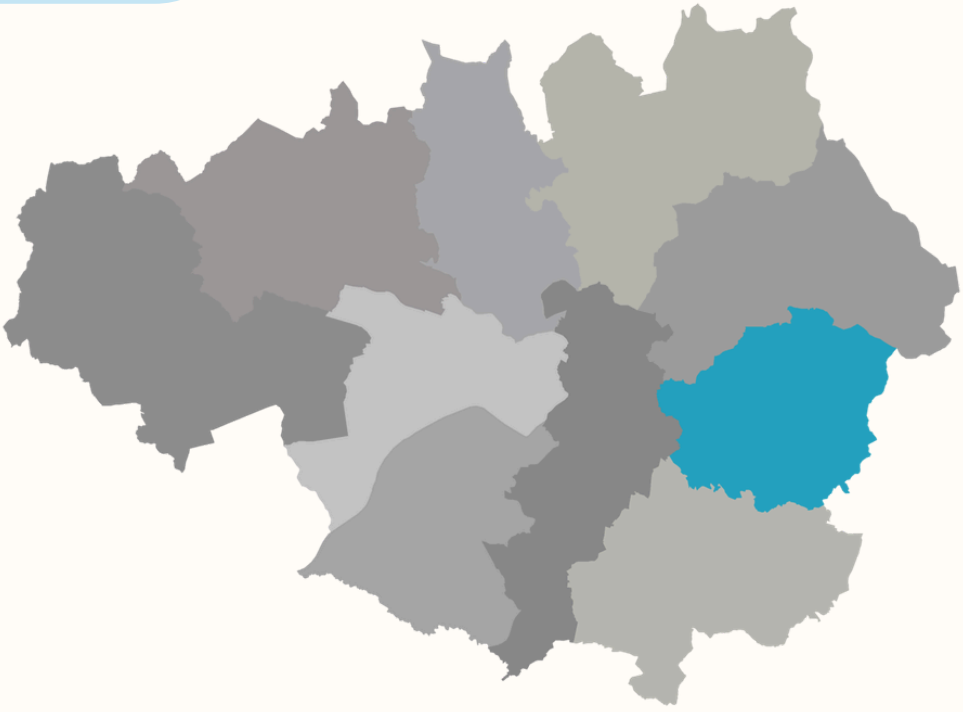
action together

10GM

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

Tameside State of the VCFSE 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, and highlighted reflections at the beginning of sections 3, 4, 5, and 6 are authored by Action Together. The executive summary is co-authored by Nottingham Trent University (NTU) and Action Together. All other sections are authored by NTU. Action Together 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

06 Executive summary

08 Glossary

10 Methodology

12 Headline findings

14 Tameside's VCFSE sector

21 Staff, volunteers and trustees

28 Communities supported, demand and access

35 Finances and the funding landscape

50 Conclusion

51 References

Foreword

Tameside's Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) sector is part of the everyday fabric of the borough. It is there in our towns, neighbourhoods, community spaces, clubs, faith settings, social enterprises, associations and informal networks. It is there when someone needs practical help, a safe place to go, a connection to others, or support to navigate a difficult moment in their life. This report helps us understand the sector in Tameside more clearly: what it looks like, what it contributes, what pressures it is under, and what local partners need to recognise if we are serious about building a stronger, fairer and more connected borough. The findings show a sector of significant scale and value, but they also show that Tameside's sector is distinctive in its character. It is largely made up of micro and small organisations, volunteer-led and rooted in very specific places. That matters because the strength of the sector is not only in the number of organisations or the volume of activity, but in its closeness to people's lives. Many groups work at neighbourhood level, which in Tameside often means town-based working: activity that is shaped by local identity, local relationships and the places people already know and trust.

This rootedness is one of the most important messages in the report. Tameside's VCFSE organisations do not simply deliver services into communities; they are part of those communities. They support wellbeing, health and social care, physical activity, community spaces, community development and inclusive local activity. The sector reflects the make-up of the borough: groups support older people, disabled people and people with long-term health conditions, children and young people, families, carers, tenants and residents, and people experiencing poverty and financial hardship. But the data does not always capture how this support is experienced. Much of the work is relational and practical: a warm welcome, a conversation, a referral, a meal, a lift, a group activity, a trusted person, or a place where someone feels they belong – Tameside groups work with people 'one life at a time'. These communities shouldn't be seen in isolation either, with needs often overlapping and reflecting how local organisations focus on the needs of people in place.

The report also shows rising demand, but the local story is not only about more people coming forward. It is about people arriving with more complex needs. Poverty, poor health, isolation, reduced public services and unclear routes into formal support have meant that community organisations have become the first accessible front door. People often turn to the places and people they know before they can find, understand or access more formal support. This places real pressure on small organisations, but it also demonstrates the trust in and importance of the sector in Tameside. Some findings need to be read with local knowledge. For example, poverty support may be under-visible in headline categories because food banks, pantries and hardship support can sit under health and wellbeing, community development, disadvantage or general community purpose. Similarly, organisations reporting "no specific focus" should not be read as lacking purpose. In many cases, this describes open-access community anchors and local groups whose focus is everyone in a place.

The people behind the sector are its greatest strength. Volunteers, trustees, small staff teams and community leaders keep organisations running, often with limited resources and growing expectations. Volunteering remains a major asset, but recruitment and retention are not straightforward. The issue is not simply whether people want to help. Organisations increasingly need volunteers with the confidence, skills and resilience to support people experiencing complex challenges. Volunteers themselves may also be managing barriers such as time, cost, travel, health, caring responsibilities or burnout. For many groups, the line between service user, volunteer and community leader is fluid, which is a strength, but it also means complexity stays close to the organisation.

The financial picture is equally important. Tameside's VCFSE sector makes a significant contribution, but headline income and expenditure figures should not be mistaken for financial security at organisational level. For a micro group, feeling "stable" may mean having enough to cover room hire, refreshments and basic activity costs in the short term. It does not mean long-term resilience. Funding remains competitive, uncertain and short term. Rising costs, limited full-cost recovery, opportunities to develop traded income and the need to apply repeatedly for small grants all affect the ability of organisations to plan, develop and meet demand. Funding distributed through trusted local infrastructure routes is particularly important because these routes understand smaller organisations, local relationships and the realities of place-based work, as well as the accompanying support in delivery.

The findings also remind us that language matters. Terms such as contracts, commissioning, legal form, trading income or service delivery can mean different things to small community organisations than they do to funders, commissioners or researchers. This highlights the importance of lived local knowledge, some of which was shared through focus group, and which local organisations have a wealth of. If we want to understand Tameside's VCFSE sector properly, we need both the numbers and the stories behind them.

The call to action from this report is clear. Local partners should work with the sector as an equal partner: involving organisations early in planning, funding the real cost of delivery, protecting and investing in community spaces, supporting volunteering, and using local insight to shape services around people and place. Tameside's VCFSE sector is not simply filling gaps. It is preventing need from escalating, connecting people to support, building trust, strengthening communities and helping people navigate fragmented systems and emerging offers. That role needs to be recognised, valued and sustained.

Thank you to every group and organisation that responded to the survey and shared their experience. Your contribution has helped create a clearer picture of the sector in Tameside. Most importantly, thank you to the wider VCFSE sector across Tameside for the work you do every day to support residents and strengthen communities.

Anna Hynes, Director, Action Together Tameside

Executive summary

Across the UK, voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise (VCFSE) 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 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.

Tameside sits within this wider context as a borough with an ageing population and around one in five of its small neighbourhoods among the most deprived 10% nationally.[1,2] Deprivation is particularly pronounced in health and disability and employment, while healthy life expectancy remains around five to six years below the England average.[3] This is the setting in which the sector supports people through poor health, disability, financial hardship and later life, while also providing community spaces, activities and opportunities that help people stay connected and involved in their local communities.

This report provides an up-to-date picture of Tameside's VCFSE 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 121 usable survey responses, focus group, wider local and national evidence, and informed estimates of the sector's overall scale and contribution.

An estimated 1,289 VCFSE organisations and groups exist in Tameside, driven by a collective workforce of over 30,000 staff, volunteers and trustees, and generating approximately £78 million in annual income. The findings from this report show a sector that is strongly rooted in Tameside's towns and neighbourhoods, with many small and volunteer-led organisations working close to the communities they support. Its contribution ranges from specialist health and social care support to physical activity, community spaces and local groups that give people somewhere to meet, take part and stay connected. Much of this work is also practical and relational, helping people navigate difficult circumstances through trusted local relationships and places they already know.

This closeness to communities means organisations are often among the first places people turn when they need help, particularly where routes into more formal support are difficult to understand or access. Demand has continued to rise, but local organisations describe the pressure as more than simply an increase in numbers, with people seeking support around combinations of poverty, poor health, isolation and other difficulties.

For a sector made up largely of small organisations and volunteer-led groups, these pressures are also carried by the people keeping them running. Volunteer recruitment remains difficult for many, while organisations describe operating in a funding environment that is often short term and that has not kept pace with rising costs. Some are drawing on reserves to meet everyday costs or funding gaps, leaving less room to plan, develop or respond to further increases in demand.

Tameside does, however, have established local arrangements that provide a basis for responding to some of these pressures. Community-led Live Well work provides a route for local organisations and residents to contribute to prevention and neighbourhood support, while the Tameside Communities Fund facilitated by Action Together has provided locally distributed investment for community-led activity that understands the local VCFSE over the past two years.

These provide practical routes for local investment, community voice and partnership, but they do not in themselves resolve the capacity and financial pressures identified in this report. Local partners will need to work with the sector as an equal partner by involving organisations early in planning, providing adequate and sustainable funding, protecting and investing in community spaces, supporting volunteering, and using local insight to shape services around people and place. This will be important if Tameside's VCFSE sector is to continue preventing need from escalating, connecting people to support and helping residents navigate fragmented systems.



Glossary

This table provides a glossary of terms, abbreviations, and acronyms used in the Tameside 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. www.livingwage.org.uk

1. Methodology

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

Survey

The survey ran from January to April 2026 and received 121 usable responses from VCFSE organisations based in Tameside. It asked about organisations' activities, who they support, where they work, demand for services, staff and volunteers, finances, and funding. Action Together 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 Tameside VCFSE 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 Action Together and follow-up contact with survey respondents. NTU analysed the discussion alongside the 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 121 usable responses and an estimated 1,289 VCFSE organisations in Tameside, 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 52% 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 VCFSE organisations in Tameside. Estimated below-the-radar groups, which are not captured on formal registers, were excluded from this comparison because they could not be sampled directly. 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. Some questions allow more than one answer, so percentages can total more than 100%.

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. 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).[4] 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

Tameside is estimated to have 1,289 VCFSE organisations: 412 registered organisations and 877 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 Tameside 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.[5] 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 Tameside 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 Tameside 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 of the scale and contribution of Tameside's VCFSE sector. These combine survey data with the estimated number and profile of organisations in the borough to scale findings up to the whole sector. They should be read as estimates, not exact counts or directly observed sector-wide totals. Section 2.2 presents the survey findings, describing what responding organisations and groups in Tameside told us about their work and experiences. These findings relate to the organisations that responded and have not been scaled up to the whole sector.

2.1. Estimated scale and contribution of Tameside's VCFSE sector

Estimated scale and contribution of Tameside's VCSE sector

1,289 organisations

Tameside's VCFSE sector is estimated to include 412 registered organisations and 877 below-the-radar organisations not captured on formal registers.

£78.06 million annual income

Tameside's VCFSE sector generated an estimated £78.06 million in income during 2024/25.

Mostly micro and small

We estimate that micro organisations and groups account for almost four fifths (79%) of the sector. Small organisations make up 14%, medium organisations 6%, and large, major and super-major organisations 1%.

28,978 volunteer and trustee roles

The sector's work is powered by an estimated 21,953 volunteers and 7,025 trustees or Board members.

391,699 instances of support

Tameside's VCFSE sector is estimated to provide 391,699 contacts or episodes of support to people and communities each year.

2.93 million volunteer and trustee hours

Volunteers and trustees contribute around 56,347 hours each week, equivalent to 2.93 million hours a year.

£39.41 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.

1,327 full-time equivalent paid staff

This represents an estimated 1,821 individual employees working in Tameside's VCFSE organisations.

£66.85 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 Tameside's VCFSE sector.

2.2. What Tameside organisations told us

121 Tameside VCFSE organisations made their voices heard, sharing their experiences of working with and supporting communities across the borough.

Demand is rising
Seven in ten organisations say demand for their services increased over the past year (70%), while almost two thirds are supporting more people (62%).

Financial vulnerability
A quarter describe their organisation as vulnerable or struggling (26%). In contrast, around one in six feel strong, secure and well-equipped for future challenges (16%).

Volunteer capacity
More than two in five organisations report difficulty recruiting volunteers (42%), and almost a third say they do not have enough volunteers to carry out their work and meet their objectives (32%).

Reserves filling gaps
Among organisations using reserves, half have drawn on them for routine operating costs (50%), while almost a third have used them to plug funding gaps (32%) or meet unplanned and emergency costs (29%).

Funding risks
Almost three in five identify competition for funding as a leading financial risk (58%), followed by rising costs (53%) and reduced donations or trading income (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 (79%).



3. Tameside's VCFSE sector: what it does, where it operates, and who it supports

Action Together reflections

Tameside's VCFSE sector is broad in what it does, but strongly local in how it works.

