BURY VOLUNTARY, COMMUNITY & FAITH ALLIANCE

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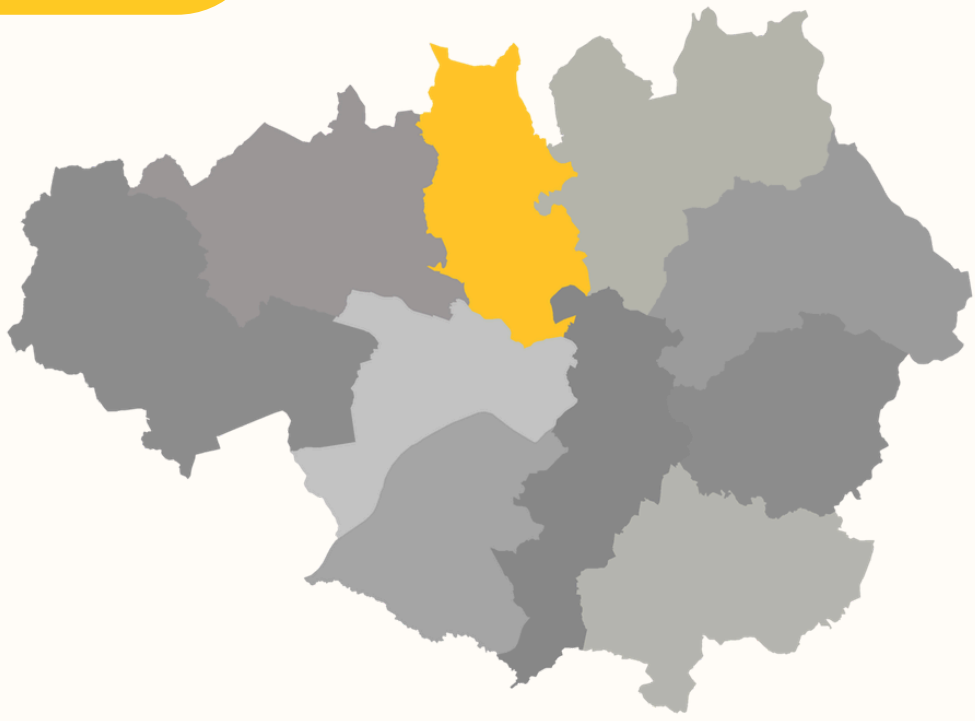
A joint venture to support the local VCSE sector in Greater Manchester

Bury State of the VCSE Sector

2026



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Authorship and editorial responsibility

In this report, the foreword, conclusion, and highlighted reflections at the beginning of sections 3 and 4 are authored by Bury VCFA. The executive summary is co-authored by Nottingham Trent University (NTU) and Bury VCFA. All other sections are authored by NTU. Bury VCFA 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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Foreword

Welcome to the 2026 State of the Sector report for Bury. This report is a powerful reminder of the role our Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector plays every day. It is not just delivering activities or services, it is building relationships, creating trusted spaces and helping people find their way through increasingly complex challenges.

Across Bury and Greater Manchester, demand continues to rise for many of our groups, and the issues people are facing are more connected and more long-term than ever before, from poverty and mental health to housing, isolation and caring responsibilities. VCSE organisations are often the first place people turn, stepping in where individuals find services and systems difficult to access or simply where individuals are unsure where to turn or who to trust.

What makes this sector so important is its rootedness in communities. It works because it is local, trusted and responsive. But the findings in this report show that there is a risk that the systems around the sector are struggling to adapt and change at pace to meet the role that the local VCSE sector is now playing.

Funding remains one of the sector's biggest challenges. This is not necessarily about the amount available but how it works. Funding is often short term, restrictive and rarely covers the true cost of delivery. Whilst at the same time, organisations are navigating increasing demand with limited capacity, relying on staff in insecure roles and volunteers who, while essential, need proper support and investment.

We also see how vital community spaces are every day in Bury, whether that's the buildings, parks and places where activity and connection happen. These spaces form the foundation of our communities within Bury but beneath the surface there are signs of fragility. Despite this, the sector continues to collaborate, adapt and deliver.

Whilst it is only natural to focus on the challenges, this report also shares the sector's strength and resilience and I want to end my foreword with those strengths. Firstly, I want to thank every organisation, volunteer and staff member who contributed to this report, and more importantly, for everything they do day in, day out.

Collectively we make a difference to the lives of local residents at scale, supporting people, strengthening communities and stepping in where it matters most. Across Bury, that contribution reaches around two-thirds of a million instances of support each year and is underpinned by a vast network of staff and volunteers.

As your Local Infrastructure Organisation, and a charity ourselves, we see this impact every day working alongside you to connect, support and champion the sector. This report sets us a shared and hopeful challenge: to build on these strengths together, across the sector and with partners across Team Bury, so that the system better reflects the reality of the role the VCSE sector already plays.

By continuing to work in partnership, valuing community insight and experience, and creating space for genuine parity in decision-making, we can ensure the sector is recognised and supported in the way it needs to be. With fair, sustainable funding and a shared commitment to collaboration, together we can ensure the sector not only sustains its impact but goes further in improving the lives of local people.

Helen Tomlinson
Chief Executive, Bury VCFA



Executive summary

Across the UK, voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations form an essential part of the social infrastructure that supports community life. 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.

Bury sits within this national context as a borough with an ageing population, increasing diversity and substantial differences between its neighbourhoods. Income and health deprivation are concentrated around Bury town centre, Radcliffe and the M66 corridor, while more affluent northern neighbourhoods have an older age profile. The sector's work reflects this range of need, delivering important health and wellbeing support and community activity to a diverse range of communities, including older residents, families, and Disabled people.

This report provides an up-to-date picture of Bury's VCSE sector in 2026, highlighting the scale and diversity of organisations working across the borough, the significant contribution they make to local people and communities, and the pressures they continue to face. It draws on 77 usable survey responses, one focus group, wider local and national evidence, and informed estimates of the sector's overall scale and contribution.

An estimated 1,345 VCSE organisations and groups operate in Bury, generating around £185 million in annual income and providing approximately 667,000 contacts or episodes of support each year. This work is powered by a collective workforce of almost 40,000 staff, volunteers and trustees. The findings in this report present a sector that is locally rooted, flexible and resilient. Its organisations provide trusted, community-led support that helps residents navigate complex and interconnected challenges, even as they face increasing pressures themselves.

Many work to promote health, wellbeing, and inclusion within their communities, creating spaces of community and belonging, and stepping in when people need support. Their local knowledge and relationships often make them trusted first points of contact for residents. These strengths also mean that many people are referred to them by both VCSE and public-sector organisations and services, particularly around social prescribing, health and wellbeing, and adult social care.

While this reflects the important role of Bury's VCSE organisations within communities and wider support systems, it also means that pressures elsewhere increasingly reach them. More than two thirds of organisations are supporting more people than last year while facing greater competition for funding. Even when funding is secured, it is often short term, falls short of the full cost of delivery and typically remains unchanged as costs rise, leaving more than half to draw on reserves, with the leading reasons being to plug gaps in funding, cover operational costs, and accommodate increases in demand. These challenges have left almost a third of organisations feeling vulnerable and facing significant pressure, with sustainability uncertain.

Where funding falls short, staff and volunteers are often relied on to keep support going. Bury's VCSE sector is a significant local employer and a champion of good employment practices, but more than two in five face difficulties recruiting new volunteers, while almost a quarter have difficulties with retention. Like a paid workforce, volunteering requires investment, coordination and support if it is to remain inclusive and sustainable. For those facing workforce difficulties, the strain on existing teams is showing through increased stress and burnout among staff and volunteers, reported by two in five. This leaves many concerned about how long they can continue working in this way, even as nine in ten organisations expect to maintain or expand their operations.

Sustaining the sector's role will require deeper cross-sector partnerships, sustainable investment and a shared commitment to community-led solutions to build on the existing strong foundations which provide a basis for responding to many of the pressures outlined in this report. The recently developed Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Bury's VCSE sector and public sector partners is a positive step towards this, setting out principles for effective collaboration and recognising the vital role of the VCSE sector in delivering services and supporting Bury's communities. The MoU aligns with the renewed Greater Manchester VCFSE Accord, signed in March 2026, committing public bodies and the sector to involving communities in decisions and devolving power. The findings in this report strengthen the case for these principles and this shared commitment, underlining the importance of continued collaboration to better understand the sector's role within Bury and to ensure the sector can thrive and maximise its impact for local communities.



Glossary

This table provides a glossary of terms, abbreviations, and acronyms used in the Bury 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.
Bury MoU (Memorandum of Understanding)	A partnership agreement between Bury's VCSE sector and public sector organisations that sets out shared principles and commitments for working together, ensuring community voices help shape services, decisions and outcomes for local people.
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 Bury and include estimates of the scale and contribution of Bury'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 77 usable responses from VCSE organisations based in Bury. It asked about organisations' activities, who they support, where they work, demand for services, staff and volunteers, and finances and funding. Bury VCFA distributed survey links through its networks. An anonymous response option was also available. NTU prepared and analysed the responses.

Focus group

One focus group took place with Bury VCSE organisations between March and April 2026. They 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 Bury VCFA and follow-up contact with survey respondents. NTU analysed the discussions to identify common themes and understand participant experiences in more detail.

How to read the survey findings

Based on the 77 responses and an estimated 1,345 VCSE organisations in Bury, the indicative margin of error is around ±10.8 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. For example, applying this margin to a finding of 60% gives a range of around 49% to 71%. 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 Bury. Estimated below-the-radar (BTR) groups, which are not captured on formal registers, were excluded from this comparison because they could not be sampled directly. Compared with the estimated whole-sector profile, the achieved sample contains a lower proportion of micro organisations and higher proportions of small and medium organisations. 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 add up to more than 100%. Findings on changes in service delivery reflect organisations' own assessments. Income and expenditure source shares describe the average share across responding organisations, not the sector-wide distribution. Ward-level data were collected but are not presented in this report at Bury VCFA's request.

How organisation size is defined

Following the approach adopted in NCVO's Almanac, 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). [1] 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

Bury is estimated to have 1,345 VCSE organisations: 617 registered organisations and 728 BTR groups. Registered organisations were identified through the Charity Commission, Companies House and the Financial Conduct Authority's Mutuals Register. Records were matched to Bury using ONS 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. [2] 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 using 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 in organisation size. To improve the stability of the Bury 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 Bury 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 Bury's VCSE sector as a whole. These informed totals are produced using survey data and an estimate of the number and profile of VCSE organisations in Bury. The survey findings 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 Bury told us directly through the survey.

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

1,345 organisations

Bury's VCSE sector is estimated to include 617 registered organisations and 728 below-the-radar organisations and groups not captured on formal registers.

£185 million annual income

Bury's VCSE sector generated an estimated £185 million in income during 2024/25.

Mostly micro and small

We estimate that micro organisations and groups account for more than two thirds (68%) of the sector. Small organisations make up 18%, medium organisations 12%, and large, major and super-major organisations 2%.

35,700 volunteer and trustee roles

The sector's work is powered by an estimated 28,100 volunteers and 7,600 trustees or Board members.

667,045 instances of support

Bury's VCSE sector is estimated to provide 667,045 contacts or episodes of support to people and communities each year.

3.95 million volunteer and trustee hours

Volunteers and trustees contribute an estimated 75,900 hours each week, equivalent to 3.95 million hours a year.

£53.11 million estimated value of volunteering

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

3,091 full-time equivalent paid staff

This represents an estimated 4,079 individual employees working in Bury's VCSE organisations.

£155.71 million estimated annual economic contribution from paid staff

The estimated contribution made to the economy each year by full-time equivalent paid staff working in Bury's VCSE sector.

2.2. What Bury organisations told us

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

Demand continues to rise
Seven in ten organisations say demand for their services increased over the past year (71%), while more than two thirds are supporting more people (68%).

Financial vulnerability
More than one in three describe their organisation as vulnerable, struggling or at risk of imminent closure (36%). In contrast, only 7% feel strong, secure and well-equipped for future challenges.

Volunteer capacity
More than two in five organisations report difficulty recruiting volunteers (42%), while one in three say they do not have enough volunteers to carry out their work and meet their objectives (33%).

Reserves filling gaps
Among organisations using reserves, more than half have drawn on them to plug funding gaps (55%). More than a third have used reserves to accommodate increased demand or routine operating costs (both 36%).

Funding risks
More than half identify competition for funding as a leading financial risk (52%), followed by rising costs (44%) and short-term funding cycles (33%).

Funding not keeping pace
Among organisations receiving grant or contract income, more than four in five say less than half of their funding is multi-year (85%), and almost four in five report no uplift to reflect rising costs (78%).



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

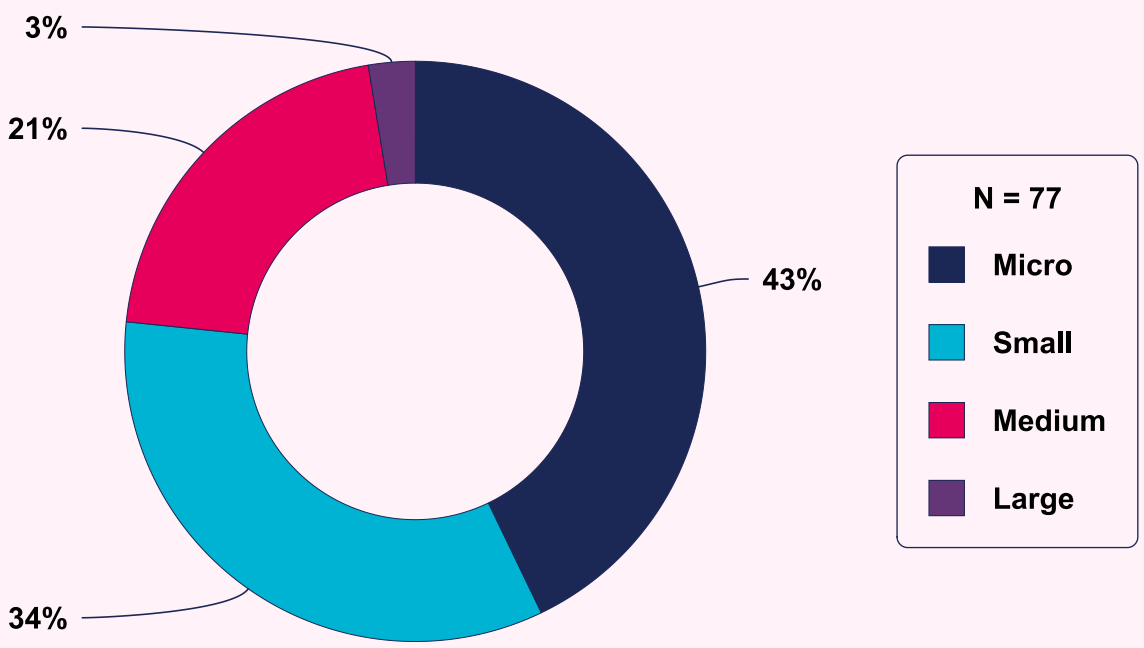
Bury VCFA reflections

Bury's demographic profile and the differing characteristics of its neighbourhoods continue to shape the work of VCSE organisations across the borough. Population change including an ageing population, increasing diversity, varying levels of deprivation and health inequalities create different needs within communities, requiring locally tailored and accessible support. These findings reflect this - from the work that the sector does (46% wellbeing, health and social care), to who they support, but also in their strong connections to communities and place, with 38% working at a neighbourhood level.

