bolton cvs

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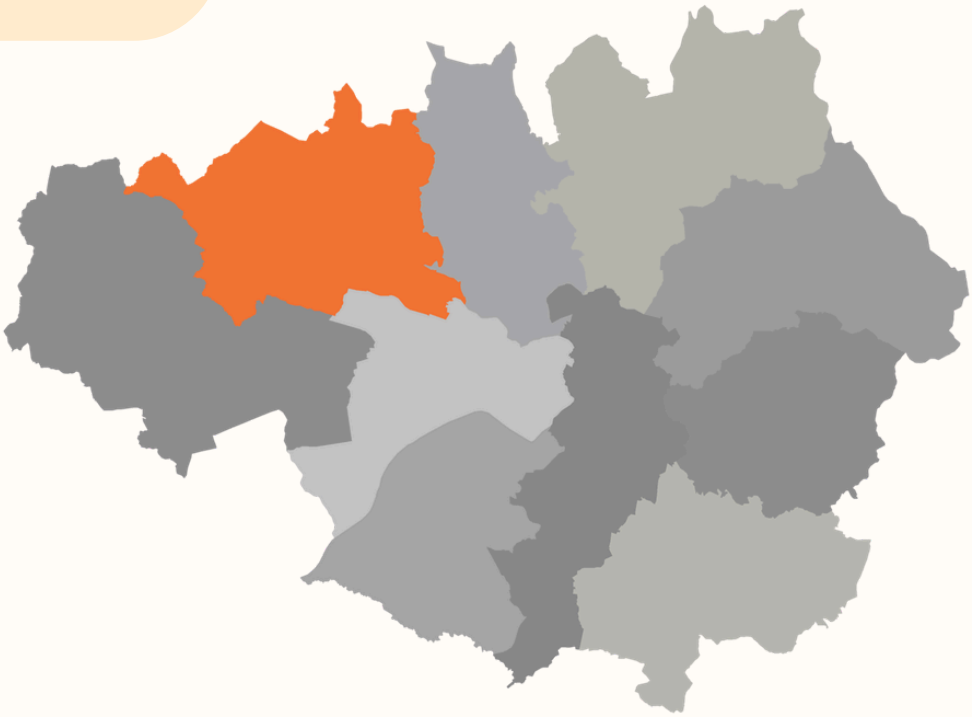
A joint venture to support the local VCSE sector in Greater Manchester

Bolton State of the VCSE Sector

2026



Acknowledgements

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We thank the organisations and groups that completed the survey and everyone who participated in the focus group. Their willingness to share their experiences, including the challenges of keeping support available for their communities, provides the foundation for this report.

Authorship and editorial responsibility

In this report, the foreword, conclusion (titled ‘Challenges and opportunities’), and highlighted reflections at the beginning of sections 3, 4, 5, and 6 are authored by Bolton CVS. The executive summary is co-authored by Nottingham Trent University (NTU) and Bolton CVS. All other sections are authored by NTU. Bolton CVS reviewed the main report and proposed changes. NTU considered these suggestions and decided which to incorporate, retaining academic independence and responsibility for the analysis, interpretation and final wording of its sections.

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Table of Contents

04 Foreword

05 Executive summary

07 Glossary

09 Methodology

11 Headline findings

13 Bolton's VCSE sector

20 Staff, volunteers and trustees

27 Communities supported, demand and access

34 Finances and the funding landscape

49 Challenges and opportunities

50 References

Foreword

The Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector is one of Bolton's greatest strengths, providing nearly 830,000 instances of support annually and mobilising over £68 million worth of volunteer effort.

These findings demonstrate a sector that is not supplementary to the system, but a core element of Bolton's social infrastructure that helps make Bolton a good place to live, work and thrive. Through community groups, charities, social enterprises and volunteer-led organisations, local people connect, contribute, learn, support one another and shape the places where they live.

Much has changed since the previous State of the Sector report in 2021. While the immediate effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have passed, its social, economic and cultural impacts continue. Existing inequalities have deepened, public services remain under significant pressure, and communities are continuing to experience the effects of the cost-of-living crisis. At the same time, increasing social and political division has created new challenges for community cohesion and inclusion.

Throughout this period, VCSE groups and organisations have demonstrated remarkable resilience, creativity, innovation and commitment. The findings in this report show that Bolton's VCSE sector has evolved while remaining consistent in its core role. The sector continues to grow in scale and significance while remaining rooted in local communities and focused on improving wellbeing, reducing inequalities and creating opportunities for participation.

However, resilience should not be mistaken for sustainability. More than four in five organisations report rising demand over the past year. Nearly three quarters say none of their funding has been adjusted to reflect rising costs, and four in five say that less than half of their funding is provided on a multi-year basis. Increasing demand, workforce pressures, volunteer recruitment challenges, rising costs and growing competition for funding are creating significant pressures across the sector. The findings presented in this report provide important insight into those challenges and the actions needed to address them.

We would like to thank our research partners at Nottingham Trent University, the VCSE organisations and community groups across Bolton that took the time to contribute their experiences and data, and our partners across the 10 Greater Manchester local infrastructure organisations who have worked collaboratively to create this evidence base. Their collective contribution has helped develop a richer understanding of the scale, value, opportunities and challenges facing Bolton's VCSE sector.

Helen Clayton, Chief Executive, Bolton CVS

Executive summary

Across the UK, voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) groups and organisations are an essential part of community life and public service infrastructure. They provide practical help, specialist services, community spaces, social connection and opportunities for people to take part in their communities, often working through trusted relationships with people who may be less visible to, or less comfortable accessing, statutory services.

This work is taking place in the long aftermath of COVID-19 and a cost-of-living crisis, alongside wider economic and social disruption that has increased demand for support. For many organisations, this means responding not only to more people but to needs that are increasingly complex and interconnected. At the same time, many grants and contracts have not kept pace with rising costs, formal volunteering remains below pre-pandemic levels, and organisations are increasingly being asked to prevent problems escalating while relying on short-term funding, reserves and stretched staff and volunteers.

Bolton sits within this wider context as a large and increasingly diverse borough with substantial inequalities between neighbourhoods. Almost half of residents live in neighbourhoods among the most deprived 20% nationally, including more than a quarter that live in the most deprived 10%. More than a third of children live in relative low-income households, while life expectancy differs by more than a decade between parts of the borough. These inequalities sit alongside needs across different stages of life, reflected in the sector's substantial work with children and young people, older residents, Disabled people and those living with long-term health conditions, families and people experiencing financial hardship.[1,2]

This report provides an up-to-date picture of Bolton's VCSE sector in 2026, considering what organisations and groups do, where they work, the communities they support, their contribution to the borough and the pressures they face. It draws on 123 usable survey responses, one focus group, wider local and national evidence, and informed estimates of the sector's overall scale and contribution.

An estimated 1,847 VCSE groups and organisations exist in Bolton, driven by a diverse collective workforce of over 50,000 staff, volunteers and trustees, and generating approximately **£235 million in annual income**. The findings from this report show a sector that is an important part of Bolton's social infrastructure, making a significant contribution to health, wellbeing, and social cohesion across the borough. Its organisations are often trusted first points of contact, not only within communities but through strengthened partnership working with other VCSE organisations and public services. Many people are referred or signposted to VCSE organisations because of their local knowledge, flexibility and relationships which enable them to reach people and adapt support to changing needs.

While this reflects the role Bolton's VCSE groups and organisations already play within communities and wider support systems, it also means that pressures elsewhere increasingly reach them. Four in five organisations report increased demand for their services over the past year, and over two thirds are supporting more people. This is taking place within a funding environment characterised by rising costs, increased competition and short-term funding. New evidence from this report suggests many organisations are not receiving funding uplifts or full cost recovery, creating significant challenges for long-term sustainability. While cross-sector partnership working is important for community wellbeing, VCSE groups and organisations emphasise the need for their voices to be recognised as equal partners in planning and decision-making, and afforded resources that match the support they provide.

Many organisations report capacity constraints alongside these funding challenges. Nationally, regular formal volunteering has been on a downward trend over the past decade and volunteer numbers have not recovered to pre-pandemic levels. Many report difficulties recruiting both staff and volunteers, placing additional strain on existing teams and leaving some organisations unable to meet growing demand.

Bolton does, however, have established local structures that provide a basis for responding to some of these pressures. Bolton's Fund has provided locally distributed funding for community activity, Community Alliances give residents and organisations a route to shape priorities across different parts of the borough, and Bolton's six health and care neighbourhoods bring VCSE and public sector partners together around local support. Bolton's involvement in Greater Manchester's Live Well programme also creates opportunities to strengthen community-led prevention.

These provide practical routes for funding, community voice and partnership, but they do not in themselves resolve the capacity and financial pressures identified in this report. Sustaining the sector's role will require continued investment in both infrastructure support and the wider VCSE sector, alongside partnerships in which community organisations have a meaningful role in shaping decisions so that Bolton's VCSE sector can continue to support communities, reduce inequalities and help the borough thrive.



Glossary

This table provides a glossary of terms, abbreviations, and acronyms used in the Bolton State of the Sector 2026 report. A detailed glossary can be accessed at: gmstateofthesector.org.

Term	Meaning in this report
Base / valid base	The number of respondents included in a percentage or analysis. A valid base excludes people who did not answer the relevant question and may also exclude invalid responses such as ‘don’t know’.
Below-the-radar (BTR) organisations	Informal or unregistered organisations and groups not captured on formal registers.
Full-time equivalent (FTE) / headcount	FTE expresses working hours as equivalent full-time posts: two people each working half-time equal one FTE. Headcount counts each employee individually.
Full cost recovery	Funding that covers direct delivery costs and an appropriate share of the organisation’s wider running costs.
Funding uplift	An increase in the value of a grant or contract to reflect rising costs.
GMCA	Greater Manchester Combined Authority, bringing together the city region’s ten councils and elected Mayor.
Instances of support	Contacts or episodes of support, rather than a count of different people. One person may receive support several times.
Local Infrastructure Organisation (LIO)	An organisation that supports, connects and represents the local VCSE sector, including through advice, training and help accessing funding.

Glossary

Term	Meaning in this report
Modelled estimate / extrapolation	A sector-wide estimate produced by scaling up survey findings using the estimated number and profile of organisations.
Multi-year funding	Funding lasting three years or more, as defined in this survey.
Paid-staff economic contribution / GVA	An indicative estimate of gross value added (GVA), calculated using estimated FTE employment and industry output benchmarks.
Real Living Wage	A voluntary hourly pay rate calculated from living costs, distinct from the government's statutory National Living Wage.
Reserves	Funds retained to support future activity or manage gaps in income and unexpected costs.
Social enterprise	An organisation that trades for a social or environmental purpose and uses most of its profits to further that purpose.
Social prescribing	Connecting people with community activities and support that address needs affecting their health and wellbeing.
VCSE / VCFSE	Voluntary, community and social enterprise. VCFSE explicitly includes the community work of faith organisations, which are also included within VCSE in this report.
Volunteer replacement cost	The estimated cost of replacing volunteer and trustee time with paid labour at the Real Living Wage.

1. Methodology

This report forms part of the wider 2026 Greater Manchester State of the VCSE Sector project. The findings presented in this report relate specifically to VCSE organisations based in Bolton and include estimates of the scale and contribution of Bolton's VCSE sector. The full technical methodology can be accessed at www.gmstateofthesector.org

Survey

The survey ran from January to April 2026 and received 123 usable responses from VCSE organisations based in Bolton. It asked about organisations' activities, who they support, where they work, demand for services, staff and volunteers, and finances and funding. Bolton CVS distributed survey links through its networks. An anonymous response option was available. NTU prepared and analysed the data.

Focus group

One focus group took place with Bolton VCSE organisations in March 2026. It explored the role of organisations in communities, workforce and volunteering, and finances and funding. NTU developed the areas for discussion using early survey findings and input from the project's core working group. Participants were recruited through Bolton CVS and follow-up contact with survey respondents. NTU analysed the discussions alongside other Greater Manchester focus groups to identify common themes and understand participant experiences in more detail.

How to read the survey findings

Based on the 123 usable responses and an estimated 1,847 VCSE organisations in Bolton, the indicative margin of error is around ±8.5 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. For example, applying this margin to a finding of 60% gives a range of around 51% to 69%. This calculation assumes organisations were selected at random. However, organisations chose whether to take part, so this margin is only a guide and cannot account for differences between those that did and did not respond.

NTU compared the respondent profile with registered VCSE organisations in Bolton. Estimated below-the-radar groups, which are not captured on formal registers, were excluded from this comparison because they could not be sampled directly. The Bolton sample was reasonably well aligned with registered organisations by size. As part of the wider Greater Manchester analysis, NTU examined whether weighting by locality and organisation size materially changed the findings. Differences between weighted and unweighted findings were generally small and did not alter the overall patterns or conclusions. Survey percentages are therefore presented without weighting, meaning each organisation answering a question counts equally. Most percentages relate to the organisations answering the relevant question. Where a question applies only to a particular group, its findings describe that group.

Percentages are rounded to whole numbers. Combined percentages reported in the text are calculated from the underlying unrounded data, so they may occasionally differ by one percentage point from the sum of rounded chart values. Some questions allow more than one answer, so percentages can total more than 100%. Findings on changes in service delivery reflect organisations' own assessments. Income and expenditure source shares describe the average share among organisations reporting income or expenditure from each category. Success in funding applications describes experiences among applicants to each source.

How organisation size is defined

Organisation size is classified by reported annual income: micro (under £10,000), small (£10,000 to under £100,000), medium (£100,000 to under £1 million), large (£1 million to under £10 million), major (£10 million to under £100 million) and super-major (£100 million or more).[3] Large, major and super-major organisations are combined as 'large' when describing locality size profiles and comparing findings by organisation size across all reports, because of the smaller numbers in these bands.

Estimating the scale and contribution of the sector

Bolton is estimated to have 1,847 VCSE organisations: 712 registered organisations and 1,135 groups not captured on formal registers, often described as below-the-radar (BTR). Registered organisations were identified through the Charity Commission, Companies House and the Financial Conduct Authority's Mutuals Register. Records were matched to Bolton using postcode data, and duplicate entries were removed. Below-the-radar groups were estimated using Office for National Statistics (ONS) population figures and the population-based approach developed by Mohan et al.[4] This estimated number and profile of organisations is referred to as the study's 'sample frame'.

The estimates in Section 2.1 scale selected survey findings to this wider sector. The main approach is extrapolation: averages are calculated within organisation-size groups, multiplied by the estimated number of organisations in each group, and added together. This allows the calculations to reflect differences between smaller and larger organisations. To improve the stability of the Bolton estimates, its estimated organisation-size profile was combined with Greater Manchester-wide averages or rates within the same size groups, rather than relying on smaller Bolton subgroups. Numeric checks were undertaken prior to extrapolation, and winsorisation was used to limit the influence of extreme values by capping them rather than deleting them. Estimates for income, expenditure and instances of support use 90% winsorised means; volunteer hours and paid staff use 95% winsorised means; and volunteer and trustee totals use cleaned means.

The report includes two economic value indicators. The replacement-cost value of volunteering estimates what it would cost to replace annual volunteer and trustee hours with paid labour at the Real Living Wage. The economic contribution associated with paid staff applies ONS output-per-job figures to the estimated number of full-time equivalent staff, adjusted to reflect the range of activities of responding organisations. Both are indicative measures of economic value and should not be interpreted as audited financial figures.

2. Headline findings

The headline findings are presented in two parts. Section 2.1 presents modelled estimates for Bolton's VCSE sector as a whole. These are informed sector-wide totals produced using survey data and the estimated number and profile of VCSE organisations in Bolton. The survey findings are extrapolated, meaning they are scaled up from responding organisations to the estimated whole sector, so the figures should not be read as exact counts. Section 2.2 presents what organisations and groups in Bolton told us directly through the survey.

2.1. Estimated scale and contribution of Bolton's VCSE sector

1,847 organisations

Bolton's VCSE sector is estimated to include 712 registered organisations and 1,135 below-the-radar organisations not captured on formal registers.

Mostly micro and small

We estimate that micro organisations and groups account for almost three quarters **(74%)** of the sector. Small organisations make up **14%**, medium organisations **10%**, and large, major or super-major organisations **2%**.

828,200 instances of support

Bolton's VCSE sector is estimated to provide around 828,200 contacts or episodes of support to people and communities each year.

£235 million

annual income

Bolton's VCSE sector generated an estimated £235 million in income during 2024/25.

46,900

volunteer and trustee roles

The sector's work is powered by an estimated 36,600 volunteers and 10,300 trustees or Board members.

5.08 million

volunteer and trustee hours

Volunteers contribute around 97,700 hours each week, equivalent to 5.08 million hours a year.

£68.34 million

estimated value of volunteering

The estimated annual cost of replacing the time given by volunteers and trustees with paid staff earning the Real Living Wage.

3,880

full-time equivalent paid staff

This represents an estimated 5,100 paid employee positions working in Bolton's VCSE organisations.

£195.45 million estimated annual economic contribution from paid staff

The estimated economic value generated each year through the services and activities delivered by full-time equivalent paid staff in Bolton's VCSE sector.

2.2. What Bolton organisations told us

123 Bolton VCSE organisations made their voices heard, sharing their experiences of working with and supporting communities across the borough.

> “It's educating and including everybody. Nobody, no matter where they come from, what they want to be as an individual, you know. We, as a community, need to be helping them, and then we'll have a stronger community.”

Demand continues to rise
Four in five organisations (81%) say demand for their services increased over the past year, while more than two thirds (68%) are supporting more people.