The most common areas of activity are wellbeing, health and social care, physical activity, community spaces, and community development and inclusion. This reflects a sector that is not only delivering support, but creating places where people can connect, stay active, access help and feel part of community life.

What's particularly important in Tameside is the strength of this place-based role. Many organisations work at neighbourhood level, which locally often means towns and very specific communities rather than large service footprints. The data should therefore be read as a picture of rooted, town-based activity, not simply formal service coverage, reflecting the geography of Tameside.

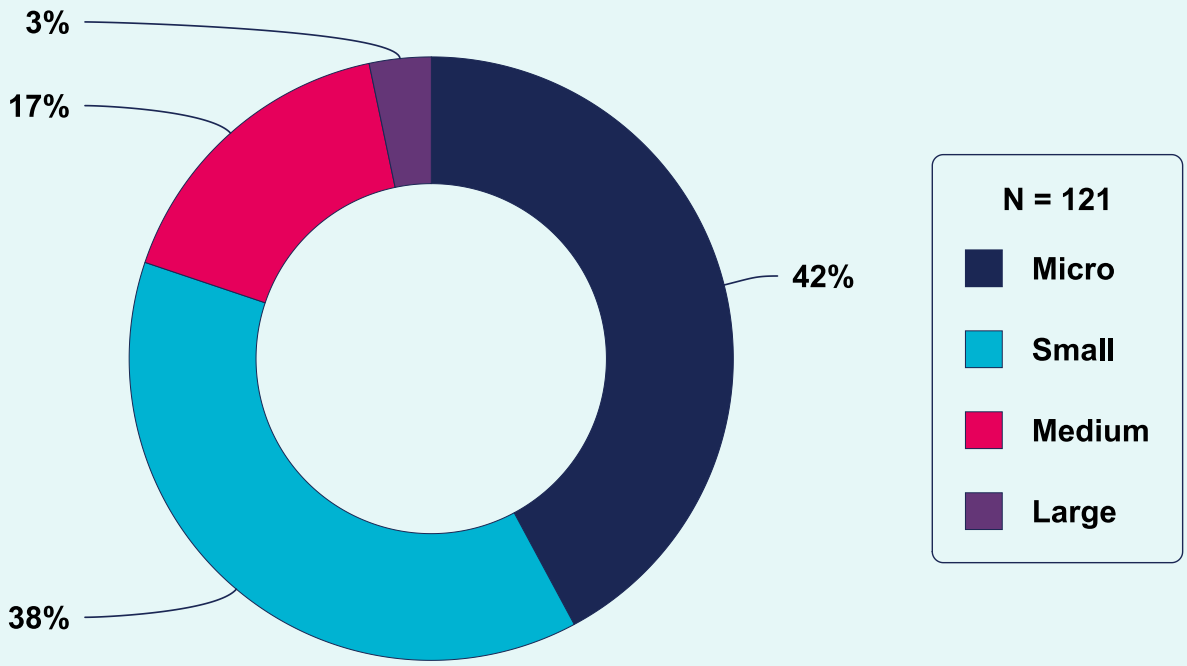
Some findings also need local interpretation. Economic and financial wellbeing appears lower than might be expected given the visible role of food banks, pantries and practical poverty support in Tameside; some of this work may sit under health, wellbeing or community development instead. Similarly, groups with 'no specific focus' can describe open-access community anchors and local groups whose focus is everyone in a place. The data reflects a practical, relational sector rooted in Tameside's towns, which tallies with previous knowledge of existing networks and support in the borough.

Tameside is one of three Greater Manchester boroughs that have become relatively less deprived since 2021. However, around a fifth of small neighbourhoods are among the most deprived 10% nationally, with health, disability, and employment particular sources of disadvantage.[2] Around a fifth of Tameside's growing older population also experience income deprivation, while more than two in five children live in income-deprived households.[6] Tameside's VCFSE sector plays a critical role here, supporting health, wellbeing, and opportunities to stay active across communities of experience and place and at all life stages.

3.1. Size, legal form and organisation age

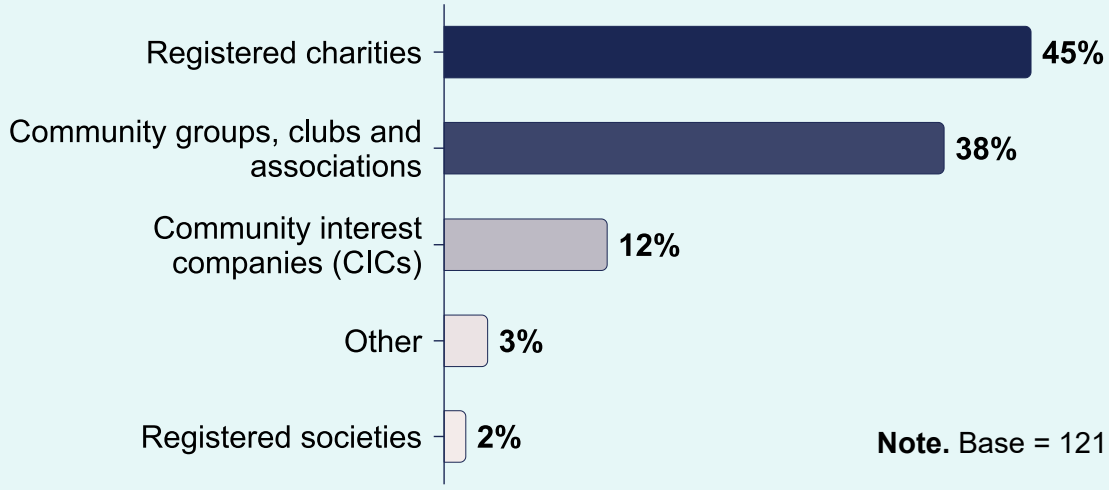
Four in five responding organisations are micro (42%) or small (38%), while around one in six are medium-sized (17%). Large organisations account for the remaining 3%.

Figure 3.1. Proportion of responding organisations by size



Registered charities account for almost half of responding organisations (45%). Almost two in five are community groups, clubs or associations (38%), and around one in eight are Community Interest Companies (12%). Almost half identify as social enterprises (47%), showing that trading and enterprise are part of how many organisations pursue their social purpose.

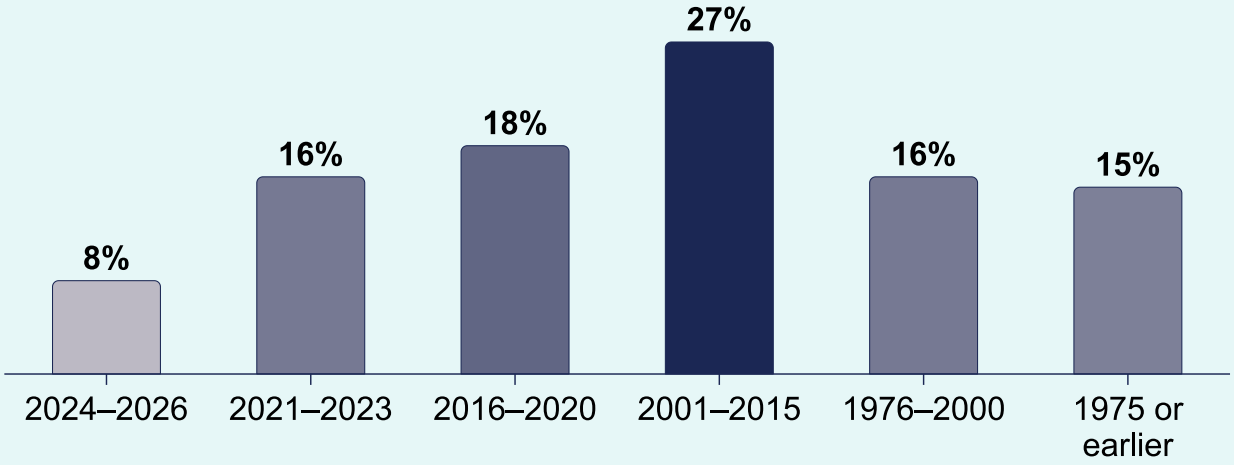
Figure 3.2. Proportion of responding organisations by legal status



Note. Base = 121.

The sector combines long-established organisations with newer groups. Almost a quarter were established within the past five years (24%), while almost one in five were established between 2016 and 2020 (18%). More than a quarter were established between 2001 and 2015 (27%), and almost a third were established in 2000 or earlier (31%).

Figure 3.3. Year in which organisations were established



Note. Base = 119.

3.2. What they do

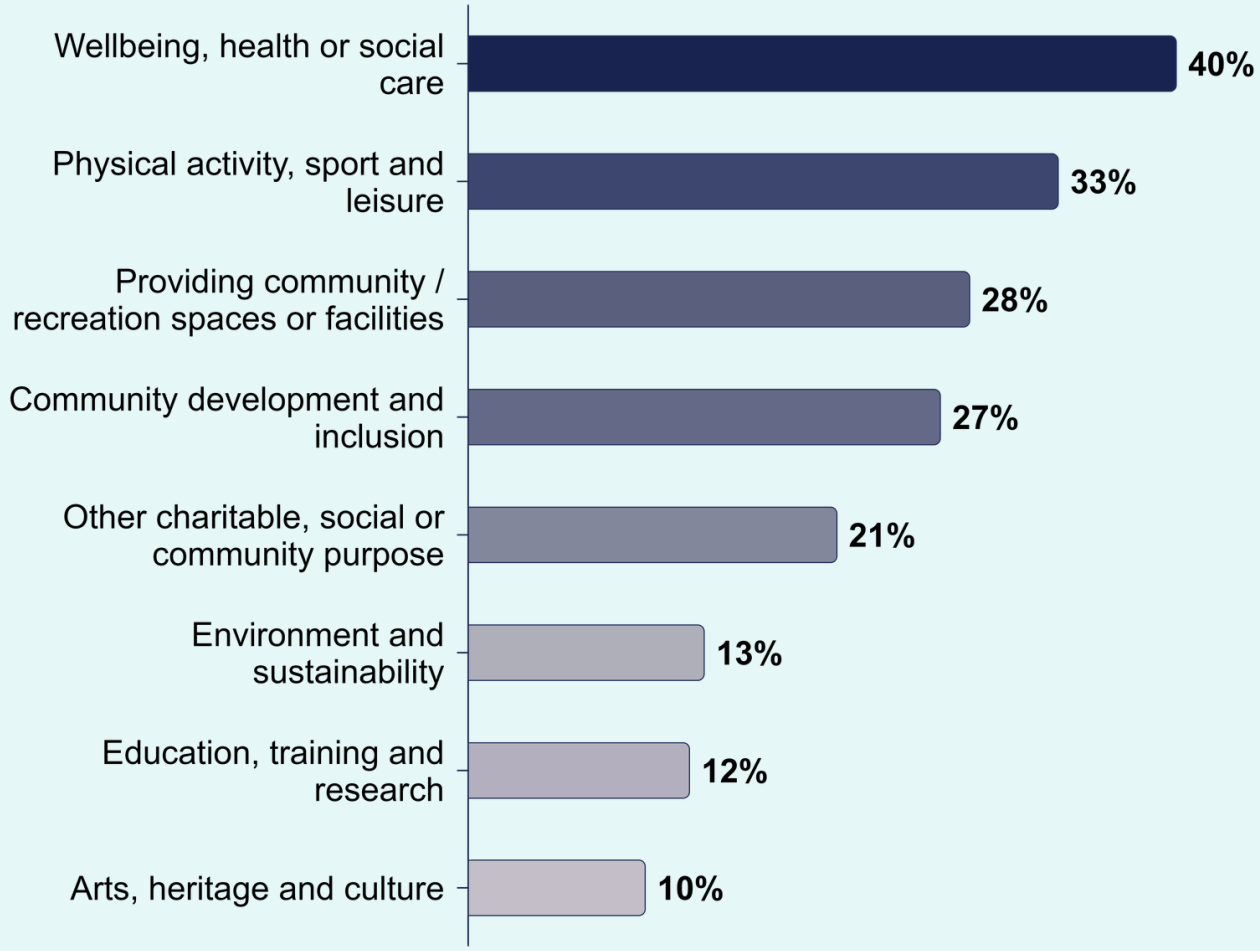
VCFSE organisations in Tameside carry out a range of work, often cutting across a number of areas that help residents to stay healthy and connected. Wellbeing, health and social care is the most common area of work among responding organisations (40%), delivering important work in a borough where healthy life expectancy is around five to six years below the England average.[3]

Organisations' work in this area ranges from tackling social isolation to responding to more severe mental health challenges. One focus group participant described offering open-access peer support groups for things like bereavement and providing a crisis service that helps prevent hospital admission:

> "We offer peer support groups for anyone who is struggling with their mental health or might be feeling isolated… alongside that, we work with other partners... hosting a crisis service for people in mental health crisis that don't need admission to hospital."

Organisations also create opportunities for people to meet, take part and shape their communities. A third of organisations work in physical activity, sport and leisure (33%), while more than a quarter provide community or recreation spaces (28%) or work in community development and inclusion (27%).

