These adaptations included working with the government to provide temporary housing to those experiencing homelessness during the pandemic, adjusting their usual Christmas fundraising campaign, and finding new ways to find and help their audiences.



We spoke to Justin Driskill, Senior Digital Marketing & Analytics Officer at Crisis, about Crisis' digital communications throughout 2020 and their plans for 2021.

## What impact did COVID-19 have on your digital communications?

During the beginning of the coronavirus lockdowns, Crisis launched the [Home 4 All campaign](#) for homeless people who needed somewhere safe to stay to avoid catching the virus. This campaign was one of Crisis' largest outside of their usual Christmas campaigns, and one of the most successful too. **"This campaign has really shown what we can do as a nation to end homelessness if we really try."**



As it was such a large campaign, Crisis engaged a new marketing agency to undertake the large amount of work. This included building a whole new section of the Crisis website, and increasing the amount of paid search advertising, email marketing, and digital fundraising activities.

The coronavirus lockdown also impacted Crisis' usual Christmas fundraising and services for homeless

people, with the closure of their 'Crisis at Christmas' centres. Instead, homeless people were provided with more socially-distanced hotel rooms and digital services, including the provision of mobile phones (in partnership with Tesco mobile) to help them access the services they needed.

## How do you rely on the Digital Benchmark at Crisis?

Justin uses the CharityComms Digital Benchmark in both weekly and quarterly reports to frame Crisis' success in a wider context, specifically looking at changes in overall performance rather than a comparison of absolute numbers.

**"Every charity is different of course, so knowing that other charities had x page views last week while we had y page views isn't that interesting. But knowing that, on average, charities like ours saw a drop of x% compared to last month can add really useful context to our own reporting. Are our successes or failures specific to us, or are they sector wide? Are we bucking trends, or following in others footsteps? For these reasons, the Benchmark is invaluable."**

We intend for the Digital Benchmark to be an ever-evolving and improving tool for charities. Justin told us that weekly data was more useful to Crisis' reporting than the monthly view that is currently available (since it was migrated to a database). If

# Crisis

any members also feel that weekly reporting is better suited to their needs, or if you have other suggestions, please let us know. We rely on this feedback to make improvements and ensure the Benchmark better meets everyone's needs.

### What does the future hold for Crisis' digital work?

As Crisis moves out of a very busy year, having proved to the government and the general public that homelessness is a solvable problem in the UK, the organisation is leaning into its digital work in order to further build on the successes of 2020.

Their activities for 2021 cover SEO, optimising Google Ad Grant and Paid Search activities, and preparing for the Core Web Vitals update.

### SEO

The team at Crisis is also looking to increase their SEO activity over 2021. This move has come about in part because of the organisation's name:

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**"We're called Crisis, and the world is in crisis. This means we don't own the word as much as we used to."**

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Justin explains that the word "crisis" is also used by people experiencing mental health crises, and they want to be sure they don't accidentally step on the toes of organisations providing mental health support to people.

As Crisis moves into optimising their content for search, Justin points out the importance of capturing rich results on Google. For example, if someone searches for "how many people are homeless in the UK?" it's important that Crisis is able to provide that information right there in the SERPs via the featured snippet, rather than relying on users to visit their website.

**"We can't just rely on people knowing our brand anymore. Just because naturally a lot of people link to us doesn't mean that we can ignore SEO."**

### Google Ad Grant

Crisis creates content for both awareness-raising and as a service for homeless people. While awareness-raising and informational content is typically optimised for organic search, Crisis uses their Google Ad Grant to specifically target those users who are facing homelessness and looking for assistance.

Going forward, Crisis will monitor the results of the grant to ensure that people facing homelessness can get the help they need, while ensuring they aren't ranking for any unrelated 'crisis' keywords.

### Core Web Vitals

An important development in 2021 will be the roll out of Google's Core Web Vitals update, so Crisis is preparing their website to meet these new metrics.

Core Web Vitals will become ranking signals in Google from May 2021, meaning they will more heavily affect a website's SEO. The metrics websites will be measured against are:

- Mobile friendliness
- The time it takes for a page's main content to load and become interactive
- Safe browsing
- The amount of unexpected layout shift
- HTTPS security
- Avoiding intrusive interstitials

These measures are designed to improve how users experience the speed, responsiveness and visual stability of a page.