Financial vulnerability
Almost a quarter describe their organisation as vulnerable (24%), while one in ten are either struggling (7%) or at risk of imminent closure (2%). Only one in ten (10%) feel strong and secure.

Volunteer capacity
Half of organisations (50%) report difficulty recruiting volunteers, while more than a third (36%) say they do not have enough volunteers to meet their main objectives.

Reserves filling gaps
Organisations drawing on reserves are using them to cover operating costs (68%), plug gaps in funding (66%) and accommodate increased demand (47%).

Funding risks
Competition for funding and rising costs (both 53%) are the most commonly reported risks to financial sustainability.

Funding not keeping pace
Among grant or contract recipients, 73% say none of this funding has been uplifted for rising costs, while 78% say less than half is multi-year.



3. Bolton's VCSE sector: what it does, where it operates, and who it supports

Bolton CVS reflections

Bolton's VCSE sector reflects the diversity and strengths of the communities it serves. VCSE groups and organisations work across a range of areas including health and wellbeing, community development, education and training, physical activity, inclusion, advice and support services. The variety of activities enables the sector to tackle key challenges such as cohesion, disadvantage and health inequalities with a myriad of approaches. Amongst this variety the sector's core purpose has remained consistent over time: supporting communities to thrive.

The sector operates across every part of the borough. Some organisations work within individual neighbourhoods, while others support people across Bolton or contribute to wider Greater Manchester initiatives. This combination of local reach and strategic influence enables VCSEs to identify emerging needs and respond quickly to change.

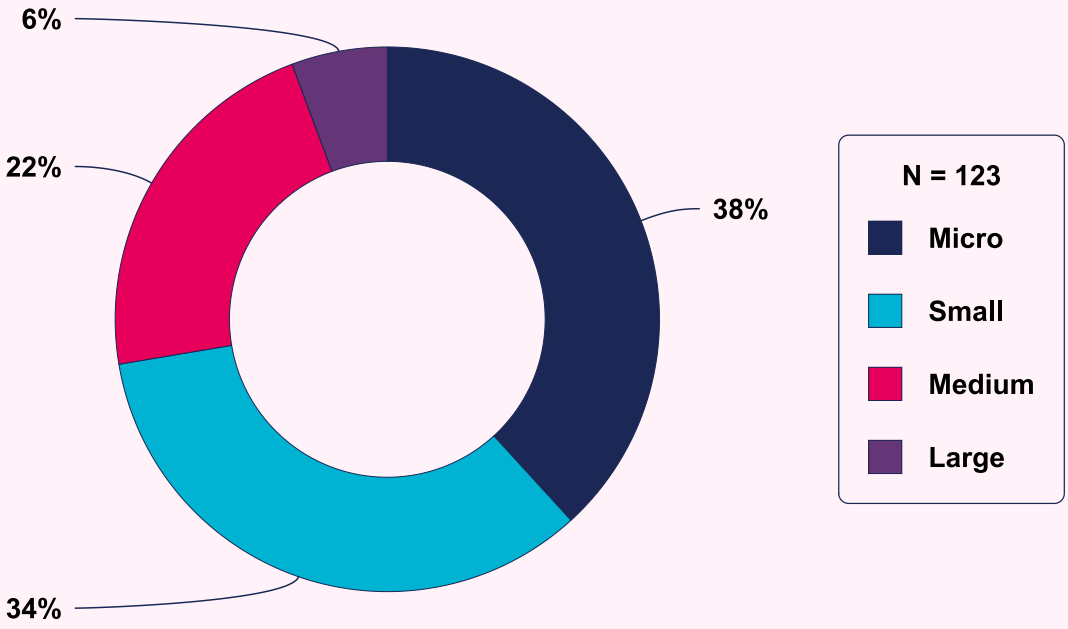
VCSE organisations support a broad range of people, including children and young people, older people, Disabled people, families, carers, people experiencing poverty and those facing social exclusion. Many also work with communities affected by health inequalities, economic hardship, loneliness and discrimination. Their ability to engage people who may not access traditional services is one of the sector's defining strengths. Importantly, the sector does more than provide support. It creates opportunities for residents to participate, volunteer, share skills, influence decision-making and contribute to community life.

Bolton’s VCSE sector operates in a borough with a relatively young and diverse population. Almost a quarter are under 18, slightly higher than Greater Manchester and England averages, but more than a third of children live in relative low-income households. More broadly, over a quarter of Bolton residents live in neighbourhoods among the most deprived 10% nationally and almost half of residents in the most deprived 20%. This contrast ranges from highly deprived parts of central Bolton around Farnworth to much less deprived areas around Bromley Cross, with life expectancy varying by more than a decade between different parts of the borough.[1,2]

3.1. Size, legal form and organisation age

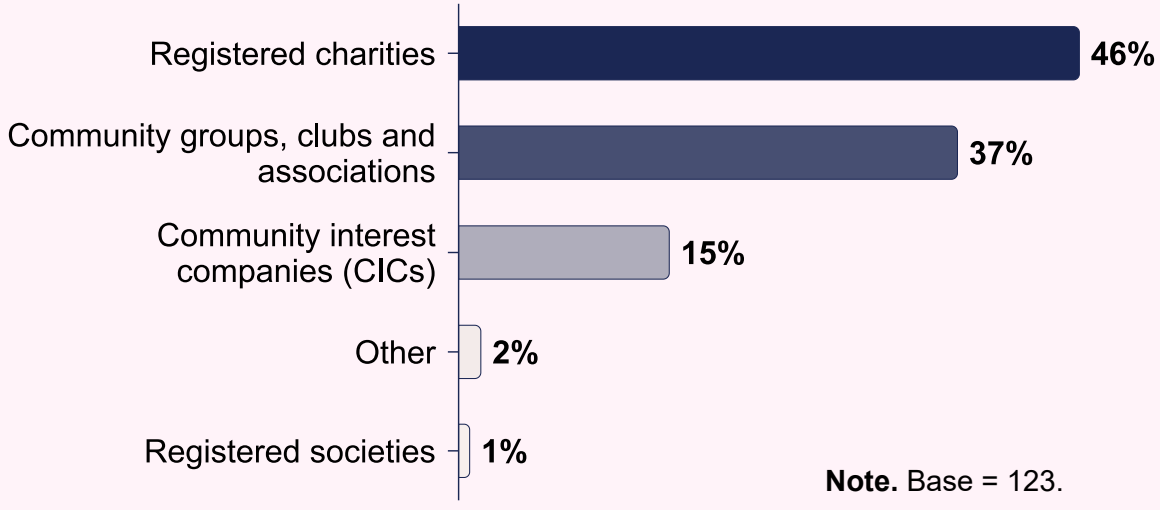
Just under three quarters of responding organisations and groups in Bolton are micro (38%) or small (34%). More than one in five are medium-sized (22%), while large, major and super-major organisations account for the remaining 6%.

Figure 3.1. Proportion of responding organisations by size



Registered charities account for almost half of responding organisations (46%). Almost two in five are community groups, clubs and associations (37%), while 15% are community interest companies (CICs). Smaller proportions are registered societies (1%) and other legal forms (2%). Almost a third of respondents (30%) identify as social enterprises.

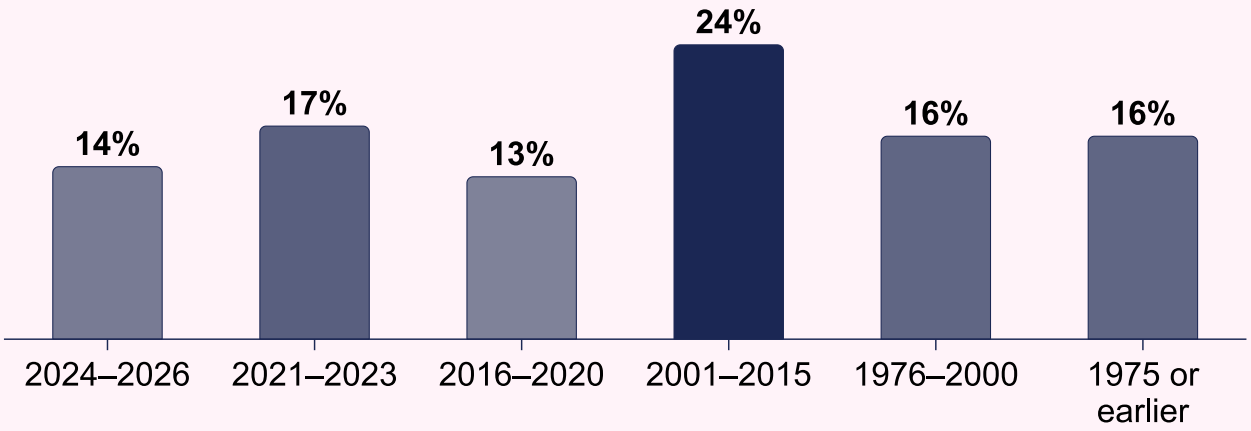
Figure 3.2. Proportion of responding organisations by legal status



Note. Base = 123.

The sector combines long-established organisations with newer groups responding to emerging needs. Almost a third were established within the past five years (31%), while 13% were established between 2016 and 2020. Around a quarter were established between 2001 and 2015 (24%), and almost a third were established in 2000 or earlier (32%).

Figure 3.3. Year in which organisations were established



Note. Base = 123.

3.2. What organisations do

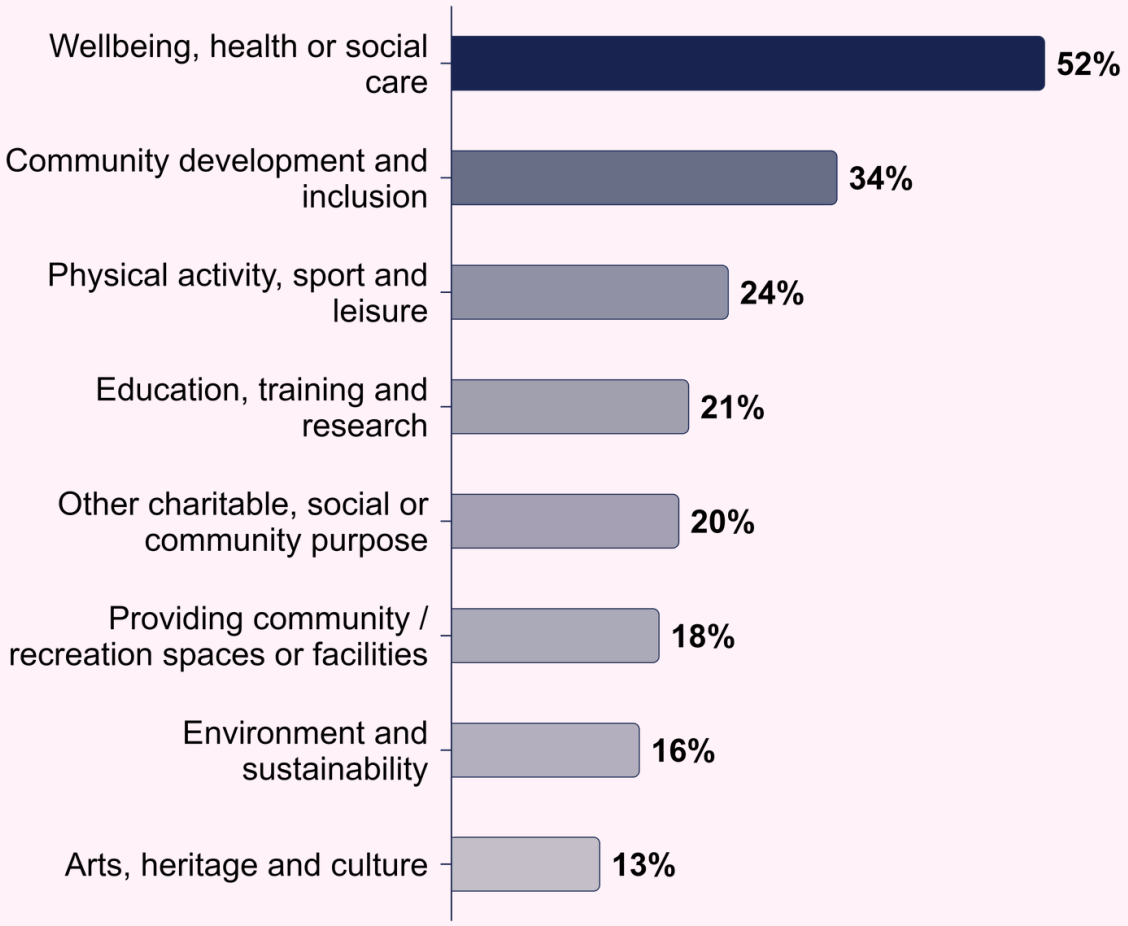
VCSE organisations in Bolton carry out a range of work, often cutting across areas that promote wellbeing, facilitate prevention, and foster community cohesion. In the focus group, organisations described providing advice and support and spaces and activities to foster connection among a diverse range of communities.

> “We're an all-inclusive group... mainly about health and well-being of people... we'll learn new skills, do DIY, or people can just come along and have a chat. It's about making people feel comfortable and meeting others.”

More than half work in wellbeing, health and social care (52%), delivering important work in a borough where health outcomes are generally worse than the England average and substantial differences exist between neighbourhoods.[1]

A third focus on community development and inclusion (34%), a quarter provide activities in physical activity, sport and leisure (24%), and a fifth have work activities in education, training and research (21%).

Figure 3.4. Main areas in which organisations work (top 8)

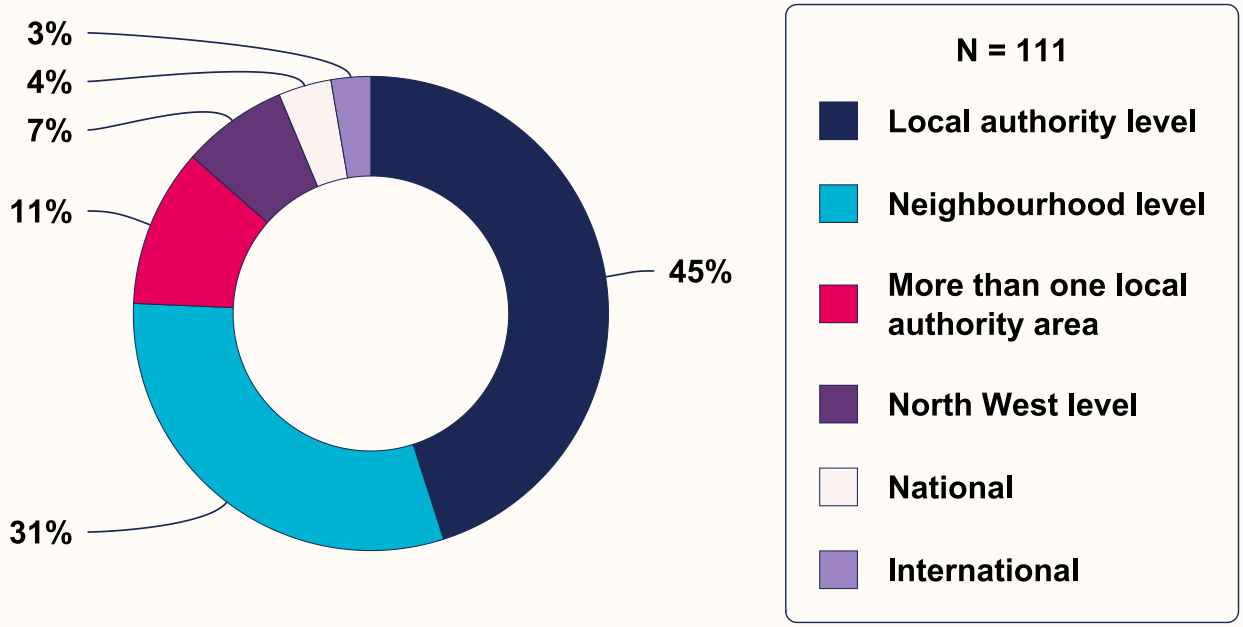


Note. Base = 116. Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%.

3.3. Where they operate

Many responding organisations work close to the communities they support. Just under half operate primarily across Bolton as a whole (45%), while almost a third work mainly at neighbourhood level (31%). A further 11% work across more than one local authority area, with smaller proportions operating regionally, nationally or internationally. This combination of locally rooted and borough-wide organisations is important in responding to needs that differ substantially across the borough.