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



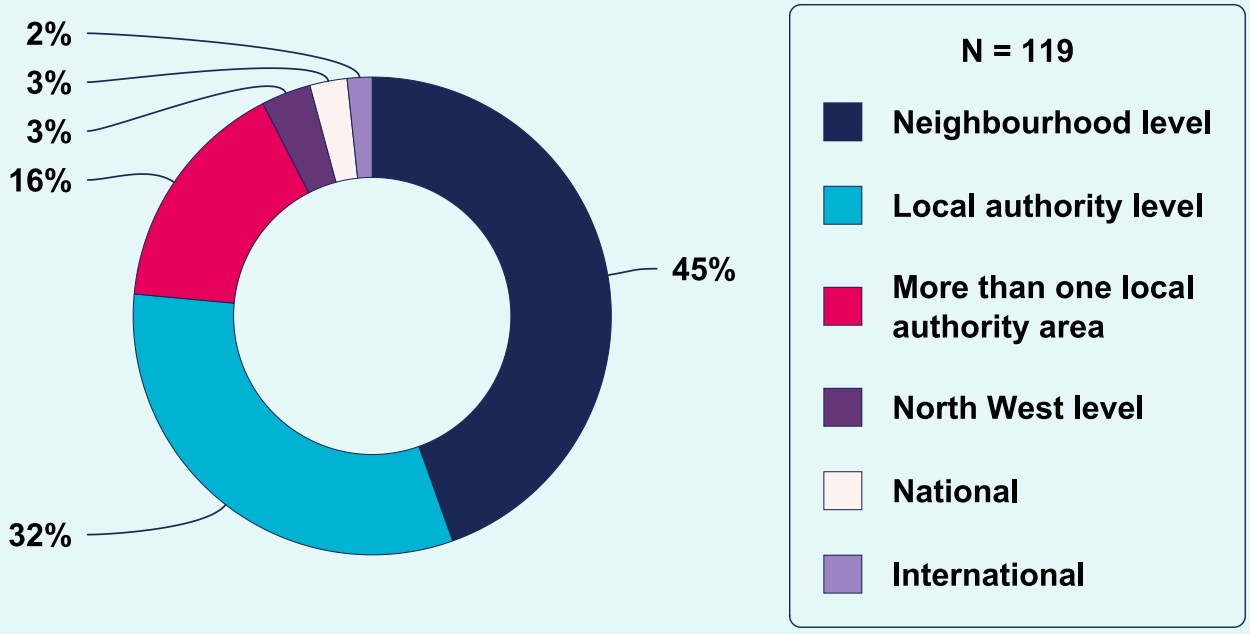
Note. Base = 120. Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%.

3.3. Where they operate

Many responding organisations work close to the communities they support. Almost half operate primarily at neighbourhood level (45%), while a third work across Tameside as a whole (32%). One in six work across more than one local authority area (16%), and fewer work mainly across the North West (3%), nationally (3%) or internationally (2%).

This combination of locally rooted and borough-wide organisations is important in responding to inequalities in health, employment and income that affect communities across Tameside and people at different life stages.

Figure 3.5. Geographic scope of organisation's work



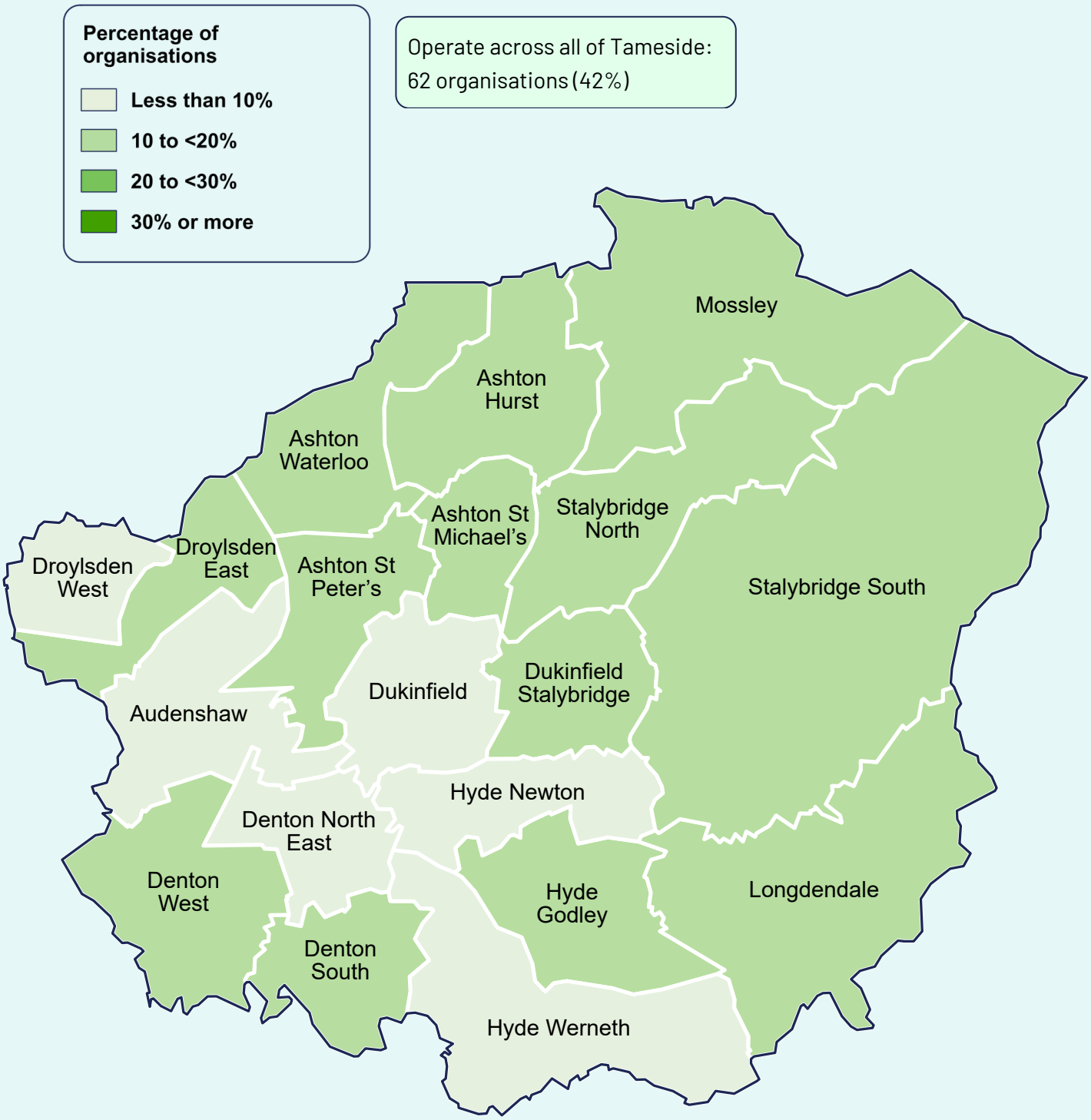
Residents of Tameside are also supported by VCFSE organisations based outside the borough. We therefore asked all organisations that selected Tameside as one of the main areas in which they carry out their activities which parts of the borough they work in. More than two in five said they operated across all of Tameside (42%).

Respondents who did not select 'All of Tameside' could identify one or more individual wards. Among this group, wards in Ashton were most frequently selected, including Ashton St Michael's (18%), St Peter's (17%), Waterloo (17%) and Hurst (16%). Audenshaw was selected least often (3%), followed by Hyde Werneth (7%).

This pattern suggests that responding organisations are reaching some communities experiencing particularly high levels of need, such as Ashton St Michael's and Hurst. However, lower reported activity in other wards may reflect several factors, including which organisations responded, gaps in provision, or differences in local demand.

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

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



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

'All of Tameside' uses the full valid base (N = 149); individual ward percentages use respondents who did not select 'All of Tameside' (N = 87).

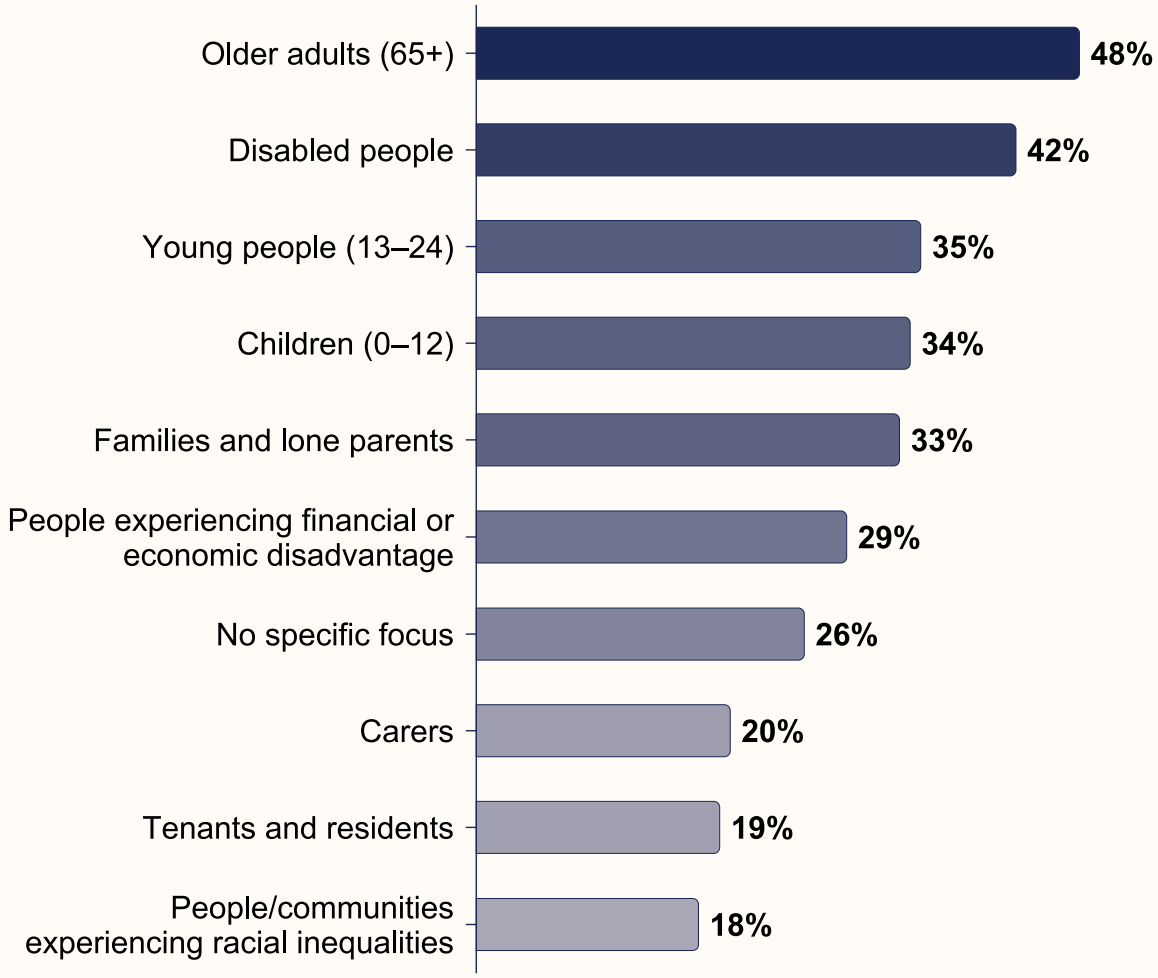
3.4. Who they support

Tameside's VCFSE organisations support people across different life stages and communities connected by identity, background and experiences. Older adults are the most commonly supported age group (48%). Around one in five Tameside residents aged 60 and over experience income deprivation, making affordability relevant alongside opportunities to remain active and connected in later life.[6]

Support also extends to younger people and families, with focus group participants describing growing demand from these groups. Around a third of responding organisations support teenagers and young adults (35%), children aged 0 to 12 (34%), and families or lone parents (33%), delivering important work in a borough where more than two in five children under 16 live in income-deprived families.[6]

More than two in five organisations support Disabled people or people living with long-term health conditions, including mental health conditions (42%). Almost three in ten support people experiencing financial or economic disadvantage (29%), and one in five work with carers (20%). With an ageing population and areas of health and disability deprivation, Tameside Council expects demand for adult social care to rise among both working-age adults with disabilities and older residents.[7]

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



Note. Base = 120. Respondents could select multiple options so percentages do not sum to 100%.

4. Staff, volunteers and trustees

Action Together reflections

Tameside's VCFSE sector is powered by people: volunteers, trustees, small staff teams and community leaders who keep organisations running and support rooted in local relationships.

The data shows that paid staff are concentrated in larger organisations, while micro groups are entirely volunteer-led. This reflects the wider shape of Tameside's sector: many organisations are small, local and dependent on unpaid time, practical commitment and local knowledge.

Volunteering is a major strength, but also a pressure point. Most organisations have volunteers and many feel they currently have enough to deliver their work, yet recruitment remains difficult. Local insight suggests this is not simply about a lack of people willing to help. Organisations increasingly need volunteers with the confidence, skills and resilience to support people facing complex needs, while volunteers themselves may be dealing with barriers such as mental health, travel, time, cost or burnout. The consequences are visible.

Where capacity is stretched, staff and volunteers absorb pressure by working longer hours, covering gaps, pausing activity or carrying stress. In Tameside, the workforce story is therefore one of commitment and fragility: the sector's people are its greatest asset, but they need support, investment and care to sustain their role.

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

4.1. Paid staff

There are an estimated 1,327 full-time equivalent paid staff working in Tameside's VCFSE sector, corresponding to approximately 1,821 individual employees. The work carried out by these staff is estimated to contribute £66.85 million to the economy each year through the services and activities they deliver.

