

## Survey of Premiership Football Club Websites

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## Summation

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### Overall Performance

90% of the websites assessed failed to achieve an overall ranking of good or excellent.

### Quality

80% of the websites assessed failed to achieve a quality ranking of good or excellent.

### Visibility

70% of the websites assessed failed to achieve a visibility ranking of good or excellent.

### Accessibility

85% of the websites examined fail one or more Website Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) Priority 1 accessibility checkpoints as outlined by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C).

## Award Winners

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No websites achieve the Gold Standard Award performance.



Everton Football Club achieve the Silver Standard Award.



Manchester United are commended for their website visibility.



Charlton Athletic are commended for their website accessibility.

## Introduction

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The purpose of this survey is to raise awareness of issues, improve the quality of websites and recognise excellence where it is found.

Our survey looks at the following key areas:

- Quality
- Visibility
- Accessibility

We have selected these areas for examination as they will be of primary interest to both the website stakeholders and the wider public in general.

## Analysis:

### Quality

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#### Why is Website Quality Important?

The quality of a user's visit to a website is not simply determined by the strength of content on that website. The way a website is constructed and maintained can have a positive or negative impact on that experience.

Most website visitors have a specific task in mind when they arrive at a website. Placing obstacles in their way from completing those tasks can lead to frustration, and consequently to website abandonment and undermine brand reputation.

Website quality impacts directly upon the following:

- **Website abandonment.** If users are frustrated in finding what they want from one website, they will quickly leave to find it on another. This may result in lost business, either directly or indirectly.
- **Brand reputation.** A good or bad experience will effect a users perception of the brand as a whole. Research has shown that 80% of business professionals use the internet for product information and evaluation, and 55% access company information to learn more about the organisation.
- **Customer retention.** The cost of retaining a customer is cheaper than acquiring a new one. Having gone to the expense of attracting a customer to the website, a poor experience could reduce the chances of that visitor returning to the website.

#### How did this sector score for website quality?

There are two contrasting approaches to website strategy evident in this sector. The first is an "open door" policy, where most of the website content is readily available. The second approach is to provide practically no information without the user registering first. Whilst the temptation must be to consider that official club websites operate in an uncompetitive marketplace, there are authoritative and comprehensive websites from the BBC, Sky, Football365 and others, including "unofficial" fan websites, that provide alternatives for users to turn to.

Making users register might not be a huge issue to those clubs concentrating on their traditional fan base, but for those clubs looking to attract new audiences - for instance from abroad - this approach could also have a negative impact on their brand, affect customer acquisition and ultimately merchandise sales. It is also worth noting that the registration forms for most of these websites are also quite long and detailed.

The biggest single factor negatively effecting website quality throughout this sector as a whole is website speed. Football websites are - at least - as likely to be browsed at home as at work, and whilst broadband becomes more popular every day, the majority of the population still uses a modem to connect with the internet from home. This is a difficult issue to resolve, as website visitors doubtless want to see images of the team, players and

matches, whilst the clubs want to harness the popularity of their websites to place advertising. However, more consideration of connection speed may provide a better user experience for website visitors.

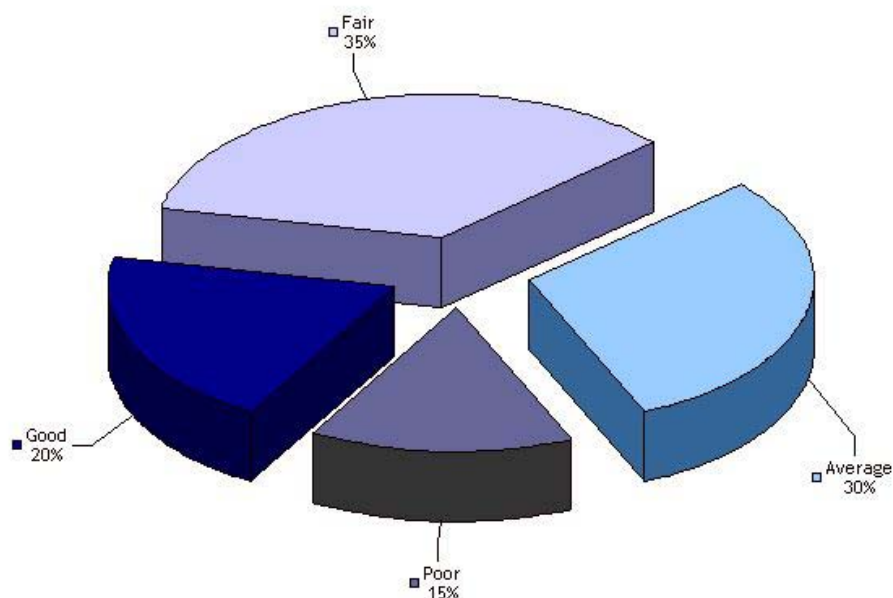
There are a small number of websites with a relatively high proportion of broken links. These are typically in the archive section. Whilst it is understandable that links can become broken when pages and images are moved or renamed, it should still not be considered acceptable. This can be compounded when a website fails to provide a custom error page (20% of the websites examined did not provide one) that would provide clear information about what has gone wrong, and how to get back to the main website. Care should be taken with handling broken links, as it is one of the single greatest contributors to website abandonment.