Figure 3.5. Geographic scope of organisation's work



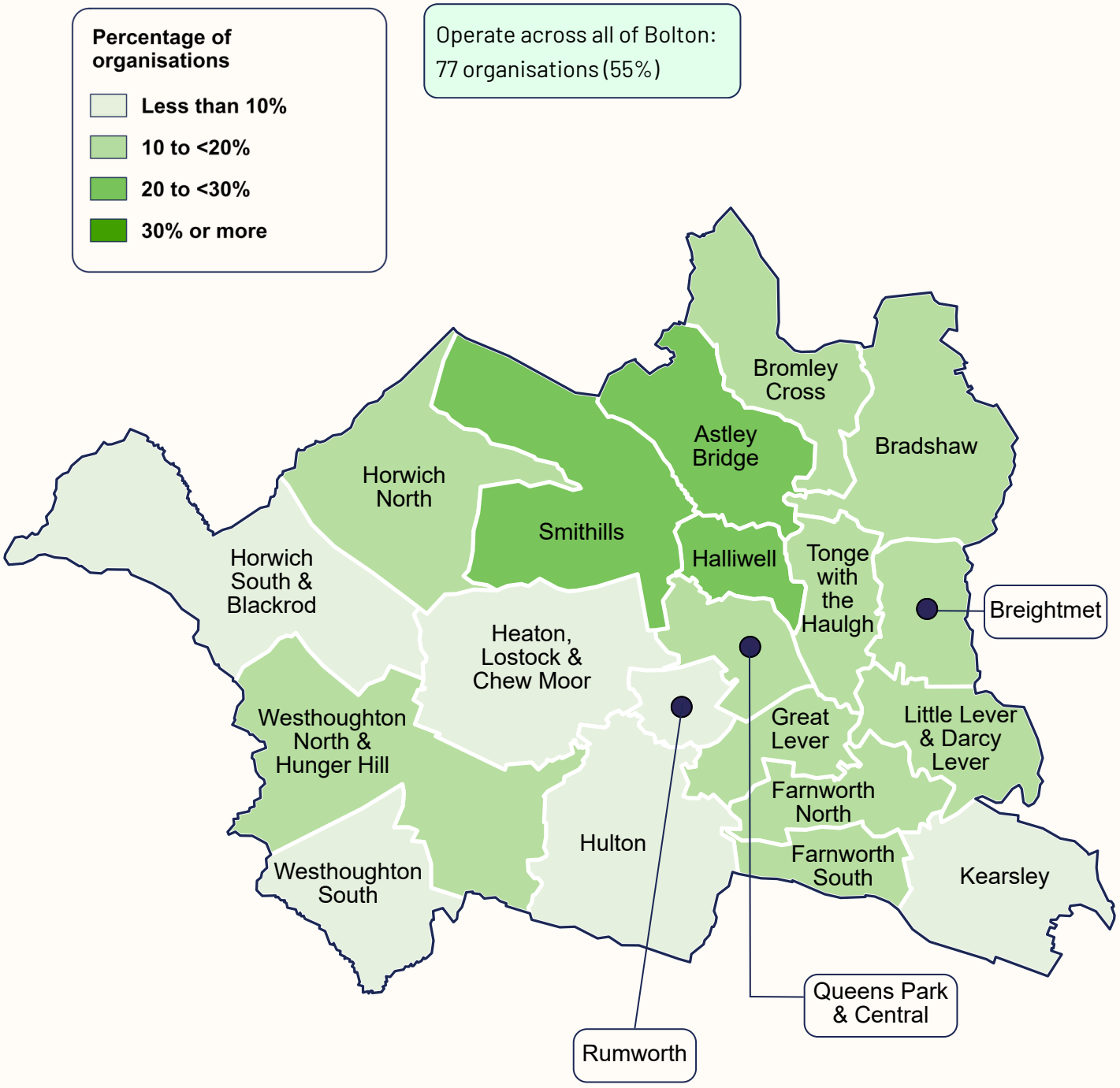
Residents of Bolton are also supported by VCSE organisations based outside the borough. We therefore asked all organisations that selected Bolton as one of the main areas in which they carry out their activities which parts of the borough they work in. More than half (55%) say they operate across all of Bolton.

Respondents who did not select 'All of Bolton' could identify one or more individual wards. Among this group, Halliwell was the most commonly reported area of operation (28%), followed by Astley Bridge and Smithills (both 20%). Kearsley was the least selected option at 6%.

The pattern suggests that responding organisations are active across the borough, responding both to places with high levels of deprivation and to the needs of the diverse population. However, lower reported activity in other wards may indicate uneven provision, but could also reflect the composition of organisations responding to the survey.

Figure 3.6 shows the proportion of respondents delivering activities in each Bolton ward.

Figure 3.6. Ward-level coverage of organisations delivering activities in Bolton



Note. Map shows the proportion of organisations delivering activities in each Bolton ward. This includes organisations based elsewhere in Greater Manchester that reported operating in Bolton.

'All of Bolton' uses the full valid base (N = 141); individual ward percentages use respondents who did not select 'All of Bolton' (N = 64).

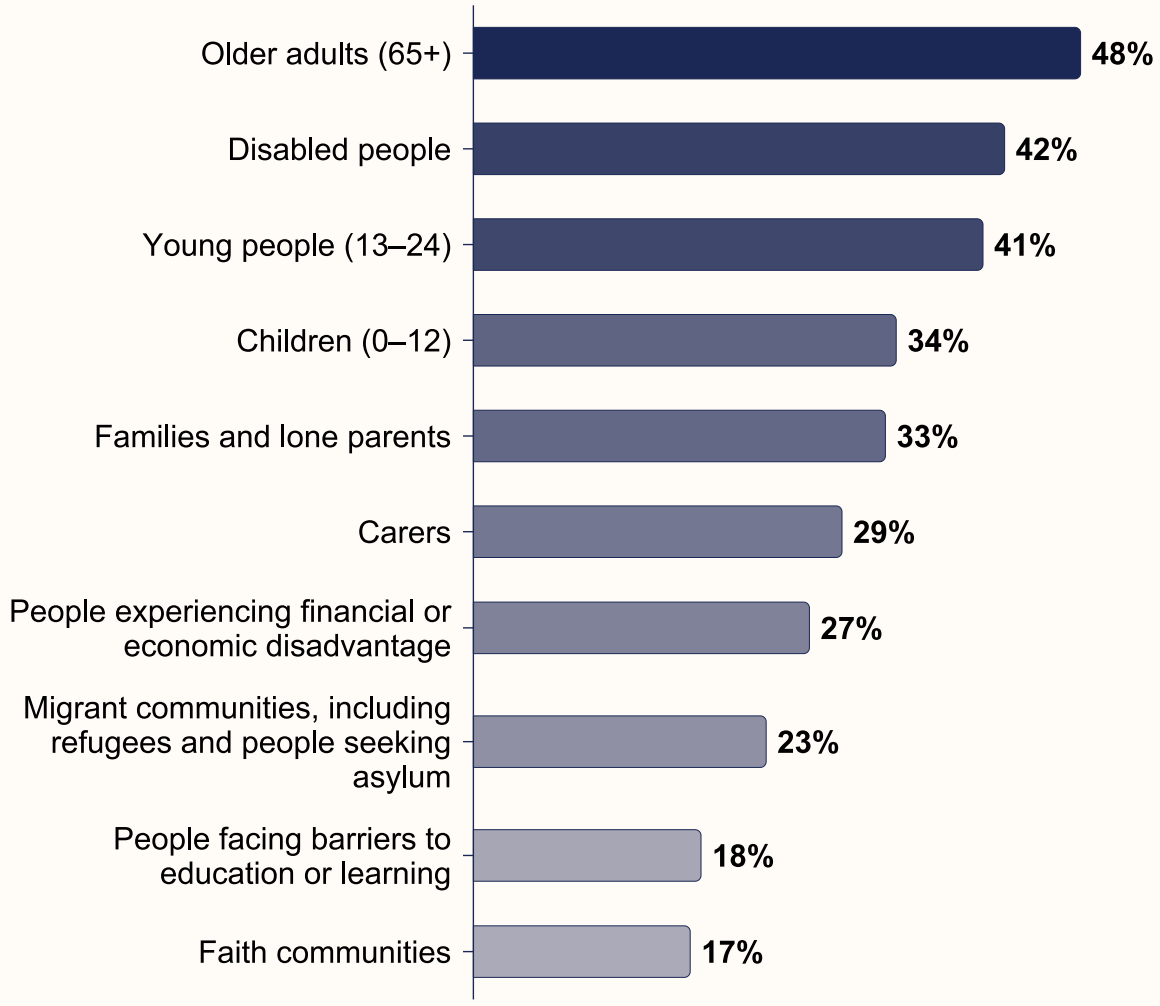
3.4. Who they support

Bolton contains clusters of income deprivation affecting older people and a population aged 65 and over that is expected to grow over the longer term.[5] At the same time, more than a third of children live in relative low-income households.[2] This means that support needs are shaped both by place and by people's age, health, identity and circumstances.

A substantial proportion of responding organisations provide support for all age groups, including older adults (48%), teenagers and young adults aged 13 to 24 (41%), and children aged 0 to 12 (34%).

More than two in five work with Disabled people or people living with long-term health conditions (42%). A third of organisations support families or lone parents (33%), while more than a quarter support carers (29%) and people experiencing financial or economic disadvantage (27%). Almost one in four respondents also support migrant communities, including refugees and people seeking asylum (23%).

Figure 3.7. The people and communities that organisations support (top 10)



Note. Base = 116. Respondents could select multiple options so percentages do not sum to 100%.

4. Staff, volunteers and trustees

Bolton CVS reflections

Across Bolton, the sector involves an estimated 36,600 volunteers and 10,300 trustees and board members, contributing around 97,700 hours of volunteering every week. This equates to more than five million hours of unpaid contribution each year.

The findings, however, highlight growing concerns about capacity. Volunteer numbers and volunteering hours have declined. The challenge is not simply attracting people, but finding individuals able to undertake meaningful volunteering and governance roles, alongside effective succession planning. Bolton CVS's VCQA-accredited Volunteer Centre is responding through new partnerships and the development of flexible volunteering opportunities.

Short-term funding arrangements also continue to create instability within the workforce. Staff are responding to growing demand while working within uncertain funding cycles, contributing to pressures around recruitment, retention, workload and wellbeing. Despite these pressures, three quarters (75%) of VCSE groups and organisations say they pay the Real Living Wage, demonstrating that the sector continues to prioritise good employment practices. As demand increases, sustaining the people who sustain the sector will be one of the most important challenges for the years ahead.

The people working in and with Bolton's VCSE organisations are central to the sector's contribution. They include paid staff, volunteers and trustees, many of whom are motivated by purpose, lived experience, social connection and a commitment to their communities. Their work is both strategic and practical, and also relational: building trust, holding local knowledge, supporting people sensitively and sustaining relationships over time.

Findings from the survey and focus group show the critical role of people in holding local knowledge and building trust and relationships, but also the implications for organisations when facing difficulties with recruitment and retention.

4.1. Paid staff and employment

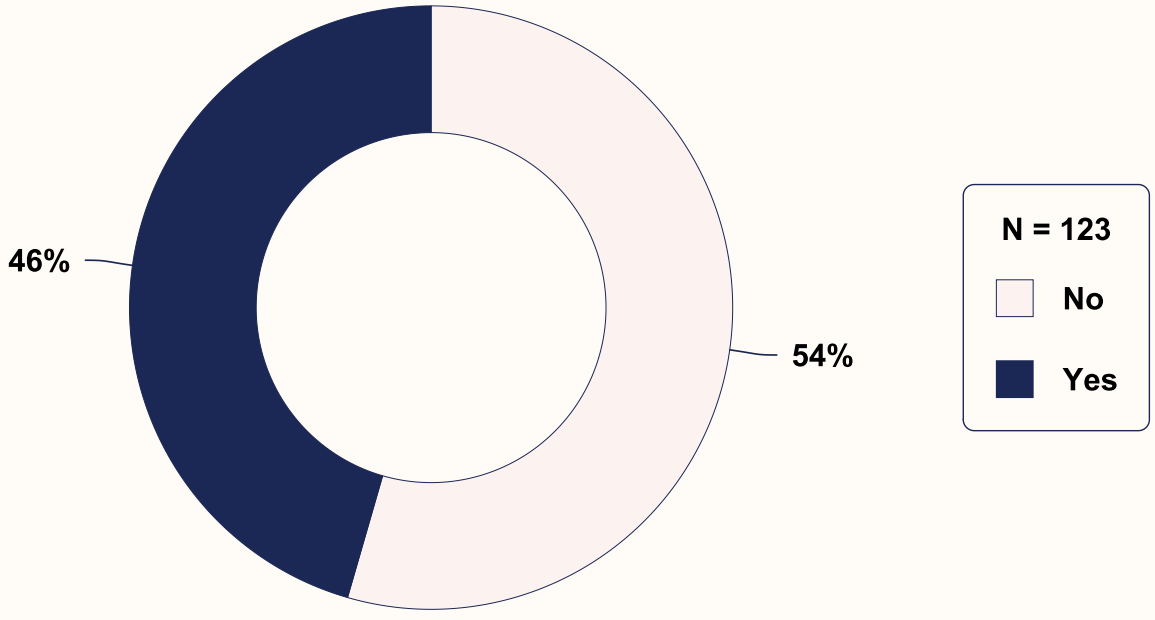
There are an estimated 3,880 full-time equivalent paid staff working in Bolton's VCSE sector, representing around 5,100 paid employee positions. This is equivalent to approximately 4.3% of the 117,000 employee jobs located in Bolton.[6] The work carried out by paid staff in Bolton's VCSE organisations is estimated to generate £195.45 million in economic value each year through the services and activities they deliver.

3,880
full-time equivalent (FTE) paid posts in Bolton's VCSE sector

Estimated contribution to the economy
£ 195.45 million

Just under half of responding organisations (46%) have paid staff, and three quarters say they pay the Real Living Wage to all eligible employees (75%). Paid employment is concentrated in larger organisations: 96% of medium and all large organisations report a paid workforce, compared with 43% of small organisations and 11% of micro organisations and groups.

Figure 4.1. Organisations with a paid workforce



Almost three in five have fewer than five full-time equivalent posts (58%), more than a quarter have between five and 19 posts (28%), while 13% have 20 or more.

When asked about recruitment and retention over the past year, almost two in five organisations with paid staff report difficulty recruiting them (38%), while more than a fifth experienced difficulty retaining them (22%).

Figure 4.2. Staff recruitment and retention difficulties



Note. Question shown only to organisations with paid staff. Base: recruitment = 52; retention = 50. Shows the proportion answering 'Yes'. 'Don't know' responses excluded.

4.2. Volunteers and trustees

Across Bolton, the sector is estimated to involve 36,600 volunteers and 10,300 trustees or Board members, contributing around 97,700 hours each week. Over a year, this is equivalent to 5.08 million hours of unpaid time supporting local people, running activities and governing organisations. Replacing that time with paid labour at the Real Living Wage would cost an estimated £68.34 million each year.

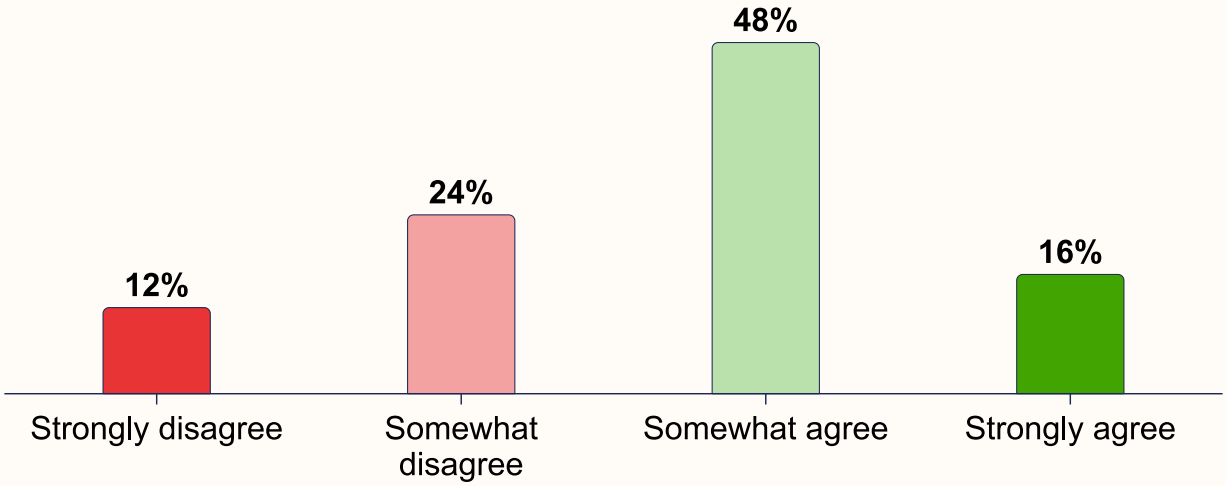
In the focus group, organisations and groups described the vital role volunteers hold in their organisations.

> "[The impact], it's massive, because the hours that they put in, the contribution, the skill set that they bring."

Around a third of organisations responding to the survey reported having fewer than ten volunteers (34%), a similar proportion have between 10 and 24 (34%), and just under a third have 25 or more (32%). The support organisations offer volunteers is both practical and developmental. More than two thirds provide training, development or progression opportunities (69%), three in five reimburse expenses (61%), and just over half provide recognition or social activities (52%).

Almost two thirds of organisations say they have enough volunteers to carry out their work and meet their objectives (64%), leaving over a third that do not (36%).

Figure 4.3. Whether organisations have enough volunteers to carry out work and meet their objectives



Note. Base = 111. 'Don't know' responses excluded.

Responding organisations reported difficulties with recruitment and retention, but recruitment appears to be the greater pressure. More than half have found it difficult to recruit volunteers over the past year (50%), compared to almost a third that have found it difficult to retain volunteers (32%).

Figure 4.4. Volunteer recruitment and retention difficulties



Note. Base: recruitment = 111; retention = 111. Shows the proportion answering 'Yes'. 'Don't know' responses excluded.

These challenges sit within a wider national decline in regular formal volunteering. The proportion of adults volunteering formally at least once a month fell from 27% in 2013/14 to 17% in 2024/25. Adults in the least deprived neighbourhoods are twice as likely to volunteer formally each month as those in the most deprived neighbourhoods,[7] and more than a quarter of Bolton's residents live in the most deprived 10% of neighbourhoods nationally.[2] This points to another potential challenge for VCSE organisations: areas with greater need for support may also face lower uptake when recruiting local volunteers.

Almost three in five of those experiencing recruitment difficulties say a low response to recruitment activities is a barrier (58%). More than a third point to limited capacity to recruit and manage volunteers (36%), a similar proportion say applicants are unsuitable for the roles available (35%), and more than a quarter say insufficient funding to support volunteers makes recruitment harder (29%).