3.1. Size, legal form and organisational age

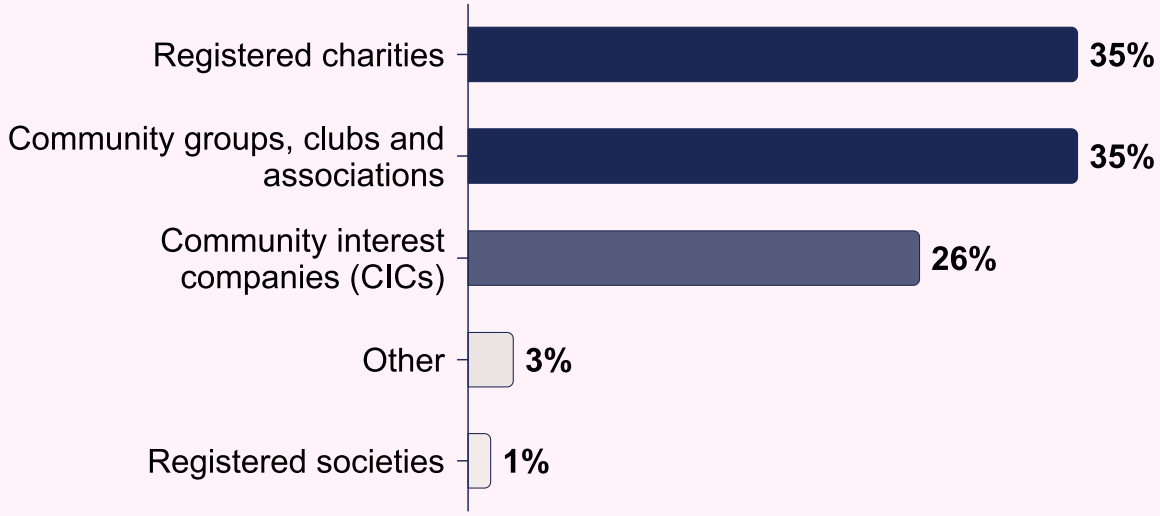
More than three quarters of responding organisations are micro (43%) or small (34%). One in five are medium-sized (21%), while large organisations account for the remaining 3%.

Figure 3.1. Proportion of responding organisations by size



More than a third of responding organisations are registered charities (35%) or community groups, clubs, and associations (35%), while a quarter are community interest companies (26%). More than a third identify as social enterprises (35%), showing that trading and enterprise are part of how many organisations pursue their social purpose.

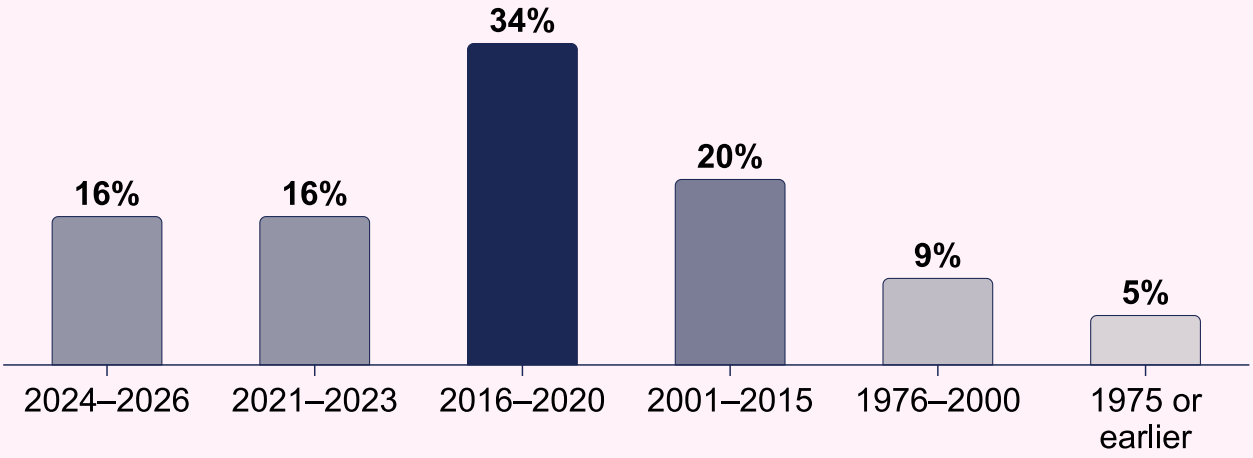
Figure 3.2. Proportion of responding organisations by legal status



Note. Base = 77.

Almost two thirds of responding organisations were established within the past ten years (66%). One in five have operated for between 11 and 25 years (20%), while one in seven were established more than 25 years ago (14%).

Figure 3.3. Year in which organisations were established



Note. Base = 76.

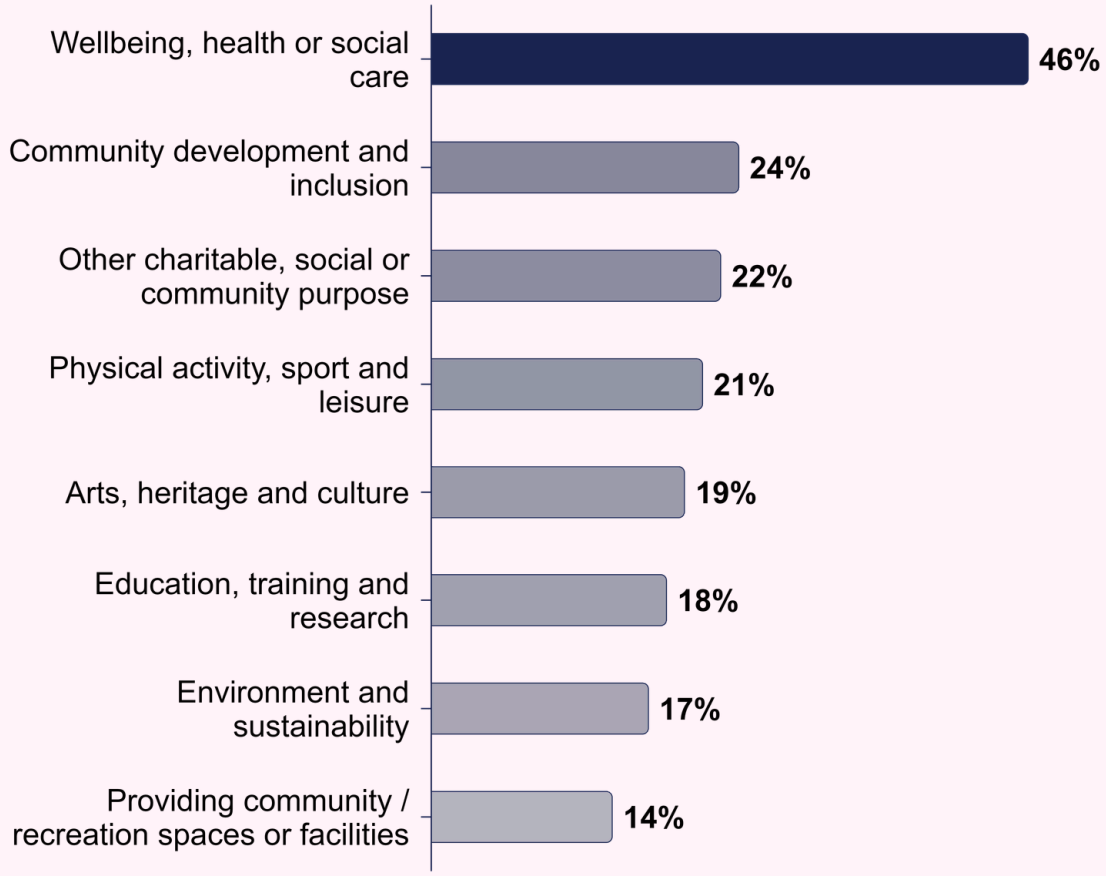
3.2. What they do

VCSE organisations in Bury carry out a range of work, often combining activities through which people meet and take part with more individual support for wellbeing. In the focus group, several organisations talked about taking this holistic approach in the support they provide:

> “So when we started, we opened the doors of a community centre and said, come in and eat breakfast and lunch with us and tell us what you need, what challenges are you facing and how can we as an organisation… make things better for you?… we treat people as individuals and we look at proper holistic support.”

This is also reflected in the survey, where almost half of responding organisations say that they work in wellbeing, health or social care (46%). Almost a quarter work to promote community development and inclusion (24%), while around one in five carry out activities related to physical activity, sport and leisure (21%), arts, heritage and culture (19%), or education, training and research (18%).

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



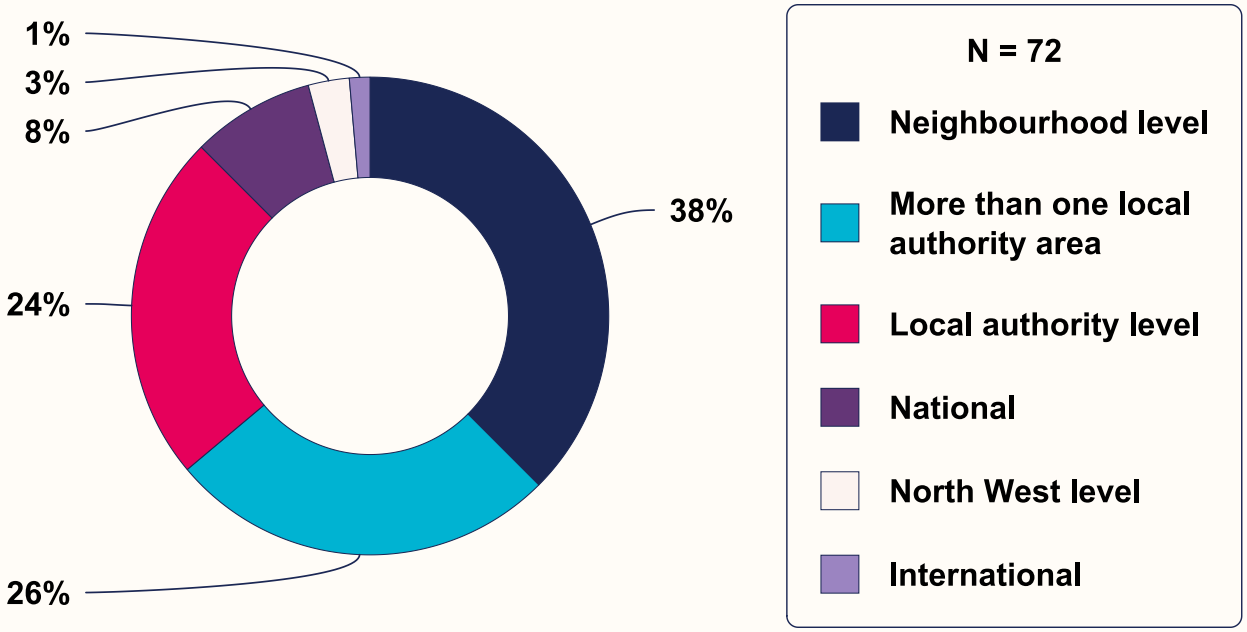
Note. Base = 72. Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%.

3.3. Where they operate

Many responding organisations work close to the communities they support. Almost two in five operate primarily at neighbourhood level (38%), while a quarter work mainly across Bury as a whole (24%) or across more than one local authority area (26%). Fewer work mainly nationally (8%), across the North West (3%) or internationally (1%).

This combination of locally rooted and borough-wide organisations is important because needs differ geographically across Bury. Income and health deprivation are more concentrated around Bury town centre, Radcliffe and the M66 corridor, while more affluent northern areas have an older population and may face greater needs around wellbeing, isolation and social care. [3,4,5]

Figure 3.5. Geographic scope of organisations' work



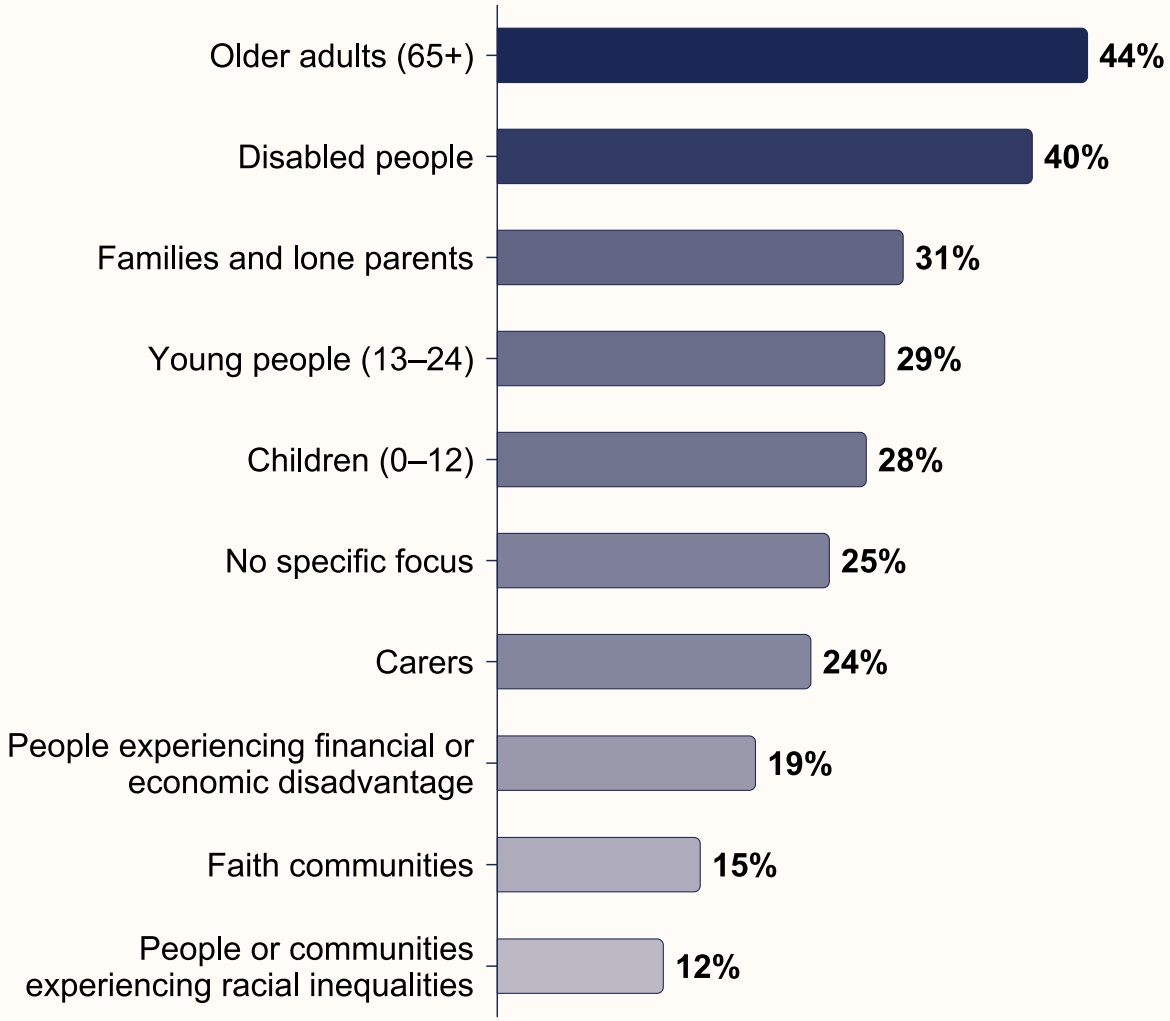
3.4. Who they support

Bury's communities experience inequalities in income and health alongside needs associated with an ageing population. Responding organisations therefore support people across different life stages as well as communities connected by health, faith, identity and shared circumstances.

Older adults are the most commonly supported group, reported by more than two in five organisations (44%). Almost a third of responding organisations support families or lone parents (31%), while a similar proportion support teenagers and young adults aged 13 to 24 (29%), and more than a quarter work with children aged 0 to 12 (28%).

Organisations also support communities connected by shared circumstances or identity, including people who may face additional barriers to services and community life. Two in five support Disabled people and those living with long-term health conditions, including mental health conditions (40%), almost a quarter support carers (24%), and one in five support people experiencing financial or economic disadvantage (19%). A quarter of organisations report no specific focus (25%), which may include organisations offering open-access activities or services rather than targeting specific communities.

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



Note. Base = 72. Respondents could select multiple options so percentages do not sum to 100%.

4. Staff, volunteers and trustees

Bury VCFA reflections

The people working in and with Bury's VCSE organisations are central to the sector's contribution and impact. Together, paid staff, volunteers, trustees and Board members form a diverse workforce that not only delivers support to residents but also contributes significantly to Bury's economy and inclusive growth ambitions. As employers, many VCSE organisations are committed to creating good quality jobs, championing fair employment practices and providing opportunities for people whose skills, experiences or circumstances may otherwise be overlooked. Alongside this, volunteers and trustees contribute a vast amount of time, knowledge and lived experience, creating social value that extends far beyond economic measures alone.