Given the size of the websites, and the amount of content available on them, it is disappointing to report a shortage of alternative navigation options. Only 35% of the web websites have an internal search engine. Additionally, only 15% have a site map, and only 10% offer both. Also of some concern is that 20% of the websites either have no link or no clearly stated link to their privacy statement on the home page.

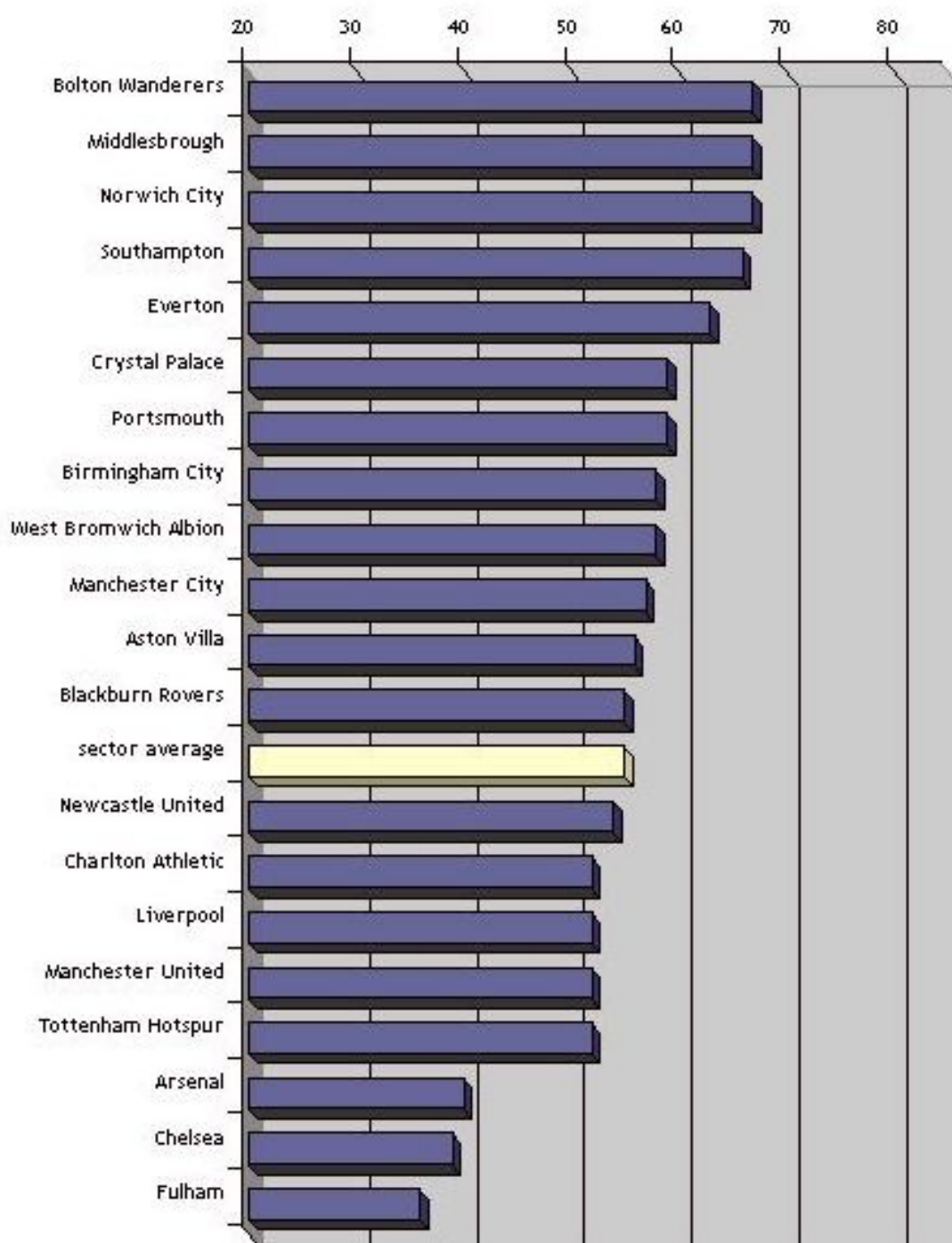
Much has been made of football clubs attempting to promote themselves world wide, and with players coming from all over the world to play for their clubs, interest in the English Premier League has never been greater. Therefore, it can be seen as a missed opportunity that relatively few websites (25%) currently offer content - limited or otherwise - in another language. Everton FC deserve a special mention, however, for not only providing content in Chinese, but for providing both graphic and text-only versions. This provides a means to download content relatively quickly for those fans located in China.