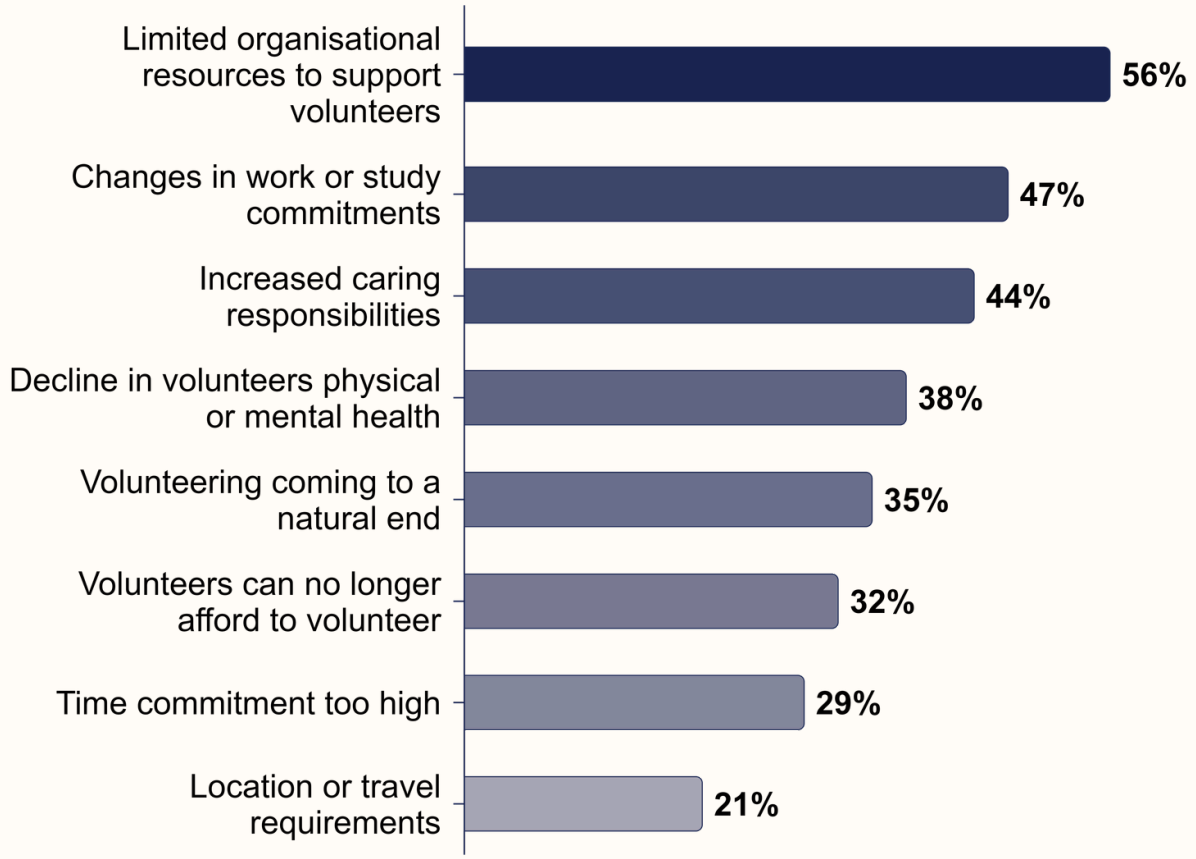
Figure 4.5. Volunteer recruitment barriers (top 8)



Note. Base = 55. Question shown only to organisations reporting volunteer recruitment difficulties. Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%.

While recruitment difficulties are more widespread, almost a third have found it difficult to retain volunteers over the past year (32%). Almost three in five of these organisations say that limited organisational resources to support volunteers is a barrier to retention (56%). Others linked retention challenges to changes in volunteers' needs and priorities, with almost half pointing to work or study commitments (47%) and around two in five citing increased caring responsibilities (44%) or declining physical or mental health among volunteers (38%). This reflects wider national evidence showing that work commitments were the most common barrier among adults who did not volunteer at least monthly, reported by more than half (51%).[7]

Figure 4.6. Volunteer retention barriers (top 8)



Note. Base = 34. Question shown only to organisations reporting volunteer retention difficulties. Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%.

4.3. Consequences of workforce shortages

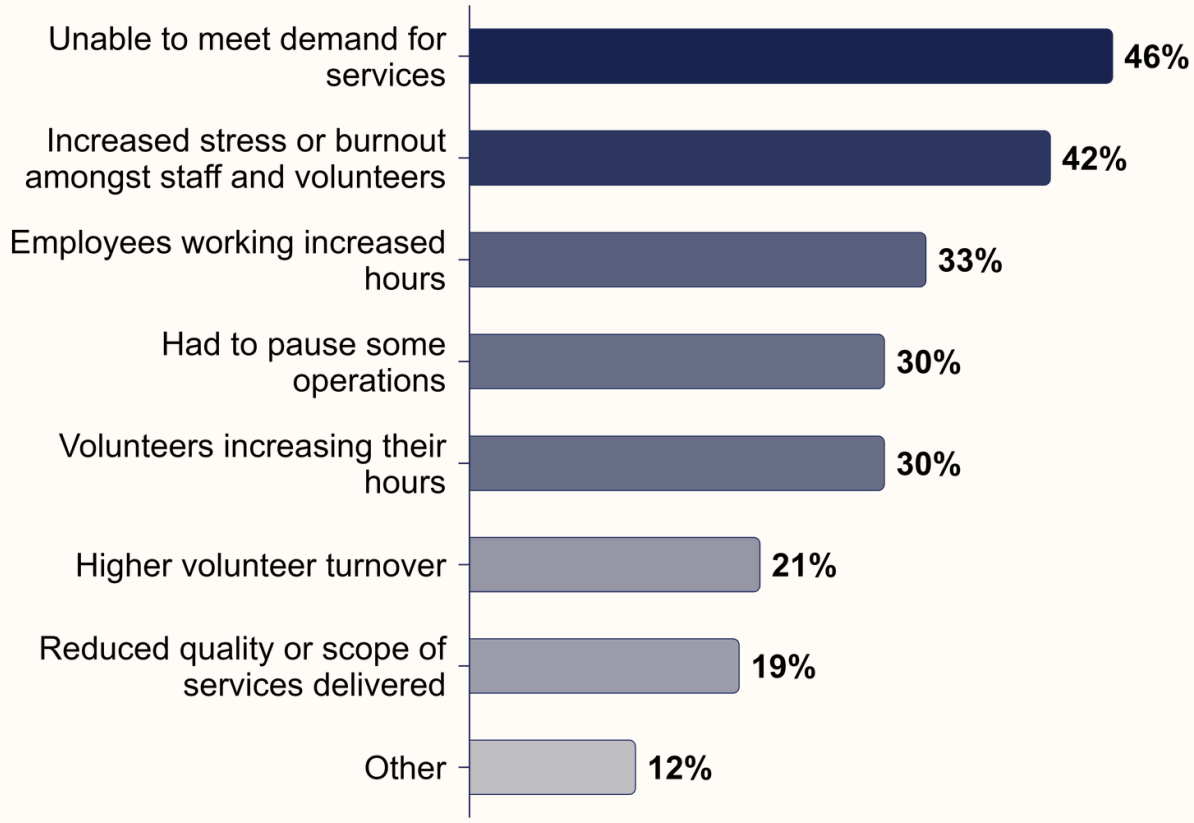
Where staff or volunteer capacity is stretched, demand does not stop. Among organisations experiencing recruitment or retention difficulties, almost half say shortages have left them unable to meet demand (46%) and just under a third have had to pause some operations (30%).

> “We are stretched out with volunteers, fully to the max… the demand is a lot more than what we can offer.”

Many described experiencing workforce difficulties at a time when demand continues to increase, both in volume and complexity. Organisations also described the human costs associated with fewer people working more to keep services running. We describe this as the cost of ‘doing good’ — a trade-off in which the people delivering services often absorb the strain in order to protect those services.

More than two in five say workforce shortages have led to increased stress or burnout among staff or volunteers (42%), while around a third say employees have worked increased hours (33%) and volunteers are contributing more time (30%). While services may be protected in the short term, these pressures have the potential to exacerbate workforce challenges and impact support over time.

Figure 4.7. How recruitment or retention difficulties are affecting organisations



Note. Base = 67. Question shown only to organisations reporting recruitment or retention difficulties among staff or volunteers. Figure shows the eight most commonly selected responses. Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%.



5. Communities supported, demand and access

Bolton CVS reflections

VCSE organisations play a vital role in supporting communities across Bolton, often providing trusted, accessible and community-led support for people facing a range of challenges. VCSEs support residents experiencing poverty, poor mental and physical health, loneliness and isolation, housing insecurity, caring responsibilities and the wider impacts of inequality. Their close relationships with local communities mean they are often among the first to identify emerging needs and respond flexibly to changing circumstances.

Demand for support continues to increase. More than four in five organisations (81%) report rising demand, while focus group participants described not only increasing numbers of people seeking support, but increasingly complex and interconnected needs. Many organisations spoke of supporting people who require practical help, advocacy, emotional support and assistance navigating services and systems.

One of the sector's greatest strengths is its accessibility and the trust it has built within communities. Most people accessing VCSE support do so through word of mouth (83%), direct contact (71%) and community outreach (49%). Referrals and signposting between organisations also demonstrate the strength of local networks and the important role VCSE organisations play in connecting people to wider services and opportunities.

Partnership working has strengthened in recent years, with VCSE organisations increasingly working alongside health, the council, housing and other partners to support residents. However, organisations continue to highlight opportunities to strengthen collaboration further, particularly by ensuring community knowledge, lived experience and grassroots insight play a greater role in shaping local decisions and services. As Bolton continues to develop place-based approaches, the VCSE sector's ability to build trust, engage communities and reach people who may not access traditional services will remain essential.

Bolton VCSE groups and organisations provide an estimated 828,176 contacts or episodes of support each year.

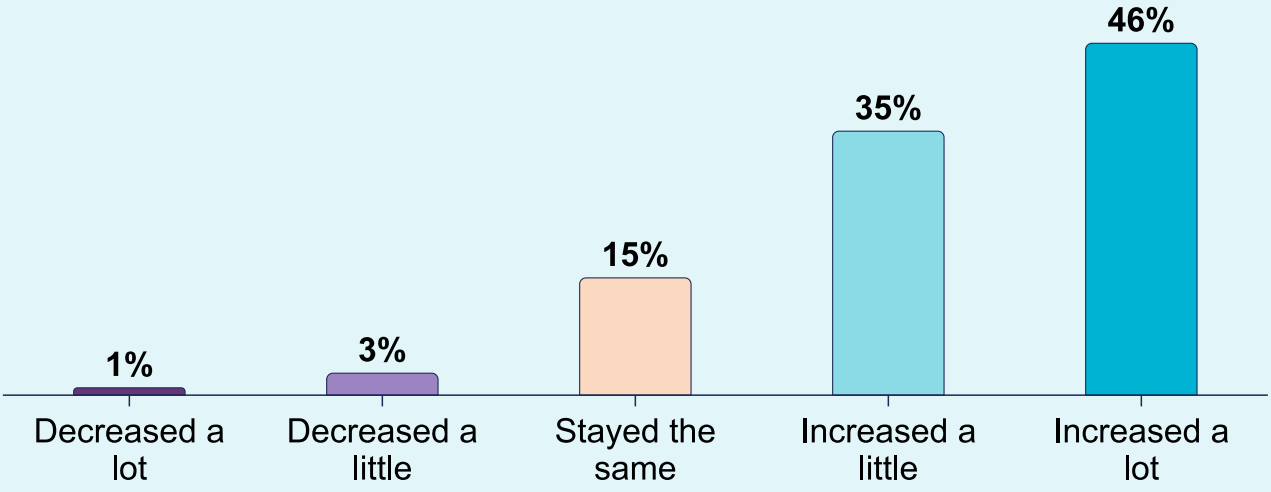
5.1. Demand for services

Section 3 highlighted substantial inequalities in income, deprivation and health across Bolton, affecting people at different stages of life. Focus group participants described how these pressures are reflected in demand for their services, with organisations responding not only to more people but also to needs that increasingly span several services or areas of life. This can involve helping people navigate connected issues around poverty, mental and physical health, isolation, housing and other forms of disadvantage. Participants also described how fragmented services can make this harder, with different parts of the system addressing individual needs rather than providing joined-up support:

> “Yes, we've got doctors, yes, we've got mental health nurses… [but] there is no programme, no structure, no follow through. You've got to deal with [one thing] before you can learn how to deal with [the next]. The world is like a jigsaw puzzle, and everybody's trying to do their little bit.”

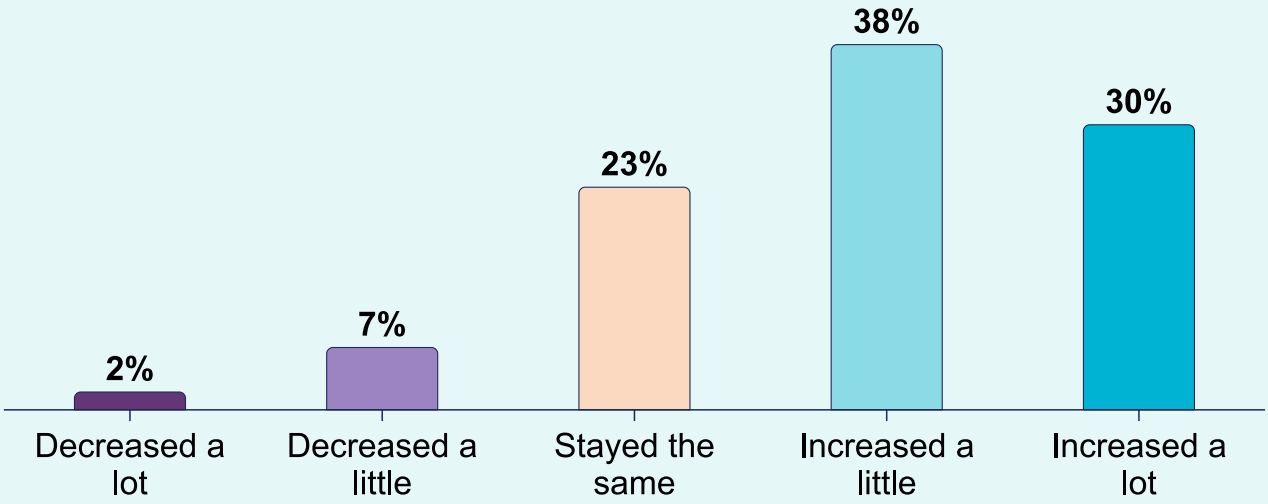
When asked how demand for services had changed over the past 12 months, four in five report an increase (81%), including almost half saying it has increased a lot. More than two thirds say the number of people they support has also increased over the past year (68%).

Figure 5.1. Change in demand for services, last 12 months



Note. Base = 104. ‘Don’t know’ responses excluded.

Figure 5.2. Change in the number of people that organisations support, last 12 months



Note. Base = 107. 'Don't know' responses excluded.

5.2. How people find and access support

VCSE organisations described themselves as being embedded, trusted and known routes into support within their communities. Word of mouth is the most common way people find support, reported by more than four in five organisations (83%). Seven in ten say people self-refer and contact them directly (71%), while two thirds say contact is made through online and digital platforms (65%). Three in five say people are signposted (60%) or referred (57%) to them by other organisations or services, while half say people come into contact through community outreach (49%) and open access or drop-in sessions (49%).

Among organisations receiving referrals, the majority report at least some referrals from both VCSE (89%) and public sector (84%) organisations or services, with two in five saying people are referred from private sector organisations or services (40%). Referrals most frequently relate to social prescribing, health and adult social care.

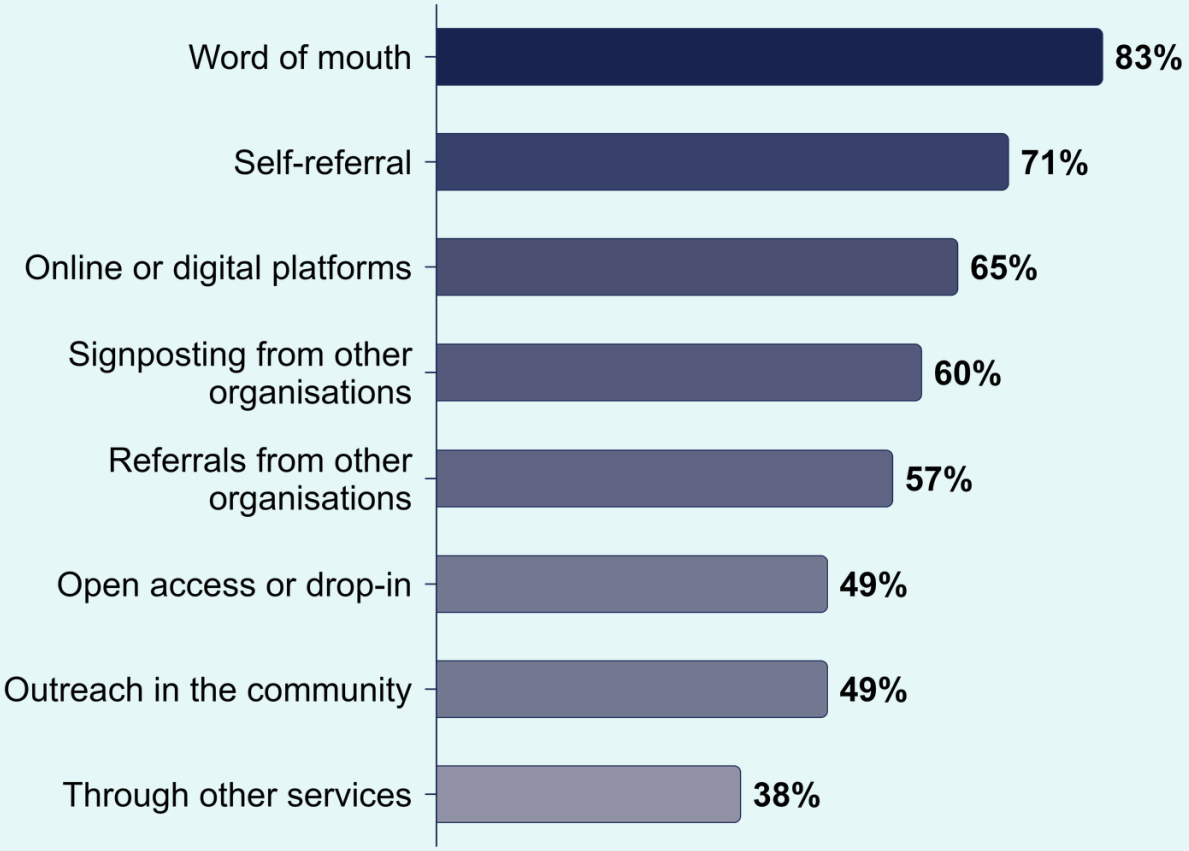
These referral routes reflect the importance of partnership working across Bolton. Initiatives such as Bolton's Family Hubs[8] and the Bolton Health and Care Partnership[9] bring together council, NHS and VCSE organisations to provide support across interconnected issues including health, wellbeing, debt and housing.