Tameside's VCFSE sector is estimated to employ **1,821** people

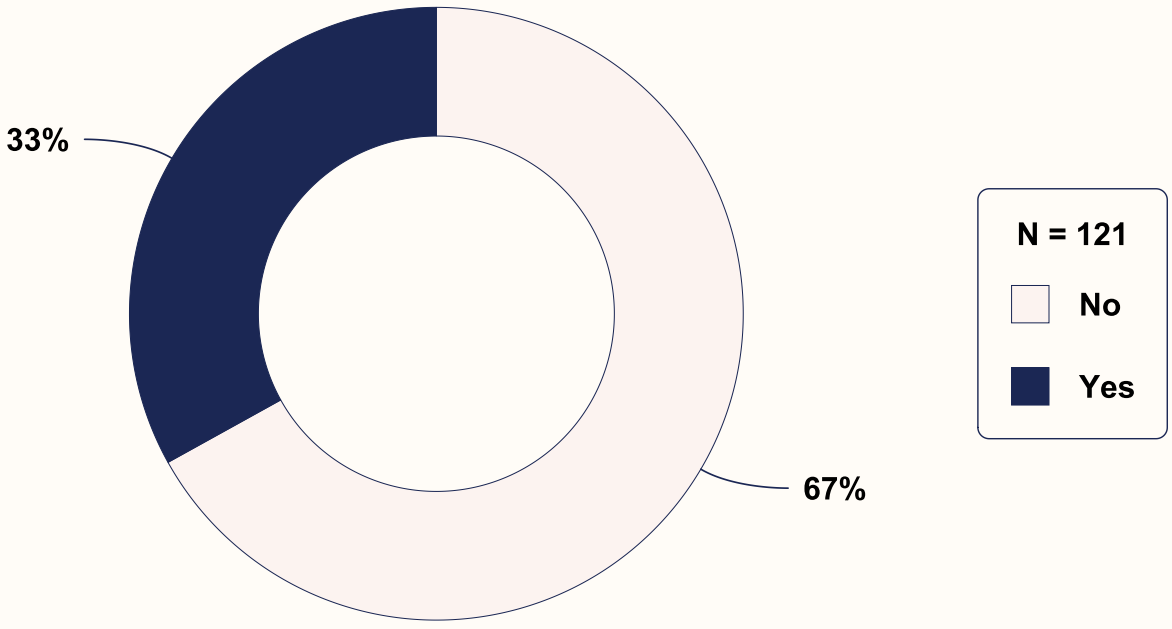
Estimated annual economic contribution from paid staff

£ 66.85 million

A third of responding organisations have paid staff (33%), and almost four in five of these organisations say they pay the Real Living Wage to all eligible employees (78%). Paid employment is concentrated in larger organisations: all large organisations and three quarters of medium organisations (75%) report a paid workforce, compared with just under half of small organisations (46%) and no micro organisations and groups.

Those with paid staff typically have relatively small teams. Almost two thirds have fewer than five FTE posts (65%), around a quarter have between five and 19 (24%), while one in ten have 20 or more (11%).

Figure 4.1. Organisations with a paid workforce



Whilst the majority of organisations with paid staff report no difficulties with staff recruitment and retention, around one in six have found retention difficult over the past year (18%), while a similar proportion have struggled to recruit staff (17%).

Figure 4.2. Staff recruitment and retention difficulties



Note. Question shown only to organisations with paid staff. Base: recruitment = 35; retention = 34. Shows the proportion answering 'Yes'. 'Don't know' responses excluded.

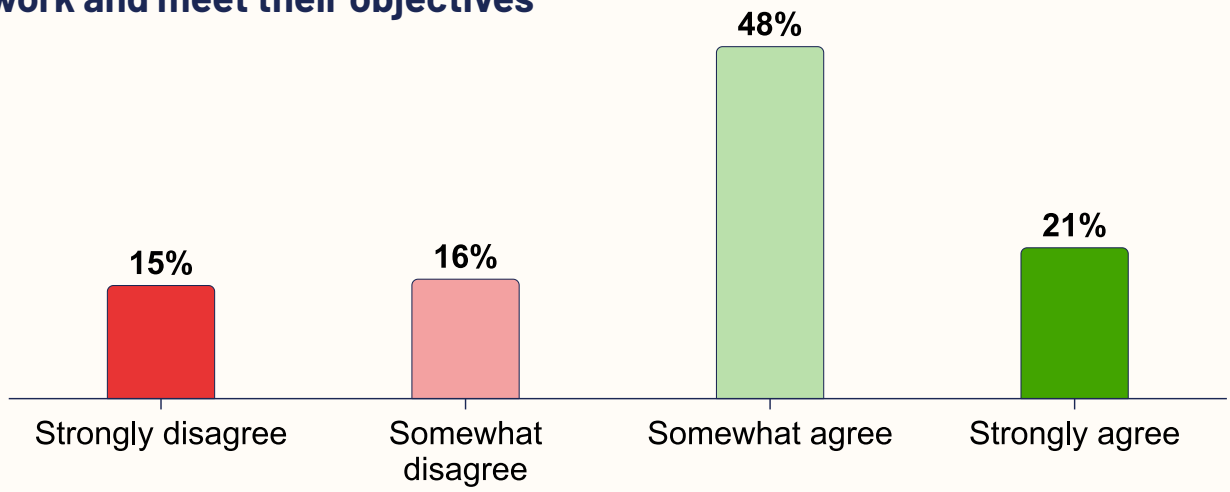
4.2. Volunteers and trustees

Across Tameside, the sector is estimated to involve 21,953 volunteers and 7,025 trustees or Board members, contributing around 56,347 hours in a typical week. Over a year, this is equivalent to 2.93 million hours spent supporting residents, running activities and governing organisations. Replacing that time with paid labour at the Real Living Wage would cost an estimated £39.41 million each year.

With many smaller organisations and groups, volunteers are a vital part of Tameside's VCFSE sector. Around two in five organisations have less than ten volunteers (42%), while similar proportions have between 10 and 24 (28%) or 25 or more (30%). The support organisations offer volunteers is both social and practical. Two thirds provide recognition or social activities (66%), almost three in five offer training, development or progression opportunities (57%), and more than two in five reimburse expenses (42%).

Over two thirds of organisations say they currently have enough volunteers to carry out their work and meet objectives (68%), leaving almost a third that do not (32%).

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



Note. Base = 117. 'Don't know' responses excluded.

Recruitment appears to be the greater pressure. More than two in five organisations (42%) have found it difficult to recruit volunteers over the past year, compared to one in five that have found it difficult to retain volunteers (20%).

Figure 4.4. Volunteer recruitment and retention difficulties



Note. Base: recruitment = 113; retention = 113. Shows the proportion answering 'Yes'. 'Don't know' responses excluded.

These recruitment difficulties sit within a longer 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. A substantial part of this decline occurred around the COVID-19 pandemic, falling from 23% in 2019/20 to 17% in 2020/21.[8]

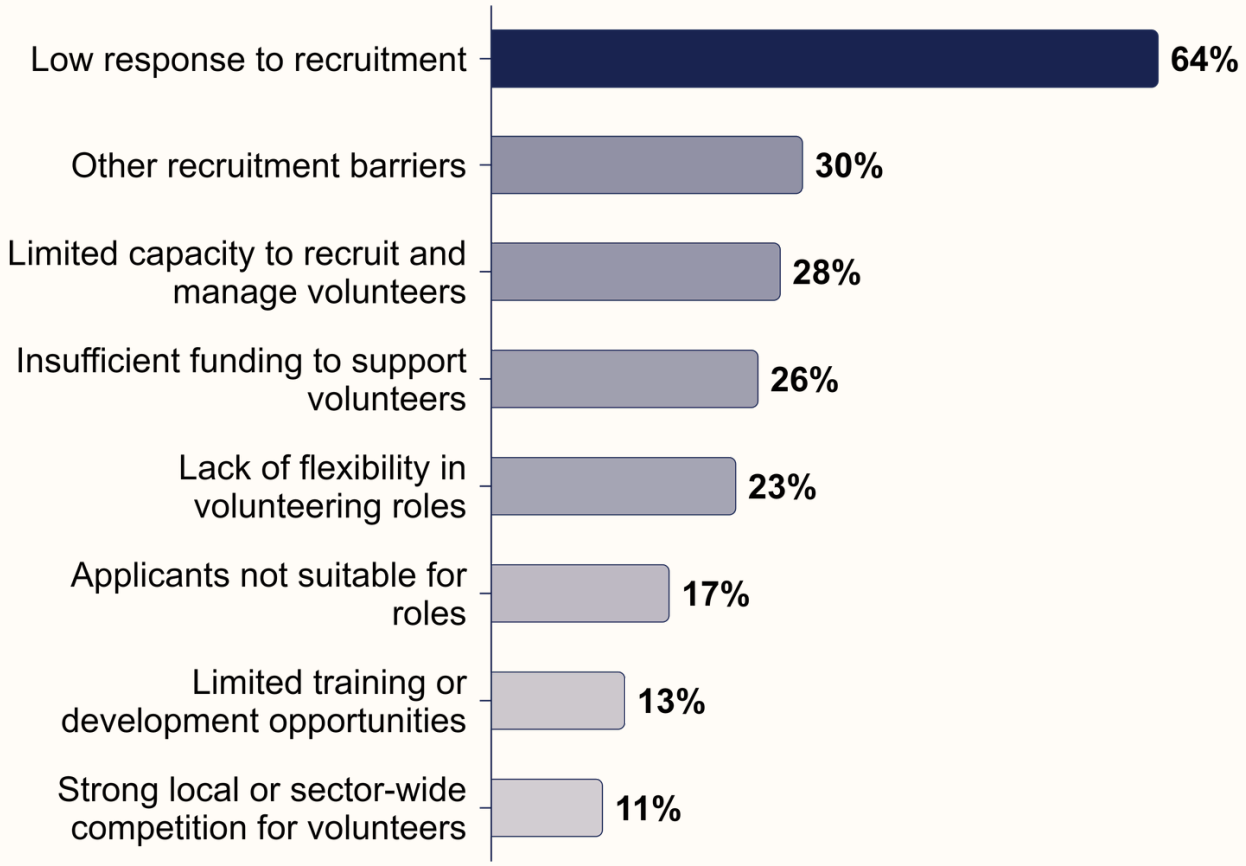
The decline has been particularly marked among people aged 50 to 64, with participation falling from 23% before the pandemic to 16% afterwards, equivalent to an estimated loss of 110 million volunteering hours from this age group.[9] Focus group participants described a similar drop locally that had not recovered:

> "It's very competitive trying to persuade a volunteer to come and help you with your cause or your organisation. Since COVID, there was a massive drop in volunteering for us."

Regular formal volunteering is also less common among adults living in the most deprived neighbourhoods. In Tameside, a substantial proportion of residents live in areas among the most deprived nationally.[2] Organisations recruiting locally may therefore be looking to communities where formal volunteering tends to be lower, even where demand for support is high.

When asked about the barriers to volunteer recruitment, almost two thirds of organisations experiencing recruitment difficulties point to a low response to recruitment activities (64%). Of the three in ten citing other recruitment barriers (30%), responses were mainly around volunteers' lack of interest or ability to commit to the roles available. Around a quarter also say that limited organisational capacity to recruit and manage volunteers (27%), insufficient funding to support them (25%), and limited flexibility in the roles available (23%) limit recruitment efforts.

Figure 4.5. Volunteer recruitment barriers (top 8)



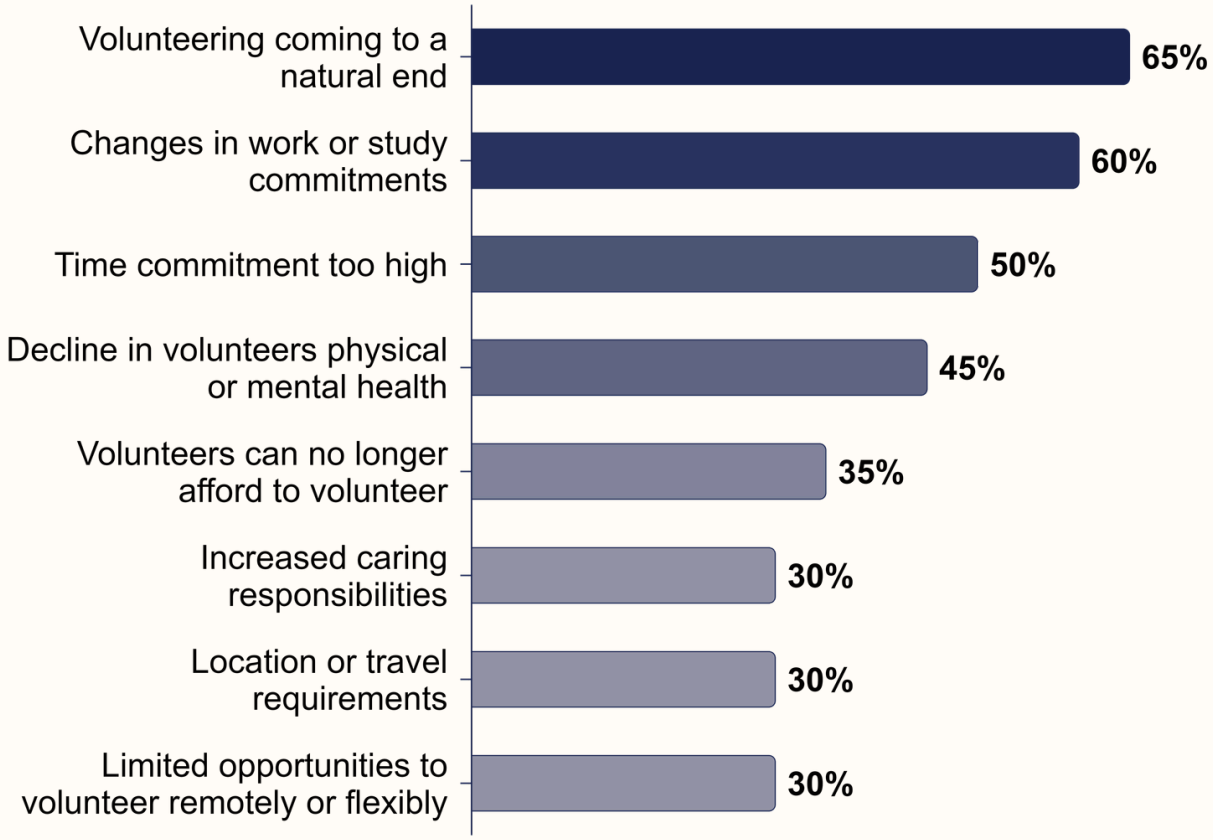
Note. Base = 47. Question shown only to organisations reporting volunteer recruitment difficulties. Figure shows the eight most commonly selected recruitment barriers. Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%.