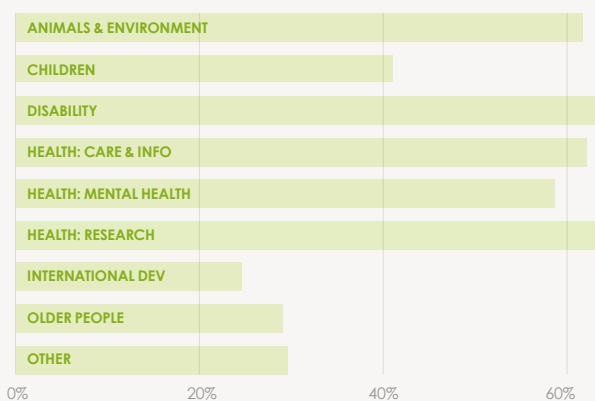
## DATA POINT

# Organic traffic

On average, organic traffic represents 58.8% of traffic to all charity websites, making it the largest single source of traffic. This builds on the slight growth we have seen in previous years, with organic traffic making up 57.5% of traffic in 2019 and 55.6% in 2018.

However, the proportionate amount of organic traffic that websites received in 2020 varied dramatically depending on the sector. Charities for older people and international development received the least amount of organic traffic, making up 29.1% and 24.7% of their total traffic respectively, while health research charities received the most, at 64.4%.

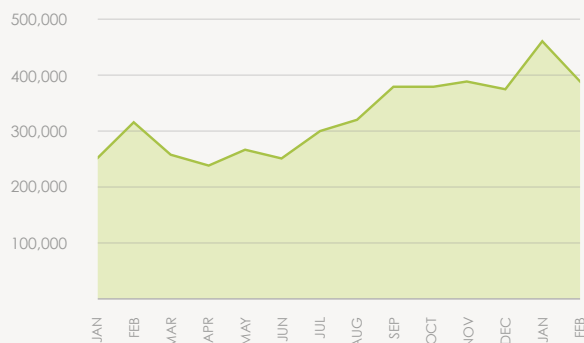
Sector vs Organic Traffic



## Mental health organic traffic

Organic traffic to mental health charity websites paints a stark picture of how the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns have increased the demand for mental health information. Organic query-led traffic was up 54.9% in January 2021 compared to January 2020 levels.

Mental health organic traffic



## Content as service provision

Many charities use their website content as part of their service provision, and this is reflected in their organic performance. Animal charities, for example, received a lot of traffic for pet adoption and pet care queries in 2020, such as “adopt a dog”, “ticks on dogs” or “kennel cough”.

“Many charities use their website content as part of their service provision, and this is reflected in their organic performance”

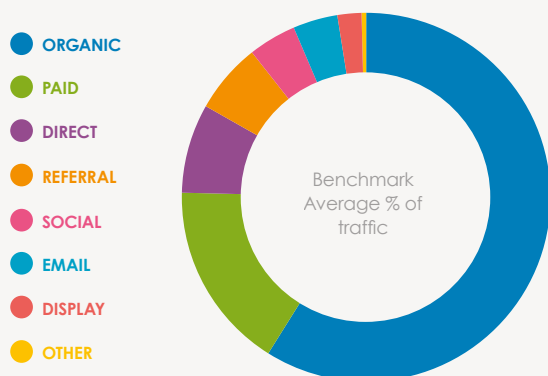
For charities that are able to give advice and guidance as part of their service provision, a keyword-led content strategy isn't just a digital marketing activity - it's part of their mission. Content that is easily found on search engines and provides real value to a charity's beneficiaries is a vital part of the important work that charities do.



# Traffic sources

The Digital Benchmark allows participant charities to understand the traffic sources of their peers, and where they should invest their digital resources for maximum results.