In the focus group, participants similarly emphasised the importance of working with other organisations so that people could access the right support at the right time, while reducing reliance on any single service:

> “We encourage and want to work in partnership and collaboration with others. We need our young adults to understand what's in the local community … So that they can stop that over-reliance on a single service and get to know other safe community settings.”

While these referral relationships help connect people to trusted support, they can also shift additional demand onto VCSE organisations. At least half of organisations receiving referrals from public sector organisations or services say that no funding accompanies them. Sustaining this partnership working therefore depends on adequate resources reaching the organisations expected to provide the support.

Figure 5.3. How people come into contact with VCSE organisations



Note. Base = 111. Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%. Figure shows the eight most commonly selected responses.

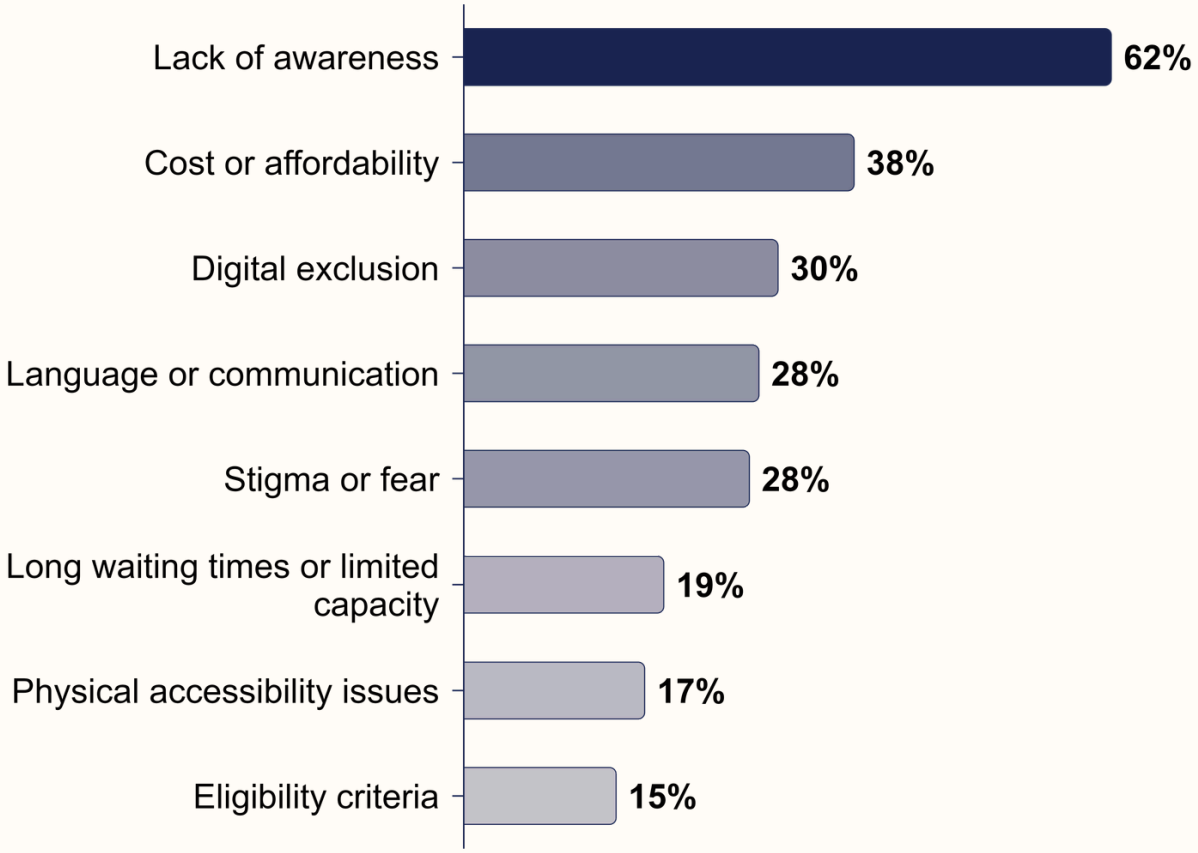
5.3. Barriers to access

Bolton's VCSE sector supports a diverse range of communities, some of which face structural barriers to accessing services, while others encounter cultural or practical barriers that can make it harder to find or engage with support.

The most commonly identified barrier is a lack of awareness of available services (62%), followed by affordability or the cost of taking part (38%). Three in ten organisations identify digital exclusion (30%), while more than a quarter point to language or communication barriers and stigma or fear (both 28%).

These findings show that people often access VCSE support through trusted relationships, personal networks and multiple entry points, reinforcing the importance of organisations having the capacity to maintain a visible and accessible presence within communities.

Figure 5.4. Barriers to accessing services

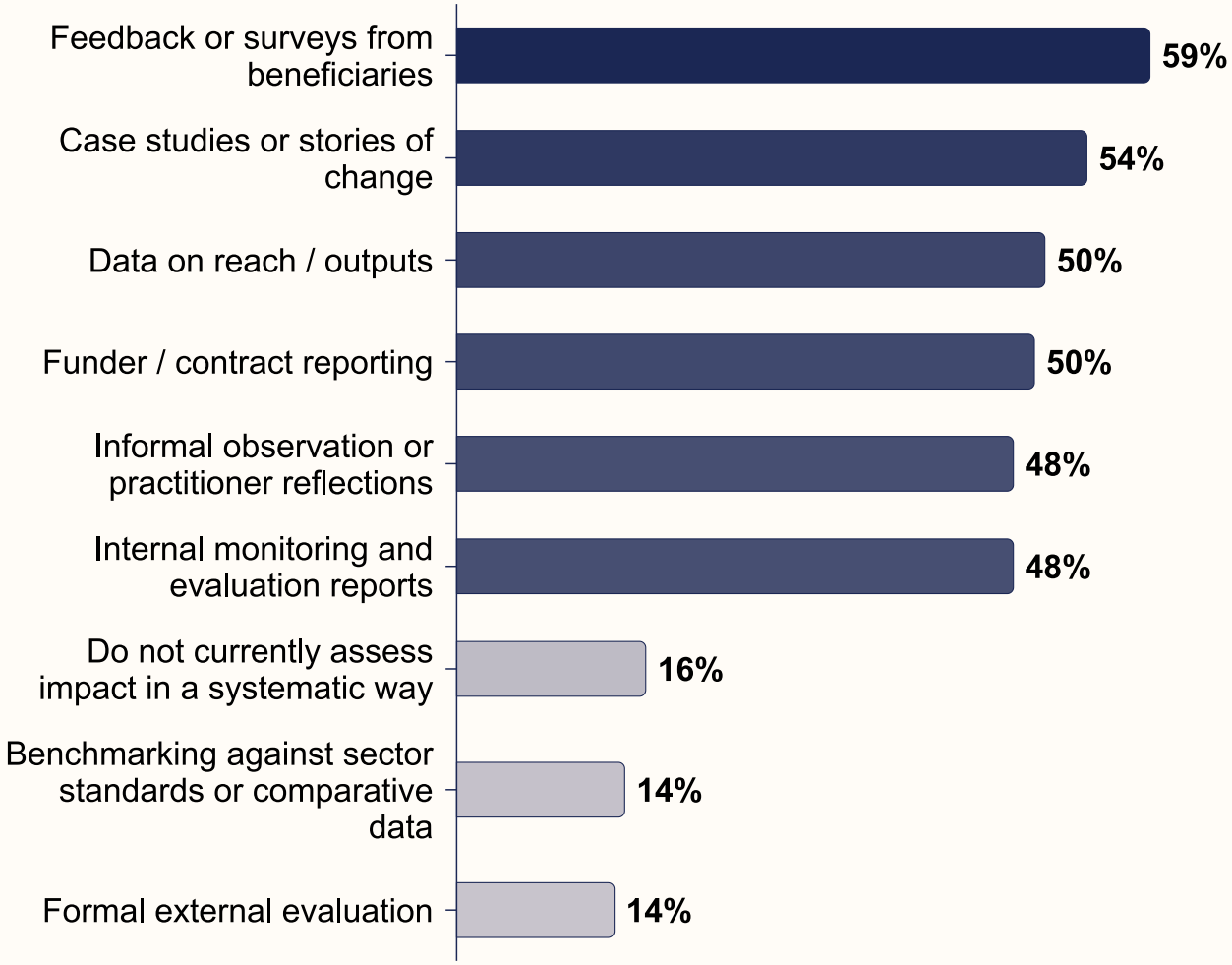


Note. Base = 109. Figure shows the eight most commonly selected responses. Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%.

5.4. Measuring impact and delivery quality

Organisations use a range of methods to understand and evidence what their work achieves. The most common are feedback or surveys from beneficiaries or service users (59%) and case studies or stories of change (54%). Around half also use reach or output data (50%), funder or contract reporting (50%), and informal observation or practitioner reflection (48%). Focus group participants emphasised that much of their impact comes through relational work that takes time and is not always captured by simple output measures. This helps explain the value of case studies and stories of change in capturing people's experiences and demonstrating aspects of impact that are harder to quantify.

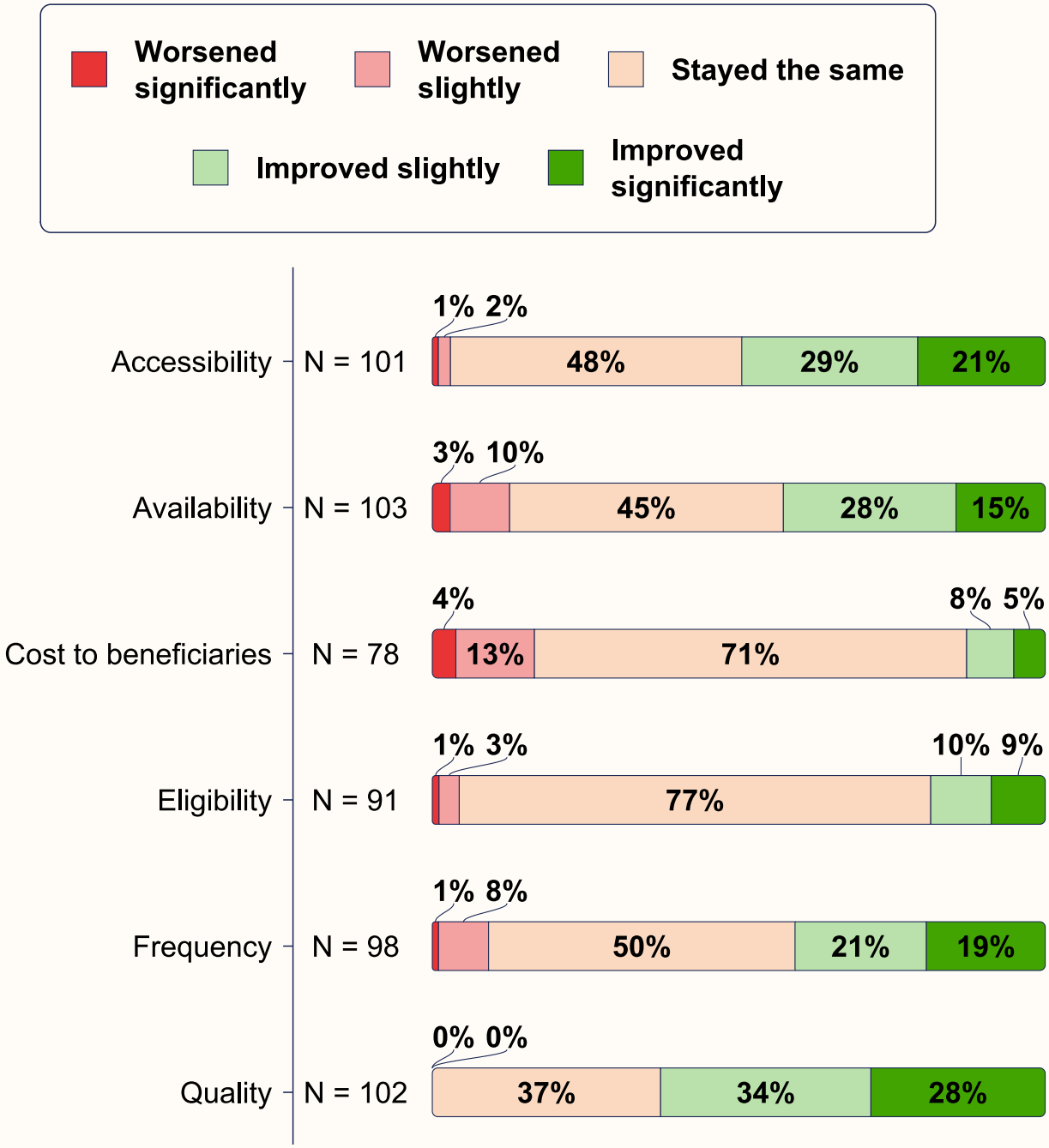
Figure 5.5. How organisations measure impact



Note. Base = 111. Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%.

Despite pressures relating to demand, finances and workforce shortages, many organisations feel their services have improved. Almost two thirds report improved quality (63%), and no organisations report a deterioration. Around half say accessibility has improved (50%), while availability (43%) and frequency (41%) have also improved for many. Cost to beneficiaries is the area where deterioration is most commonly reported (17%), although most organisations say there has been no change (71%).

Figure 5.6. Change in services over the past 12 months



Note. Bases are shown in the chart and vary by metric. 'Don't know / not applicable' responses excluded for each metric. Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

6. Finances and the funding landscape

Bolton CVS reflections

The financial sustainability of Bolton's VCSE sector is becoming an increasing concern. Organisations are operating within a challenging funding environment. Competition for funding is increasing, requiring organisations to invest more time and capacity into fundraising while often facing lower success rates.

At the same time, funding is failing to keep pace with inflation and rising delivery costs. Nearly three quarters (73%) of organisations report that none of their grants or contracts have been uplifted to reflect increased costs, despite significant increases in expenditure. Combined with short-term funding arrangements and limited access to multi-year funding, this creates uncertainty, affects workforce stability and makes long-term planning increasingly difficult.

Bolton CVS has worked with Bolton's Fund partners to increase investment in flexible revenue funding for local VCSE organisations, recognising the importance of supporting core organisational capacity alongside project delivery. Bolton CVS also provides specialist support to help VCSEs diversify income streams, develop trading opportunities and strengthen organisational resilience.

The challenge facing many VCSE organisations is not a lack of impact, quality or ambition, but a lack of long-term, sustainable investment. Under-investment in the VCSE sector risks weakening early intervention, prevention and community capacity, creating additional pressures for health, social care and public services across Bolton.



VCSE organisations across the UK have been navigating an increasingly challenging financial and funding landscape in recent years. Shrinking public budgets and reduced donations have made it harder to generate income, while rising energy, wage and overhead costs have increased the cost of delivery.[10,11] At the same time, the communities they support are facing greater pressures, driving demand during a period of constraint and uncertainty.