While recruitment difficulties are more widespread, one in five also find it difficult to retain volunteers (20%). This group linked retention difficulties to changing volunteer needs, motives, and availability.

Almost two thirds of responding organisations say retention is made harder by volunteering coming to a natural end as projects finish or as long-serving volunteers step back (65%), three in five point to changes in volunteers' work or study commitments (60%), and half say the time commitment required for volunteers is too great (50%).

The challenge of fitting volunteering around paid work reflects 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%).[8]

Figure 4.6. Volunteer retention barriers (top 8)



Note. Base = 20. 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%.

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.

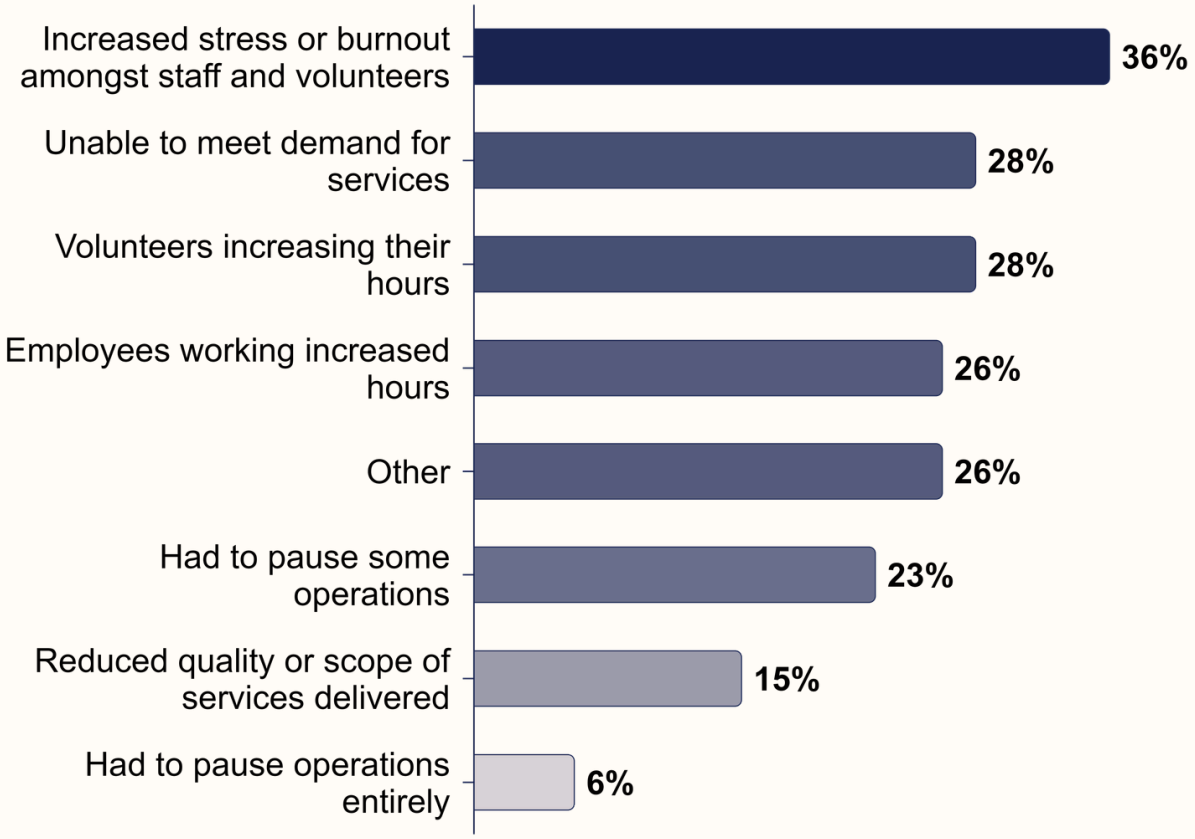
More than a third of those experiencing recruitment or retention difficulties say staff and volunteers have experienced increased stress or burnout (36%) as a result. More than a quarter say volunteers are contributing more time (28%), while a similar proportion say employees are working increased hours (26%).

National research has identified similar patterns, showing that both staff and volunteers are working or contributing more of their time.[10] Evidence has also shown that charity workers report high levels of stress, anxiety and emotional exhaustion because of their work.[11,12] Focus group participants described how supporting people with increasingly complex needs can add to these pressures, requiring staff to navigate greater levels of risk while managing the effect on their own wellbeing:

> “People are presenting with high risk… with financial difficulties, physical difficulties... So it just means staff need to navigate that more carefully and almost need more skills, and then the impact on them and their wellbeing is greater as well.”

Alongside these pressures on staff and volunteers, workforce shortages also affect organisations’ ability to operate and respond to need. Over a quarter of organisations experiencing difficulties say shortages have left them unable to meet demand (28%), while almost a quarter have had to pause some operations (23%).

Figure 4.7. How recruitment or retention difficulties are affecting organisations (top 8)



Note. Base = 53. 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

Action Together reflections

Tameside's VCFSE sector has acte as the borough's everyday front door for support. Demand is rising, but local insight suggests this is not only about more people coming forward; it is also about people arriving with more complex needs shaped by poverty, poor health, social isolation, reduced public services and unclear routes into formal support. This helps explain why organisations rooted in communities are seeing delivery pressures even when lack of awareness remains a major barrier to access.

The ways people reach support reflect the relational nature of the sector. Word of mouth, direct contact, drop-ins, signposting, outreach and referrals all show that people often find help through trusted local routes rather than formal pathways alone. In Tameside, this is particularly important because community organisations are often visible, familiar and physically present in places people already know.

Barriers such as cost, stigma, digital exclusion, communication and accessibility show that reaching support is not straightforward for everyone. Yet organisations continue to adapt, using feedback, stories, observation and everyday learning to understand impact and improve delivery. This shows a sector responding creatively to rising and more complex need, while helping people navigate a fragmented support system.

Tameside's VCFSE sector is estimated to provide 391,699 contacts or episodes of support to people and communities each year.

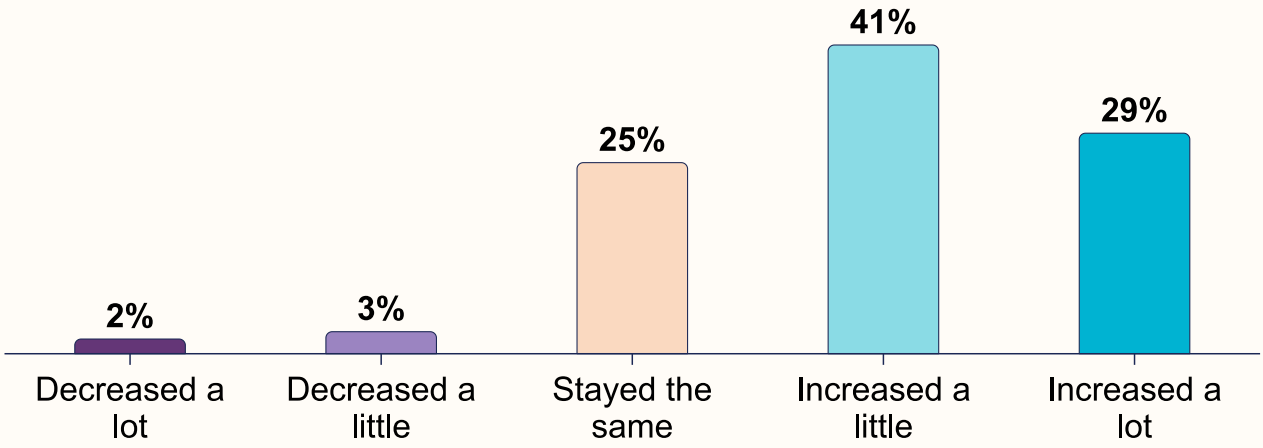
In a borough where deprivation remains concentrated in some communities, particularly across health, disability and employment, Tameside's VCFSE organisations provide everyday social infrastructure through community spaces, relationships and local connections. Their local knowledge, flexibility and trusted relationships within communities make them important routes into support for residents and partners across the local system.

5.1. Demand for services

When asked how demand for services had changed over the past 12 months, seven in ten report an increase (70%). Three in five say the number of people they support has also increased over the past year (62%). Focus group findings described a sector serving a dual purpose: being a trusted point of contact whilst also supporting people who struggle to access statutory services, including those whose needs do not fit established thresholds or service criteria:

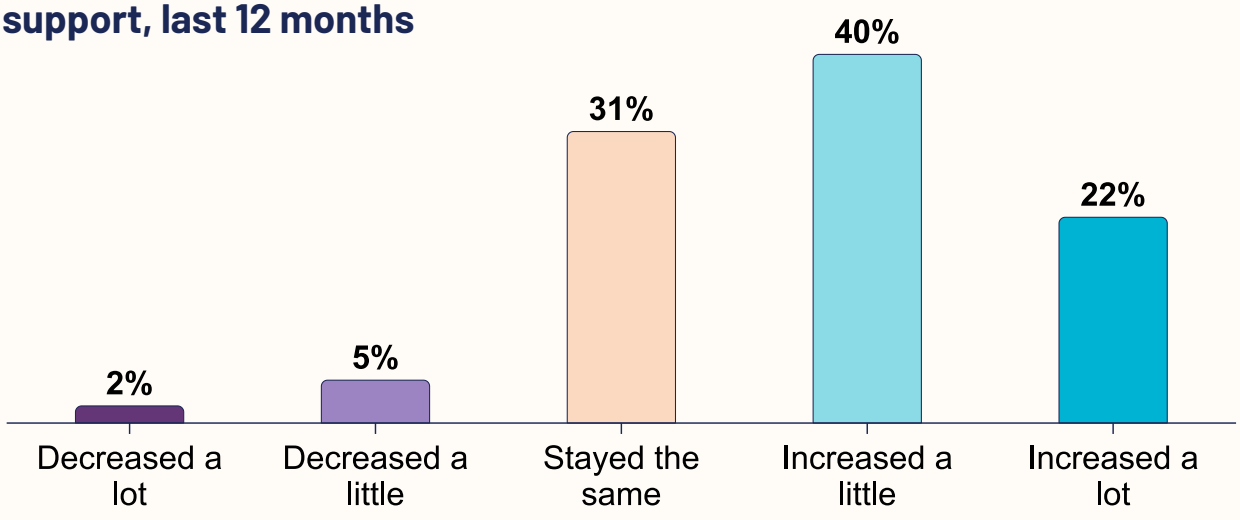
> “We support people when they don't fit the services… waiting lists, not being able to access or fit in the box of clinical services. You're either too poorly or not poorly enough. So where does that person go? They come to us.”

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



Note. Base = 103. ‘Don’t know’ responses excluded.

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

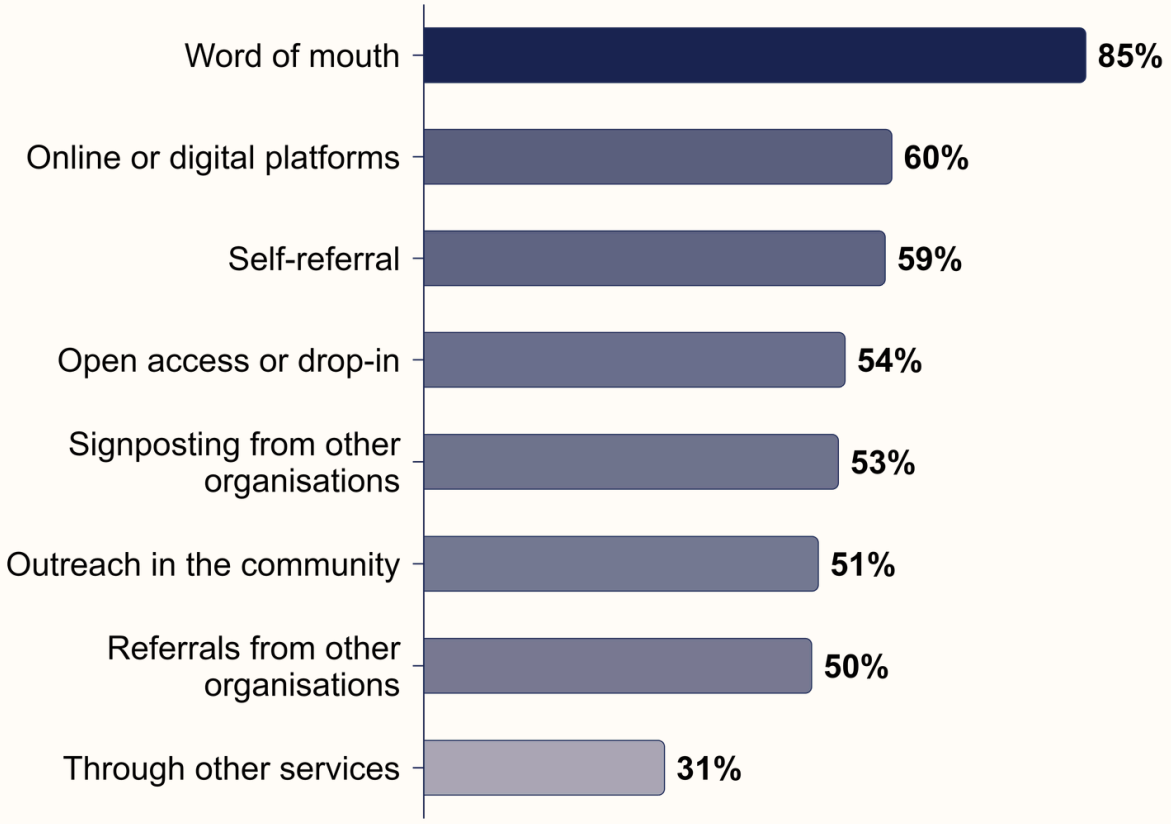


Note. Base = 108. ‘Don’t know’ responses excluded.