A large number of websites (60%) also employ pop-up windows for advertising. Use of pop-up windows are generally considered to be poor practice from a usability point of view, as they tend to irritate users and with pop-up blockers becoming more common, the effectiveness of this approach is also open to question. A similarly discredited technique is to use splash screens, and 75% of the websites also have those. One website even has two splash screens.

### Overview of Sector Website Quality



**Website Quality League Table**



Score	Rating
> 75	Excellent
> 65	Good
> 55	Fair
> 45	Average
45 or less	Poor

## Analysis:

### Visibility

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#### Why is Website Visibility Important?

Search engines are responsible for generating approximately 80% of new visitors to the majority of websites. Appearing in the top results for the most appropriate phrases is key to maximising the benefit derived from the search engines.

Incoming links to websites are responsible for driving visitors directly to websites from other websites. Additionally, the number of incoming links to a website can have a positive effect on search engine ranking and improve visibility.

Visibility is important for the following reasons:

- **Generating traffic.** Whether a website is an information only website, or a full e-commerce website, generating new visitors to a website is a vital part of any online strategy.
- **Brand awareness.** Occupying top positions in search results increases brand awareness, and denies that opportunity from competitors.
- **Brand endorsement.** Incoming links to a website act as a tacit endorsement of a website and its branding, which can have a positive effect on the way a company is perceived.

#### How did the sector score for website visibility?

Overall website visibility for this sector is good. The biggest factor in this success is the number of incoming links to the websites. For the majority of websites these are high and this sector's average number of incoming links exceeds the average across the internet as a whole. These links will help to drive traffic to the website, act as an endorsement and boost brand reputation, and help to improve search engine performance. There are pros and cons to having multiple domain names, as a majority of the clubs do, however one of the drawbacks is that by not having all the incoming links pointing at a single domain name, it dilutes the positive effect that they have on search engine performance.

Performance on the search engines tells a more mixed story. Statistically, 85% of first time visitors to a website discover that website via a search engine. Search engine performance, therefore, should be important to website owners. Users may know the brand name, but they may not know the URL, and using search engines to find the website is a logical way to find out what it is. Universally, the websites in this sector dominate the top positions for their club names.

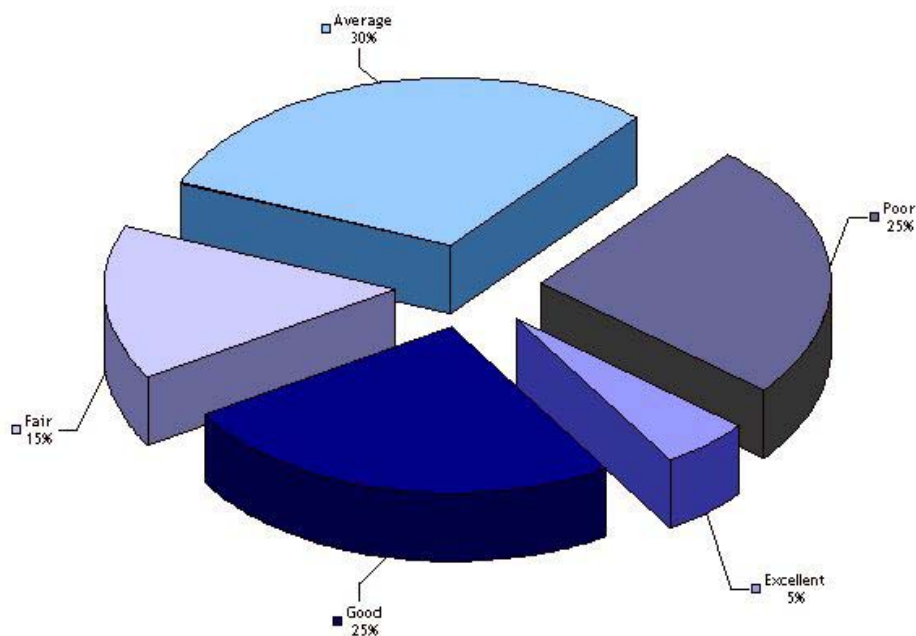
Performance is more varied for the other terms tested. Some websites perform well for the club nickname, club ground, a player or manager's name or for two terms out of all three, but very few of the websites score particularly well for all of these search terms.

Additionally, many of the websites fail to perform for a search term based on their merchandise. Whilst acknowledging that competition for more commercial search phrases is strong, there are a number of basic measures that could be taken that might improve performance.