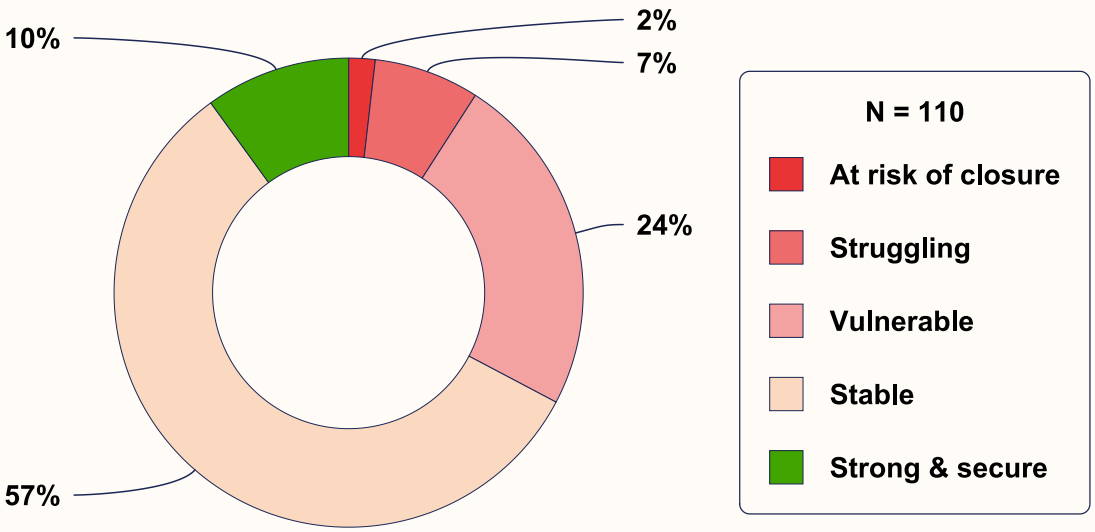
Bolton's VCSE organisations face similar pressures, with funding that is often short term and does not increase as delivery costs rise. Almost a quarter describe their organisation as vulnerable and facing significant pressure, while many others are stable but concerned about the future. More than half of organisations holding reserves have drawn on them over the past year, most commonly to cover day-to-day running costs and plug gaps in funding. Organisations are increasing fundraising, collaborating on bids and diversifying income, but competition for funding and the time and capacity needed to secure it remain significant challenges. Most expect to maintain or expand their work, but few feel strong and secure, and many are planning ahead in an uncertain financial environment.

Bolton's VCSE sector generated an estimated £235 million in income in 2024/25, with estimated expenditure of £230 million.

6.1. Financial position and reserves

These estimates describe the scale of Bolton's VCSE sector, but they should not be read as a sign that individual organisations feel financially secure. More than half of respondents describe their organisation as stable but with concerns about the future (57%). Almost a quarter say they are vulnerable and facing significant pressure, with sustainability uncertain without changes being made (24%). One in ten describe themselves as strong, secure and well-equipped for future challenges (10%), while fewer say they are facing more serious struggles (7%) or at risk of imminent closure (2%).

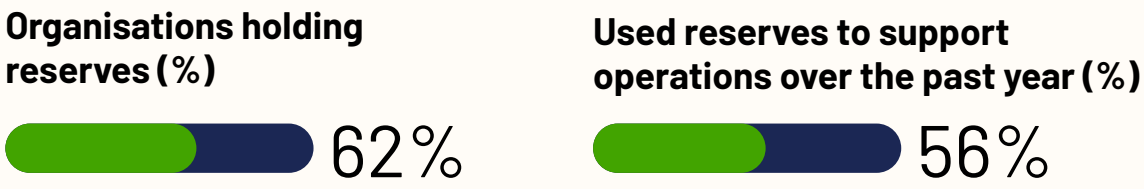
Figure 6.1. Organisations' current financial and operational state



More than three in five responding organisations hold reserves (62%), and more than half have used them to support operations over the past year (56%).

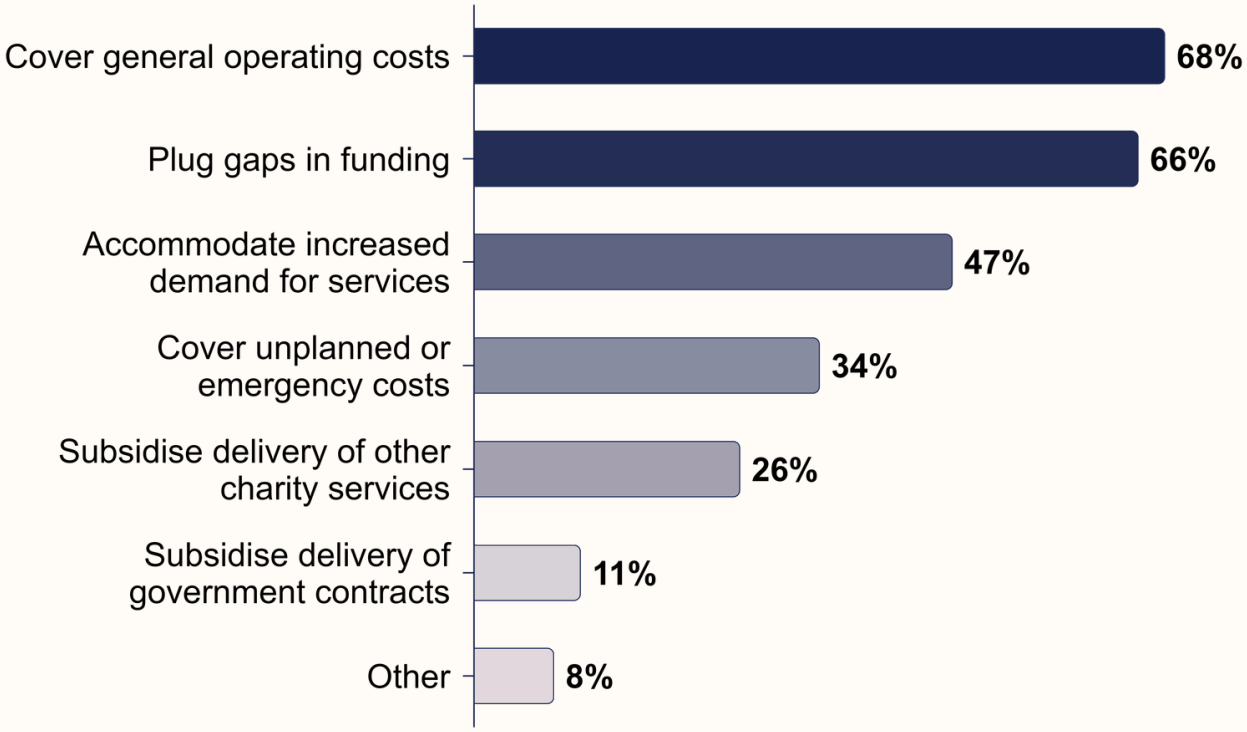
Around two thirds have drawn on reserves to cover general operating costs (68%) or to plug gaps in funding (66%). Almost half have used reserves to accommodate increased demand for their services (47%), while a third used them to cover unplanned or emergency costs (34%).

Figure 6.2. Use of financial reserves



Note. Base: holds reserves = 109; used reserves = 68. Figure shows the proportion answering 'Yes'. The 'used reserves' question was asked only of organisations that hold reserves.

Figure 6.3. Reasons for using reserves over the past 12 months

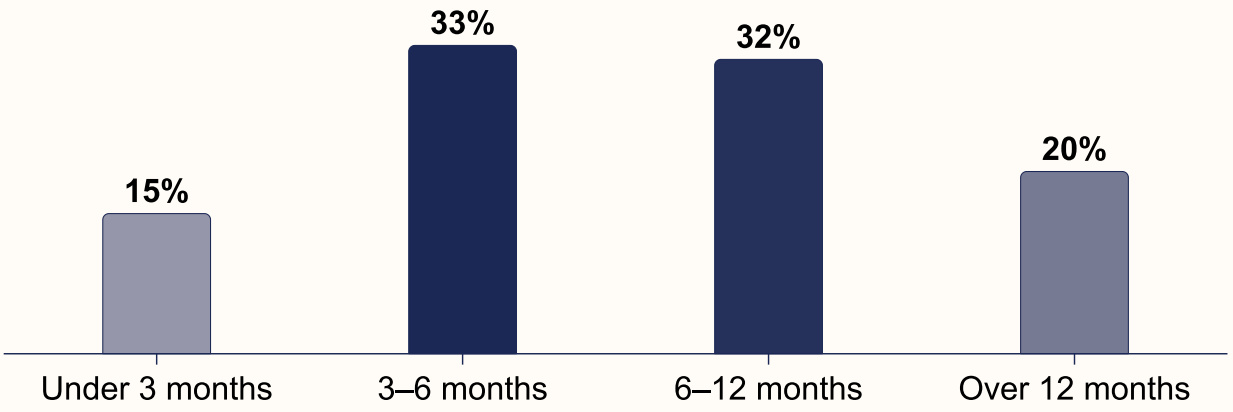


Note. Base = 38. Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%.

This suggests that reserves are being used to support everyday operations and plug gaps in funding to keep support in place, rather than being held for emergencies or future investment. Using reserves in this way can protect services in the short term, but repeated use reduces the organisation's ability to absorb later shocks, manage delays in future funding, invest in development, or respond to emerging need.

When asked how long they expect their reserves to last, based on current levels of income and expenditure, a third of organisations expect them to last between three and six months (33%), while a similar proportion have between six and twelve months (32%). One in five have more than 12 months (20%), and 15% have less than three months.

Figure 6.4. Number of months reserves are expected to last



Note. Base = 66. 'Don't know' responses excluded.

6.2. Income and expenditure

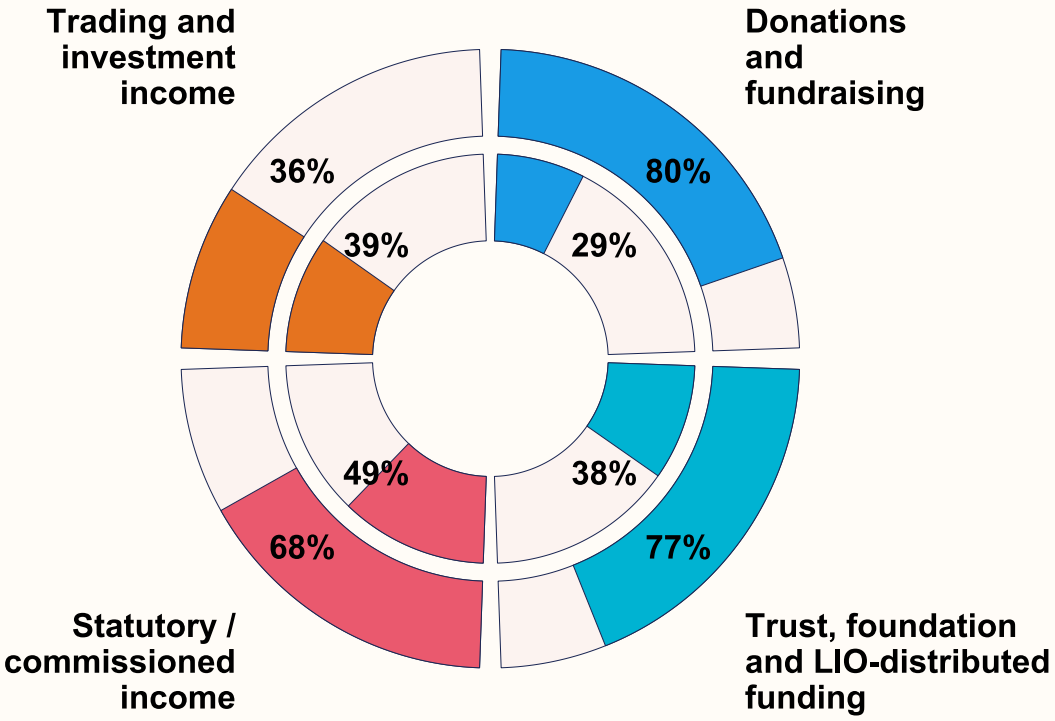
The ways in which VCSE organisations generate income have changed in recent years. Nationally, the number of people donating has fallen by around six million over the past decade, and the total value of public donations in 2025 was 10% lower than the previous year.[12] Some organisations are looking to legacy fundraising, a source with long-term growth potential but uncertain time horizons.[13] While the number of government contracts delivered by VCSE organisations has increased,[14] evidence shows that these often do not cover the true cost of delivering services.[15]

We asked organisations where their income comes from and how much each source contributes to their overall income. Income sources were grouped into four categories: statutory and commissioned income; funding from trusts, foundations and local infrastructure organisations (LIOs); donations and fundraising; and trading and investment income. For each category, we calculated both the percentage of organisations receiving income and its average share of their total income. Organisations receiving no income from a category were excluded from that category's average, so the averages do not add up to 100%.

Survey findings suggest that responding organisations draw on a mix of income sources. Four in five receive income from donations and fundraising (80%), more than three quarters from trusts, foundations or LIOs (77%), and over two thirds from statutory funding and commissioned income (68%). Trading income features less, reported by over a third (36%).

While most organisations receive at least some income from donations and fundraising, this accounts for the smallest average share of total income (29%). Statutory and commissioned funding accounts for the largest share (49%), followed by trading and investment income (39%) and funding distributed by LIOs, trusts and foundations (38%).

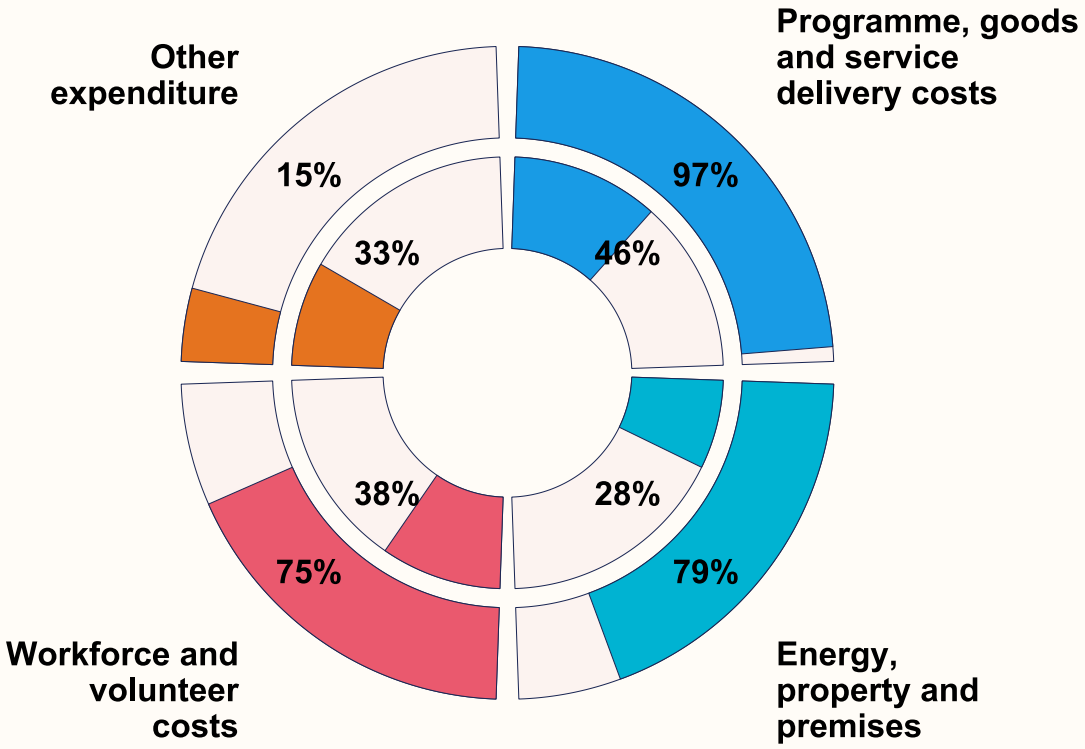
Figure 6.5. Income sources received and their average share of total income



Note. Outer ring shows the percentage receiving any income from each source (base = 91); inner ring shows the average share of total income among organisations receiving that source (base = 33-73, depending on source).

Expenditure was analysed in the same way as income, showing both the proportion of organisations reporting each category and its average share of total expenditure. Almost all organisations report programme, goods and service-delivery costs (97%), which also account for the largest share of total expenditure (46%). Four in five report energy, property and premises costs (79%) and three quarters report workforce and volunteer costs (75%), accounting for 28% and 38% of total expenditure respectively.

Figure 6.6. Expenditure areas and their average share of total expenditure



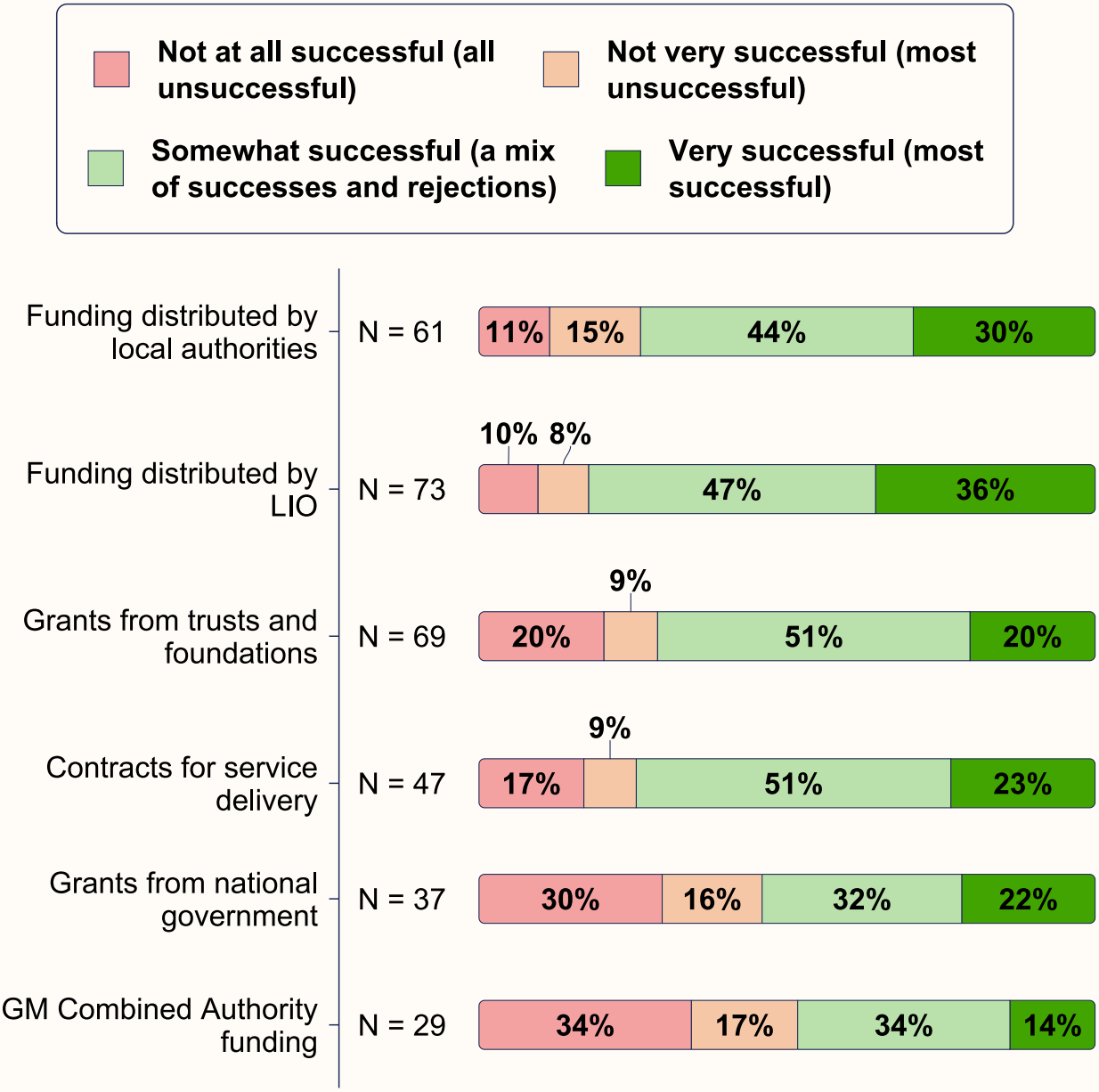
Note. Outer ring shows the percentage reporting any expenditure in each area (base = 99); inner ring shows the average share of total expenditure among organisations reporting expenditure in that area (base = 15-96, depending on area).