What makes this workforce distinctive is not only what it does, but how it works. Much of the sector's impact is built on trusted relationships, local knowledge and a deep understanding of communities. Staff, volunteers and trustees often provide support that is relational as well as practical, helping people to navigate services, build confidence, reduce isolation and access opportunities that improve their quality of life.

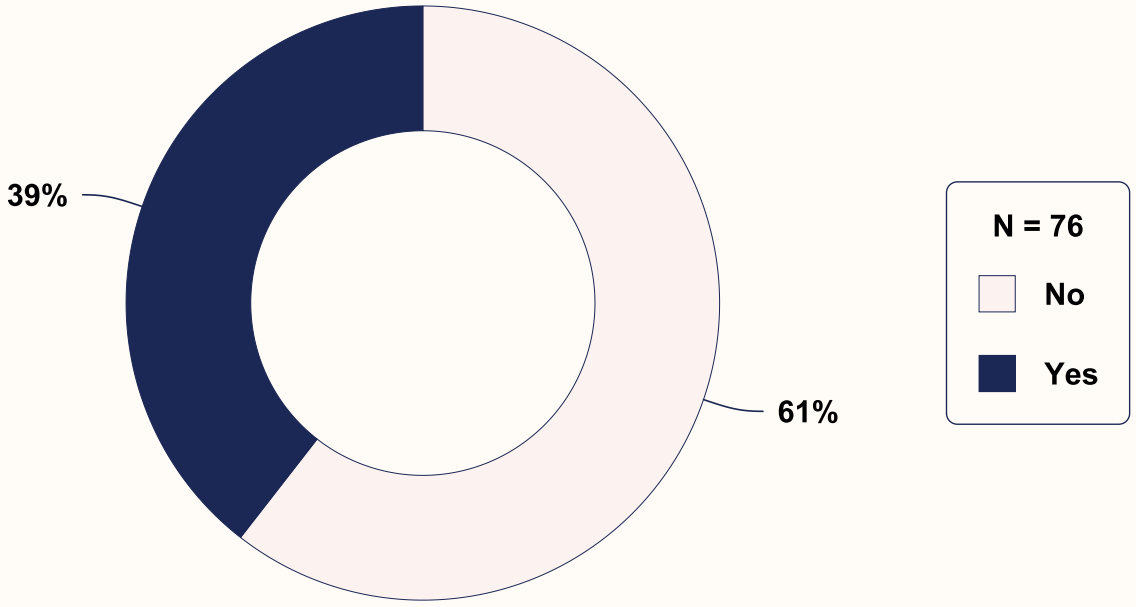
This commitment is one of the sector's greatest strengths, but it also creates vulnerabilities. Many organisations rely on small teams, significant levels of unpaid contribution and a limited number of people carrying considerable responsibility. As demand continues to increase, sustaining this workforce requires investment in good employment, leadership, volunteer development and organisational capacity. The findings below highlight both the scale of the workforce's contribution to Bury and the challenges associated with ensuring its long-term sustainability.

4.1. Paid staff

There are an estimated 3,091 full-time equivalent paid staff working in Bury’s VCSE sector, representing 4,079 individual employees. Their work is estimated to contribute £155.71 million to the economy each year through the services and activities they deliver.

Two in five responding organisations have paid staff (39%), and more than four in five of these say they pay the Real Living Wage to all eligible employees (83%). Paid employment is concentrated in larger organisations: all medium and large organisations have paid staff, compared with more than a third of small organisations (36%) and around one in ten micro organisations and groups (9%).

Figure 4.1. Organisations with a paid workforce



Of those with a paid workforce, two thirds have fewer than five FTE posts (67%), around a quarter have between five and 19 (26%), while 7% have 20 or more.

Most organisations with paid staff did not report difficulties recruiting or retaining them over the previous year. Around one in five found recruitment difficult (22%), while 15% experienced difficulty retaining staff.

Figure 4.2. Staff recruitment and retention difficulties



Note. Question shown only to organisations with paid staff. Base: recruitment = 27; retention = 27. Shows the proportion answering 'Yes'. 'Don't know' responses excluded.

4.2. Volunteers and trustees

Across Bury, an estimated 28,100 volunteers and 7,600 trustees or Board members contribute around 75,900 hours each week. Over a year, this is equivalent to 3.95 million hours spent supporting local people, running activities and governing organisations. Replacing that time with paid labour at the Real Living Wage would cost an estimated £53.11 million each year.

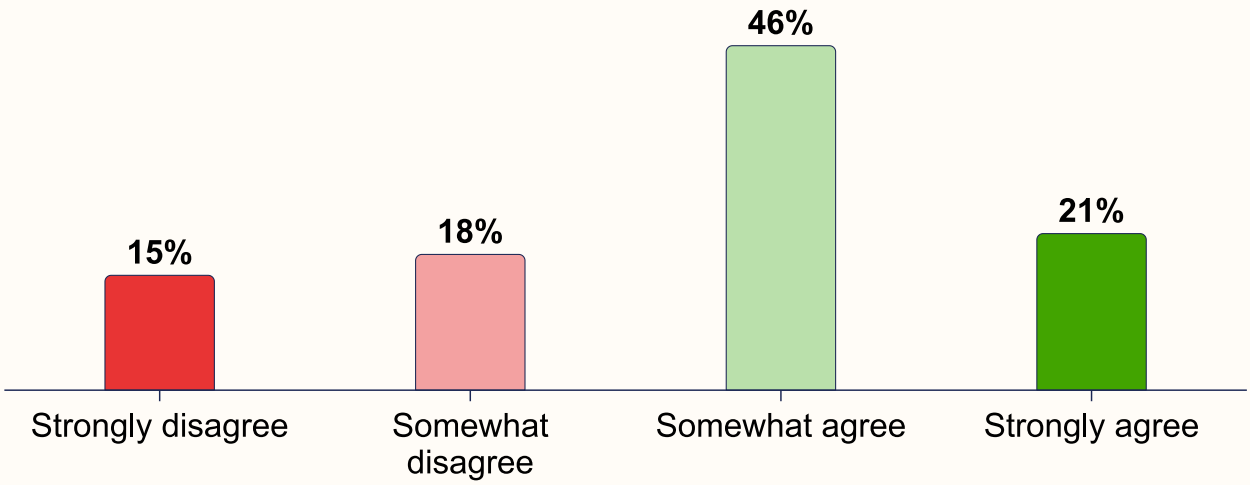
Volunteers are the lifeblood for many VCSE organisations, and this sentiment was echoed in the focus group. One organisation described that they would not be able to operate without volunteers, despite being in a stable financial position with fully funded paid staff:

> “We literally could not open the doors without our volunteers. We need them. They are absolutely crucial to what we do.”

Almost two in five responding organisations have fewer than ten volunteers (38%), a similar proportion have between 10 and 24 (36%), and a quarter have 25 or more (26%). The support organisations offer volunteers is both practical and developmental. Almost two thirds provide recognition or social activities (64%), more than half offer training, development or progression opportunities (56%), and a similar proportion reimburse expenses (54%).

Two thirds of organisations say they have enough volunteers to carry out their work and meet their objectives (67%), leaving a third (33%) that do not.

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



Note. Base = 72. ‘Don’t know’ responses excluded.

Volunteering pressures sit within a longer national decline. In England, the proportion of adults volunteering formally at least once a month fell from 27% in 2013/14 to 17% in 2024/25. [6] Bury's ageing population makes the national decline in volunteering among older adults particularly relevant locally. Monthly formal volunteering fell from 31% before the pandemic to 23% in 2023/24 among people aged 65 to 74, and from 23% to 16% among those aged 50 to 64. [6,7] Analysis published by the Centre for Ageing Better shows a drop of 1.16 million people aged 50 and over compared to 2019 levels; this reduction in participation was equivalent to more than 110 million fewer formal volunteering hours each year. [6,7]

Recruitment appears to be the greater pressure. More than two in five found it difficult to recruit volunteers over the past year (42%), compared to just under a quarter that have found it difficult to retain volunteers (23%).

Figure 4.4. Volunteer recruitment and retention difficulties



Note. Base: recruitment = 69; retention = 70. Shows the proportion answering 'Yes'. 'Don't know' responses excluded.

Among those experiencing difficulties, almost three in five point to low response to recruitment or limited capacity to recruit and manage volunteers (both 57%), while two in five identify insufficient funding to support volunteers (39%).

Figure 4.5. Volunteer recruitment barriers (top 8)



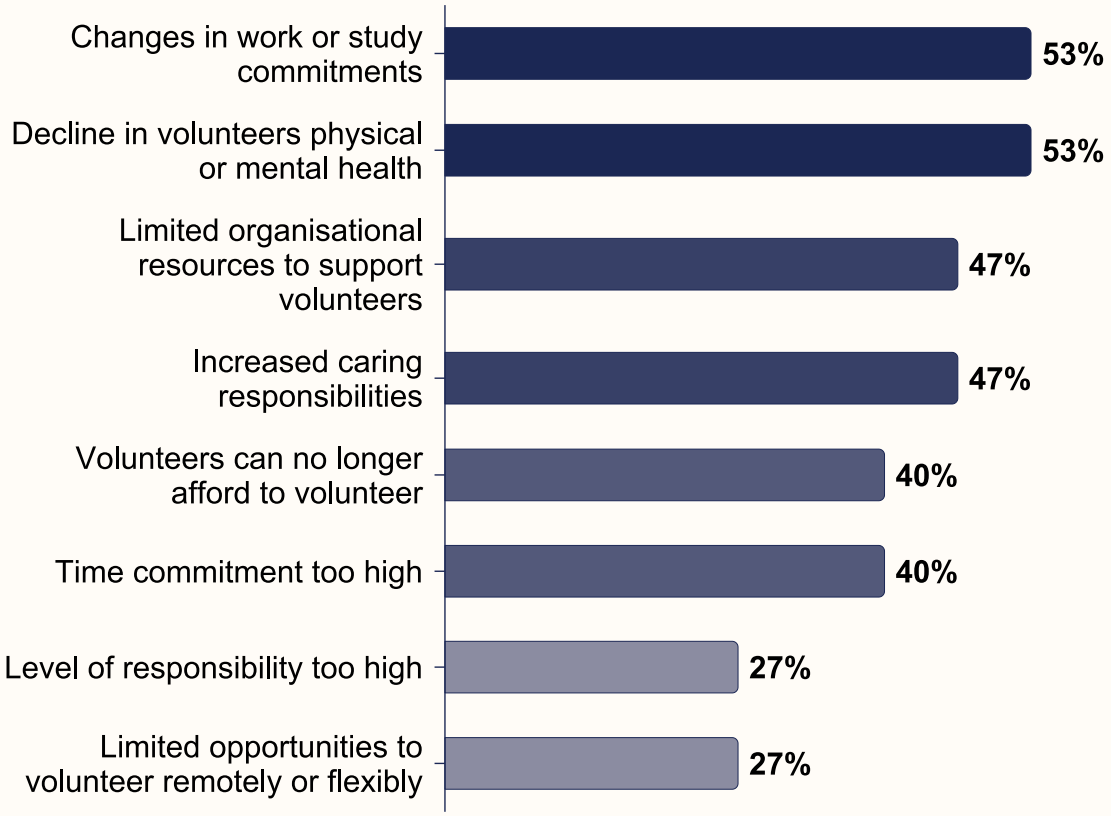
Note. Base = 28. Question shown only to organisations reporting volunteer recruitment difficulties. Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%.

In the focus group, one participant likened recruitment to a ‘dripping bucket’; an ongoing task of replacing people as they move away or step back:

> “Recruitment is an ongoing task. That's what I call a dripping bucket. People obviously drop out of the bottom … because of age, move out the area or things like that. And we keep having to top them up at the top.”

While recruitment difficulties are more widespread, almost a quarter also find it difficult to retain volunteers (23%). These organisations linked retention challenges to changes in work or study commitments (53%) or declining physical or mental health (53%). Just under half say that limited organisational resources (47%) or volunteers having increased caring responsibilities (47%) are barriers to retention. This reflects wider national evidence showing that changing health, home or work circumstances are among the leading reasons why older people stop volunteering, [7] while work commitments are cited as the most common barrier among adults who do not volunteer regularly. [6]

Figure 4.6. Volunteer retention barriers



Note. Base = 15. Question shown only to organisations reporting volunteer retention difficulties. Figure shows the eight most commonly selected retention barriers. Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%.

Bury's Volunteering Strategy also recognises factors affecting both recruitment and retention, including the need for volunteering to be flexible, accessible and supported through ongoing investment. [8] Creating that positive experience, however, requires resources and organisational capacity that many organisations are already struggling to sustain.

4.3. Consequences of workforce shortages

When asked how these workforce difficulties affect their organisation, respondents described both the human and operational impacts. When staff, volunteer or trustee capacity is stretched, demand does not stop. Services may continue because the people involved work longer or take on more responsibility, and the alternative is that organisations are unable to meet demand.

We describe this as the cost of 'doing good': people within organisations absorb the strain to protect support for communities. In the focus group, one organisation reflected on this tension:

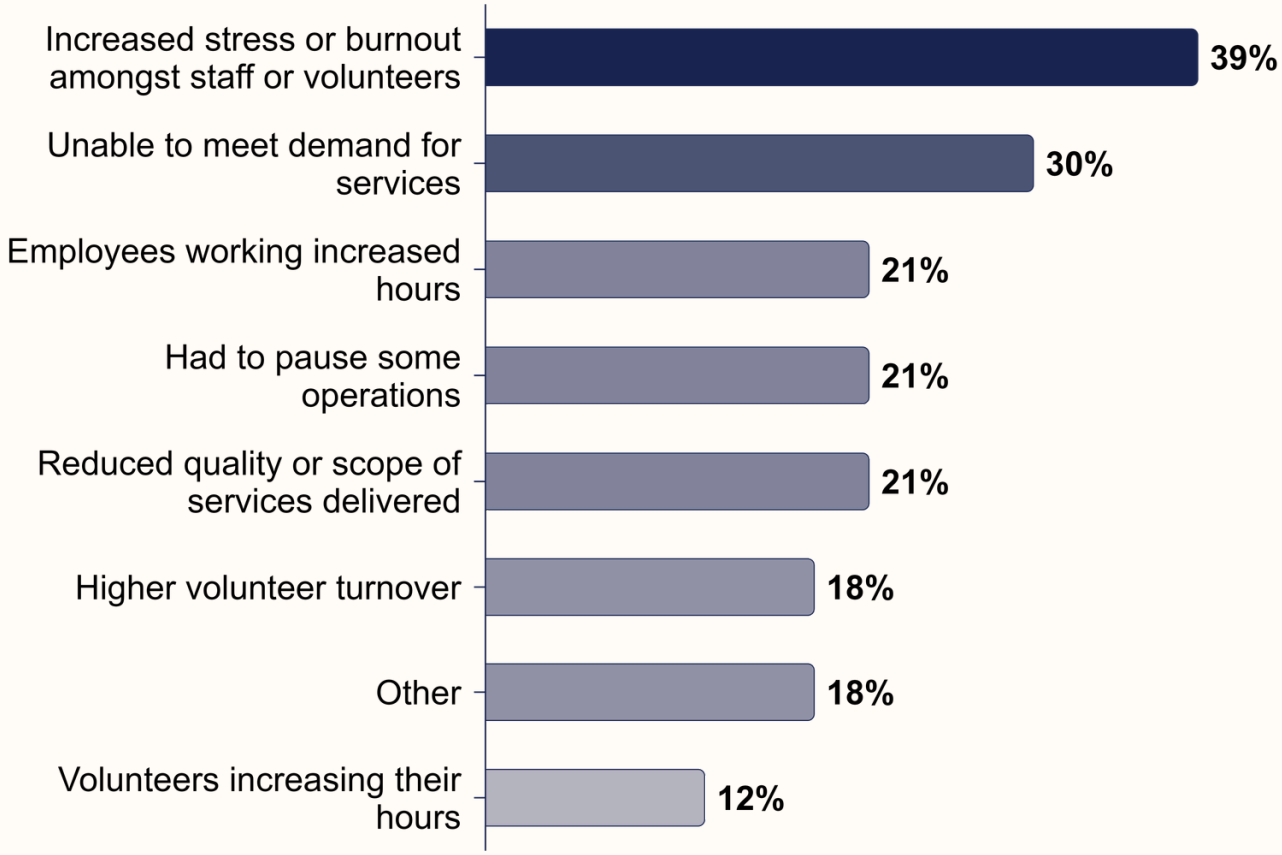
> "I think that's what charities really lack… And how do we make sure that we can continue doing it without getting burned out, without getting traumatised ourselves?"