5.2. How people find and access support

VCFSE 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 over four in five organisations (85%). Three in five say people contact them through online or digital platforms (60%) or contact them directly to self-refer (59%). More than half say people come into contact through open access or drop in sessions (54%) or outreach in the community (51%). Around half say people are signposted (53%) or referred (50%) to them by other organisations or services.

Figure 5.3. How people come into contact with VCFSE organisations (top 8)



Note. Base = 116. Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%. Figure shows the seven most commonly selected responses.

Among organisations receiving referrals, almost all receive them from other VCFSE organisations (95%), over four in five from public sector organisations or services (85%), and more than a third from the private sector (36%). Referrals most commonly originate from health and wellbeing pathways including social prescribing and adult social care, showing the important role of the sector working alongside local systems, particularly for health.

Referrals play an important role in connecting communities to help. Locally, Tameside's Early Support and Advice Hub provides a first contact for adults seeking social-care support and for professionals making referrals, helping people explore care and community options.[13] The Live Well Community Navigation Service, announced in June 2026 and due to launch later that year, will offer personalised help connecting residents with non-clinical support.[14]

Focus group participants agreed that joined-up services are important, particularly for people being discharged into the community who may not have people to support them, but emphasised the need for clear expectations:

> "On partnerships, I think we're sold it as it's some sort of utopia across the voluntary sector that will solve the ICB and NHS's problems. … But for us, it's about [how] we do [the] work in partnerships, it's about us having our niches and how we fit together. But it is hard."

While referrals are an important part of connecting people to trusted help, they also shift demand onto organisations that are already supporting more people and with fewer resources.

At least three in five 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.

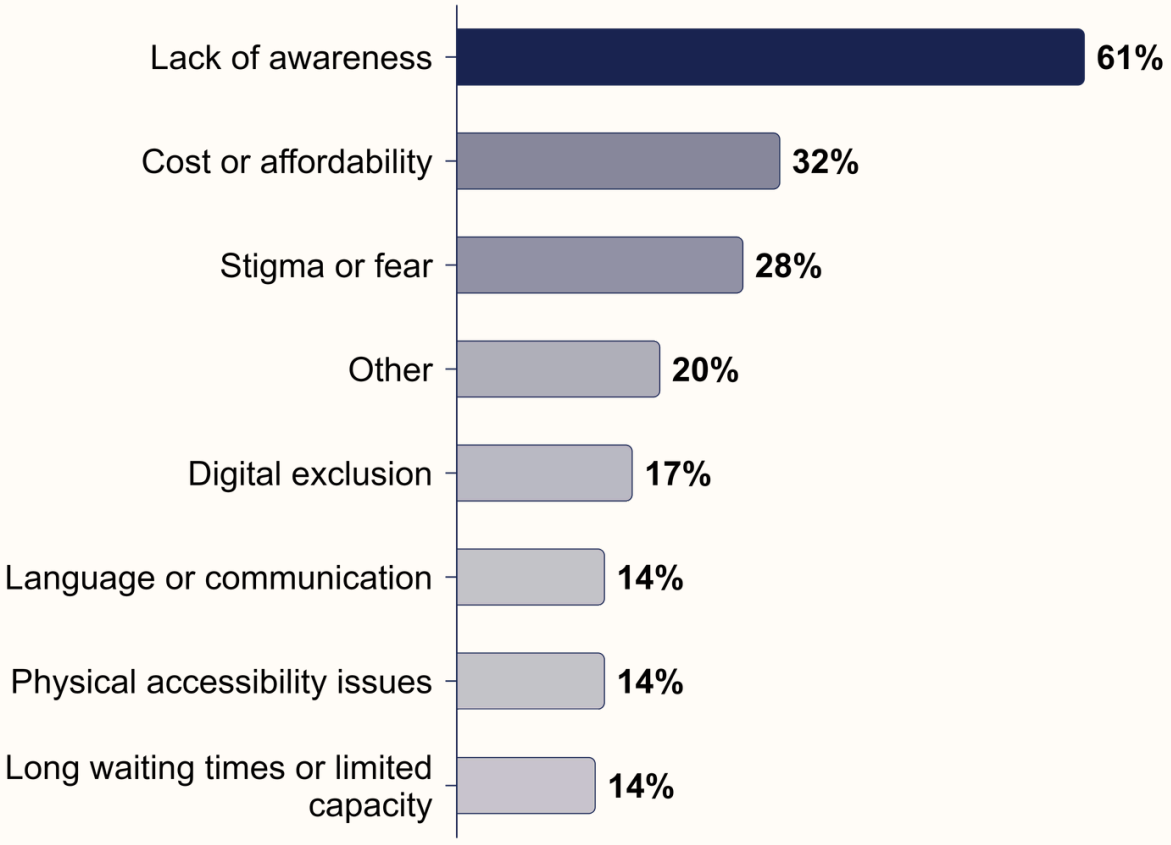


5.3. Barriers to access

Tameside's VCFSE sector supports communities that can face practical, cultural and structural barriers to accessing services. The most common issue is simply knowing what support is available: three in five organisations report a lack of awareness of their services (61%). Local infrastructure support in Tameside includes several approaches intended to make services easier to find, including Action Together's Community Activities Directory and community teams, which help people identify local groups and activities.[15] The planned navigation service is intended to go a step further by helping people who may be unsure where to turn or how to take the first step towards accessing support.[14]

Almost a third of organisations point to affordability barriers, including fees and travel costs (32%), while more than a quarter say that stigma or fear of engaging with services (28%) may affect access. With income deprivation affecting more than a quarter of Tameside residents, the cost of reaching and taking part in activities may limit access even where support is locally available.[6] Fewer organisations say that digital exclusion (17%) and language or communication (14%) are barriers to access.

Figure 5.4. Barriers to accessing services (top 8)

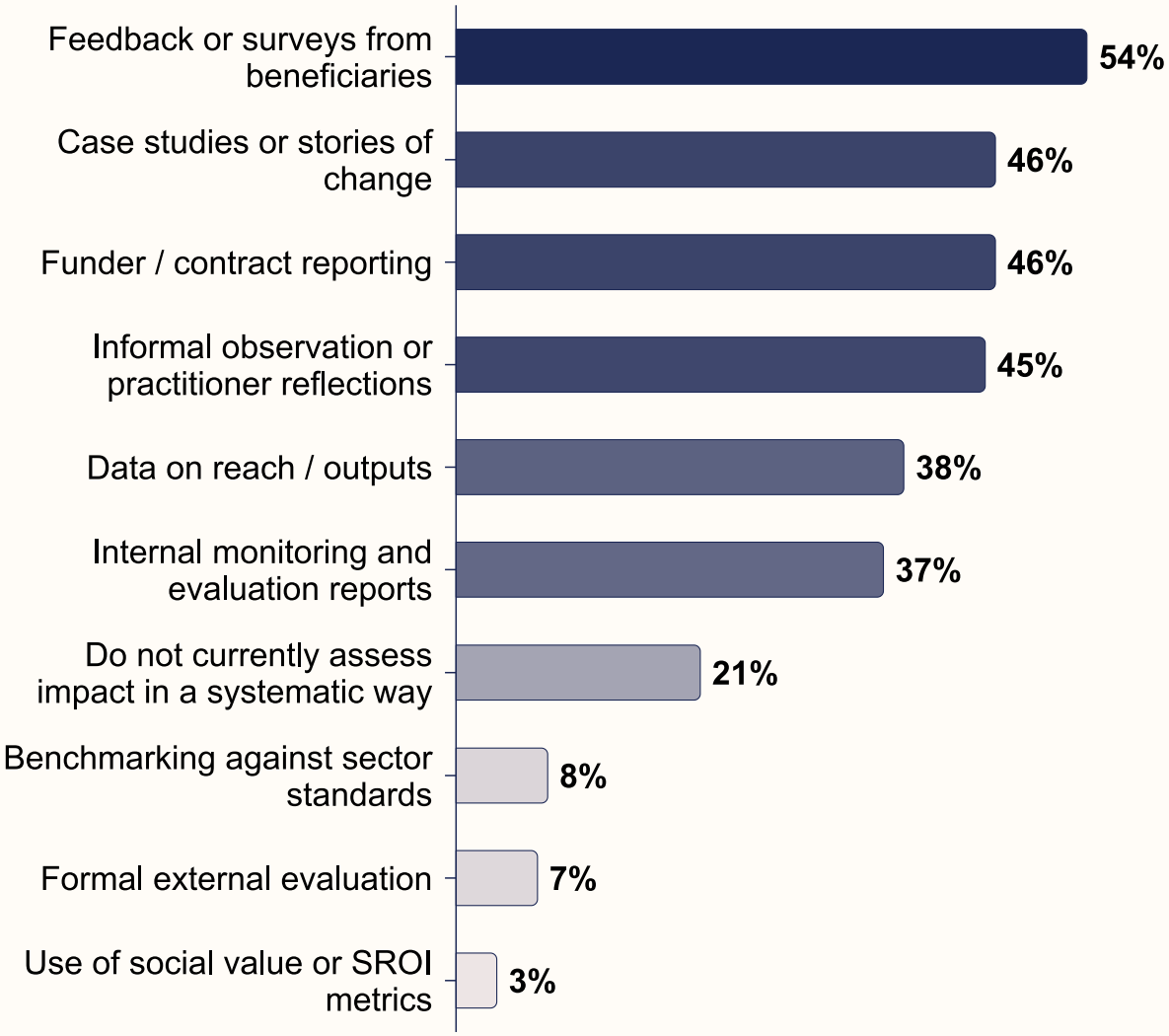


Note. Base = 111. Figure shows the eight most commonly selected responses. Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%.

5.4. Measuring impact and delivery quality

Organisations use a range of methods to understand and demonstrate what their work achieves. More than half gather feedback or surveys from the people they support (54%). Almost half use case studies or stories of change (46%), funder or contract reporting (46%), or informal observation and practitioner reflection (45%). Almost two in five use data on reach and outputs (38%) or internal monitoring and evaluation reports (37%). These approaches allow organisations to describe people's experiences alongside the scale of their activity.