6.3. Funding

When asked how successful they were in applying for funding sources relevant to them, more than four in five responding organisations report being very or somewhat successful when applying for funding distributed by LIOs (82%). Bolton CVS, the borough's LIO, provides several established routes for distributing funding to local organisations. These include Bolton's Fund, which has distributed £6.5 million across more than 1,200 projects since 2019,[16] while Bolton CVS distributed more than £2.3 million in grants and investments during 2024/25, supporting 240 groups and organisations.[17]

Around three quarters also report success with contracts for service delivery (74%), local authority funding (74%) and grants from trusts or foundations (71%). More than half report success with national government grants (54%), while just under half report success with GMCA funding (48%).

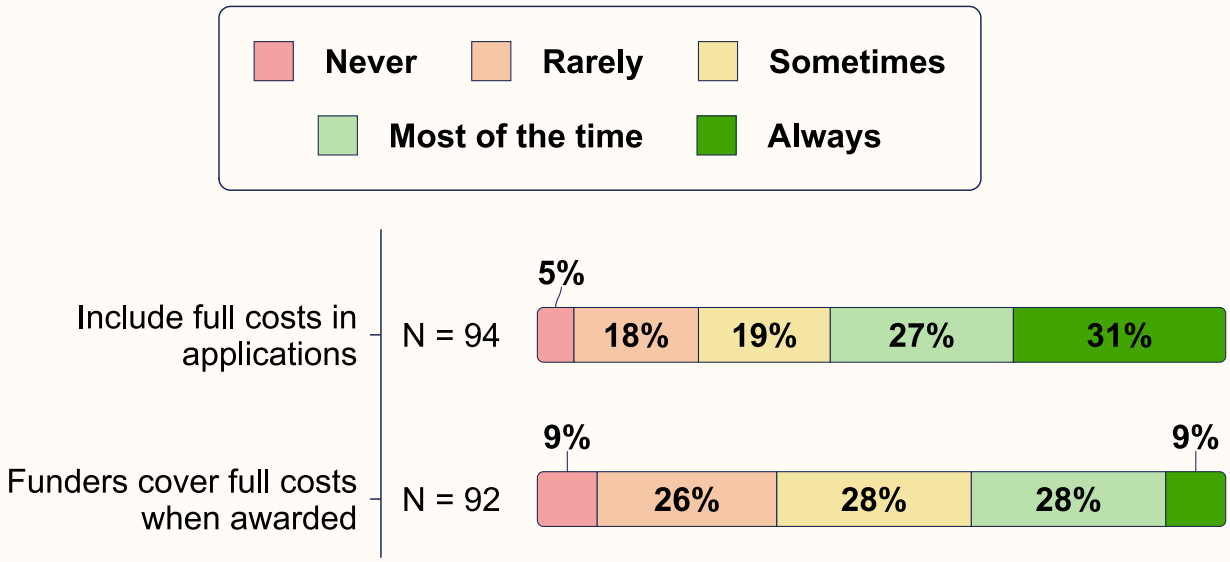
Figure 6.7. Success in funding applications over the past 12 months



Note. Bases are shown in the chart and vary by source. 'Didn't apply' responses excluded for each source. Shows outcomes among organisations that applied to each source. Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

A successful funding application does not always translate into financial security if the money is short term, restricted, or does not cover the real cost of delivering services. Almost three in five organisations say they always (31%) or mostly (27%) include full costs in funding applications, but fewer than two in five say funders always (9%) or mostly (28%) cover these costs when funding is awarded. When there is a mismatch between the funding required and what is awarded, organisations are often left drawing on reserves or income from other sources, or rely on unpaid work to ensure support is delivered.

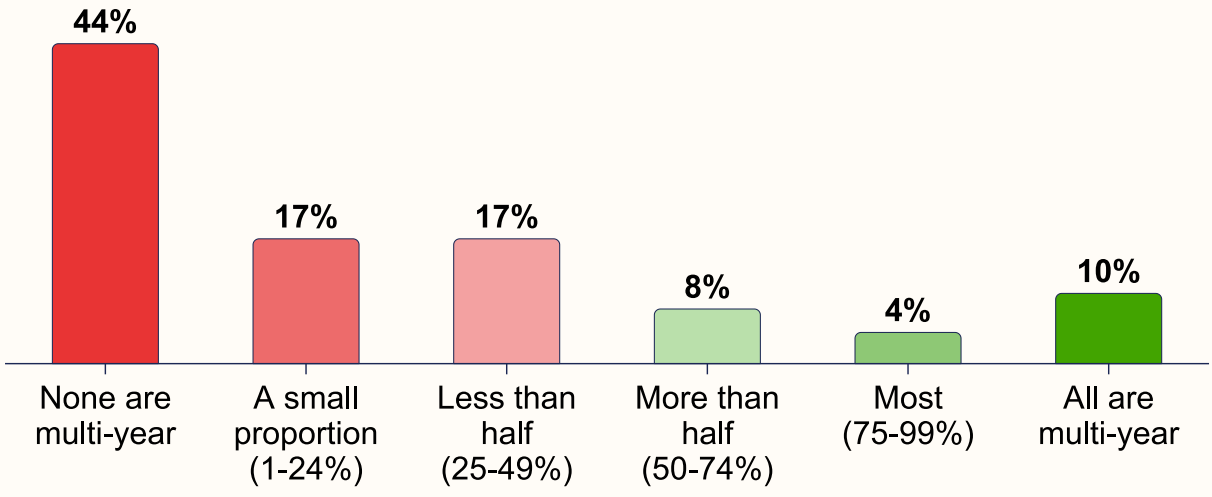
Figure 6.8. Full cost recovery



Note. Bases are shown in the chart. 'Don't know' responses excluded. Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Longer-term funding gives organisations more scope to plan staffing and services, and IVAR's most recent funding experience survey found that multi-year grants were a leading priority.[18] Yet among Bolton organisations receiving grant or contract income, almost four in five (78%) say less than half of this funding is multi-year, including over two in five that say none is (44%).

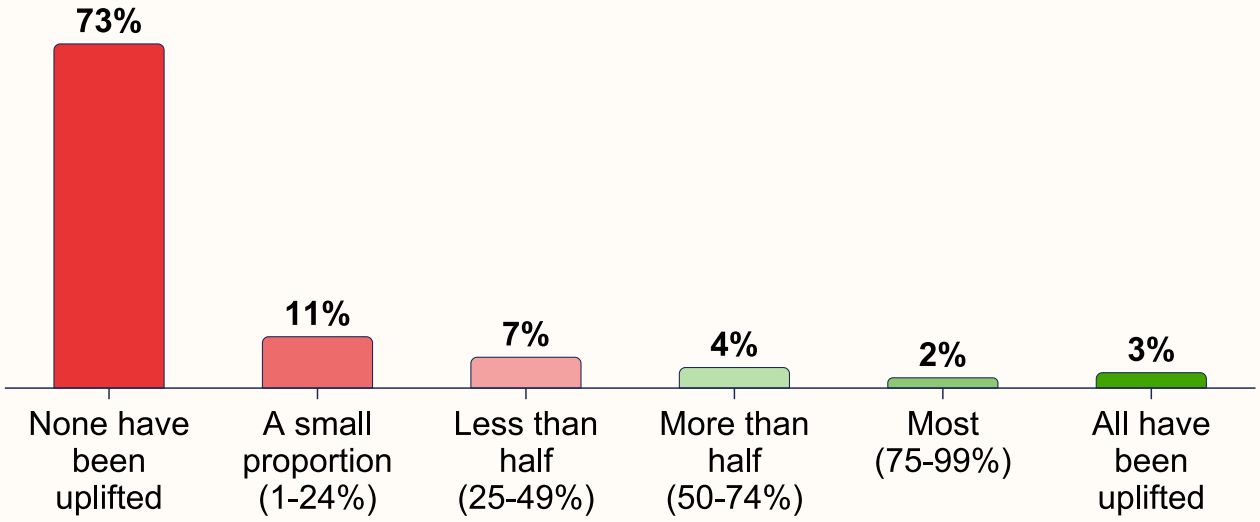
Figure 6.9. The proportion of organisations' grants or contracts that are multi-year (three years or more)



Note. Base = 93. Question shown only to organisations receiving income from grants or contracts from any source.

Rising delivery costs also reduce what existing awards can cover, yet national evidence shows that uplifts remain uncommon, particularly for shorter-term funding.[11] Almost three quarters of organisations receiving grant or contract income say none of this funding had been uplifted to reflect rising costs over the last year (73%), while only 5% say most or all had been uplifted. This can leave organisations to meet the difference through other income, reserves or unpaid work, a pattern also found nationally in the VCSE sector's delivery of public services.[15] However, it is important to recognise that this covers grants and contracts from all sources, so it should not be read as an assessment of any single funder.

Figure 6.10. The proportion of organisations' grants or contracts that have been uplifted over the past 12 months



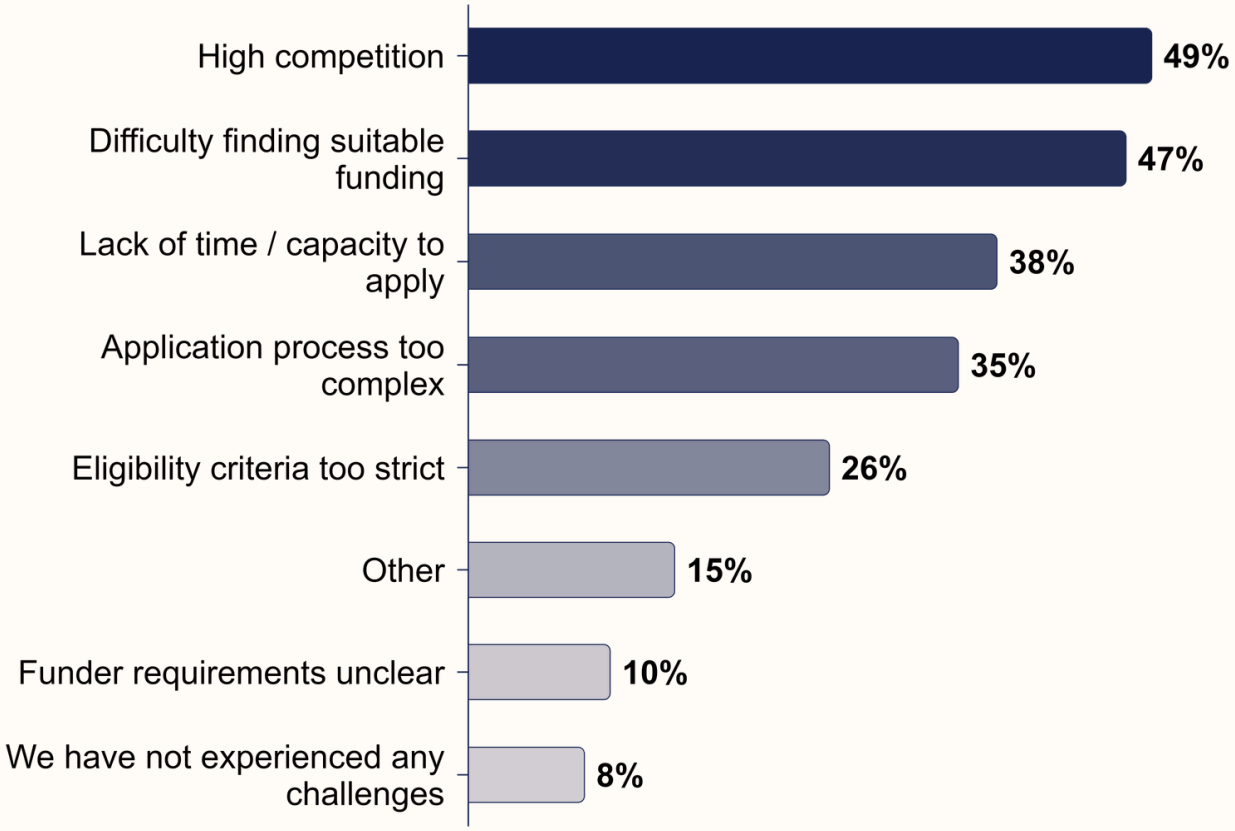
Note. Base = 92. Question shown only to organisations receiving income from grants or contracts from any source.

These findings suggest that organisations face challenges not only in securing funding, but in securing funding that is sufficient, sustained and able to cover the full cost of delivery. One focus group participant described how this can leave organisations trying to sustain work with funding that falls short of both the period and level of support required:

> "It's been my first year of running this and finding funding, but I've struggled, to be honest. The funding that we've got is not going to cover the 12 months that we put in for … I can't see how we meet the criteria, to be honest … it's not enough to cover what we do."

When asked what the biggest challenges are with finding, applying for, and securing funding, organisations most commonly point to high levels of competition (49%) and difficulty finding suitable funding (47%). This reflects wider evidence showing that competition has intensified in recent years, with funders receiving growing numbers of applications.[10] More than a third say that a lack of time or capacity to apply for funding (38%) and complicated application processes (35%) make the process of applying for and securing funding more challenging.

Figure 6.11. Funding challenges



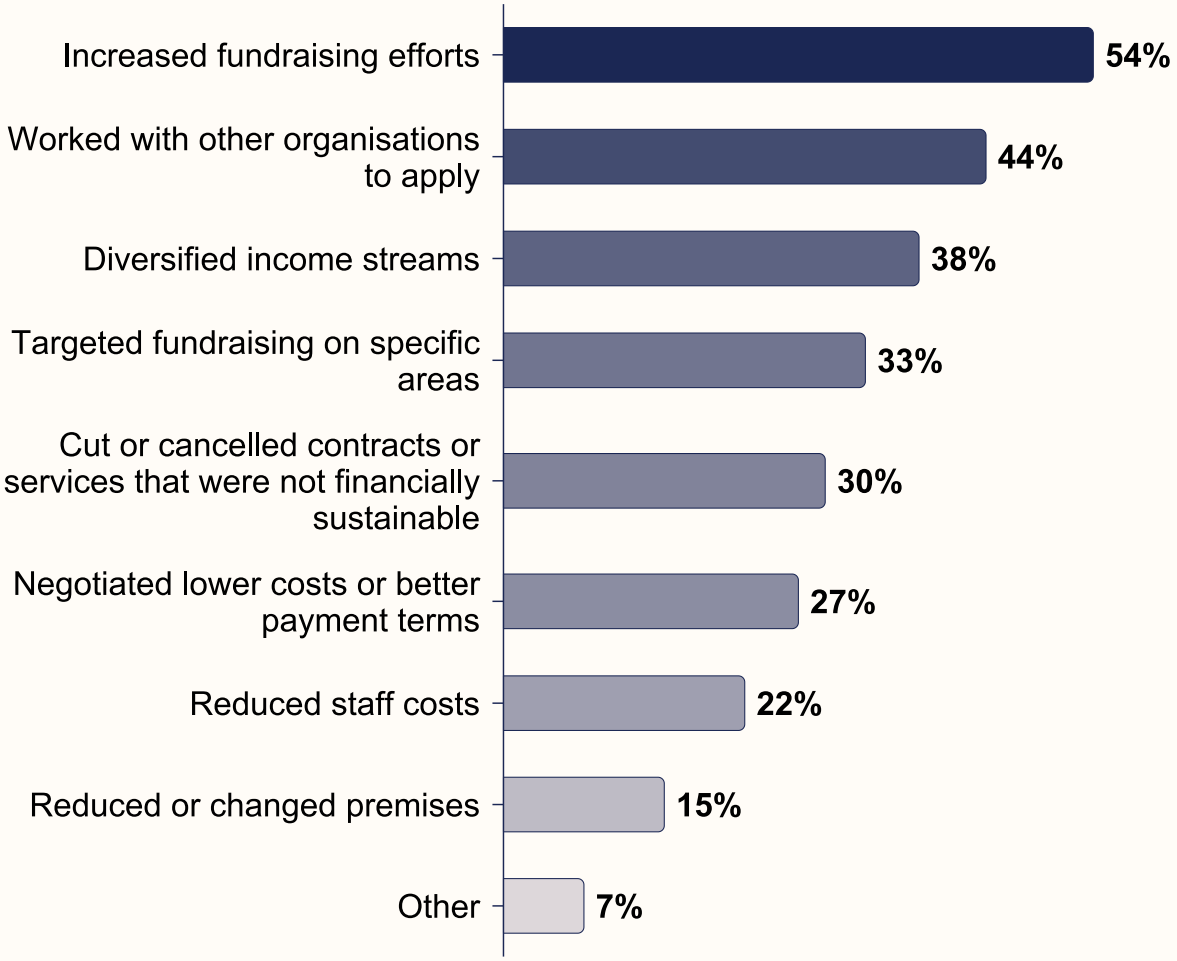
Note. Base = 109. Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%.