**The types of traffic participant charities can analyse data by are:**



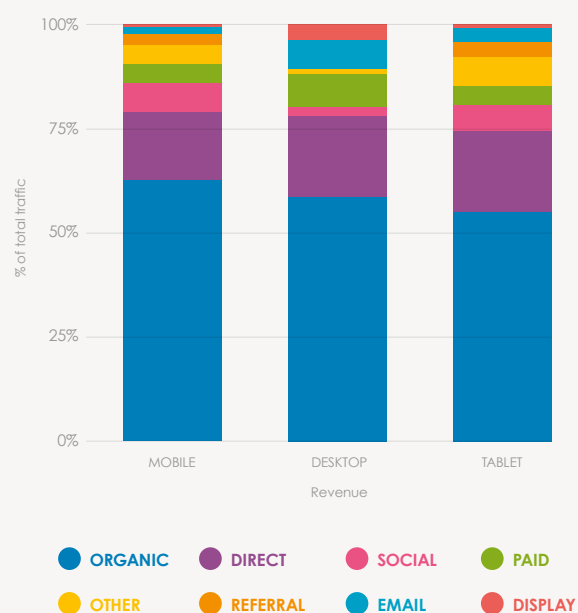
“It’s important to note that traffic is not the be-all and end-all of digital success, and sources with smaller amounts of traffic can still return higher conversions overall.”

## Traffic source by device

As you might expect, the source of traffic to charity websites changes depending on the device being used. While organic search makes up a balanced amount of traffic (between 55-62% of total sessions) across all devices, differences in traffic levels for paid search and social media tell us a lot about how users interact with digital content across different devices.

In turn, this data can be used to tailor your content towards the device that returns the most success for that traffic source. For example, social media content is evidently more successful on mobile, so social media content should be created with mobile users in mind.

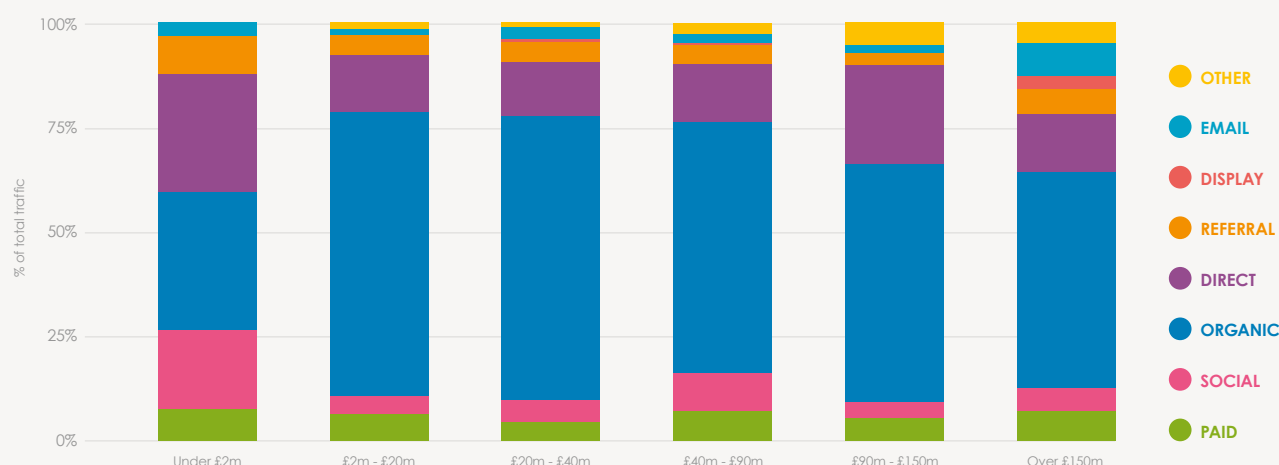
Traffic Source by Device



# Traffic sources

## Impact of charity revenue

It's also interesting to note the impact that charities' overall revenue has on the channels which deliver the most traffic. For example, charities with income of £2m or less receive much more of their traffic from social media (18.96% of all traffic to their website) than other income brackets, but also receive the smallest proportionate amount of organic traffic (at 32.74%).



## Top channels by sector

### Organic

At 64.4%, **health research** receives the most organic traffic

### Social, email & display

**International development** and **disaster relief charities** receive the most social media, email and display traffic at 34%, 7.7%, and 4.4% respectively.

### Paid

At 11.8% and 8.5% respectively **children's charities** receive the most paid traffic and referral traffic