Among organisations experiencing recruitment or retention difficulties, two in five say shortages have led to increased stress or burnout among staff or volunteers (39%). Consecutive Unite surveys of sector workers show that many experience stress, anxiety and emotional exhaustion because of their work. [9,10] This risk is compounded in small organisations: Fair Collective's research showed that 85% of leaders within small organisations said their role had negatively affected their mental health, while two thirds (67%) had no budget to support their own or their team's mental health.[11]

Despite two in five reporting increased stress and burnout among staff and volunteers, fewer report increased working hours. One in five say employees are working increased hours (21%), while 12% say volunteers are contributing more time.

Organisations also described the operational impacts of workforce difficulties. Almost a third say shortages have left them unable to meet demand (30%), one in five have had to pause some operations (21%), and a similar proportion have had to reduce the quality or scope of the support or services they provide (21%).

Figure 4.7. How recruitment or retention difficulties are affecting organisations



Note. Base = 33. 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%.

Bury's VCSE workforce brings skills, lived experience and trusted relationships into communities through paid employment and substantial voluntary commitment. Although most organisations currently have enough volunteers to meet their main objectives, recruitment remains a significant challenge, with organisations pointing to limited capacity and low response to recruitment activity. Workforce shortages also place pressure on those already involved, including increased stress and burnout. Funding arrangements therefore need to recognise the time and resources required to recruit, support and manage volunteers.

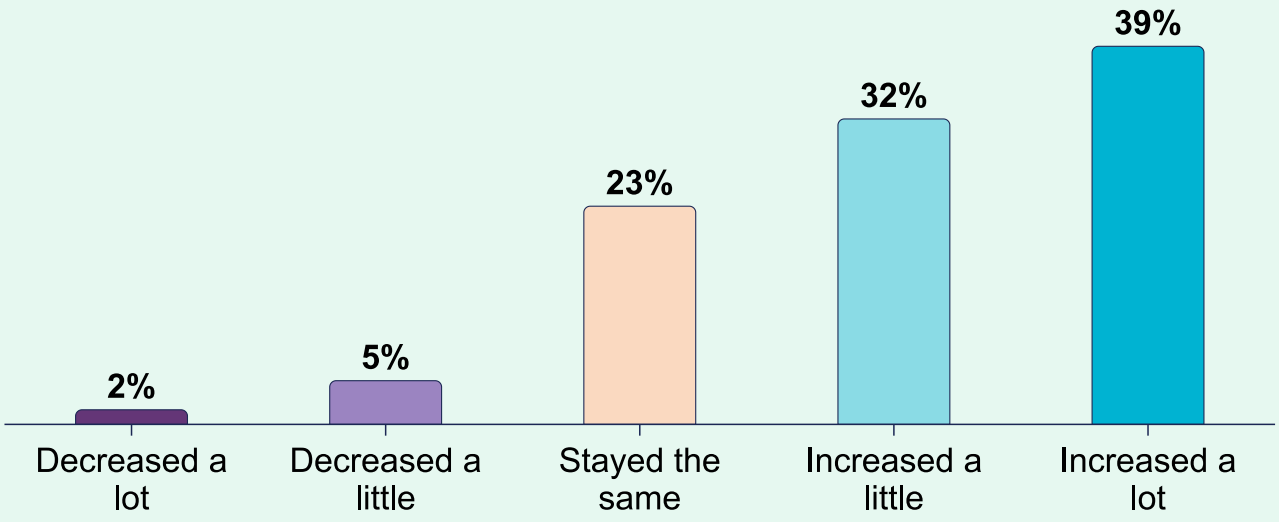
5. Communities supported, demand and access

Bury's VCSE organisations provide an estimated 667,045 instances of support each year. Evidence from both the survey and focus group paints a picture of Bury's VCSE organisations acting as everyday social infrastructure. They are people, connectors, places, relationships and trusted routes into support. Their local presence often makes them the first place residents turn when needs are connected or difficult to navigate. Many are supporting increasing numbers of people while demand for their services continues to rise. While many come into contact directly, often through word of mouth, three in five also receive referrals from other voluntary organisations as well as public services. While this demonstrates the growing recognition of the sector's role in local support systems, these referrals do not typically arrive with the resources required to deliver that support.

5.1. Demand for services

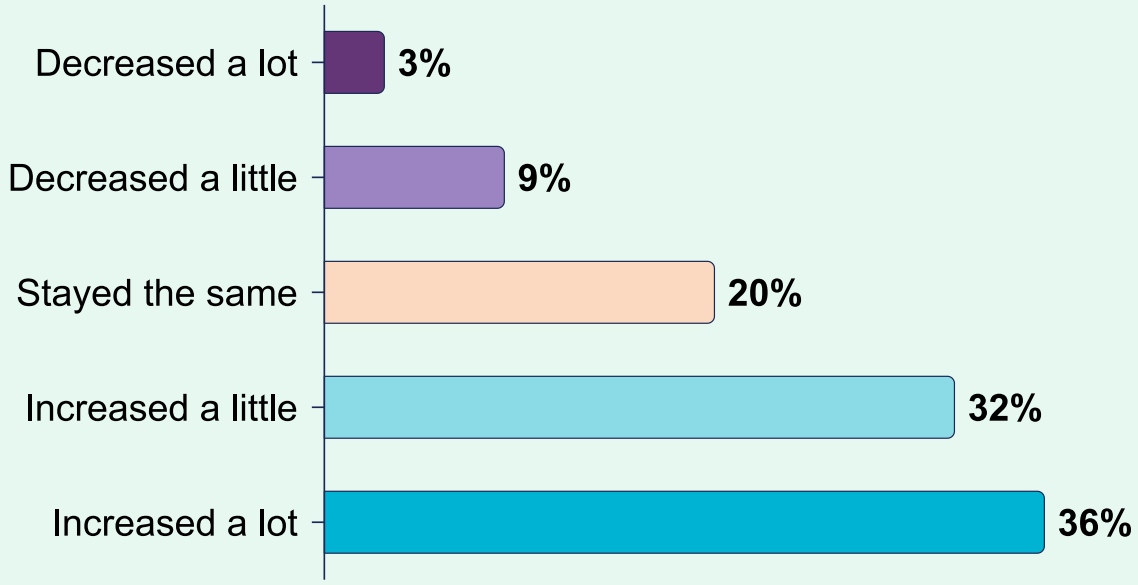
When asked how demand for services had changed over the past 12 months, almost three quarters report an increase (71%), with two in five saying that it has increased a lot (39%). More than two thirds say the number of people they support has also increased (68%).

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



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

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



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

In the focus group, several organisations described supporting people with multiple and sometimes complex needs. One organisation was encouraged that people were approaching their group and, as trust was built, asking for support across a range of areas, including benefits, health challenges, and details for follow-on support. One other organisation described a similar experience, but was concerned about having the capacity and expertise to support people with more complex needs who arrived when public services failed to meet their needs:

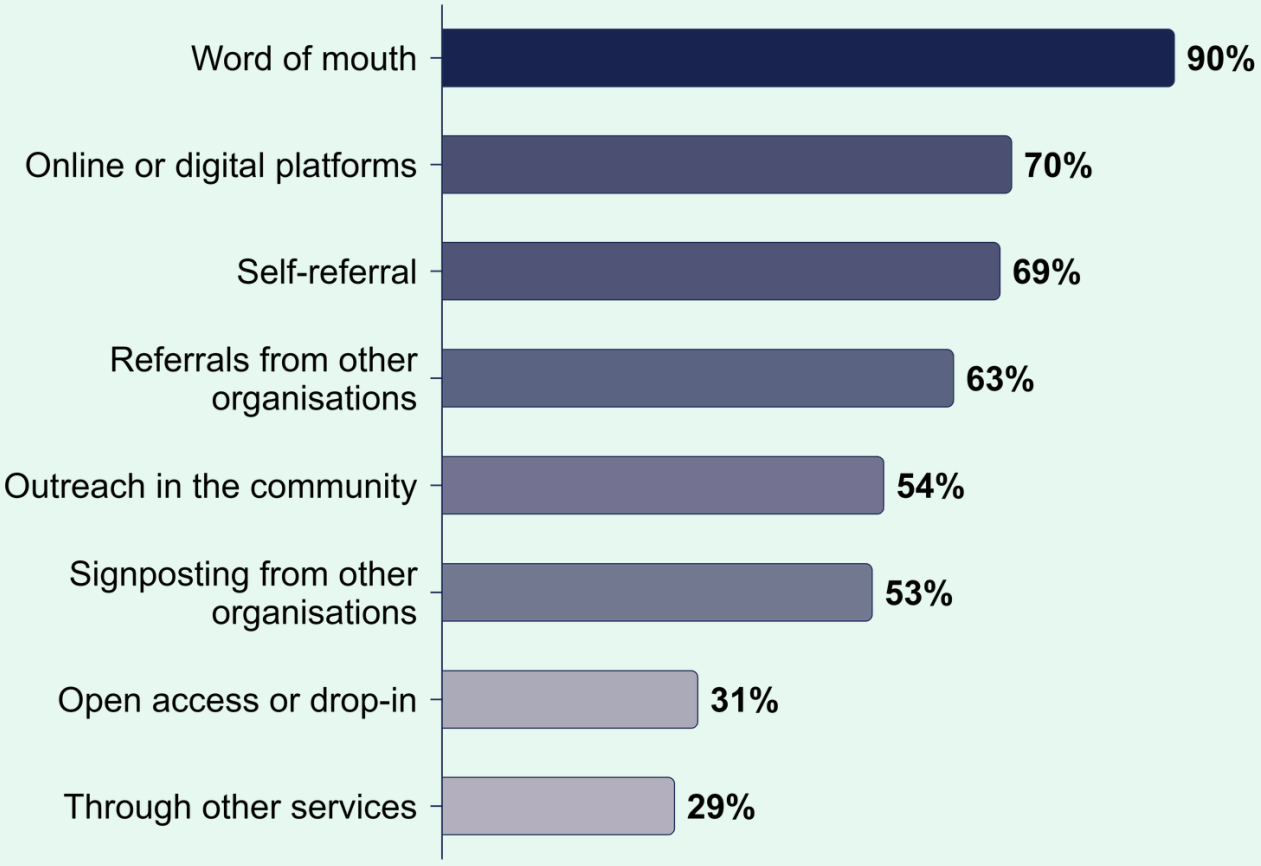
> "[A big worry] is the complexity of the people that we've got coming through our doors seeking help because the services are not there anymore, we're trusted because we're part of the community, we live here and we know people."

While this illustrates the importance of the voluntary sector in addressing a range of needs, it is important that the increased depth and breadth of support they provide is accompanied by adequate resources for it to be sustainable.

5.2. How people find and access support

Findings from the survey and focus group show Bury's VCSE organisations as embedded, trusted, and known routes into support within their communities. Word of mouth is the most common way people find support, reported by nine in ten organisations (90%). Seven in ten report contact through online or digital platforms (70%), and a similar proportion say people come into contact directly through self-referral (69%). More than three in five receive referrals from other organisations (63%), and more than half report contact through community outreach (54%) or signposting from other organisations (53%).

Figure 5.3. How people come into contact with VCSE organisations



Note. Base = 70. Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%. Figure shows the eight most commonly selected responses.

Among organisations receiving referrals, more than four in five receive them from other VCSE organisations (82%), more than three quarters from public services (77%), and around half from the private sector (52%). Referrals most frequently originate from services or organisations related to social prescribing and community wellbeing, health, and adult social care.

These referral relationships connect organisations to Bury's wider neighbourhood approach, which brings social prescribers and Bury VCFA representatives into local leadership teams alongside health, care and other public services. [5] Social prescribing is one route through which people can reach community-based help with loneliness, debt, housing and other concerns affecting their wellbeing. [12] While referrals are an important part of connecting people to trusted help, they may also shift demand onto organisations that are already supporting more people and with fewer resources.

For community organisations, working together also means being able to secure specialist help when they reach the limits of their own support. One focus group participant welcomed the council's engagement with the sector but wanted its assessment of a resident's needs to carry more weight when further intervention became necessary:

> "If I'm saying this person has an issue, it's because we've got to the end of where we can get with this person. And we're putting our hands up and saying, now we need some intervention."

Public services need to respond when community organisations identify needs beyond their own expertise or capacity, as well as relying on them to receive referrals, particularly without matching resources. At least half of organisations receiving referrals from public sector organisations or services say that no funding is received to accommodate them. Providing accessible support that is sustainable depends on adequate resources being provided to the organisations expected to deliver that support.

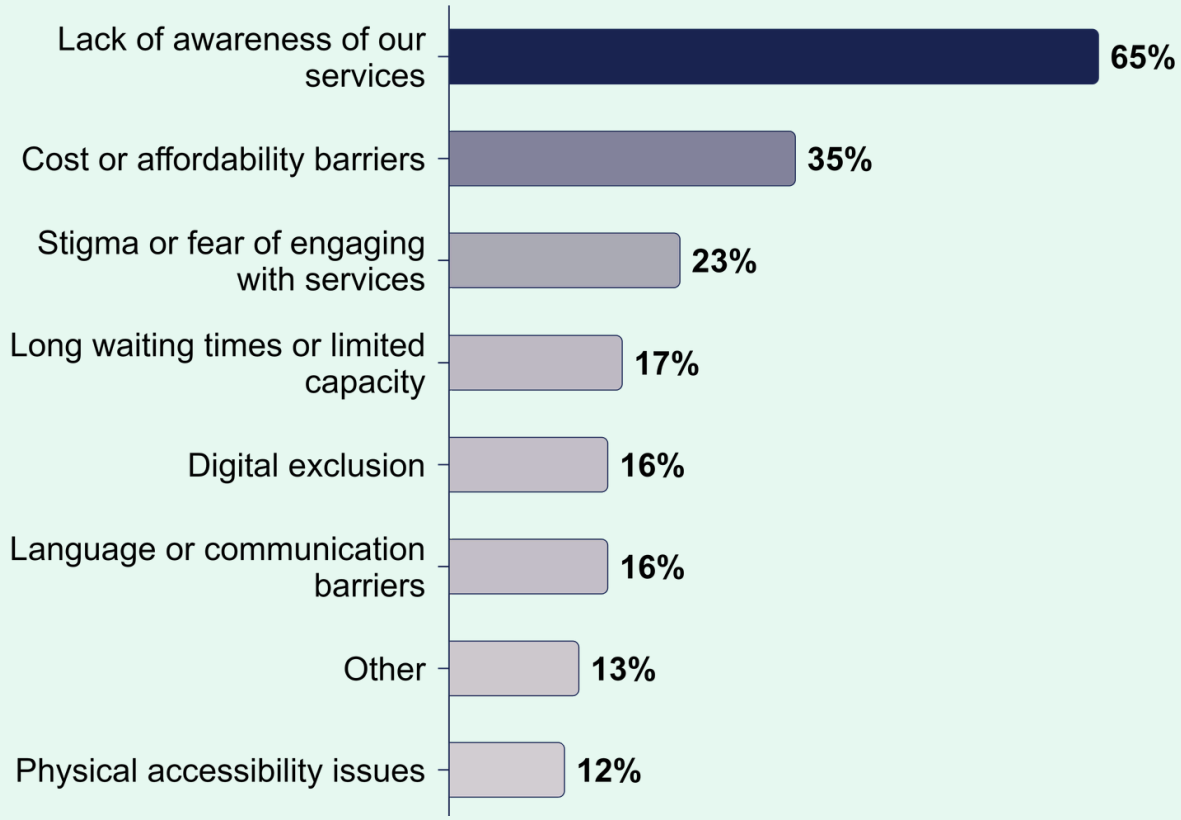
5.3. Barriers to access

Bury's VCSE sector supports a diverse range of communities, some of which face structural barriers to service provision. Almost two thirds of organisations identify lack of awareness of their services as a barrier to access (65%). With most responding organisations saying that people come into contact through informal methods, reaching people beyond existing community networks may be a challenge for some.