To understand how organisations are responding to these funding challenges, we asked what steps they had taken over the previous year. Three quarters (75%) had taken at least one action. Of this group, over half increased their overall fundraising efforts (54%), while more than two in five worked with other organisations to apply for funding (44%). Almost two in five diversified income or funding streams (38%), and a third targeted specific funding areas or opportunities (33%). For the quarter taking no new action over the previous year (25%), this may reflect limited scope to respond or measures already introduced before that period.

These findings show that organisations are actively trying to respond to a more competitive funding environment, but many of the strategies available to them require additional time and capacity. For smaller or volunteer-led organisations in particular, this can create a trade-off between delivering services and continually searching and applying for new funding, especially where support comes through a succession of short-term pots rather than more sustained funding. One focus group participant described this tension:

> “So my frustration is, we haven't got employees, just a few volunteers. We haven't got the people that can search for funding or do the funding, so I'm having to take time out instead of delivering the service to look for funding … I think it's a waste of money unless we can get a rolling programme to continue to deliver that … not bits of pots here, there and everywhere.”

Figure 6.12. Actions taken in response to funding and income challenges



Note. Base = 81. Excludes respondents selecting ‘No actions taken’ (N = 27). Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%.

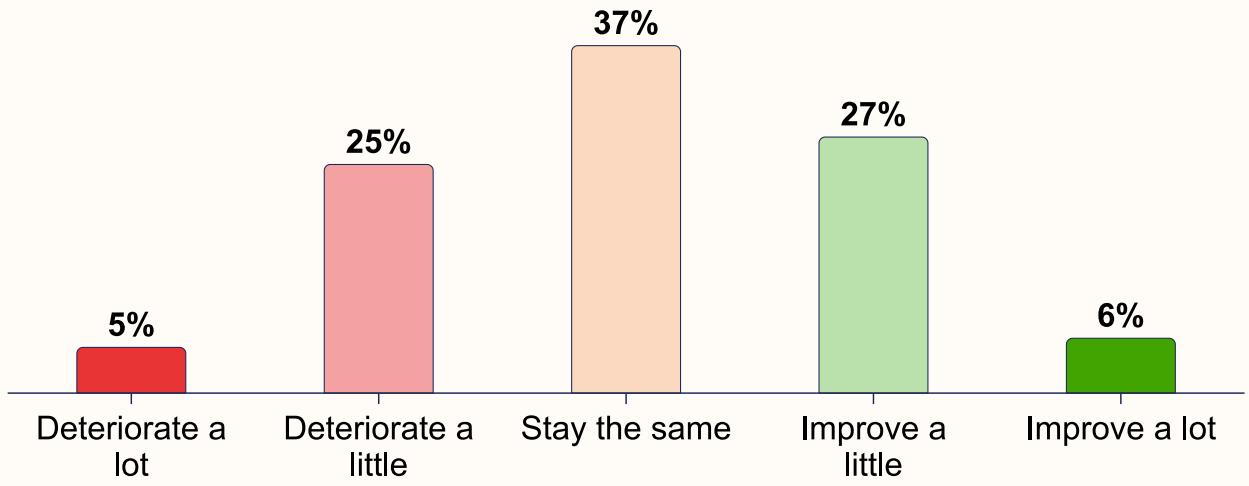
6.4. Premises

Physical premises and spaces are part of the sector's contribution, providing places where people can meet, access support and build relationships. Organisations use a mix of premises arrangements: three in five organisations operate from premises they lease or rent (61%), while almost a third use premises with shared or free access (31%). Around one in ten operate from premises they own (11%), and a similar proportion do not use physical premises (9%).

6.5. Future outlook

Findings from this report suggest that Bolton's VCSE sector is supporting more people, often with a wider range of needs, whilst coping with funding arrangements that fail to provide stability and longevity. This uncertainty is reflected in mixed expectations about the next 12 months. A third expect their financial position to improve over the next 12 months (33%), over a third expect it to stay the same (37%), and just under a third expect it to deteriorate (29%).

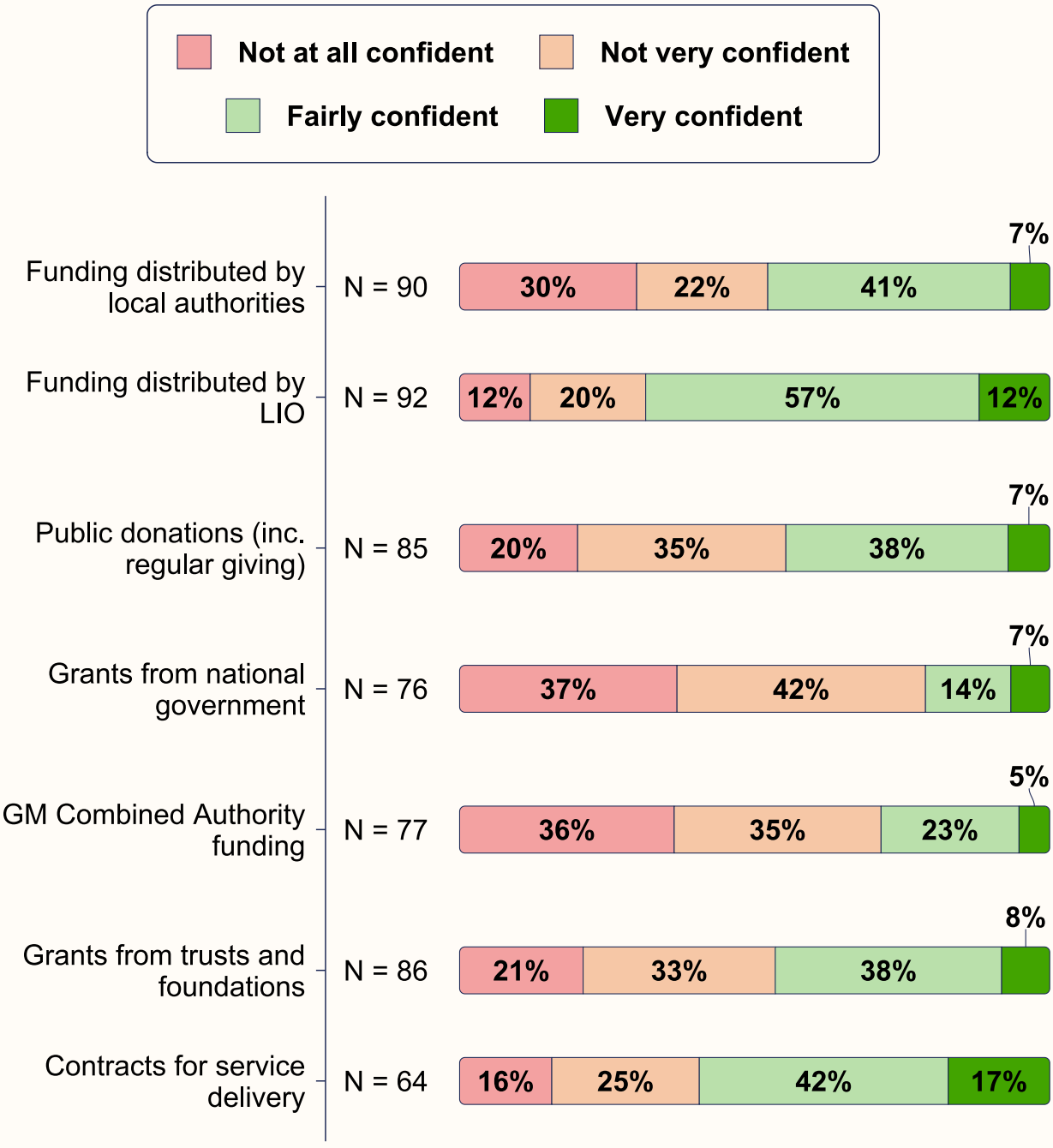
Figure 6.13. Expected financial position over the next 12 months



Note. Base = 102. 'Don't know' responses excluded.

These mixed views are also reflected in organisations' confidence in being able to secure funding from different sources over the next year. Among organisations that considered each source relevant to them, more than two thirds feel fairly or very confident in funding distributed by LIOs (68%), which sits alongside the relatively high application success rate with this source over the past year. Three in five feel confident about service delivery contracts (59%), while almost half feel confident about local authority funding (48%). In contrast, a majority are not very or not at all confident about national government grants (79%) or GMCA funding (71%).

Figure 6.14. Confidence levels in funding over the next 12 months

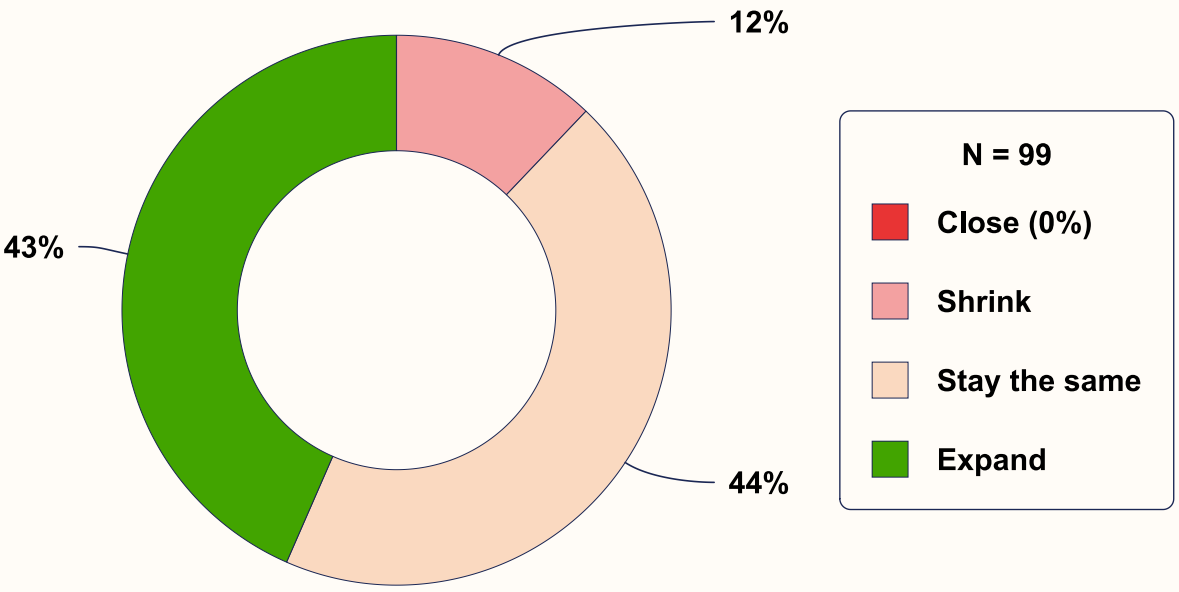


Note. Bases are shown in the chart and vary by source. 'Not applicable' responses excluded for each source. Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

These findings suggest greater confidence in funding that is more locally rooted or linked to established relationships than in regional and national public-sector sources, where funders may also face pressures on their own resources.

Despite these pressures, most responding organisations do not expect their overall operations to reduce. Looking ahead, two in five expect their operations to remain at a similar level (44%) over the next year, and a similar proportion expect to expand (43%). Around one in eight expect to shrink (12%), and none of those answering the question expect to close.

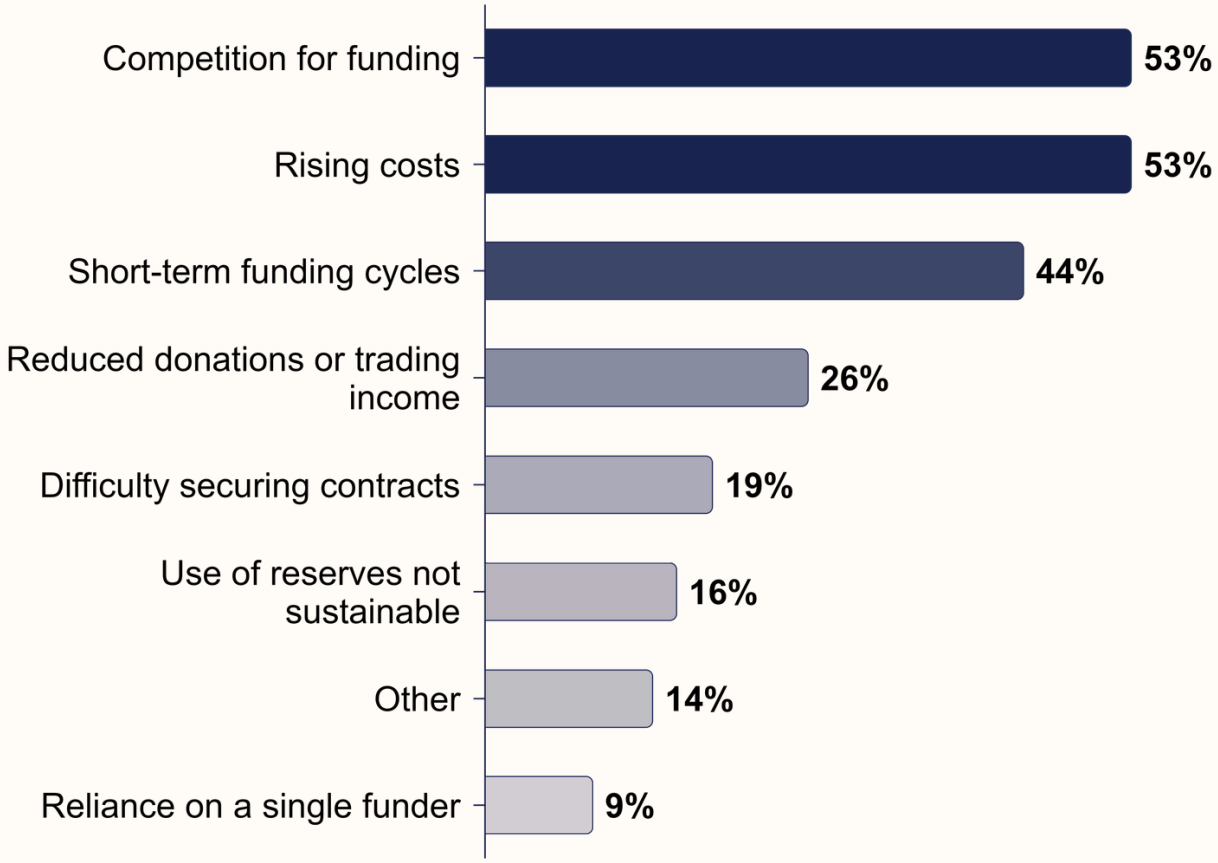
Figure 6.15. Organisational expectations for the year ahead



Ambitions to maintain operations or grow activity sit alongside a number of financial risks, with organisations pointing to competition for funding (53%), rising costs (53%), and short-term funding cycles (44%) as the main risks to their financial sustainability.

Collectively, these interconnected pressures can have a cumulative impact on organisations. Rising costs make services more expensive to run while leaving residents with less money to donate or spend on the activities organisations provide. As more people also turn to the sector for support, organisations face pressure to secure additional funding both to meet growing demand and to cover shortfalls in existing income, adding to competition for available funds. Short funding periods make this harder to manage, leaving organisations repeatedly seeking money to sustain work their communities already depend on.

Figure 6.16. Risks to financial sustainability



Note. Base = 102. Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%.



Challenges and opportunities

This report presents a picture of a sector that plays a vital role in Bolton's communities and makes a significant contribution to the borough's wider system. VCSE organisations provide trusted relationships, create opportunities for participation, strengthen communities and help residents navigate increasingly complex challenges. Their ability to build trust, identify emerging needs early and respond flexibly to changing circumstances makes them one of Bolton's greatest community assets.

The findings also highlight significant pressures. Demand continues to increase, funding is becoming more competitive, and organisations face growing challenges recruiting and retaining staff, volunteers and trustees. At the same time, many VCSE groups and organisations are operating without the long-term funding certainty or full cost recovery needed to plan, invest and grow with confidence.

As Bolton moves forward with Live Well's public service reform ambitions and the aspirations of the Bolton 2040 Borough Plan, there is a clear opportunity to place communities and the VCSE sector at the heart of change.[19,20] Investment in the VCSE sector should not be viewed simply as support for community organisations. It is an investment in prevention, early intervention, community resilience and stronger outcomes for residents. A sustainable and well-resourced VCSE sector helps reduce inequalities, improve wellbeing, strengthen economic participation and alleviate pressure on health, social care and other public services. Investing in Bolton's VCSE sector is therefore an investment in the long-term resilience and success of the borough as a whole.



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Bolton's State of the VCSE Sector dashboard:
https://bolton-cvs.gmstateofthesector.org/

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