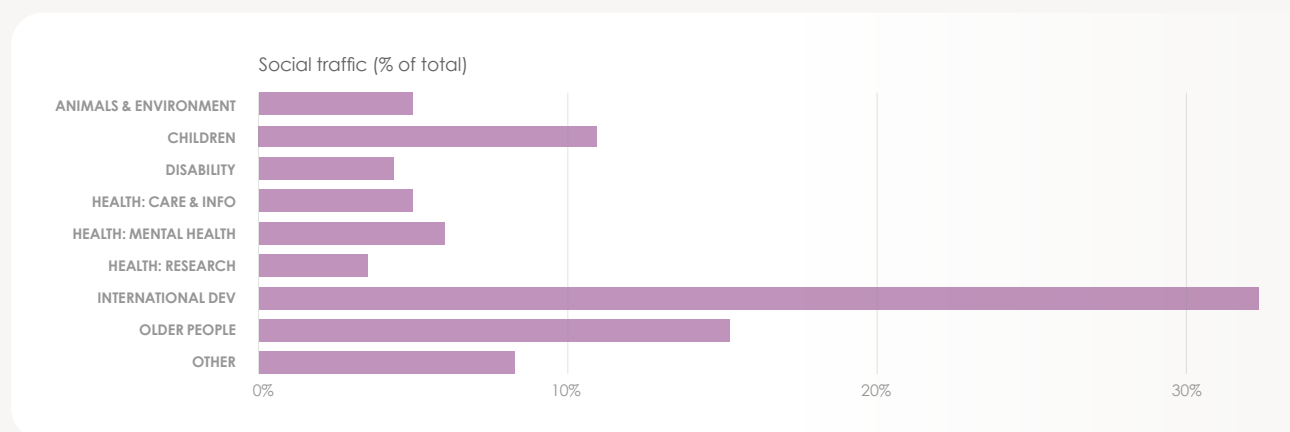
### Direct

**Charities for older people** receive the most direct traffic at 30.1%

# Social media

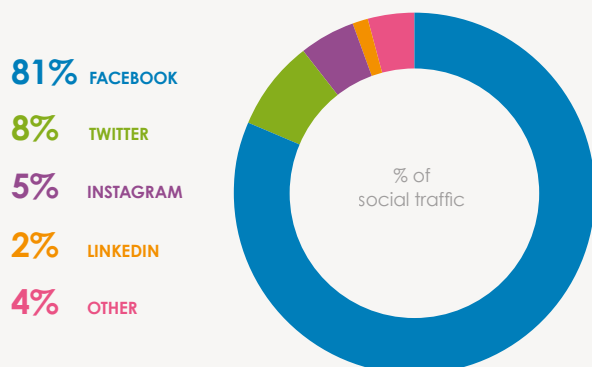
Organic social media accounted for 6.2% of all charity traffic across the Digital Benchmark in 2020, similar to the 6.1% it accounted for in 2019. However, digital performance on social media varied from sector to sector.

International development and disaster relief charities relied on social media more than any other channel. These charities in particular needed to focus on outbound activities to bring more traffic to their website, resulting in 34% of traffic being driven from social media platforms - a jump from 2019's 19.2%.



## Platforms

Despite the 2020 Facebook boycott (more on page 24), Facebook dominates social media traffic for participant charities, standing at 80.8% of all social media traffic. While it's unsurprising that Facebook delivers the largest share of traffic - as it is the largest social media platform in terms of users - the amount it dominates by is remarkable, especially as YouTube has just [16% fewer users](#) than Facebook yet delivers only 0.6% of traffic to charity websites.



## 87.5%

Of charities posted to social media every day, with two people on average working exclusively on organisations' social media throughout 2020

## 982,741

Average number of Facebook likes

## 27,682

Average number of Instagram followers

## 102,706

Average number of Twitter followers

# Social media

## Social Media Results

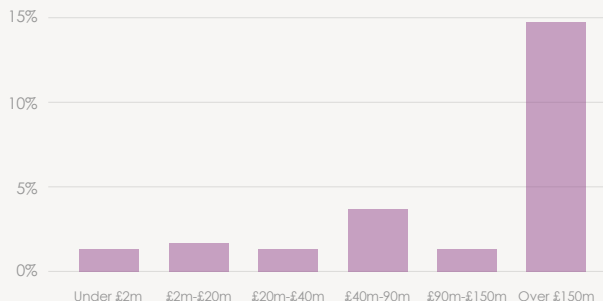
Charities with the most income (£150m and above) were able to capitalise on Instagram much more successfully than other charities, with 14.9% of their social traffic coming from the platform. As Instagram is not designed to deliver traffic to websites (as the only place you can place a link is on your profile) it is unlikely that we will see any sizable shift in the amount of traffic driven by Instagram unless that is changed.