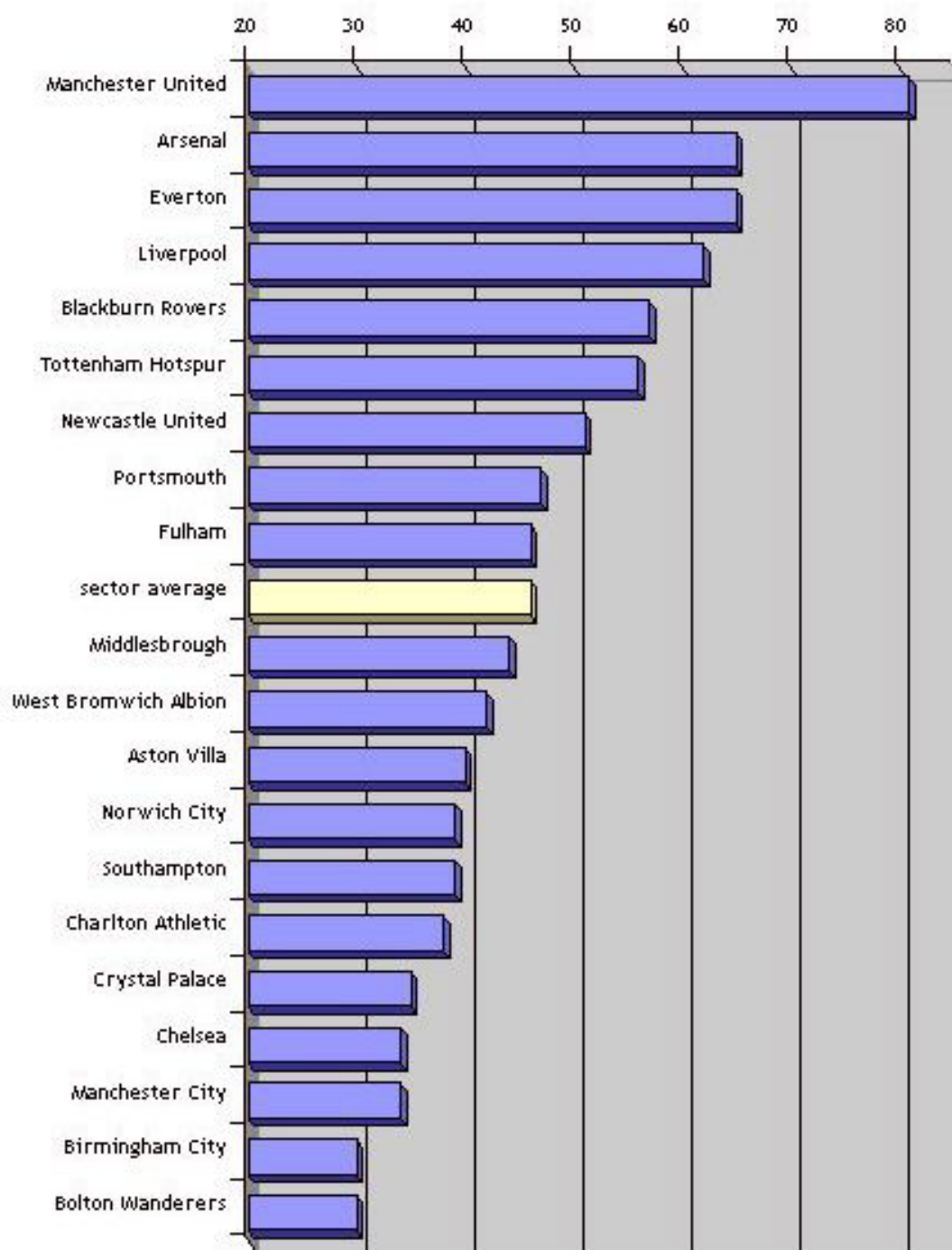
Given that clubs achieve better profit margins selling their merchandise directly, it is surprising not to see more evidence of optimisation despite the relatively strong showing by some of the clubs in the search engines.

30% of the websites did not make use of meta data. Of those that did, several websites only used meta tags for the club name. 65% used images rather than text for promotion within their website and nearly all the websites (90%) failed to optimise page titles for specific content. A similar proportion of websites also used images rather than keyword-rich text.

### Overview of Sector Website Visibility



**Website Visibility League Table**



Score	Rating
> 65	Excellent
> 55	Good
> 45	Fair
> 35	Average
35 or less	Poor

## Analysis:

### Accessibility

#### Why is Website Accessibility Important?

An estimated 10% of the worldwide online population suffer from visual disabilities, and yet this area is often neglected by business. By catering for this large section of the public, you can ensure that everyone has access to your website.

Moreover, even doing simple things like making the size of the text changeable can transform the quality of visitor experience for those with less than 20/20 vision.

Accessibility is important for the following reasons:

- **Inclusivity.** According to iCAN, an estimated 54 million people in America alone suffer from some form of disability, and they have a discretionary budget of 188 billion dollars.
- **Brand reputation.** As part of any social responsibility program, making your website accessible to all visitors improves your brand reputation with all user groups.
- **Legislative compliance.** Legislation exists across the world to ensure efforts are made to provide accessibility to all user groups. Failure to comply with minimum accessibility standards could lead to prosecution.

#### How did the sector score for website accessibility?

There are two approaches to making websites accessible. The first is to work on the website, and use the recognised methods to make the website accessible. This is by far the best solution, as it engenders a sense of inclusiveness for all users. The second approach is to create a special accessible version of a website. Of the websites examined, only one has adopted the first approach. A further 20% of the websites offer an accessible version, but the remaining 75% have made no discernible effort to accommodate the requirements of this section of the population.