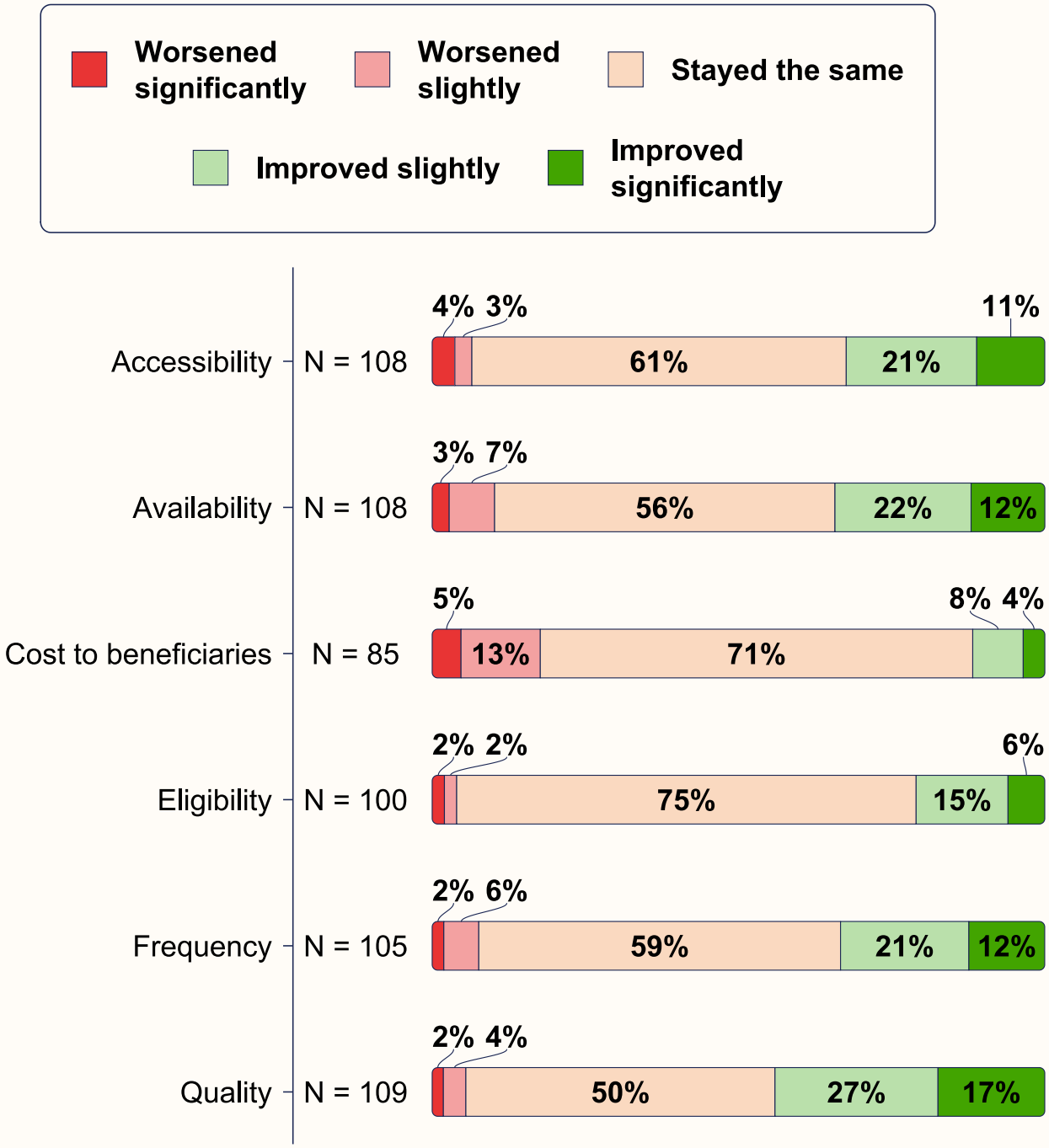
Figure 5.5. How organisations measure impact (top10)



Note. Base = 115. Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%.

Although many organisations are supporting more people compared to a year earlier, more than two in five say the quality of their services improved over the previous year (44%). Around a third reported improved availability (34%), frequency (33%) or accessibility (32%). In contrast, almost one in five report increased costs to the people they support (18%).

Figure 5.6. Changes 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

Action Together reflections

Tameside's VCFSE sector makes a significant financial contribution, but the headline income and expenditure figures should not be read as a sign of security for individual organisations. The picture is more fragile. Many groups describe themselves as stable, but local insight suggests 'stable' can mean different things for different organisations. For a micro group, it may simply mean having enough to cover room hire, refreshments and basic activity costs in the short term, rather than long-term resilience.

Funding remains uncertain and uneven. Donations, fundraising, local infrastructure funding, trusts and foundations all matter, while public sector funding and contracts need careful interpretation. In Tameside, some survey responses may reflect confusion between grants, service level agreements, relational funding and formal commissioned contracts. By contrast, funding distributed through local infrastructure organisations appears particularly important, with high reported success and confidence, reflecting the value of trusted local routes that understand smaller organisations and the communities they serve.

Rising costs, short-term funding, competition for grants and limited full-cost recovery are creating pressure. Overall, the funding landscape is competitive, short term and difficult to navigate, especially for small, volunteer-led organisations. The focus on funding and making ends meet means organisations are hampered in their ability to grow and develop their services.



VCFSE 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,[16] while rising energy, wage and overhead costs have increased the cost of delivery.[17] At the same time, the communities they support are facing greater pressures, driving demand during a period of constraint and uncertainty.

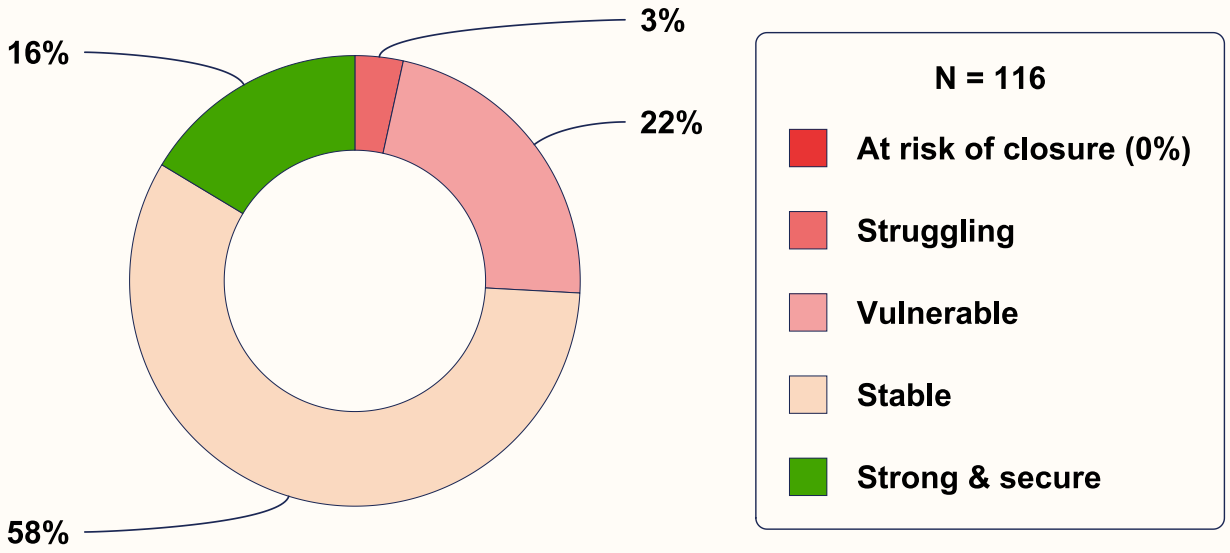
Tameside's VCFSE organisations face many of these pressures. Despite good success in local funding routes, existing funding arrangements are often short-term and fail to keep pace with rising costs, leaving many organisations using reserves to cover routine costs and funding gaps. Finding suitable opportunities, competition for funding and limited time to apply create further pressures. Most organisations expect to maintain or expand their activity over the next year, but relatively few feel strong and secure, with many concerned about high levels of competition for funding and rising costs.

Tameside's VCFSE sector is estimated to have generated £78.06 million in income and spent £75.52 million during 2024/25.

6.1. Financial position

While these estimates describe the economic scale of Tameside's VCFSE sector, they do not capture the financial health of individual organisations. Almost three in five respondents describe their organisation as stable but concerned about the future (58%). More than one in five say they are vulnerable and facing significant pressure, with sustainability uncertain without changes being made (22%). Around one in six feel strong, secure and well-equipped for future challenges (16%). Fewer describe themselves as struggling (3%), and none report being at risk of imminent closure.

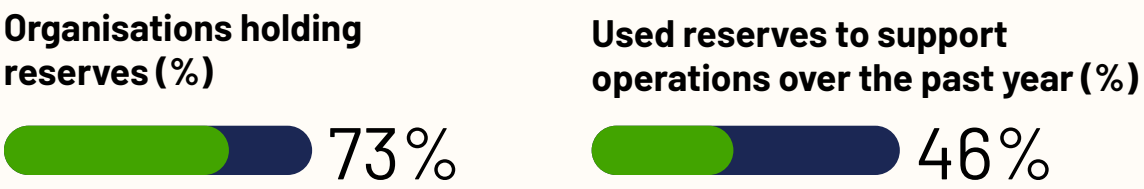
Figure 6.1. Organisations' current financial and operational state



Almost three quarters of responding organisations hold reserves (73%), and just under half have used them to support operations over the past year (46%). Half have drawn on reserves to cover routine operating costs (50%), a third to plug gaps in funding (32%), and three in ten to cover unplanned or emergency costs (29%).

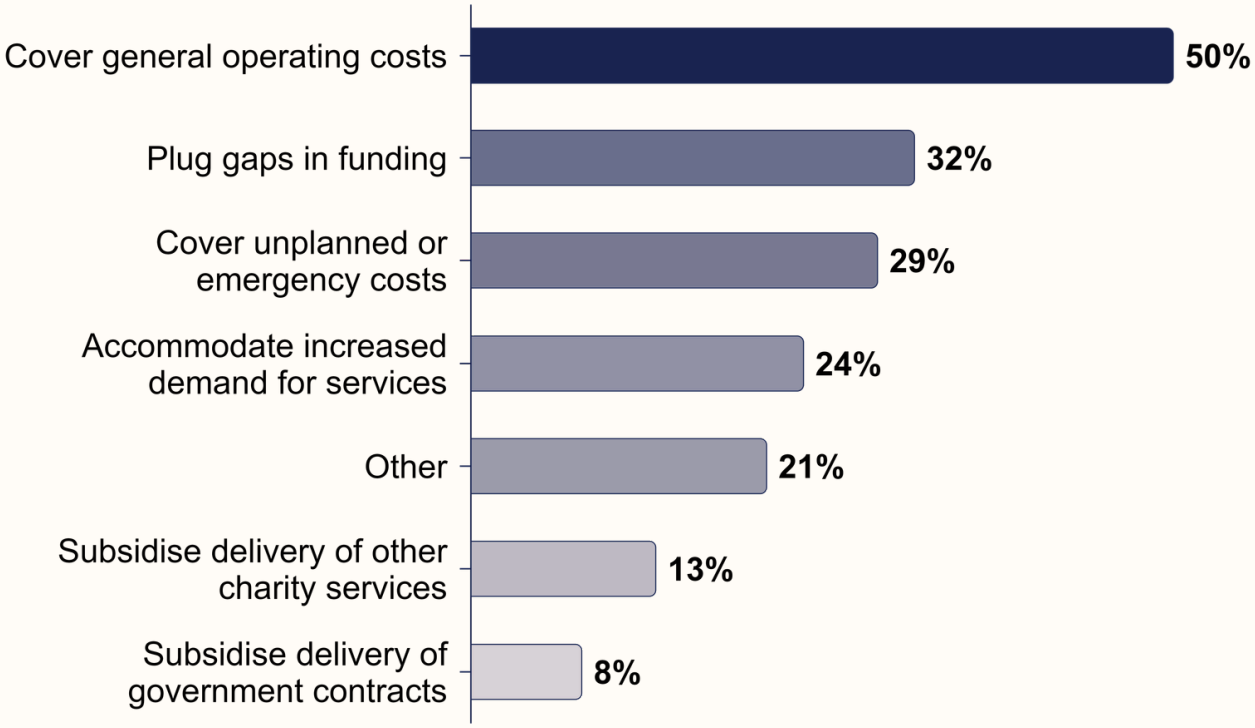
This suggests that, while a large proportion of organisations hold financial reserves, many are using them to support everyday running costs, rather than being held for emergencies or future investment. Using reserves in this way can protect services in the short term, but repeated use reduces the organisation's ability to absorb later shocks, manage delays in future funding, invest in development, or respond to emerging need.

Figure 6.2. Use of financial reserves



Note. Base: holds reserves = 114; used reserves = 82. Figure shows the proportion answering 'Yes'. The 'used reserves' question was asked only of organisations that hold reserves.

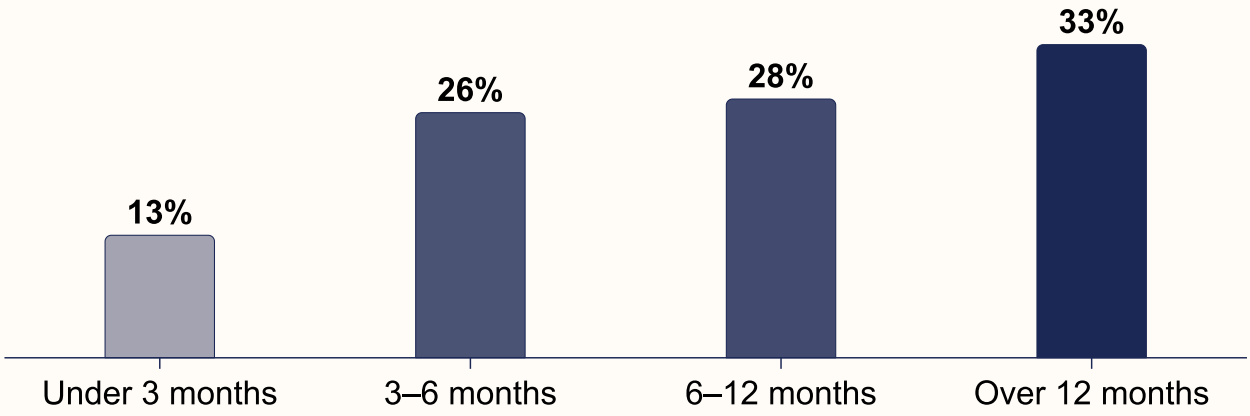
Figure 6.3. Reasons for using reserves over the past 12 months



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

When asked how long their reserves would last at current levels of income and expenditure, a third of responding organisations report more than 12 months of cover (33%). More than a quarter report six to 12 months (28%) or three to six months (26%), while around one in eight have fewer than three months (13%).

Figure 6.4. Number of months reserves are expected to last



Note. Base = 69. 'Don't know' responses excluded.