“Facebook is the most democratised social media platform for charities”

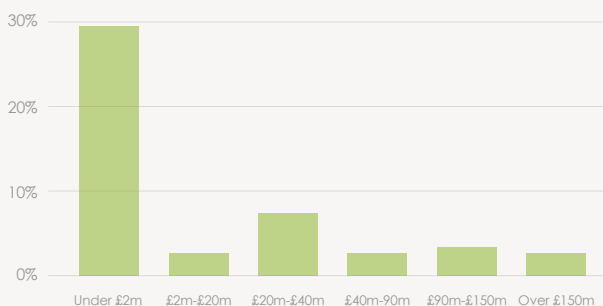
This wasn't repeated across all social media platforms - for example charities with incomes under £2m had the most success on Twitter, driving 29% of their social media traffic via the microblogging site. Twitter gives small organisations the chance to gain a larger reach, sometimes just by the retweet of an 'influencer' account and as such is a great opportunity for those organisations looking to increase their following.

Facebook is the most democratised social media platform for charities, with a more evenly spread distribution of traffic regardless of organisation income.

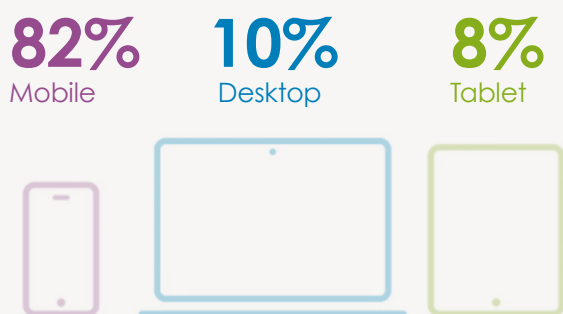
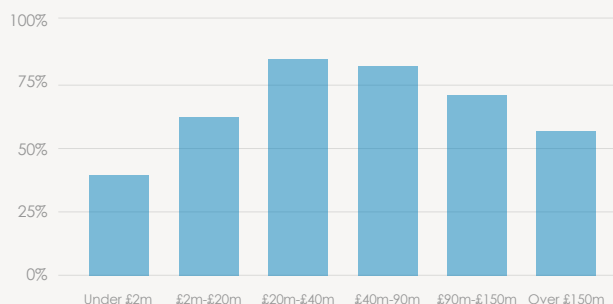
% of social media traffic from Instagram vs. revenue



% of social media traffic from Twitter vs. revenue



% of social media traffic from Facebook vs. revenue



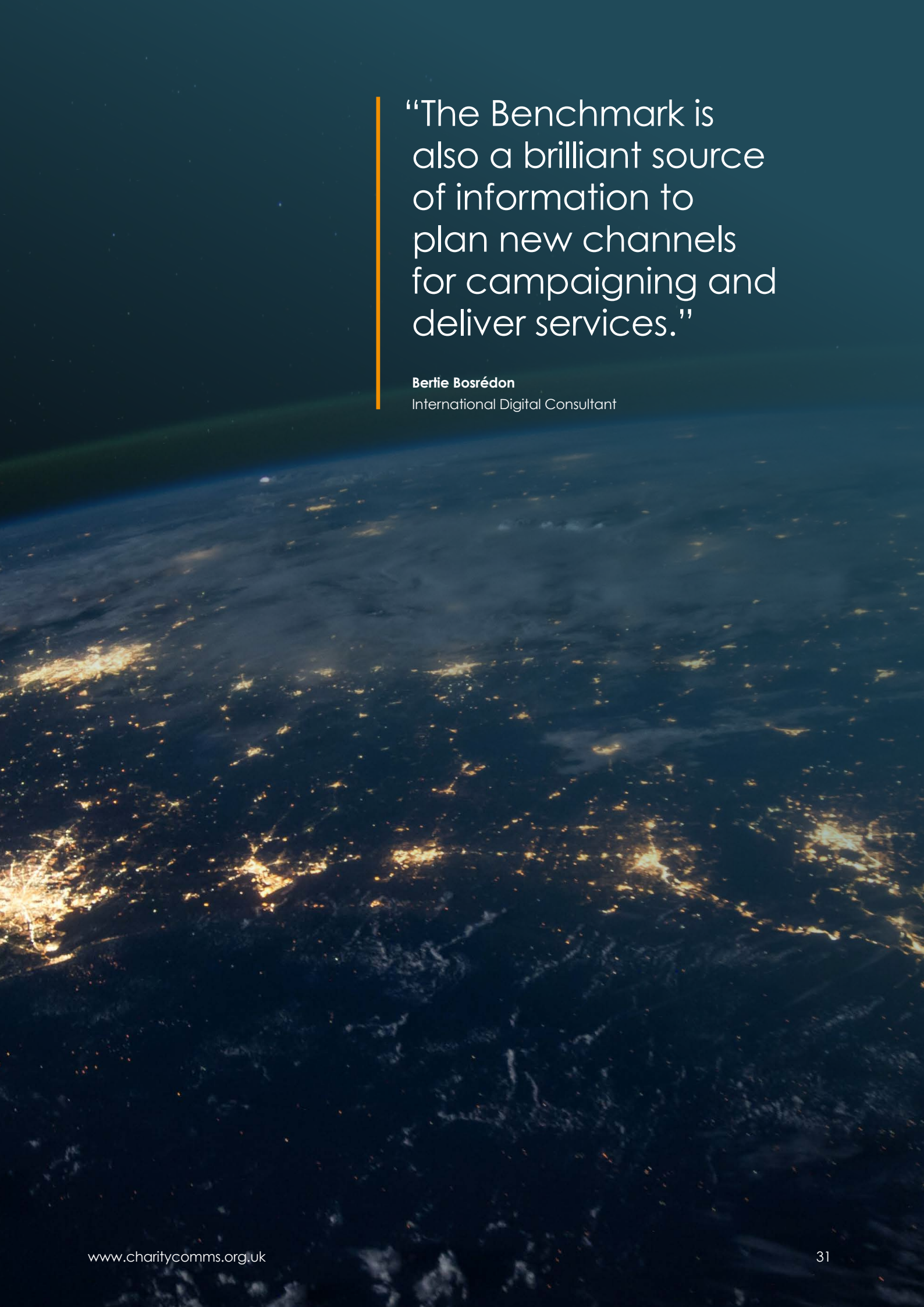
Average usage across all sectors between Mar 2020 - Feb 2021

