

Rebuilding With Care

A guide for Sydney-based purpose-driven organisations considering a website refresh or rebuild in 2026

Published 2026 | marzipan.com.au

About This Guide

Your website is often the first place someone lands when they are at their most vulnerable — seeking legal help, navigating a crisis, or looking for services they have never needed before. That moment deserves care.

This guide is for teams at community organisations, advocacy groups, community legal centres, and other purpose-driven services in Sydney who are thinking about refreshing or rebuilding their website.

It draws on current web design thinking, accessibility best practice, and principles from trauma-informed communication — applied specifically to the digital environment. It is not a technical manual. It is a considered starting point.

We have written it in plain language. We have tried to avoid jargon. And we have organised it so you can read it all the way through, or dip into the sections most relevant to you.

Who is this for?

This guide is most useful for Executive Directors, Communications Managers, and Operations staff at organisations with 5-50 staff who serve communities in moments of stress, transition, or disadvantage — and who know their current website is not doing them justice.

Part One: Before You Begin

Why a website rebuild feels so daunting

Most purpose-driven organisations have at least one of the following:

- A website that was built years ago, by someone who no longer works there
- Outdated content that nobody feels confident removing
- A sense that the site 'works well enough' — even though staff privately know it does not

- Fear of breaking something that cannot easily be fixed

These are not signs of failure. They are signs of an organisation that has been putting its energy where it belongs — into its people and its programs. But they do matter, because your website is often the only version of your organisation that a person in crisis will encounter.

What 'trauma-informed' means in a digital context

Trauma-informed practice is well understood in direct service delivery: it means recognising that people may carry experiences of harm, and designing your interactions accordingly — with predictability, choice, dignity, and care.

The same principles apply to your website. A person searching for legal help at midnight, or a parent trying to find emergency housing services for their family, is not browsing casually. They are likely stressed, possibly scared, and their capacity to navigate complexity is reduced.

Trauma-informed web design does not mean overhauling everything. It means asking a few consistent questions at each stage of the build:

- Does this page make it easy to understand what to do next?
- Does the language feel safe, or does it inadvertently shame or confuse?
- Is it clear what will happen if someone fills in this form?
- Can someone exit discreetly if they need to?
- Does the site work on a phone, in a moment of urgency?

A useful frame

Ask this question at every decision point: 'If someone is having the worst week of their life, can they still use this page?' If the answer is uncertain, the design needs work.

Strategic thinking first

One of the most common mistakes organisations make is treating a website rebuild as a design project. It is not — or at least, not primarily. It is a strategic project.

Before you talk to any designer or developer, it is worth spending time on these questions:

- Who actually visits our website, and what are they trying to do?
- What action do we most want people to take?
- What do we want funders, partners, or referrers to understand about us?
- What content is essential, and what has simply accumulated over the years?
- What does success look like — not in traffic terms, but in real-world terms?

The answers will shape every decision that follows: structure, navigation, content, design, and where to invest your limited budget.

Part Two: Design That Serves Your Community

Accessibility is not optional — and it is not complicated

Accessibility means building your website so that people with disabilities can use it. This includes people who are blind or have low vision, people who are Deaf or hard of hearing, people with cognitive or neurological differences, and people using assistive technologies such as screen readers.

In Australia, the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 requires that digital services be accessible. For organisations serving vulnerable communities, this is not merely a legal obligation — it reflects your values.

The practical standard is WCAG 2.1 AA (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines). The core principles are:

Perceivable

Information must be presentable in ways all users can perceive. In practice:

- All images have descriptive alt text
- Videos have captions
- Text does not rely on colour alone to convey meaning
- There is sufficient contrast between text and background

Operable

Users must be able to navigate and interact with your site:

- All functionality is accessible by keyboard, not just mouse
- There are no time limits that cannot be adjusted
- Nothing flashes in a way that could trigger seizures
- Users can skip repetitive navigation to reach main content

Understandable

Content and navigation must be understandable:

- Language is as plain and direct as possible
- Forms give clear instructions and helpful error messages
- Navigation is consistent across the site
- Unusual words or abbreviations are explained

Robust

Content must work with a wide range of assistive technologies. This means following proper HTML structure — headings in order, form labels linked to inputs, landmark regions named correctly.