Charlton Athletic should be commended for re-launching their website so that it is pretty much accessible to all user groups. Manchester United also deserve credit for their accessible website, which looks good and is fast loading. In fact, many users not suffering from visual disabilities may find the accessible version worth investigating.

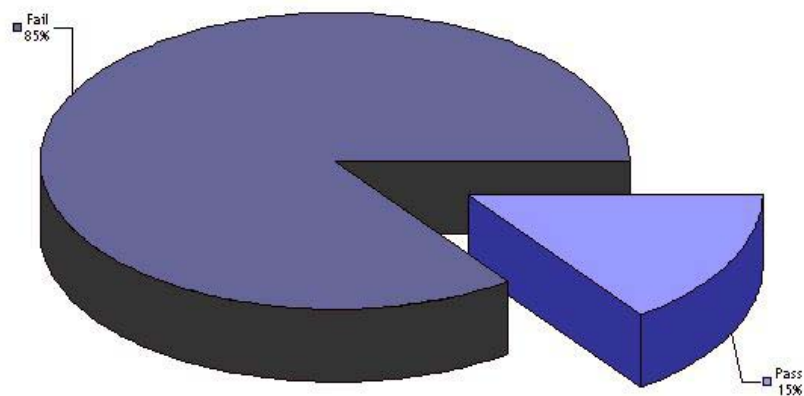
The remaining 75% of websites by and large remain difficult to use for those with visual disabilities. This is in contrast to offline attitudes, where most clubs have on the whole taken their responsibilities seriously with regards to making their grounds accessible, and improving the quality of match day experiences.

Even those with less than perfect eyesight will find 20% of the websites troublesome, as these websites use fixed fonts that make it difficult for users to make text larger or smaller to improve legibility for themselves.

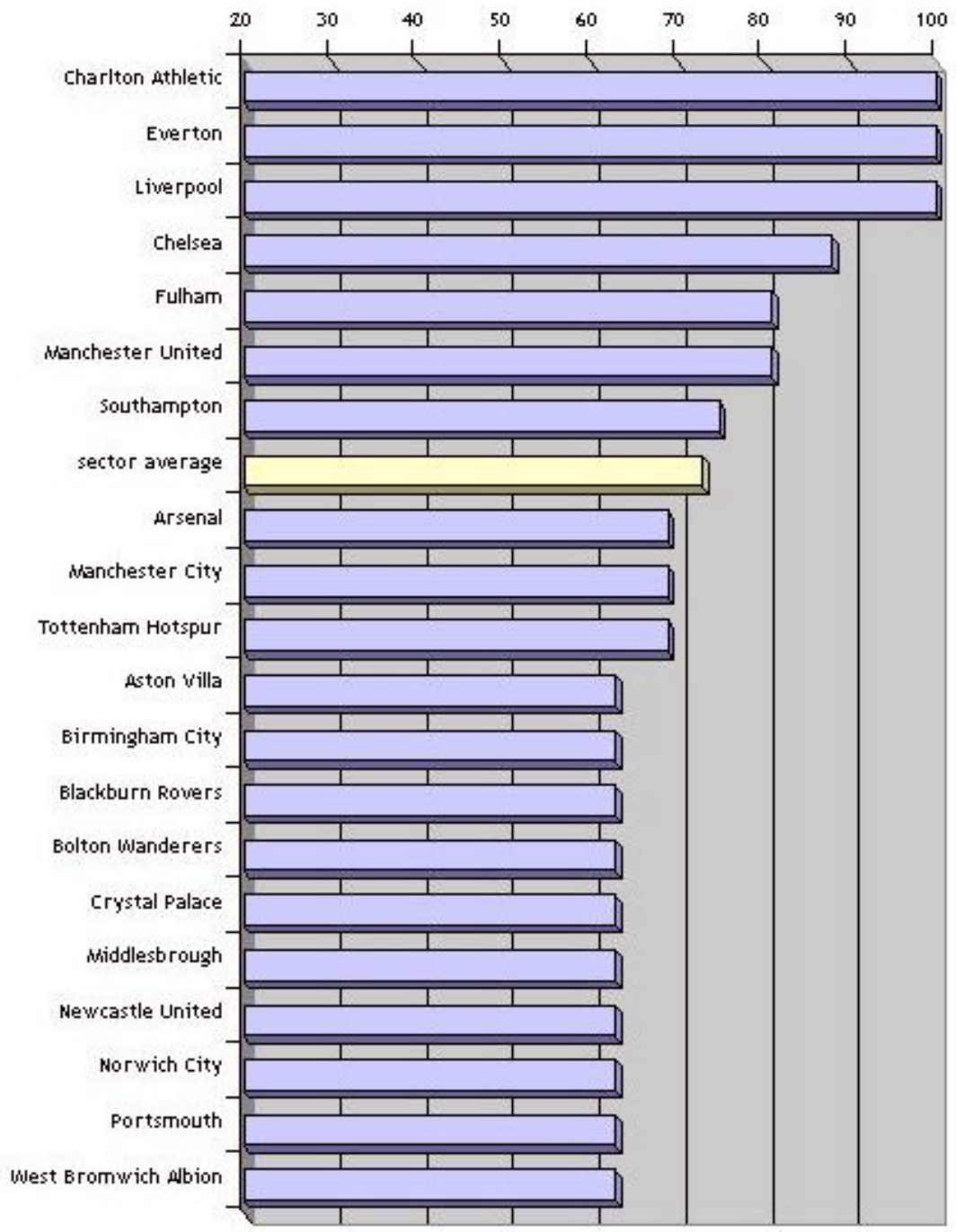
Improving accessibility should be a major consideration for those website owners who have not addressed these issues already. Small steps could help to make the websites more usable. For example, 80% of the websites contained meaningless links like “click here” or “more” which, out of context, are not helpful. Even some of the accessible websites are guilty of making this mistake. Similarly, Only 25% of websites used alt tags (which are textual descriptions) for images, and again, one could question the usefulness of some of the tags used. “Article image” is not informative. There were also very few examples of websites using the longdesc attribute (which is a more detailed textual description) to provide fuller descriptions of images used.