More than a third say that affordability or cost of taking part (35%) may affect access, and almost a quarter identify stigma or fear (23%). Less than one in five point to limited capacity or waiting times (17%) or language and communication barriers (16%).

With an ageing population, Bury's residents may be more vulnerable to digital exclusion, but only 16% pointed to this as a barrier to access. This may be at least in part due to initiatives launched by Bury Council in partnership with Bury VCFA aimed at tackling digital exclusion, including practical help and bringing community groups together to offer training and support. [13]

Figure 5.4. Barriers to accessing services



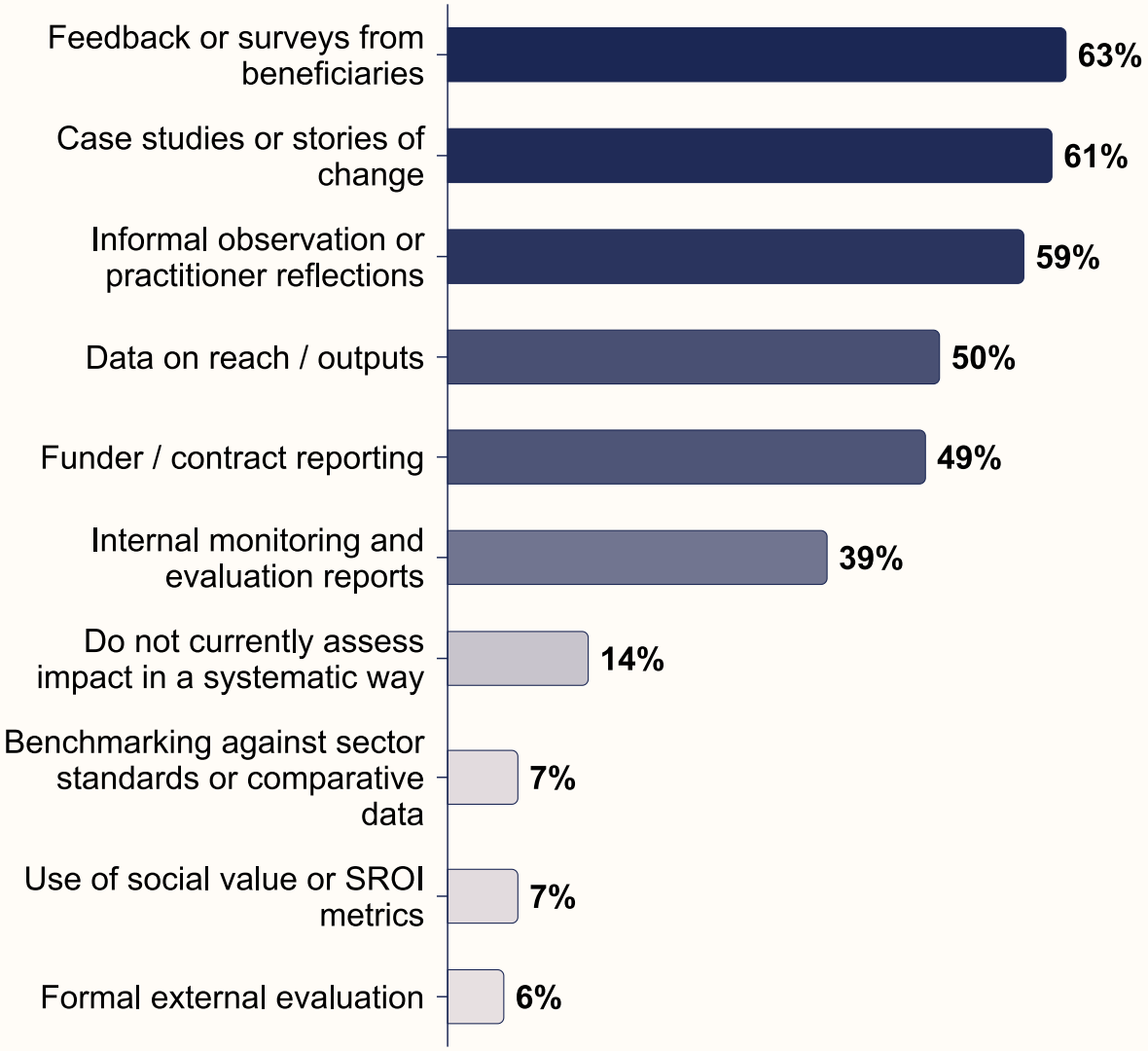
Note. Base = 69. Figure shows the eight most commonly selected responses. Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%.

5.4. Measuring impact and delivery quality

Organisations use a range of methods to understand and demonstrate what their work achieves. Almost two thirds use feedback from beneficiaries or service users (63%) or case studies and stories of change (61%), followed by informal observation or practitioner reflection (59%). Half use reach or output data (50%), while a similar proportion use funder or contract reporting (49%).

For many VCSE organisations, combining these methods helps capture both measurable outcomes and aspects of their work that are harder to quantify, such as building trust and rapport that enables people to disclose further support needs, or providing spaces for connection that reduce isolation.

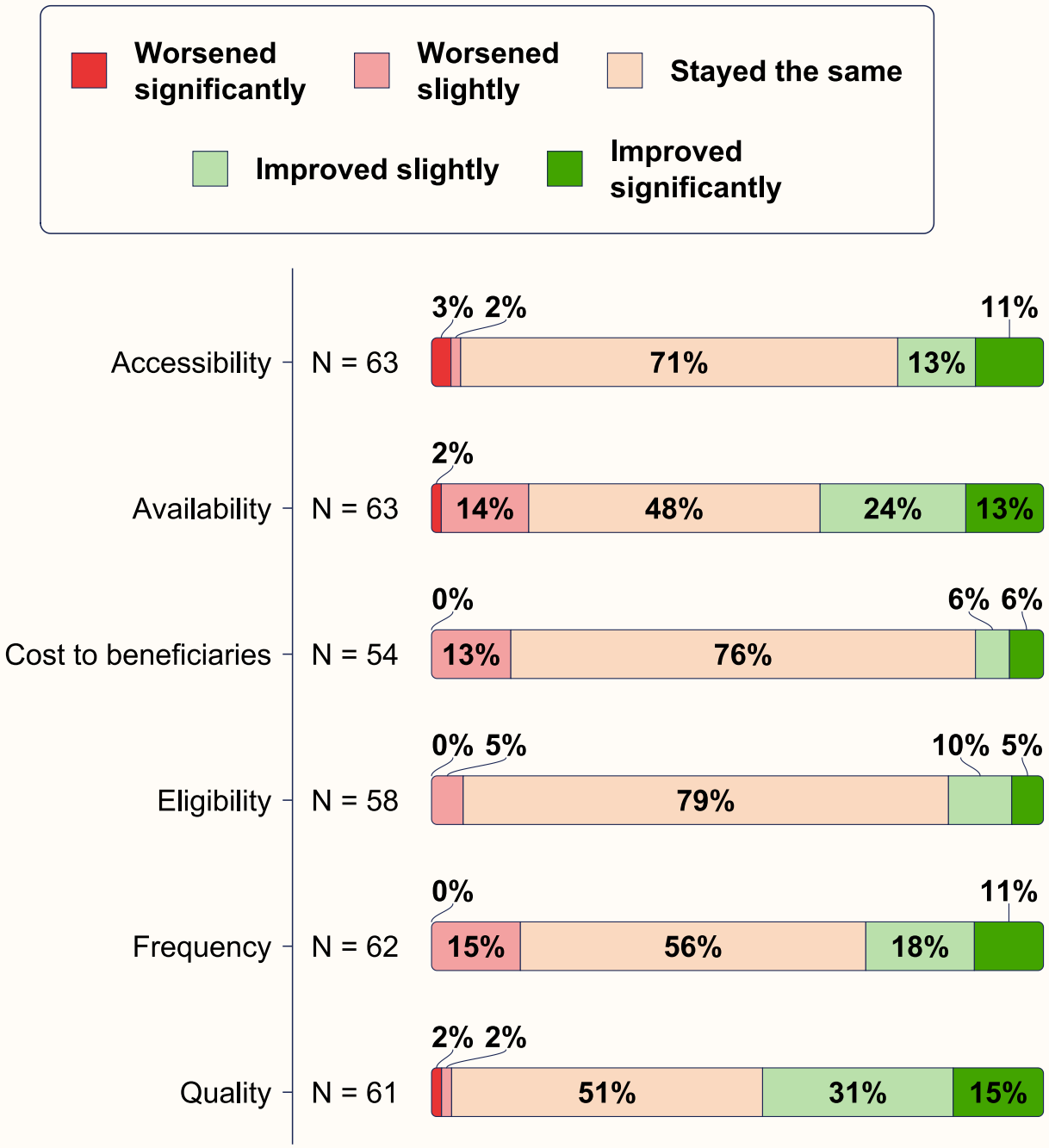
Figure 5.5. How organisations measure impact



Note. Base = 70. Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%.

Despite rising demand, many organisations say their services have improved over the previous year. Almost half report improvements in quality (46%), while more than a third report better availability (37%) and more than a quarter improved frequency (29%). Fewer report deterioration in the support they offer. Around one in six report worsening availability (16%) or frequency (15%), and 13% say the cost of using their services has worsened.

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

VCSE organisations across the UK have been navigating an increasingly challenging financial and funding landscape in recent years. Pressure on public budgets and household finances has made it harder to secure income, while the cumulative effect of inflation since the pandemic has increased the cost of delivering services. [14,15] At the same time, the communities they support are facing greater pressures, with less money to donate or spend locally, and less time to volunteer, even as more need support themselves. Together, these factors contribute to a growing gap between what communities need and the resources available to respond, placing increased pressure on organisations to secure additional funding and cut costs to keep support in place.

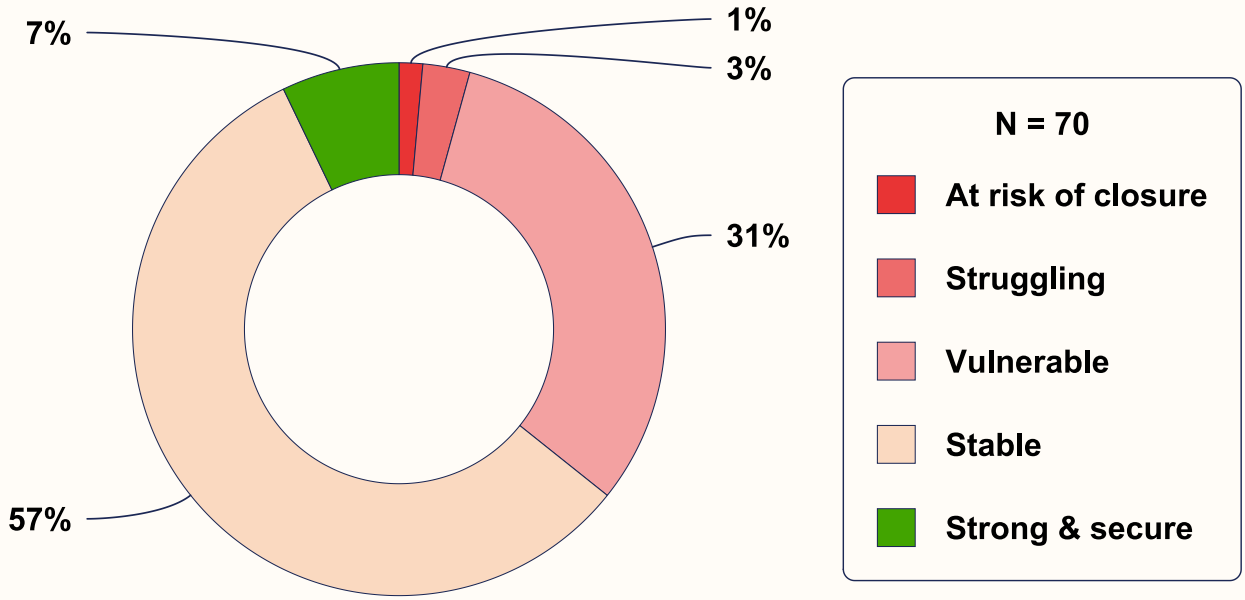
Bury's VCSE organisations face similar pressures. Findings from the survey and focus group point to an increasingly competitive funding landscape and, where funding is secured, it is often short-term, fails to cover the full cost of delivering services, and is rarely uplifted to cover rising costs. Organisations are increasing fundraising and drawing on reserves to bridge gaps, but finding suitable funding and making applications also take time away from people already delivering support to more people. Nine in ten expect to maintain or expand their support or services, but a third describe themselves as vulnerable with sustainability uncertain, and some face difficult choices between maintaining services now and protecting their ability to continue in the longer term.

Bury's VCSE sector generated an estimated £185 million in income during 2024/25, with estimated expenditure of £180 million.

6.1. Financial position

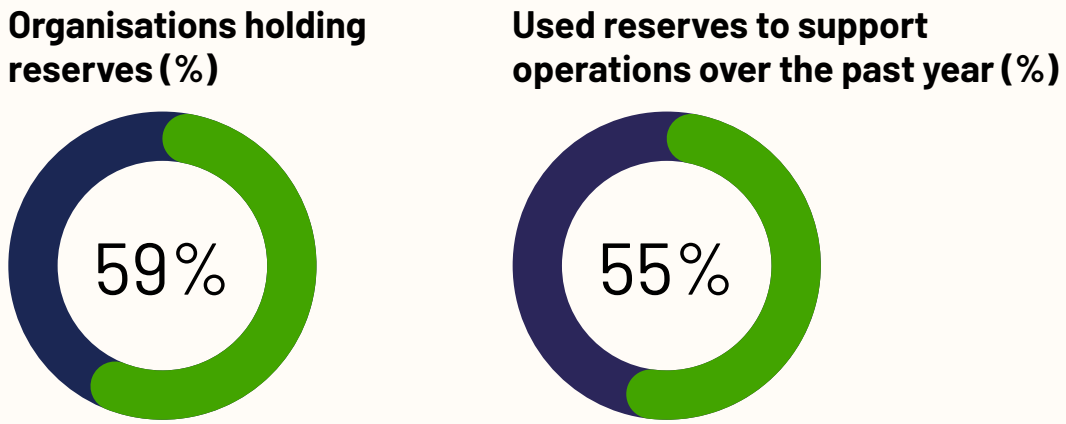
These estimates describe the scale of Bury's VCSE sector, but they should not be read as a sign that individual organisations feel, or indeed are, financially secure. Almost three in five describe their organisation as stable but with concerns about the future (57%). Almost a third say they are vulnerable and facing significant pressure, with sustainability uncertain without changes being made (31%). Only a small proportion say they are facing more serious struggles (3%) or are at risk of imminent closure (1%). A similarly small proportion feel strong, secure and well-equipped for future challenges (7%).

Figure 6.1. Organisations' current financial and operational state



Three in five responding organisations hold reserves (59%), and more than half have used them to support operations over the past 12 months (55%).