## Social Media by Device

As expected, mobile accounted for the vast majority of social media traffic to charity websites in 2020, standing at an average of 81.7% across all sectors.

This stayed consistent throughout the year and into 2021. As 98.3% of users worldwide access Facebook [via a mobile device](#), it's unsurprising that mobile users make up the majority of social media traffic.





“The Benchmark is  
also a brilliant source  
of information to  
plan new channels  
for campaigning and  
deliver services.”

**Bertie Bosrédon**

International Digital Consultant

# Using the Benchmark: Top 5 tips



Tips from **Bertie Bosrédon**  
International Digital  
Consultant

## 1. Benchmark and 'mystery shopping'

When we first launched the Benchmark (in 2013), the idea was to have a tool for members to compare their online traffic with other organisations and report back to directors/trustees. Reporting is still the main purpose, but you want to be sure you are making a fair comparison. As such, you can filter out sectors that are not relevant. Or, even better, just show your results alongside 5 organisations.

You can use the Benchmark for insights alongside other information. In addition to the annual Benchmark report and the live dashboard, you should sign up to the email list of 5-10 charities, regularly visit their website and test key journeys (especially donations). You can use this information to report on their activities and results compared to yours during your team meetings. (Of course, the Benchmark must continue to be a standing item on the agenda.)

## 2. Grow your team

I often work with organisations with big expectations about their digital performance. Once I know more about their vision and ambition, I look at the size of their team and use the Benchmark to compare them with the rest of the sector. Often, they are understaffed compared to organisations of a similar size.

I also look at the traffic of organisations they want to be compared with. On a number of occasions, the annual Benchmark report was used as a factor in the business case to increase the size of the digital team or recruit staff dedicated to digital fundraising. (I hear it's also being used to increase digital budgets. Peer pressure works!)

## 3. Next year... +20%

Yes, there are still charities who plan next year's KPIs by just adding 20% more traffic/donations/followers... Using the Benchmark helps you to see what is a realistic increase across the sector instead.

This works even better for your awareness month. Look at an organisation that had an awareness month: what was the increase of traffic, which social media channels performed well, was there an increase in income (if you in the e-commerce sharing Benchmark), what email stats should you be expecting (I still remember a volunteering manager telling me they stopped email activities because their opening rate was only 55%). It's also a useful tool to educate your colleagues in setting KPIs.