Whilst the amount of advertising on the websites is generally questioned elsewhere in this document, its treatment is also worth considering from an accessibility standpoint. In accessible versions of websites, advertising is typically dropped. Whilst this improves the usability of those pages it is another example of how the two user groups are treated differently. This also represents a missed opportunity for the clubs to promote their services and merchandise to this user group.

### Overview of Sector Website Accessibility



**Website Accessibility League Table**



Score	Rating
100	Pass
99 or less	Fail

**Detail:****Quality****Aspects of Website Quality Checked**

Factor	Description	Importance
Primary broken links	These are significant and noticeable errors that negatively affect a user's experience. These errors consist of missing or incorrectly specified links to pages, images, documents, email addresses, other websites and broken anchors.	High
Secondary broken links	Whilst a "no tolerance" attitude to errors is recommended, some broken links impact less than others on the quality of visit. Consequently, missing image files that merely help to align the page correctly, and are generally not noticeable to a visitor are not penalised to the same level as primary broken links.	Low
Missing page titles	Page titles help users to orientate themselves within a website and can be particularly important to users employing screen reader software.	Medium
Website speed	A slow website can cause great frustration for a website visitor, and can cause website abandonment. Whilst factors like the speed of the internet and quality of connection are important, so is page size. As some slow pages are necessary if not desirable on any website to show product images, presentations and so on, it is the ratio of slow to fast pages that is measured to provide an overall website speed figure.	High
Deep pages	A website with pages more than four clicks away from the home page is considered to have "deep" pages. This can disorientate visitors so that they feel lost on the website.	Medium
Slow home page	For the majority of websites, the home page is the biggest single entry point. Failure to load quickly can lead to website abandonment at the first hurdle. A penalty is applied to those websites that have a slow home page.	High
Generic page titles	Page titles help users to orientate themselves within a website. Use of generic titles largely fails to help with this, and so a penalty is applied.	Medium
Javascript/Java/Flash Required	Websites that require JavaScript, Java or Flash to be active in order to navigate a website or view content receive a penalty, as they exclude user groups that do not support these technologies.	High
Privacy policy	Users generally want to know if data about them is recorded, and if so, what is done with that data. Failure to have or clearly label a link to a privacy policy statement from the home page receives a penalty.	High

## Methodology

Due to the size of some of some of the websites, only the first 5,000 URLs were checked where applicable. Where clubs have more than one domain, only one has been tested.

A combination of manual checking and automated software was used to identify the number of issues present on a website. Weighting was applied to reflect the relative importance (low, medium or high) of the various issues. The score takes into account the relative size of the website.

## Explanation of Results

The quality of a website is measured on a scale of 0-100. The higher the score, the better the website quality.

## Guidelines

Score	Rating	Description
> 75	Excellent	Likely to provide an excellent visitor experience.
> 65	Good	Likely to provide a good visitor experience.
> 55	Fair	Likely to provide a fair visitor experience.
> 45	Average	Likely to provide an average visitor experience.
45 or less	Poor	Likely to provide a poor visitor experience.

**Detail:****Visibility****Aspects of Website Visibility Checked**

Factor	Description	Importance
Search engine visibility	The major search engines were tested for five keywords and phrases (for example the club name) and performance of the websites for those phrases recorded.	High
Incoming links	The number of links to a website, as reported on a number of major search engines were totalled.	Medium

**Methodology**

Where clubs have more than one domain, all were tested for search engine performance. Incoming links to multiple domains were added together. Ten search engines (US versions) were selected on the basis of user popularity for testing. A combination of manual inspection and automated software was used to determine the performance of the websites for five relevant search phrases. A similar approach was used to determine the number of incoming links to each domain. The scores were then weighted to reflect their relative importance (high or medium) to determine the visibility score.