A note on plain language

Plain language is not a concession to those with lower literacy — it is a courtesy to everyone. When someone is stressed or overwhelmed, their ability to process complex sentence structures is reduced. Aim for a Year 8 reading level as a baseline. Use short sentences. Break instructions into steps.

Human-centred design in 2026

Purpose-driven organisations do not need to chase aesthetic fashions. What they do need is design that:

- Makes the most important information easy to find
- Feels warm without being condescending
- Communicates credibility without feeling corporate
- Loads quickly on a mobile phone with a weak signal
- Does not penalise users who are less digitally confident

The current move away from rigid, boxy layouts toward more organic, considered compositions can genuinely benefit community organisations — it allows a site to feel less like a form and more like a considered welcome. But always weigh aesthetics against function. If a design choice makes something harder to find, it is not a good choice.

Motion and interaction — use with care

Animations and transitions can enhance the experience of a website — guiding attention and making complex information more digestible. For organisations serving people who may experience anxiety, PTSD, vestibular disorders, or sensory sensitivities, they can also cause real harm if implemented carelessly.

- Always honour the 'reduce motion' setting in a user's operating system
- Never use animation as decoration — only where it adds meaning
- Avoid parallax effects, which cause dizziness for some users
- Ensure nothing auto-plays without consent — particularly video or audio

Micro-interactions and responsiveness

Small interactive moments — a button that changes colour when hovered, a form field that highlights when selected, a confirmation message when a submission is received — matter considerably.

For users who are uncertain whether something has worked, or who may be anxious about submitting personal information, these small signals provide reassurance. They communicate: we received you. Something happened.

Part Three: Content and Language

Write for the person who is struggling

Content strategy for purpose-driven organisations begins with one question: who is coming to this page, and what do they need?

The answer is often: someone who is confused, frightened, or overwhelmed — and who needs to know quickly whether you can help them, and what to do next. Some practical principles:

- Put the most important information at the top — do not bury it
- Use active voice: 'We can help' rather than 'Help may be available'
- Be specific about who you serve and what you offer
- Avoid internal jargon, acronyms, or program names that mean nothing to an outsider
- Tell people what will happen when they contact you
- If there are eligibility criteria, state them plainly — it saves everyone time and reduces false hope

Safety planning in your content

Organisations working with people experiencing family violence, legal crisis, housing instability, or mental health challenges should consider:

- A clearly visible exit button that takes users to a neutral page — usually positioned top right
- A note about browser history on relevant pages, with simple instructions for clearing it
- Crisis line information in the footer of every page, not buried in a resources section
- Forms that do not auto-save or pre-fill sensitive information

These are small decisions with potentially significant impact.

The archival instinct — and why it matters

There is a growing appreciation in design for the clarity and authority of archival presentation: well-organised, typographically considered, information-dense but readable. This aesthetic is genuinely suited to community legal centres and advocacy organisations. It communicates authority without coldness, and seriousness without inaccessibility.

Practically, this means:

- Investing in typographic hierarchy — clear visual difference between headings, subheadings, and body text
- Organising large resource libraries with clean categorisation and search
- Letting good writing and credible information do the work, rather than relying on stock imagery
- Using space deliberately — breathing room is not wasted space

Part Four: Technical Foundations

Performance is care

A slow website is an inaccessible website. A significant proportion of Australians — disproportionately in lower-income households and regional areas — access the internet on mobile devices with limited data plans and inconsistent connections. When your website takes seven seconds to load, you have already lost them.

Performance optimisation is therefore not a technical nicety. It is a matter of equity.

- Images should be compressed and served in modern formats (WebP)
- Fonts should be limited — two is usually enough
- Third-party scripts (analytics, chat tools, social embeds) add significant load — each one is a choice
- Core Web Vitals — Google's performance benchmarks — now directly influence search rankings
- A performance audit should be part of any website rebuild, not an afterthought

On Google Ad Grants

Many community organisations are eligible for Google Ad Grants — up to USD \$10,000 per month in free search advertising. A poorly performing or inaccessible website can result in suspension of the Grant. If your organisation relies on or aspires to use Ad Grants, performance and accessibility are not optional.