## 4. Online delivery

Despite being nearly as old as the web, online communities are still strong. A community is a fantastic platform to support your beneficiaries and great for SEO. Over the past two years, I have worked on two community launches and the Benchmark was helpful to establish a realistic baseline.

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**"The Benchmark was helpful to establish a realistic baseline"**

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The Benchmark is also a brilliant source of information to plan new channels for campaigning and deliver services. Many charities now use YouTube, and we are even seeing pilots on Minecraft.

## 5. Digital Programme

You can call it digital strategy if you want, although I believe in limiting the number of strategies and building a digital programme instead, which supports various strategies.

Our annual report is full of useful information to strengthen your programme (with nice infographics, too): culture, average donation amounts (are your donations forms matching sector's average gift amounts?), where donations are coming from (regular donations have been declining year on year), but it is also useful to shortlist technology platforms like CMS, CRM, marketing automation tools or payment gateways based on what is used in the sector.

**These are just a few tips, but there are hundreds of different ways you can use the Benchmark. Please share yours for the next edition of this guide!**

# Ethical digital marketing practices

In July 2020, Facebook's policies for addressing hate speech came under increasing global scrutiny as big [businesses boycotted](#) advertising on the platform.

More than 1,100 companies, including major corporations such as Unilever, Disney and Volkswagen, pulled their advertising from the platform and analysts suggest up to \$200m may have been lost in ad revenue. UK charities also took part in the boycott and out of that campaign, a collective of more than 40 charities came together to form Charities Against Hate, who are continuing to work together to combat online hate speech. Their [Guide to Best Practice in Ethical Digital Marketing & Comms Practices](#) highlights these eight principles:



### 1. Engage

Visibly engage with hate speech on charity-owned channels, where appropriate, to address issues



### 5. Remember your cause

Consider which societal issues to campaign on based on charity objectives, values, relevance to the cause and ability to contribute unique insight or perspective.



### 2. Show inclusivity

Promote positive, diverse and inclusive content on charity-owned channels that represents your audiences



### 6. Sign up

Sign up to the Conscious Advertising Network and commit to their manifestos



### 3. Respect privacy

Respect the privacy of beneficiaries and supporters when marketing to them



### 7. Diversify your advertising

Devise advertising diversification plans to avoid over-reliance on one platform alone



### 4. Provide support

Ensure adequate wellbeing support is in place for social media moderators



### 8. Engage partners

Ensure partners and agencies adopt a similar approach to ethical marketing and communications practices, as outlined in this framework



# Ethical digital marketing practices

While it may not be practically possible for many charities to stop advertising outright as part of a boycott, some key principles for those in digital marketing revolve around diversifying advertising streams and, in particular, not relying on just one channel. A 2019 [survey](#) of 200 UK charities revealed that a third of organisations were too dependent on one income stream.

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“Nonprofits are transforming their future fundraising strategies, embracing digital, and diversifying their approach to use a broader range of channels.”

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Digital income streams have become a more and more prominent aspect of charity fundraising activities over the past year, and a recent report from EFA and Salesforce.org on the [Impact of COVID-19 on non-profits in Europe](#) reported that “Nonprofits are transforming their future fundraising strategies, embracing digital, and diversifying their approach to use a broader range of channels.”

Interestingly, the report also found that use of virtual (online) events for fundraising was much more widespread in the UK (58%) than elsewhere, indicating an appetite for innovative digital campaigns (and a corresponding need to offer effective capture of online donations). Increasing digital skills was cited by 41% as one of their top three challenges during the pandemic, while 83% of UK-based charities mentioned a shift to digital services.



Embedding ethical marketing and communications practices at every level helps everything from building trust in your brand to ensuring a safe and fair digital environment for all. Support for those working in digital and social media is also key, as is advocacy for digital roles throughout the charity sector.





“We look forward  
to continuing to  
support our fantastic  
digital community  
and reporting on  
your wonderful  
achievements over  
the coming year.”

**Sarah Clarke**

Head of Membership, CharityComms



[www.charitycomms.org.uk](http://www.charitycomms.org.uk)

To become a member of CharityComms  
or to join the Digital Benchmark email  
[sarah.clarke@charitycomms.org.uk](mailto:sarah.clarke@charitycomms.org.uk)



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

Any feedback or suggestions  
about the Benchmark should  
be sent to Uprise Up at  
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## Digital Comms in 2020-21

What the CharityComms Digital Benchmark tells us  
about charities' digital response to the coronavirus