**Explanation of Results**

The visibility of a website is measured on a scale of 0-100. The higher the score, the better the website visibility.

**Guidelines**

Score	Rating	Description
> 65	Excellent	Likely to provide excellent visibility.
> 55	Good	Likely to provide good visibility.
> 45	Fair	Likely to provide fair visibility.
> 35	Average	Likely to provide average visibility.
35 or less	Poor	Likely to provide poor visibility.

## Detail:

### Accessibility

#### Aspects of Website Accessibility Checked

Standards of accessibility are measured against the checkpoints outlined by the World Wide Web Consortium's (W3C) Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 1.0 (WCAG).

There are three levels of accessibility standards as outlined in WCAG. Priority 1, containing 16 checkpoints, is the minimum recommended level of accessibility. For the purposes of this survey, the home page of each website was tested against Priority 1 checkpoints. A full list of Priority 1 Checkpoints can be found on the [W3 website](#).

#### Methodology

Where a club has an accessible version of the website, this has been tested. Home pages were manually checked against WCAG Priority 1 checkpoints. A score of 100% means that the home page (and only the home page) has passed all the Priority 1 checkpoints. Passing the Priority 1 checkpoints should not be interpreted as meaning the website is fully accessible which would require the website to pass Priority 2 and 3 checkpoints.

#### Guidelines

Score	Rating	Description
100	Pass	Home page conforms to WCAG 1.0 Priority 1 accessibility standards.
99 or less	Fail	Home page does not conform to WCAG 1.0 Priority 1 accessibility standards.

## Overall Ranking

### Final Observations

The same market forces do not drive Premiership football club websites as most other sectors. They have a loyal fan base that they can rely upon. They are able to provide a lot of exclusive content that can't be found elsewhere. And they have brand names easily recognisable, in many cases, worldwide. Despite these apparent advantages, each club website should not be seen as operating in a vacuum. Alternatives are available. Loyalty to one team should not be confused with loyalty to the team's official website.

The results of this survey should be considered within this broader context. Whilst the clubs doubtless enjoy large volumes of traffic, and many successful transactions, there is clear scope for improvement.

EPL clubs benefit from their high profile brands with regards to the large numbers of incoming links that boost their website's visibility. Clubs will doubtless be able to boast of large numbers of visits originating from search engines. This appears to owe more to their brand name or unique offerings (like club credit cards) than to any clear evidence of optimisation on their sites. Yet, clubs should not feel that they should rely only on their successful brands. As good as this sector's visibility is, there are still steps that could be taken by the majority of the clubs to improve that. And any improvement in visibility should ultimately result in increased revenue streams.

Although the quality of content generally cannot be faulted, the quality of user experience could be improved. Fans having to wait for pages to load, not so much because of pictures of the team, but because of adverts, are entitled to feel frustrated. Website abandonment must still be a factor on these websites, as well as perhaps generating negative feelings towards the brand. Some home pages, for example could take as long as a minute or more to fully load on a standard modem connection.

For some websites, advertising can take up as much as a third of the screen. And with space for navigation, content sometimes seems squeezed into the middle, almost as an afterthought. The number of slow pages differs wildly from website to website. On one website, 94% of pages are considered slow. And yet on another, it is only 14%, showing that it is possible to make a fast website even in this sector.