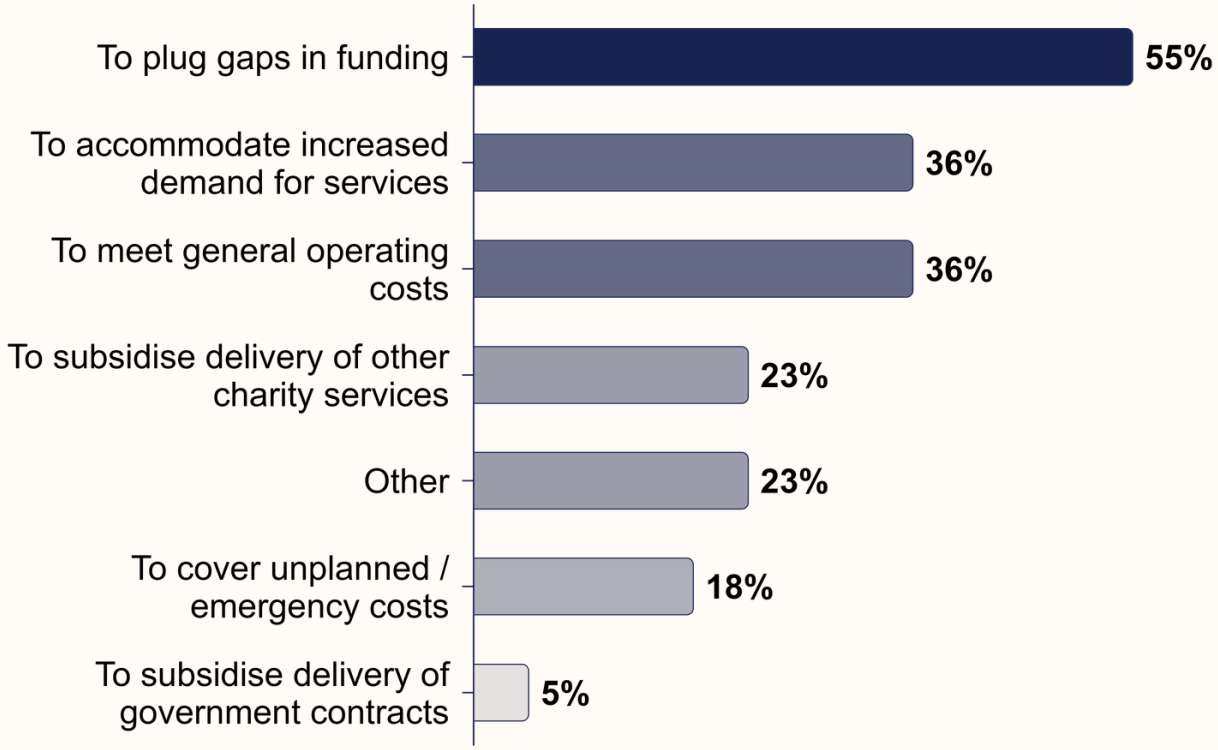
Figure 6.2. Use of financial reserves



Note. Base: holds reserves = 69; used reserves = 40. Figure shows the proportion answering 'Yes'. The 'used reserves' question was asked only of organisations that hold reserves.

More than half have drawn on reserves to plug funding gaps (55%), while more than a third have used them to accommodate increased demand or cover routine operating costs (both 36%). This suggests that reserves are increasingly being used to plug gaps in funding and to cover everyday running costs so that support can be protected, 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, respond to emerging need, or invest in the organisation's development.

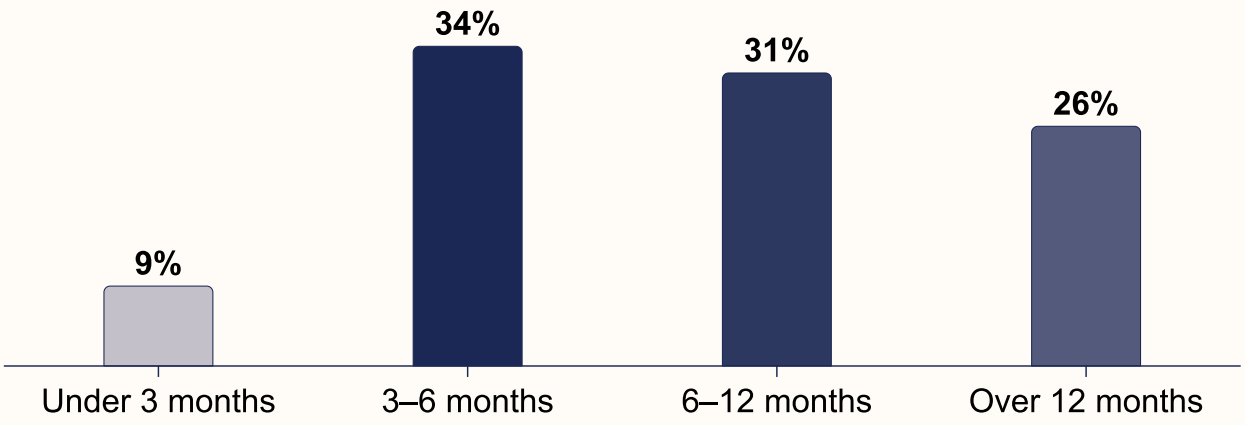
Figure 6.3. Reasons for using reserves over the past 12 months



Note. Base = 22. Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%.

When asked how long their reserves would last, based on current levels of income and expenditure, around a third of organisations with reserves report between three and six months (34%), and a similar proportion between six and twelve months (31%). A quarter have more than a year (26%), while fewer than one in ten have less than three months (9%).

Figure 6.4. Number of months reserves are expected to last



Note. Base = 35. 'Don't know' responses excluded.

6.2. Income and expenditure

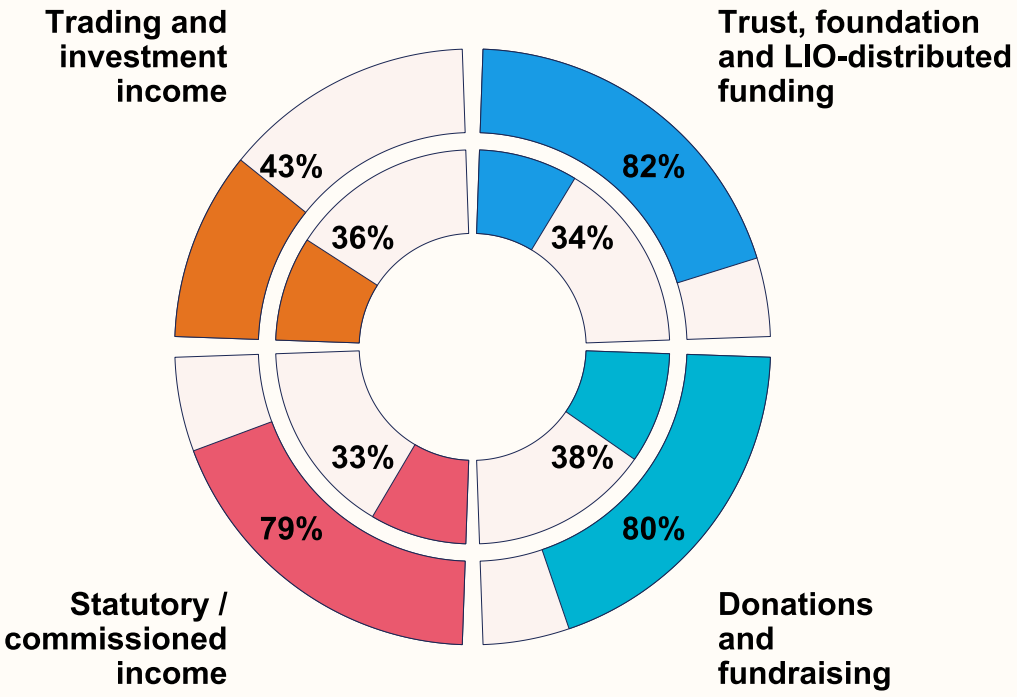
The ways in which VCSE organisations generate income have changed in recent years. Nationally, the number of people donating has fallen by around six million over the past decade, and the total value of public donations in 2025 was almost 10% lower than the previous year. [16] Some organisations are looking to legacy fundraising, a source with long-term growth potential but uncertain time horizons. [17] While the number of government contracts delivered by VCSE organisations has increased, [18] evidence shows that these often do not cover the true cost of delivering services. [19]

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 Local Infrastructure Organisations, trusts and foundations; 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%.

Findings from the survey suggest that Bury's VCSE sector is increasingly drawing on a balanced mix of income sources rather than relying heavily on any single funding stream. More than four in five responding organisations receive funding from trusts, foundations and Local Infrastructure Organisations (82%), while a similar proportion generate income through donations and fundraising (80%) or receive statutory and commissioned funding (79%).

On average, income is relatively evenly distributed across these sources, with donations and fundraising accounting for 38% of income, trust and foundation funding 34%, and statutory or commissioned income 33%. This demonstrates both the adaptability of the sector and the growing importance of diversifying income to improve resilience in an increasingly uncertain funding environment.

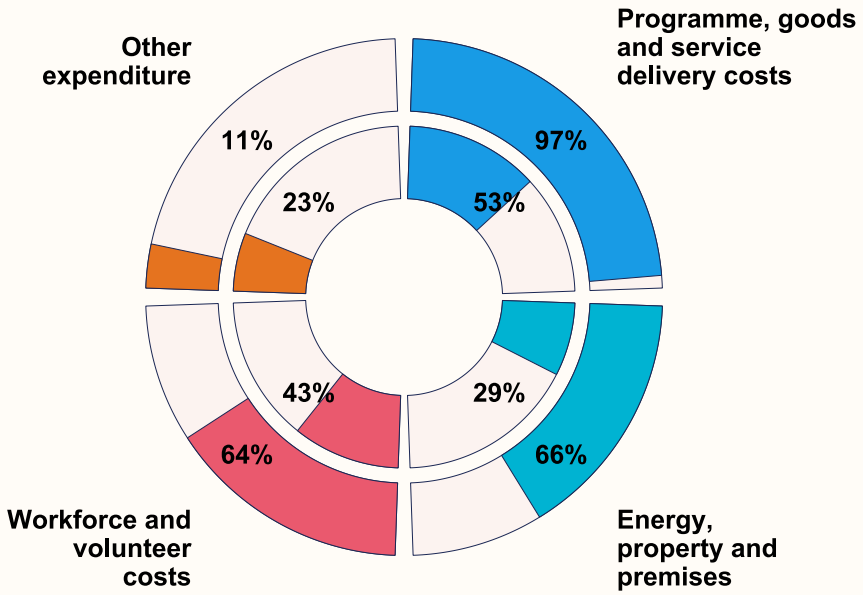
Figure 6.5. Income sources received and their average share of total income



Note. Outer ring shows the percentage receiving any income from each source (N = 56); inner ring shows the average share of total income among organisations receiving that source (N = 24-46, 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. Expenditure patterns show that a substantial share of spending goes towards delivering support directly to communities. Almost all respondents (97%) reported spending on programme delivery, goods and services, with these activities accounting for over half (53%) of average expenditure. Workforce and volunteer costs represented 43% of expenditure, while premises and property costs accounted for 29%.

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



Note. Outer ring shows the percentage reporting any expenditure in each area (N = 61); inner ring shows the average share of total expenditure among organisations reporting expenditure in that area (N = 7-59, depending on area).

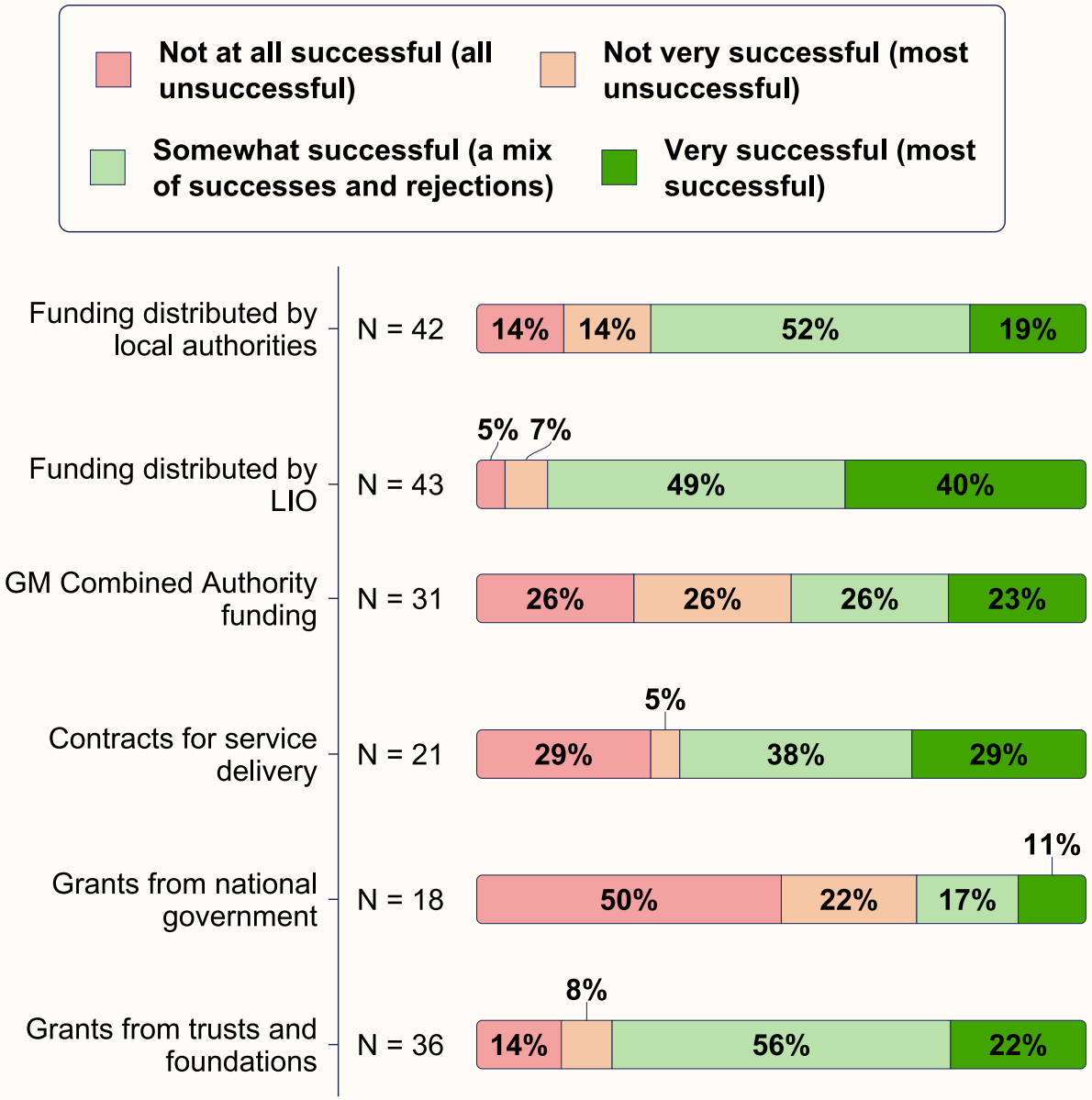
Expenditure is concentrated on frontline delivery and community-facing activity, with a smaller share directed towards organisational infrastructure and back-office functions. While this balance will vary by organisation size and operating model, it may also reflect funding and commissioning approaches that prioritise project delivery over investment in the core capacity, systems and organisational development needed for full cost recovery and longer-term sustainability.

6.3. Funding

When asked how successful they have been over the past 12 months in applying for funding sources relevant to them, organisations reported the highest success with funding distributed by LIOs (88% of applicants). Bury's LIO, Bury VCFA, offers established routes for community funding; for example, its grants programme includes awards that enable organisations to pay the Real Living Wage to grant-funded staff. [20] Its wider work to attract investment has helped bring more than £1.1 million into the borough between 2023 and 2026, including support for community development, physical activity and work with children and young people. [21]

More than three quarters of applicants also reported at least some success with grants from trusts and foundations (78%), while more than two thirds reported success with funding from local authorities (71%) and two thirds with service delivery contracts (67%). Just under half reported success with GMCA funding (48%), compared with just over a quarter for national government grants (28%). This suggests that place-based funding offered the highest success rates.

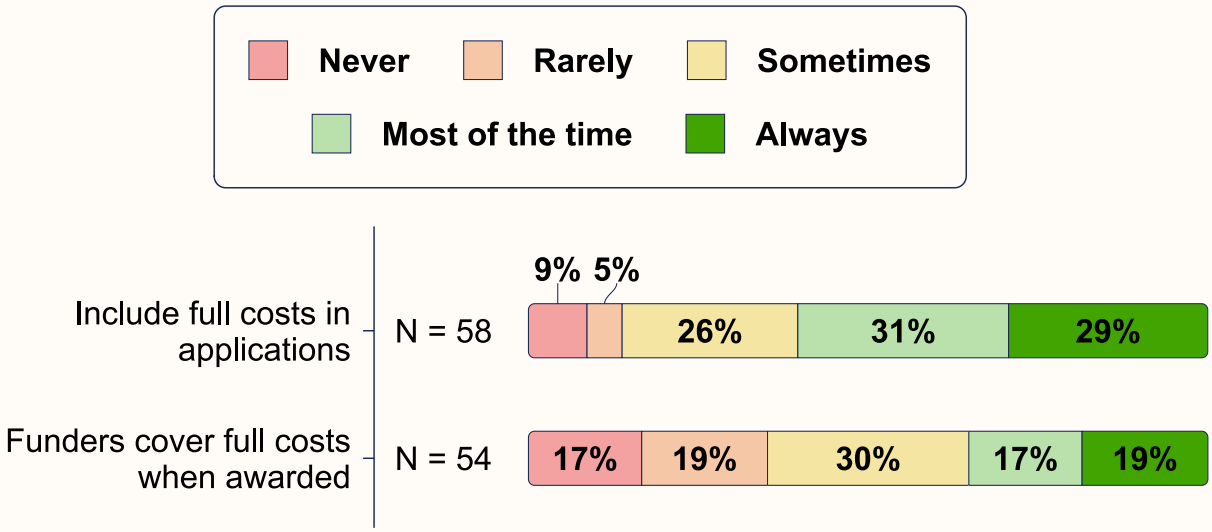
Figure 6.7. Success in funding applications over the past 12 months



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.

