Improving our website

Introduction

The website plays a key role in the identity of the Club and is an important resource for the Club and its members. The services provided to Club members through the website are significant. It is also the "public-facing" end of the Club and what we do.

The current website has served us well but there is an emerging view that some change is needed if it is to continue to play a key role in the Club and its activities over the next 5 to 10 years.

The Committee recently agreed that we should review the website and take steps to improve it over the next 1-2 years. This paper sets out our current thinking. It's based on some initial discussions involving the Committee and from several Club members who have been closely involved in the website or who are involved in website development.

Before the Committee decides on the extent of change needed and what level of priority to give to different elements of this work, we'd like to hear your thoughts and ideas on:
- the need for change – what you like and don't like about the website
- the layout, structure and usability of the website and how we might improve it
- the content of the website and how this is created and managed
- what extra functions or services you'd like the website to provide

It would be great to hear from you. Please send your thoughts and ideas to me by 31 October at comms@eagleskiclub.org.uk.

The current website

Our current website (www.eagleskiclub.org.uk) has served us well over the last few years. Apart from finding out about tours and events, members can use the website to search the membership database, book on tours and events, pay for training events and buy carbon credits. Later this year, members will also be paying their subs by direct debit through the website.

Results from the last membership survey suggested that about two-thirds of members think the website is important to them. The most popular pages are those relating to the touring programme, booking on tours/events and the forums. Pages on ski touring, avalanches, etc receive far fewer visits.

About 60% of people use the website from their desktop PCs, with 32% using a mobile and 8% a tablet. Overall, it appears that desktop and tablet use is slowly declining and mobile use increasing (24% in 2016 to 32% in 2019). Although not designed for mobile use, the website has been adapted for this use.

Our website has been created and managed by a small group of volunteers, at very little cost to the Club. We have invested a lot of time and effort in making key services available through the current website, and the approach taken has been professional and thorough.

The need for change

Based on comments from the 2018 membership survey, from committee members and from others within the club, the need for change includes:

a) the structure is viewed by some as labyrinthine – where it is often difficult to find what you're looking for and to navigate around the website
b) it comes across as quite old-fashioned and doesn't present a modern, inspirational face to the Club or to ski touring more generally (particularly to potential younger members)
c) it doesn't make much use of good quality, attractive images of ski touring and mountains, and the images used don't really indicate what the Club is about or what its main target audiences are (e.g. young adults, more women members)
d) some content is out of date and isn't generated by more than a small number of members
e) public and member-only content is mixed across the website, and there is no clear "members-only" section
f) although adapted for mobile use, it hasn't been designed specifically for this
g) content and presentation, particularly on the home page, doesn't change very often and isn't reinforced by other forms of communication (e.g. Facebook)
h) we don't have an appointed officer (e.g. a Website Editor) to look after it

What sort of website do we want?

It's important to decide what we want the website to do, not just now but in 5 to 10 years' time. Initial thoughts are that the website should:

a) **present a modern, welcoming and inspirational face to the Club** and act as the "shop window" for non-members (who are potentially new members of the Club, particularly amongst target groups such as younger people and females)
b) **provide a range of "transactional" services for members**, including booking on tours, paying membership subs, booking on events, buying carbon credits, making use of membership benefits and getting in touch with other members
c) **provide an official record of the Club and its activities**, created and looked after by Club members
d) **help build knowledge and skills across the membership relevant to ski touring** (e.g. avalanche awareness, navigation, first aid, environmental and climate care issues)
e) **support better communications** between members and between members and Club officers

In terms of how we run the website and manage its content, we think the following are important:

a) people should be able to navigate easily around the website on any device
b) pages and content should be kept up-to-date and managed, supported by a good content management tool
c) other means of communication (e.g. e-newsletter, Facebook page) should drive members to new or important content held on the website
d) the membership database should be easier to search (e.g. for members living in a particular area)
e) members should be encouraged to add content to their public profiles
f) there should be greater functionality to support better communications across the Club and its members

Improving the layout, structure and usability of the website

We think smaller-scale improvements are possible in the short-term to help the website meet our needs without changing the basic infrastructure on which the website operates. Early priorities could include:

a) reviewing the layout and structure of the website (e.g. section titles, pages, member-only content) and re-designing it where necessary (e.g. a clear training/skills section)
b) improving the ease of navigation around the website (e.g. to find what you're looking for, use of links)
c) improving the presentation of the website (e.g. its look and feel, the size of text, making it feel more modern and up-to-date)
d) simplifying the home page, particularly so that it is more inspirational and with greater news-based content generated by members and Club officers
e) improving the visibility of some potentially useful content (e.g. past newsletters)
f) having a clear "members-only" section and looking at the balance between public and member-only content

Improving content and how we manage it

A website is only as good or as useful as its content: if content isn't useful or current, and if old content isn't removed, the website becomes out-of-date and cluttered. Current sections include how the club works/club administration, tours and events, introduction to ski touring and basic skills, avalanche awareness and safety, first aid/rescue, grants, training and leader development, climate care and low carbon travel, images and galleries, help/how to do, expeditions, forums and "My Account".

This issue is partly about the amount and quality of content and partly about how we manage this content and keep it up-to-date. Early priorities could include:

a) appointing a Website Editor to lead on generating and managing content, and to carry out improvements to the website
b) identifying which sections of content need most improvement
c) reviewing, and improving where necessary, how we generate and manage content, including the list of members with current responsibilities for content/pages
d) setting up a more active group of members to lead on particular types of content, led by the Website Editor
e) making better use of images from the Yearbooks and from the galleries section particularly where these show members of all age groups and both male and female members
f) working out how we can best use media such as our Facebook group and e-newsletter to reinforce the central role of the website and point people towards it for more substantive, news-based content
g) reviewing what content should be for members only (i.e. password protected)

Extra functions and services

Whilst the services provided to members through the website are significant, we could look at what other functions and services could be provided online. Options could include:
a) developing a better search function that enables members to search for members in particular areas or regions
b) creating a new "how to" page to help make it easier for people to use the website (e.g. how to update your details and profile, how to apply for a tour, how to look for other members)

c) developing stronger links to social media via the website (e.g. Twitter feed)
d) having some sort of "bulletin board" function
e) using the website to help gather the views of members (e.g. channels for opinions, "taking the pulse", topical discussion points) on key issues within the Club and its activities
f) improving how we generate and share information about ski touring (as a community)
g) setting up an Instagram or Flickr site for the Club (replacing or complementing the galleries section) and encouraging members to post images more regularly

Looking longer-term

Many of the possible improvements described above assume that we continue with the current website infrastructure. If we look 5 to 10 years ahead, it might be sensible to carry out an independent review of the website and our long-term options. Key elements could involve looking at alternatives to the current Drupal platform, the implications for the functionality that we've built into the current website (a key consideration) and what resources would be required (both cash and volunteer time).

Next steps

The next steps include:
- hearing what you think about these issues and asking for your thoughts and ideas
- appointing a Website Editor to lead this work as part of our communications effort
- holding a workshop (later on in 2019) to drill down into one or two key issues in more detail and coming up with more concrete plans
- finalising the Club's requirements for the website and produce a short action plan
- exploring how best to carry out a longer-term review (e.g. contracting an agency not directly involved in the current website to do this)

Conclusion

Overall, the current view of the committee is that we think the changes needed at this stage are more evolutionary than revolutionary in nature: supporting more active management of content and taking steps to improve the look and feel of the website. However, we also think that an independent assessment of what changes might be needed in the long-term would be sensible.

Richard Davison
Communications Secretary
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