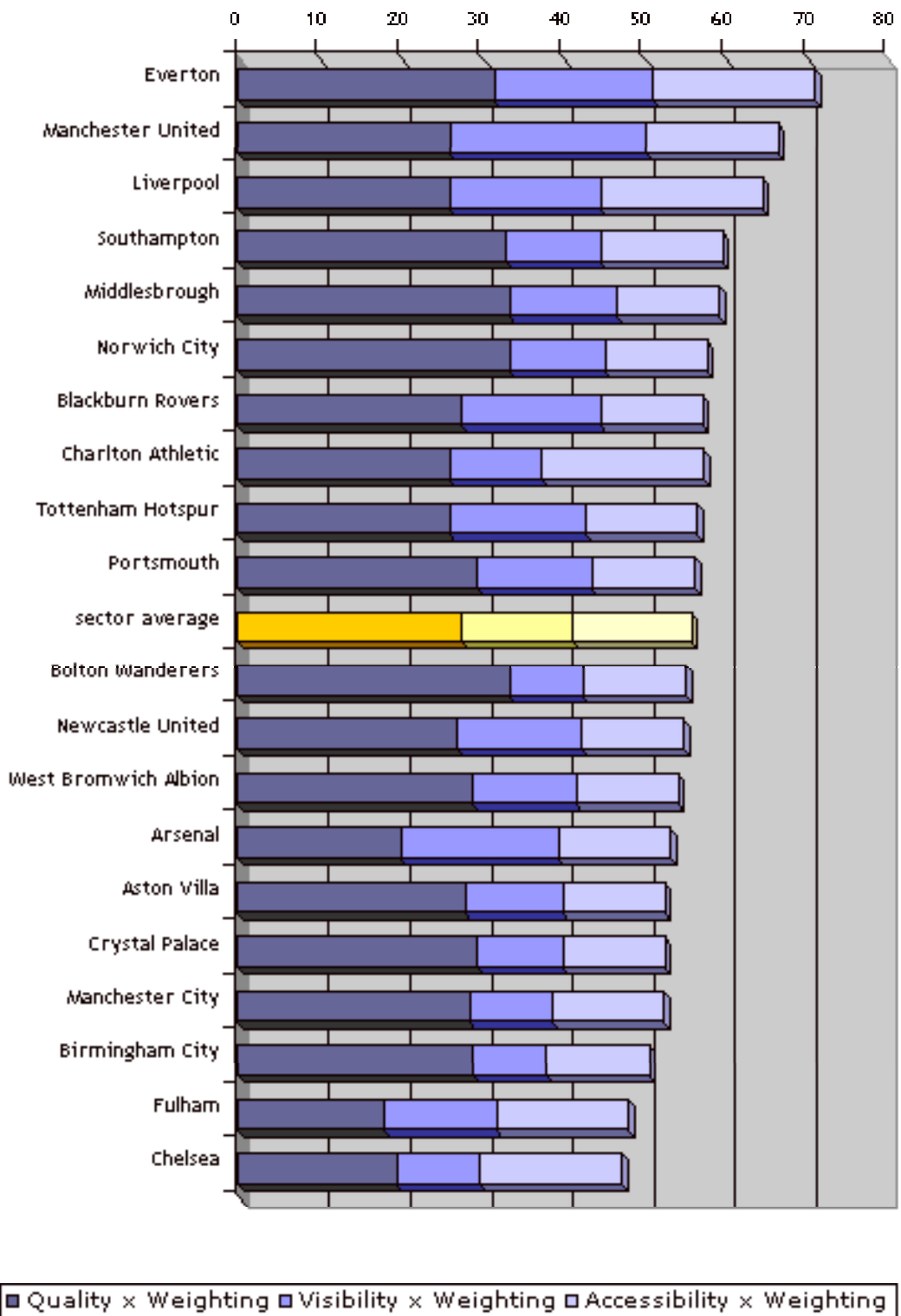
Through various community projects clubs have traditionally shown a commendable attitude towards the disadvantaged in society. Clubs are also working hard to improve facilities at their grounds for those with physical disabilities, from improving access for wheelchair users to providing commentaries for the blind.

Sadly, the majority of clubs have failed to demonstrate this positive attitude towards the whole internet community. Many of the websites are very difficult for some user groups. This not only prevents them from accessing the websites, but from spending money with the clubs, as well as negatively effecting brand reputation. It is to be hoped that when the next survey is completed, those clubs that have not done so will have taken significant measures to improve the accessibility of their websites.

### Methodology

The results of testing for quality, visibility and accessibility have been weighted to reflect their relative importance to provide the following composite league table.

### Overall League Table



## net-progress Awards for Excellence

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### Gold Standard Websites

To qualify for the Gold Standard Award, a website must achieve an excellent rating in both quality and visibility and pass Priority 1 Accessibility standards.

### Silver Standard Websites

To qualify for the Silver Standard Award, a website must achieve a good or better rating in both quality and visibility and pass Priority 1 Accessibility standards.

### Commendations

Commendations are awarded where a site is considered to excel in a specific area.

## Award Winners

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No websites were awarded the Gold Standard Award.



Everton Football Club is awarded the **Silver Standard Award** for their website, [www.evertonfc.com](http://www.evertonfc.com).



Manchester United Football Club is commended for the visibility of [www.manutd.com](http://www.manutd.com).



Charlton Athletic is commended for the accessibility of [www.charlton-athletic.co.uk](http://www.charlton-athletic.co.uk).

## About net-progress

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**net-progress** is an internet consultancy using a holistic approach to add value to a company's online presence. net-progress specialise in accessibility, quality, visibility behaviour analysis and reputation management in order to deliver measurable improvements to a business.

net-progress has been working in the field of web analytics since 1997, with clients ranging from FTSE100 companies to SMEs.

net-progress recently launched net-guide, an accessibility centric search engine and directory, which has been shortlisted for the NLB Visionary Design Awards 2004.

net-progress produces regular surveys on various aspects of online performance in a variety of sectors, as well as accepting commissions from trade and consumer publications.

[www.net-progress.co.uk](http://www.net-progress.co.uk)  
[www.net-guide.co.uk](http://www.net-guide.co.uk)

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### Data Collection

The data for this survey was compiled between 11th October 2004 and 19th October 2004. All the data reflects the state of the websites during that time. Only publicly accessible areas of the websites were inspected. No improper methods were used to determine this data. All reasonable steps have been taken to ensure the accuracy of the data. However, it should only be seen as representing a general overview of the websites examined.

### Copyright Notices

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