However, 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. Three in five organisations say they always or mostly include full costs in funding applications (60%), but only around one in three say funders always or mostly cover them when funding is awarded (35%). Nationally, NCVO's research with charities delivering public services found that 87% subsidised their grants or contracts from other income and reserves. [19] When an award falls short, money raised for an organisation's wider work can be needed simply to fulfil the funding agreement.

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.

Focus group participants described needing to cross-subsidise to cover the full cost of providing support or running services. One community group described using membership fees for regular costs and using grants for repairs and equipment, and combining a range of income to purchase more expensive items which are difficult to secure funding for:

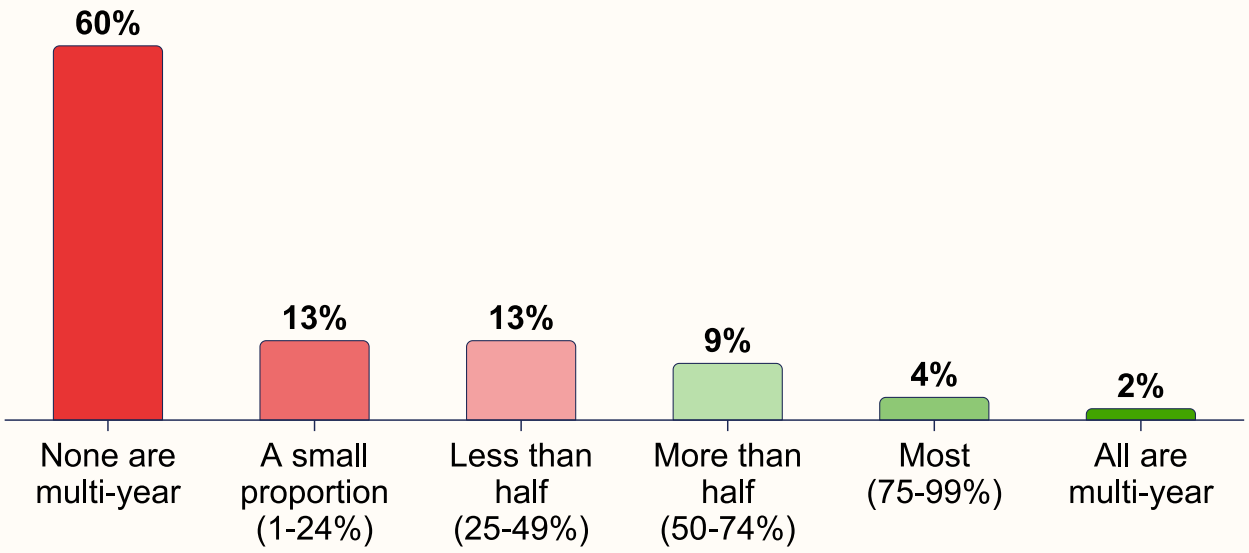
> "as a member club, we have our subscriptions from members. That in no way really covers the full cost of running the club. We also try and get funding for peripheral items… like defib units and bleed boxes, which are obviously very important."

This shows the importance of unrestricted funding, particularly grants, which help organisations and groups to retain scope, pursue priorities identified with their communities, and respond to local need. These are also things which benefit from longer-term, sustainable funding. Multi-year 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. [22] Yet among Bury organisations receiving grant or contract income, more than four in five say less than half of this funding is multi-year (85%), including three in five that say none is (60%).

One consequence of this is that, just as support becomes trusted and established within a community, the funding to sustain it ends. One focus group participant described being unable to secure continuation funding for a pilot scheme which was successful and that residents valued:

> “I think it's just difficult when you're just delivering a pilot scheme and then you can't get the money to continue it… and it's successful and then it stops, and people [ask] why have you stopped doing it?”

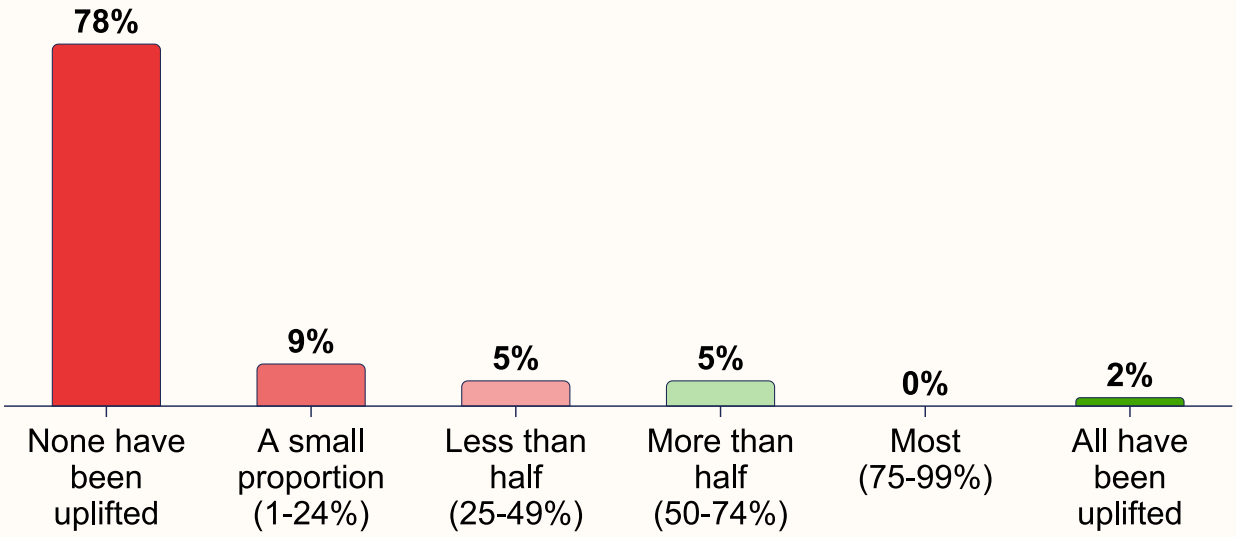
Figure 6.9. The proportion of organisations’ grants or contracts that are multi-year (three years or more)



Note. Base = 55. 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. [15] In Bury, almost four in five organisations receiving grant or contract income say none of this funding had been uplifted to reflect rising costs over the previous year (78%), while only 2% say most or all had been uplifted. 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.

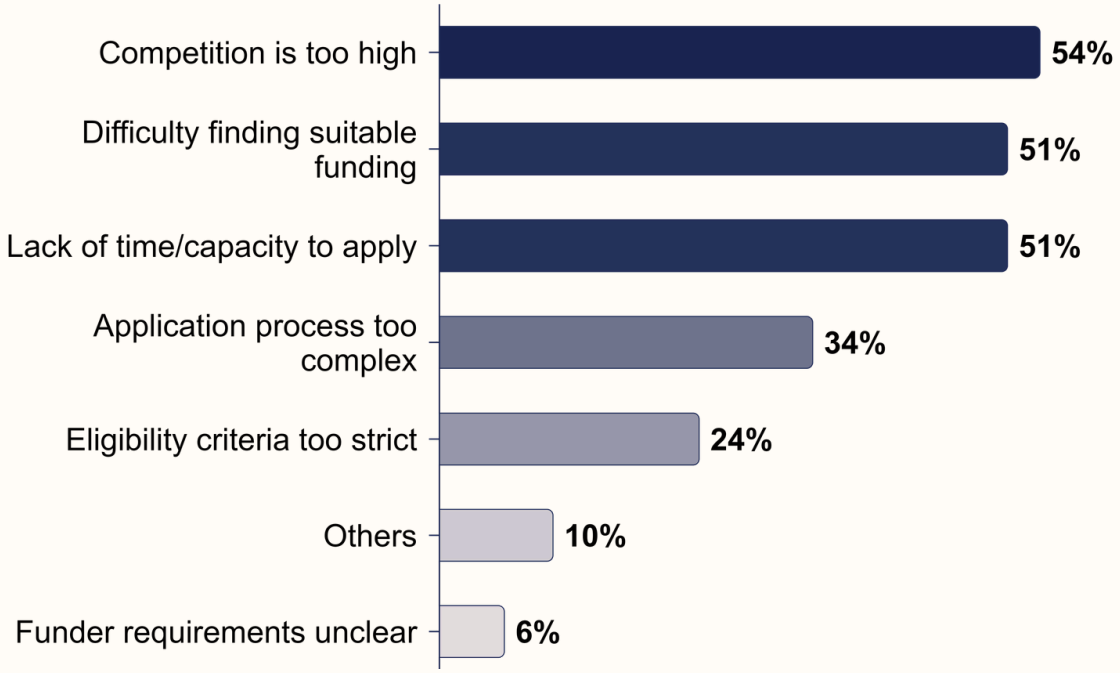
Figure 6.10. The proportion of organisations' grants or contracts that have been uplifted over the past 12 months



Note. Base = 55. Question shown only to organisations receiving income from grants or contracts from any source. Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

When asked about the biggest challenges in finding, applying for and securing funding, organisations most commonly point to high levels of competition (54%), something validated by funders that have reported growing numbers of applications in recent years. [14] Around half have difficulty finding suitable funding (51%) or lack the time or capacity to apply (51%). A third say that complex application processes (34%) are a challenge, while almost a quarter point to strict eligibility criteria (24%).

Figure 6.11. Funding challenges



Note. Base = 68. Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%.

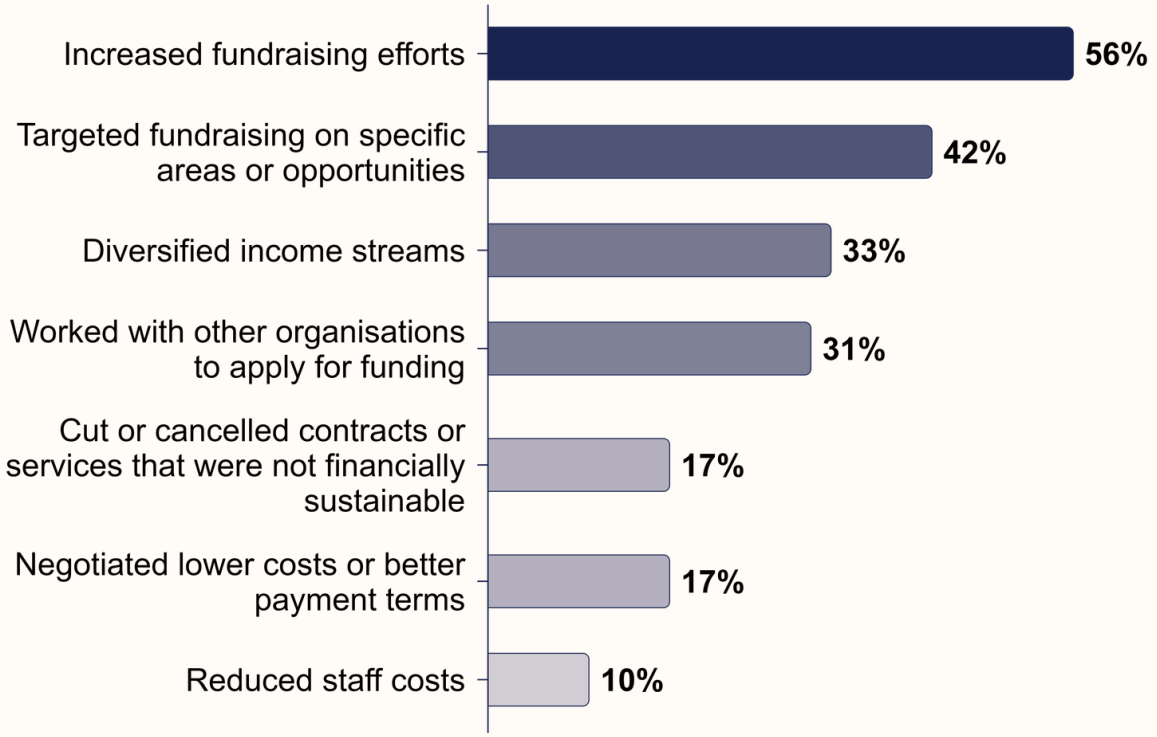
In the focus group, one organisation described how these challenges intersect, withdrawing from an application for a small award after a lengthy and complex application process that demanded significant time:

> “I’d done the application, sent it in, and three times, I think it was. It was 11 more questions on top of the application form, and I just said the third time, I don't want the money.”

Bury’s Memorandum of Understanding calls for proportionate application and reporting requirements and, where financially viable, minimum three-year funding terms with annual inflation-linked uplifts. [23] Applying these principles would reduce burdens during application and provide greater stability to sustain services and invest in organisational development.

To understand how organisations are responding to funding challenges, we asked what steps they had taken over the previous year. Three quarters (76%) had taken at least one action. Of this group, more than half increased their overall fundraising efforts (56%), two in five targeted specific funding areas or opportunities (42%), a third diversified their income or funding streams (33%), and a similar proportion worked with other organisations to apply for funding (31%). For the quarter taking no new action over the previous year (24%), this may reflect limited scope to respond or measures already introduced before that period.

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



Note. Base = 52. Shows top seven selections. Excludes respondents selecting ‘No actions taken’ (N = 16). Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%.

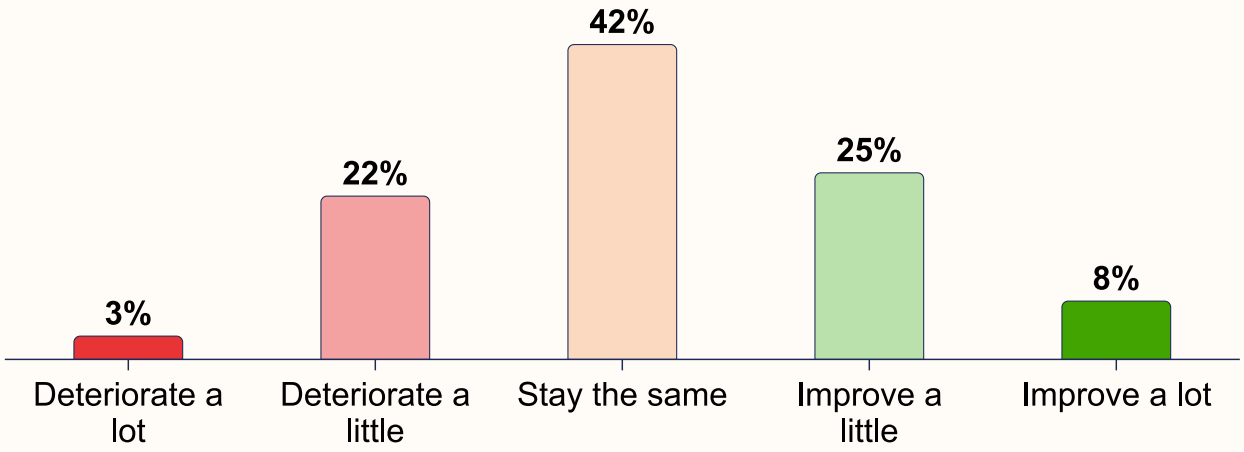
6.4. Premises

Physical premises and spaces are part of the sector's contribution, providing places where people can meet, connect and access support. Organisations use a mix of arrangements: almost half operate from premises they lease or rent (49%), more than a quarter use premises with shared or free access (29%), and one in seven operate from buildings they own (15%). More than one in five do not use physical premises (22%).