Security and governance

Your website may hold sensitive information: contact forms, client inquiries, referral pathways. Basic security hygiene includes:

- Keeping your CMS and plugins updated
- Using HTTPS — not negotiable in 2026
- Having a clear process for who can edit the site and under what circumstances
- Knowing who holds your domain name and hosting credentials
- Having a simple incident response plan if something goes wrong

Many organisations discover during a rebuild that they do not know who owns their domain, or that hosting is tied to a staff member who left years ago. Find out now, before it becomes urgent.

AI tools — useful, not sufficient

AI tools are increasingly used in web design and content creation. They can accelerate ideation, assist with first drafts, and surface options quickly.

They are not a replacement for considered human judgement — particularly for organisations whose work requires cultural sensitivity, legal precision, or trauma-informed communication. The risk of AI-assisted design is not that it will produce something obviously wrong. It is that it will produce something that feels plausible but lacks the particular care your community deserves.

Use AI tools deliberately, as one input among many. Keep human review and editorial judgement at the centre of any content that represents your organisation.

Part Five: Working with a Digital Partner

What to look for

If you are considering engaging a digital partner for a rebuild, look for:

- Do they ask about your users before they talk about aesthetics?
- Do they understand accessibility as a design principle, not just a compliance checklist?
- Can they explain their process in plain language?
- Do they have experience with purpose-driven or community sector organisations?
- Will they still be reachable in two years, or are they primarily interested in the build?

The last question matters more than it might appear. A website built without ongoing stewardship tends to deteriorate. Content goes stale, plugins go unupdated, the person who knew how things worked moves on.

What to avoid

- Agencies that lead with trend-based pitches rather than strategic questions
- Proposals focused on technology choices rather than user outcomes
- Timelines that feel impossibly short — good accessible design takes time
- Contracts that leave you entirely dependent on the agency for basic updates
- Any promise of overnight visibility or dramatic search ranking improvements

The stewardship model

The most sustainable relationship between an organisation and its digital partner is ongoing, not transactional.

A website is not a product you purchase and put on a shelf. It is a living part of your organisation's infrastructure — one that needs attention, maintenance, and periodic review as your work evolves and the digital environment changes.

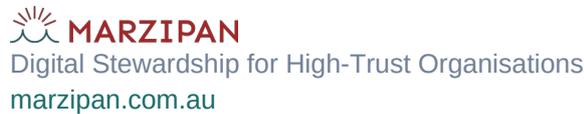
Organisations that treat their website as a long-term responsibility, rather than a periodic project, consistently have better outcomes: higher visibility, fewer crises, lower cumulative cost, and a digital presence that genuinely serves their community.

A Final Note

Rebuilding your website is an act of care — for your community, your staff, and the people who will find you at three in the morning when they do not know where else to turn.

It does not need to be the most beautiful website on the internet. It needs to be honest, accessible, fast, and clear. It needs to work for the person who is struggling, not just the person who is browsing casually.

If you approach the project with those values at the centre, and partner with people who share them, the result will be something you can stand behind.



Quick Reference: Accessibility Checklist

Use this checklist when reviewing a site or briefing a rebuild. It is not exhaustive, but it covers the foundations.

Content and Language

- All key information is available at the top of the page
- Language is plain and free of unexplained jargon
- Acronyms are spelled out on first use
- Contact and eligibility information is specific and current
- Crisis line numbers appear on every page

Visual Design

- Text contrast meets WCAG AA standards (4.5:1 for body text)
- Information is not conveyed by colour alone
- Font sizes are readable without zooming (minimum 16px body text)
- Focus states are visible for keyboard navigation

Structure and Navigation

- Heading levels are used in logical order (H1, H2, H3)
- Navigation is consistent across all pages
- There is a skip-to-main-content link for keyboard users
- Form fields have visible, associated labels

Media and Motion

- All images have meaningful alt text
- Videos have accurate captions
- No content auto-plays without user consent
- Animations respect the prefers-reduced-motion setting

Technical

- Site loads in under three seconds on a 4G mobile connection
- Site is functional on all major mobile browsers
- HTTPS is enabled across the entire site
- CMS and plugins are updated and maintained
- Google Search Console is connected and monitored