6.5. Future outlook

Findings from this year's State of the Sector show that Bury's VCSE sector is supporting more people while dealing with uncertain funding that is often short-term and rarely covers the full cost of delivering services. This uncertainty is reflected in mixed expectations about the next 12 months, where two in five expect their financial position to remain the same (42%), a third expect it to improve (33%), and a quarter expect it to deteriorate (25%).

Figure 6.13. Expected financial position over the next 12 months

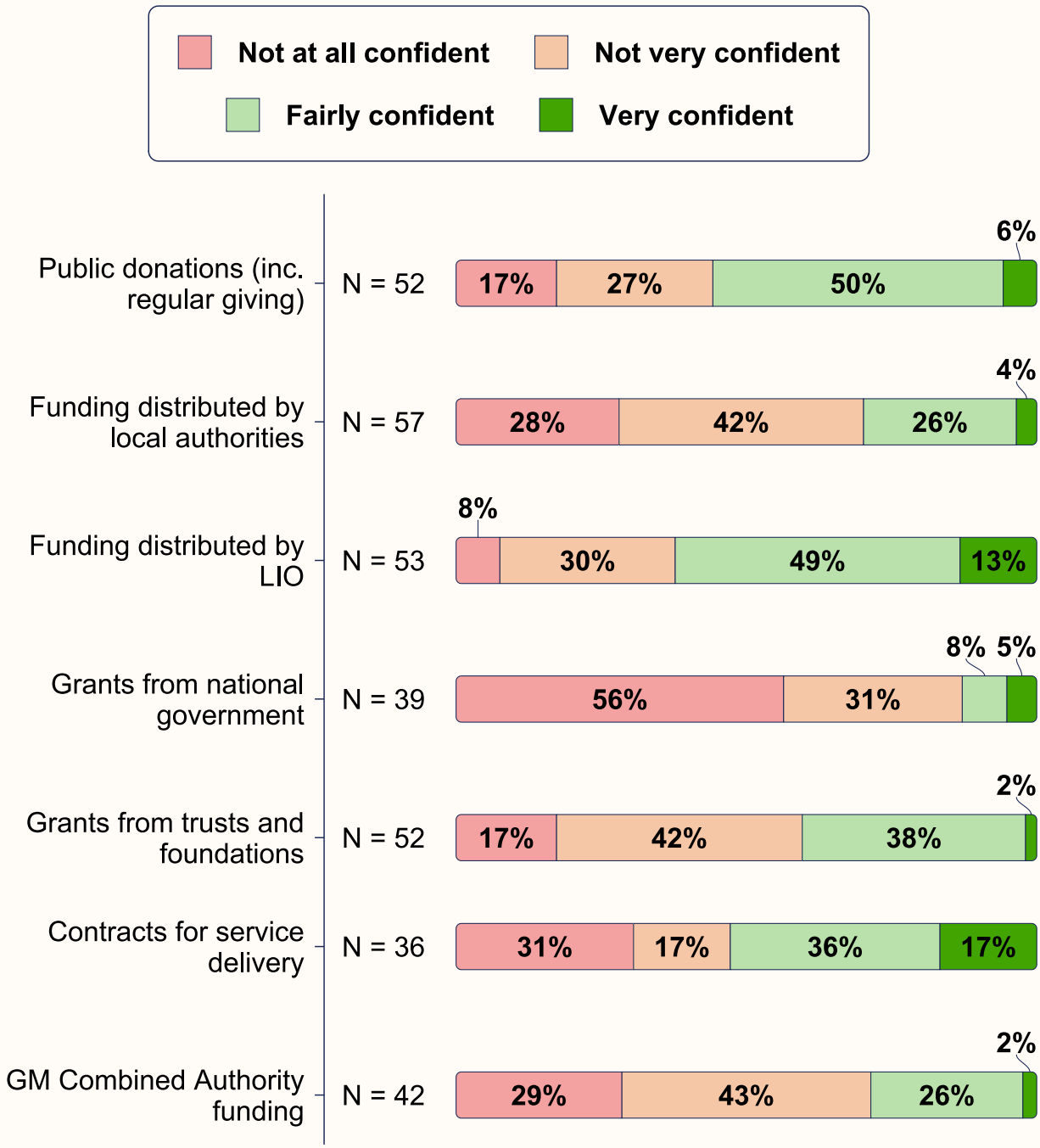


Note. Base = 64. 'Don't know' responses excluded.

Organisations expressed the greatest confidence in place-based sources of income that are rooted in local relationships and established networks. Among organisations that considered each source relevant to them, more than three in five organisations feel fairly or very confident in funding distributed by LIOs (62%), which sits alongside the relatively high success rate in securing funding from them over the past year. More than half feel confident about donations from the public (56%) and contracts for service delivery (53%). While the highest application success rates were reported for grants from trusts and foundations, fewer are confident about securing funding from this source over the next year (40%).

In contrast, almost nine in ten are not very or not at all confident about national government grants (87%), while seven in ten say the same about GMCA funding (71%). A similar proportion are not confident about securing funding from local authorities (70%), despite the relatively high success rates among previous applicants.

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



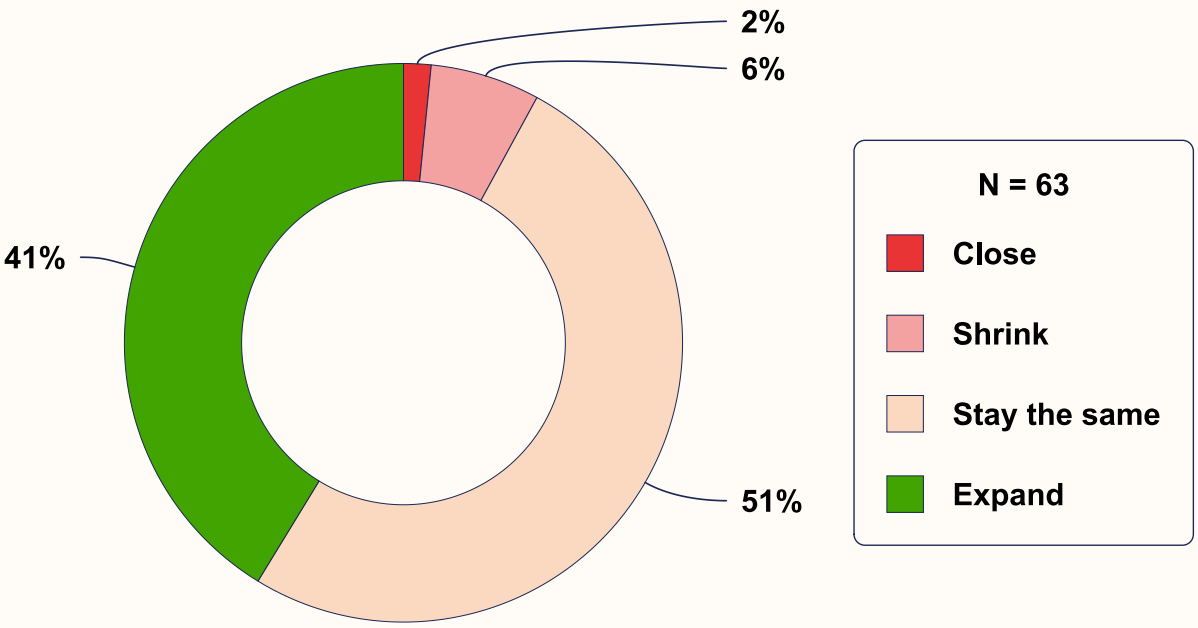
Note. Bases are shown in the chart and vary by source. 'Not applicable' responses excluded for each source. Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

These findings suggest that organisations feel most confident in funding built on trusted relationships, local knowledge and an understanding of community need. Confidence is lower for public sector funding, including at local authority level, where funders face significant pressures on their own resources.

Bury Council's latest financial report forecasts a £5.7 million overspend in 2026/27, [24] and it is introducing tighter controls on discretionary spending as it works towards balancing the budget. NHS Greater Manchester is also restricting additional spending commitments. [25] These constraints may make it harder to expand funding for community support or increase awards as delivery costs rise, even where public bodies recognise the sector's contribution.

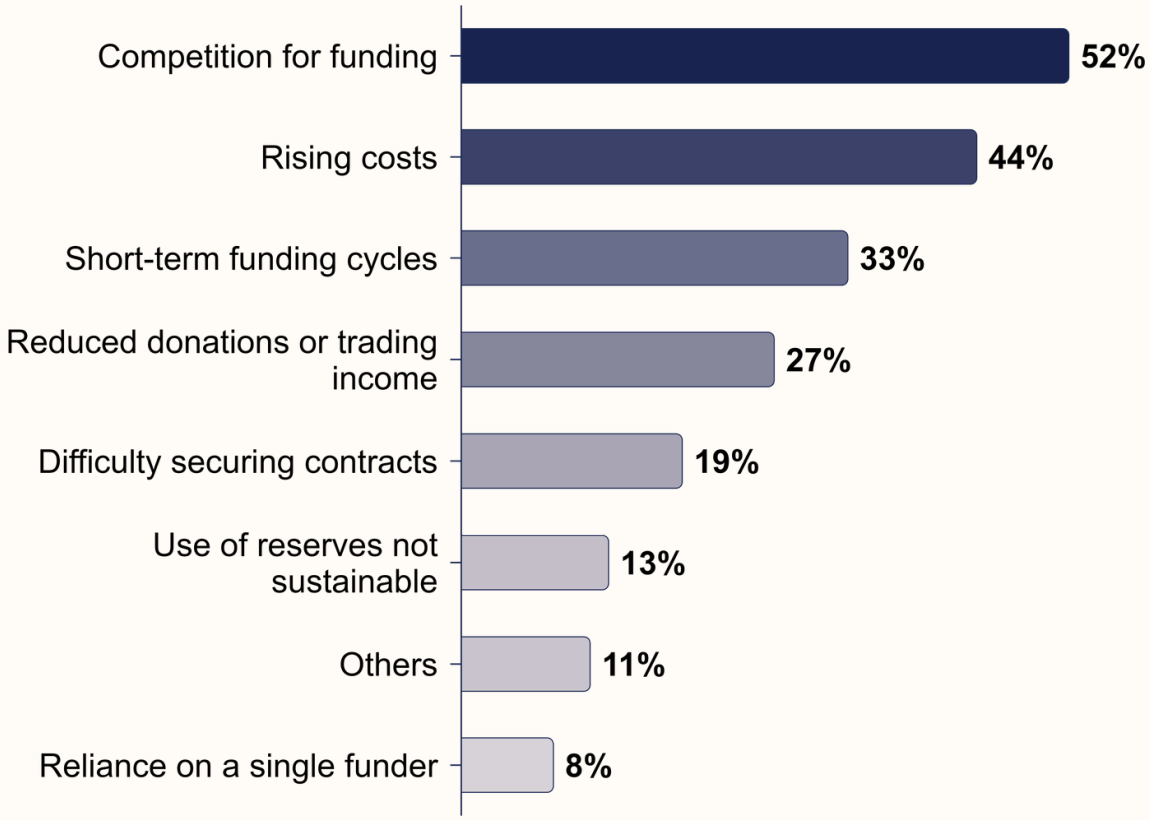
Looking ahead, most organisations expect to maintain or increase their operations. Half anticipate operating at a similar level (51%) and two in five expect to expand (41%), while only small proportions expect to shrink (6%) or close (2%).

Figure 6.15. Organisational expectations for the year ahead



Ambitions for expansion sit alongside a number of interconnected risks to their financial sustainability. The most commonly reported are increased competition for funding (52%), rising costs (44%), short-term funding cycles (33%) and reduced donations or trading income (27%).

Figure 6.16. Risks to financial sustainability



Note. Base = 63. Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%.

Collectively, these pressures place a triple squeeze on organisations. Higher living 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. [14,15] Short funding periods make this harder to manage, leaving organisations repeatedly seeking money to sustain work their communities already depend on.

Recommendations and final thoughts

A number of the emerging themes from this report are not new or unheard of within the sector or the borough. During the time of this research significant work was being done within Bury by both the VCSE and public sector to develop the Bury Memorandum of Understanding. This report strengthens and underlines the need for this commitment and the key work within it.

Recognising the VCSE sector as core social infrastructure and embedding co-production

This report reinforces the importance of recognising the VCSE sector as core social infrastructure within Bury. VCSE organisations are acting as the everyday 'front door' for communities – building relationships, trust and access to support, while also serving as key anchor organisations within neighbourhoods and communities of identity. At the same time, while there is strong collaboration across the borough, this is not yet consistent or system-wide, with resource constraints, time pressures and power imbalances limiting its full potential. There is a clear opportunity through Team Bury, and the commitments within the Bury MoU, to move further and embed the sector as an equal partner across the system. Central to this is a renewed focus on co-design and co-production, ensuring services are shaped around people's journeys and lived experiences rather than organisational boundaries. This includes strengthening VCSE and lived experience representation in decision-making spaces, recognising the sector's insight and reach, and supporting it to work alongside partners in designing and delivering services. By building on the strong foundations already in place, Bury can move towards a more collaborative, person-centred system where the value of the VCSE sector is fully recognised and embedded.

Strengthening workforce and volunteer sustainability

The VCSE workforce is a critical driver of support for local people, but this report highlights increasing pressures across the system, including insecure employment, capacity constraints and the growing risk of burnout among both staff and volunteers. Through the Bury MoU and the Bury Volunteering Strategy, there is a shared commitment across Team Bury to develop a more sustainable, supported and valued workforce.

However, to achieve this aspiration will take a holistic approach across partners, ensuring that workforce wellbeing, supervision and professional development are recognised as core components of delivery, not additional costs. Funding and commissioning models must reflect the true cost of positive employment practices, including investment in leadership, support and development.

There must also be greater recognition that volunteering is not without cost. Volunteer involvement requires coordination, training and support, and this should be funded as essential infrastructure rather than seen as optional. Strengthening this approach will help ensure volunteering is inclusive, sustainable and able to meet growing demand.

By taking a system-wide approach to workforce and volunteer sustainability, Bury can better support those who underpin the VCSE sector and ensure it remains resilient, effective and able to continue improving the lives of local people.

Reforming funding, commissioning and community investment to maximise impact

This report highlights a clear misalignment between how the VCSE sector delivers support and how it is currently funded, commissioned and resourced. Funding is often short-term, fragmented and narrowly defined, while community spaces which underpin much of the sector's work remain underfunded and difficult to sustain. At the same time, organisations are delivering increasingly complex, relational and place-based support that relies on trust, continuity and accessible community assets.

Through the Bury MoU, there is a significant opportunity for Team Bury to take a more joined-up and system-wide approach that better reflects this reality. This includes a commitment to more sustainable funding models, such as multi-year investment for trusted local organisations, alongside the consistent application of full cost recovery across both grants and commissioning. Building on progress already made through initiatives like the Bury Fund and Real Living Wage approaches, there is scope to embed these principles more widely so that organisations are properly resourced to deliver high-quality support.

Commissioning frameworks should also more clearly recognise the intrinsic social value created by the VCSE sector via appropriate outcomes and measurements. This should include relational, trust-based work, community connection and navigation support as core outcomes. This ensures that the wider social, economic and preventative impact of the sector is properly understood, valued and reflected in decision-making.

Alongside this, community buildings, parks and spaces must be recognised as essential social infrastructure. These are the places where support happens, yet they continue to face challenges around access, maintenance and long-term sustainability. Existing programmes such as GM Live Well, Right to Grow and local pilots like the Whitefield Live Well Centre provide a strong foundation to build on, but further coordinated action is needed. This includes strengthening shared use models, improving asset transfer processes, and ensuring local strategies consistently recognise and support the long-term stewardship of both built and green community assets.

By aligning funding, commissioning and community investment, Bury can move towards a more coherent system that enables the VCSE sector to deliver sustainable, impactful support, strengthening communities and improving the lives of local people.

Taken together, these recommendations set a clear direction for strengthening the conditions in which the VCSE sector operates in Bury. This report shows that this is not about starting again, but about building on strong foundations and shared ambition across the borough.

Ultimately, it is how we collectively work together, value community insight and invest in what works that will enable the VCSE sector to go further in improving the lives of local people.

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