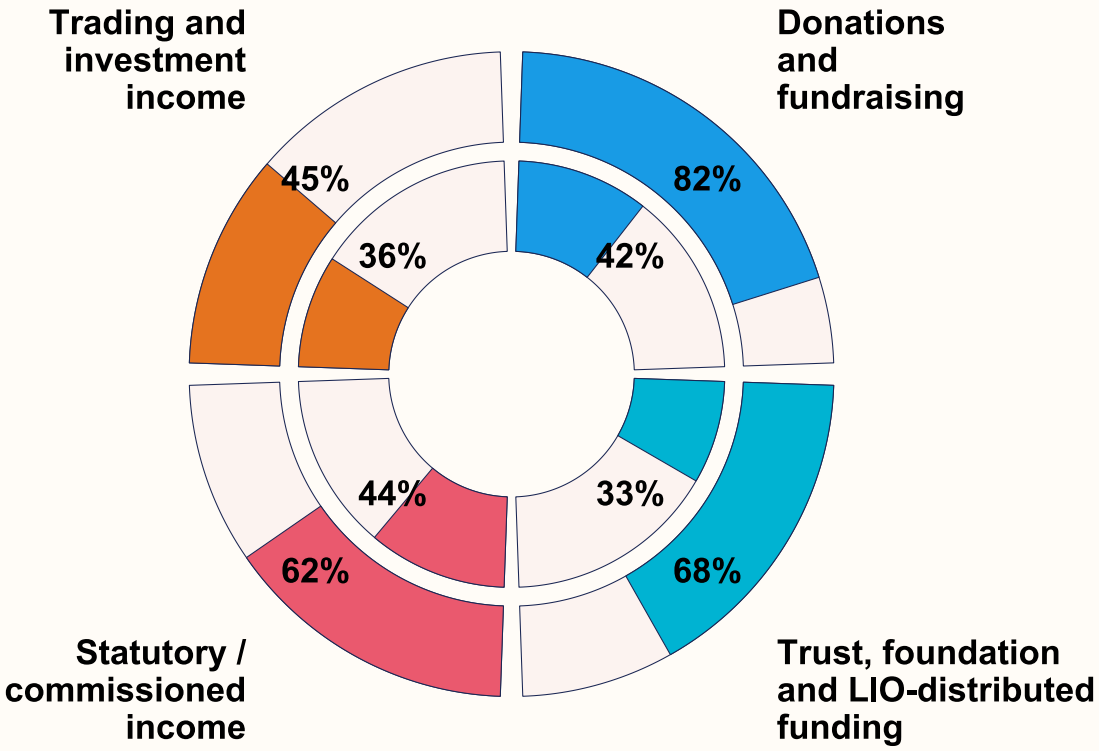
6.2. Income and expenditure

The ways in which VCFSE 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.[18] Some organisations are looking to legacy fundraising, a source with long-term growth potential but uncertain time horizons.[19] While the number of government contracts delivered by VCFSE organisations continues to increase,[20] evidence shows that these often do not cover the true cost of delivering services.[21]

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%. 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.

Survey findings suggest that responding organisations draw on a mix of income sources rather than relying heavily on any single stream. More than four in five receive income from donations and fundraising (82%), over three quarters from funding distributed by trusts, foundations or LIOs (68%), more than two thirds from statutory funding and commissioned income (62%), and almost half receive income from trading or investments (45%). Statutory funding and commissioned income (44%) and donations and fundraising (42%) account for the largest share of overall income, followed by trading and investment income (36%) and funding distributed by trusts, foundations or LIOs (33%).

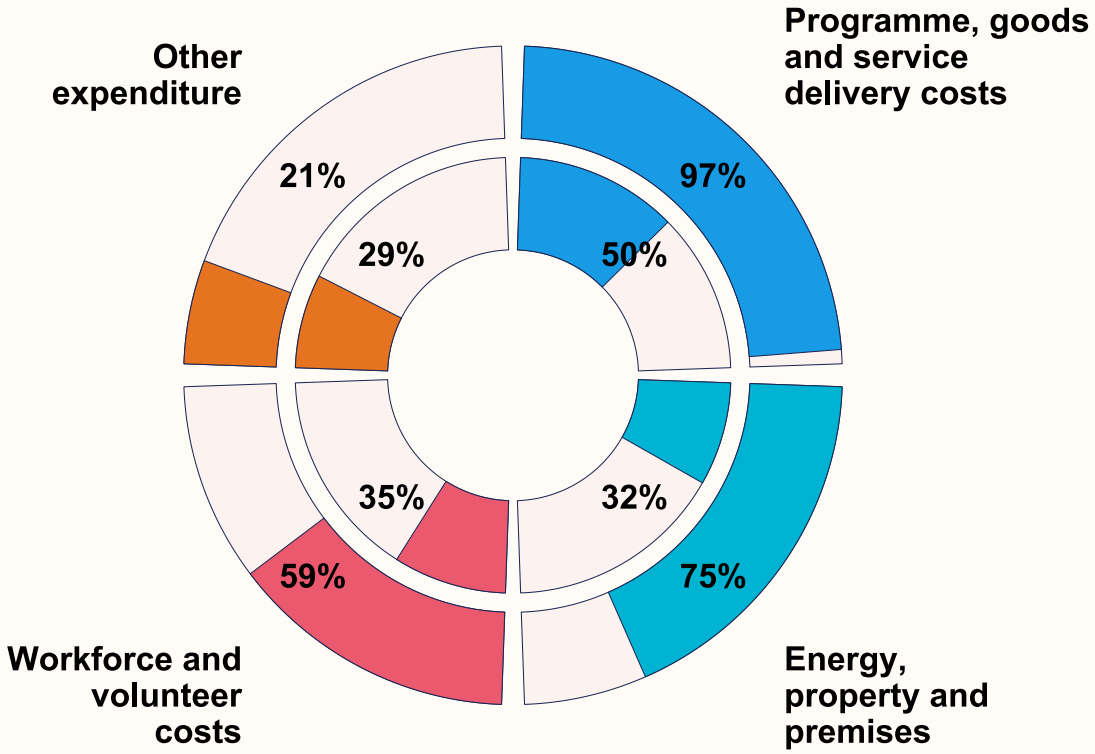
Figure 6.5. Income sources received and their average share of total income



Note. Outer ring shows the percentage receiving any income from each source (base = 100); inner ring shows the average share of total income among organisations receiving that source (base = 45–82, depending on source).

In terms of expenditure, almost all organisations report programme, goods and service-delivery costs (97%), which also account for the largest share of total expenditure (50%). Three quarters report energy, property and premises costs (75%) and almost three in five report workforce and volunteer costs (59%), accounting for 32% and 35% of total expenditure respectively.

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



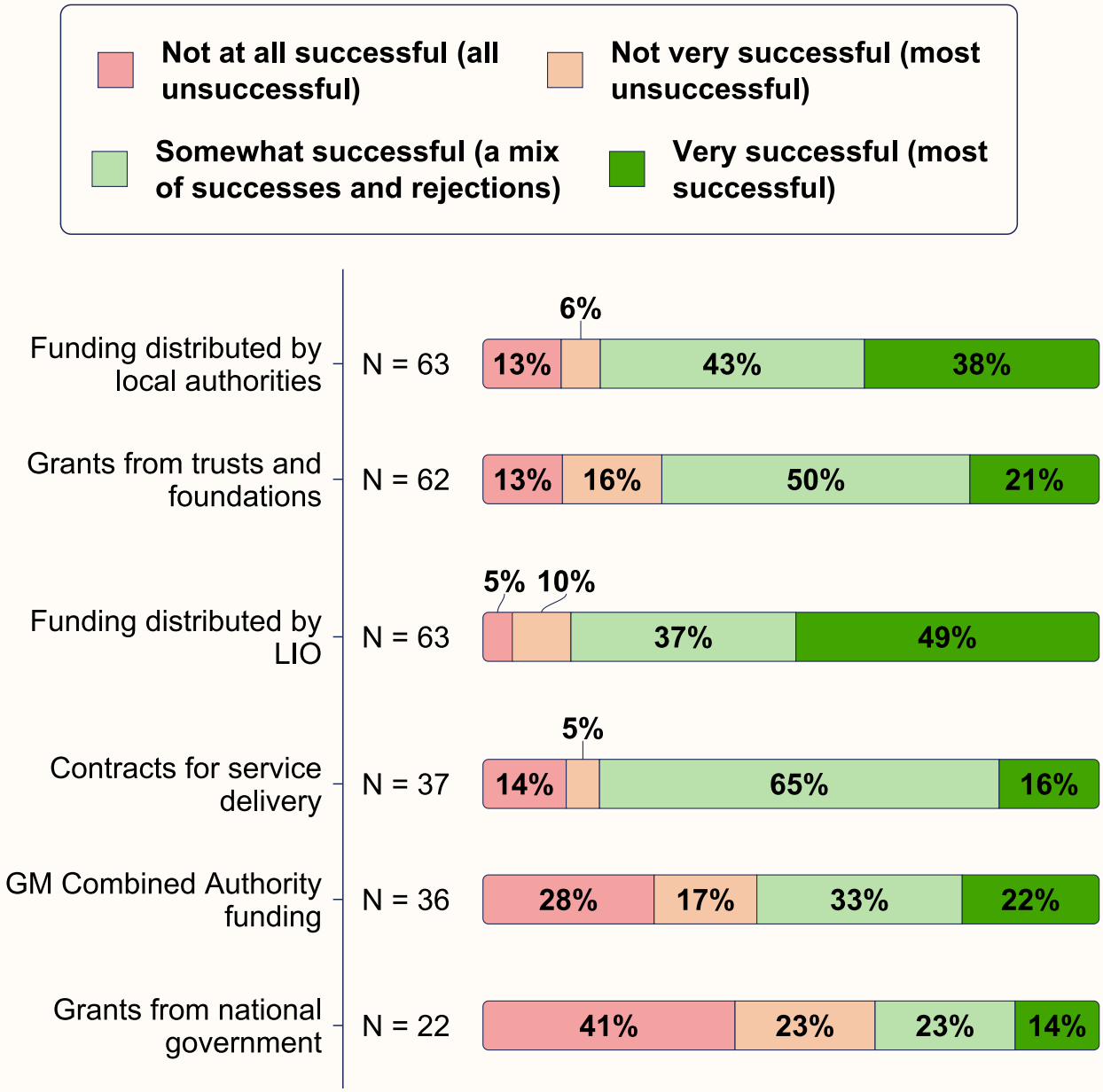
Note. Outer ring shows the percentage reporting any expenditure in each area (base = 103); inner ring shows the average share of total expenditure among organisations reporting expenditure in that area (base = 22–100, depending on area).

6.3. Funding

When asked how successful they were in applying for funding sources relevant to them, almost nine in ten responding organisations reported being very or somewhat successful when applying for funding distributed by LIOs (86%). Action Together provides several local routes into funding, often in partnership with Greater Manchester public services and Tameside Council. These have included the Tameside Communities Fund, which has offered small and medium grants to support community-led health and wellbeing activity and tackle health, social and economic inequalities and support prevention, including funding for locally rooted community anchor organisations.[22,23]

Four in five applicants report success with service delivery contracts (81%) and funding from local authorities (81%), while seven in ten report success with grants from trusts and foundations (71%). Fewer reported success with grants from national government (36%).

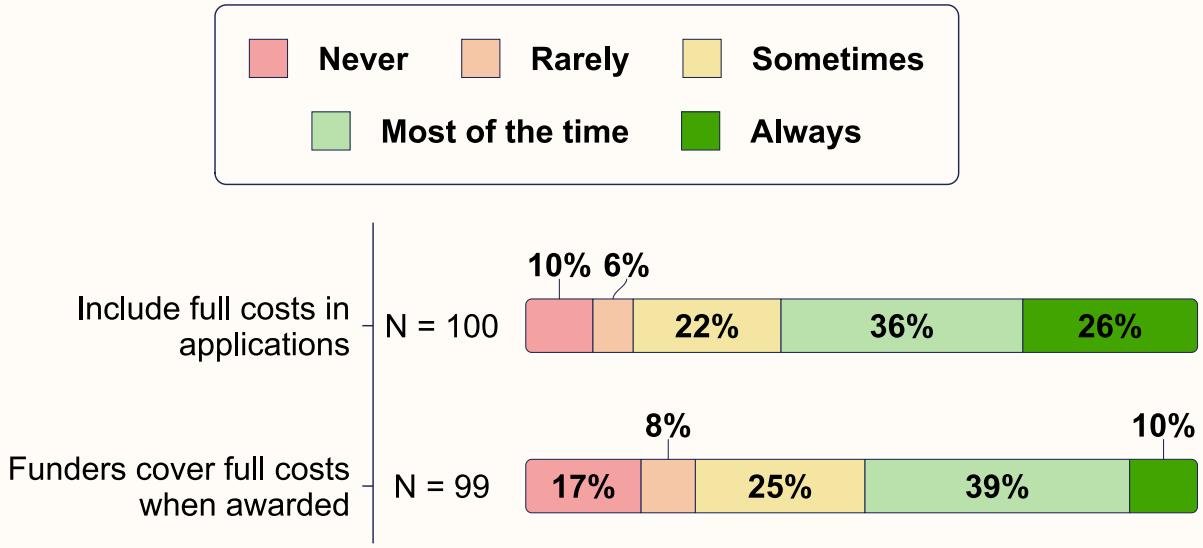
Figure 6.7. Success in funding applications over the past 12 months



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. More than three in five organisations say they always (36%) or mostly (26%) include full costs in funding applications, but fewer than half say funders always (10%) or mostly (39%) cover these costs when funding is awarded. When there is a mismatch between the funding required and what is awarded, organisations can be left to draw on reserves or income from other sources, or rely on unpaid work to ensure support is delivered, a pattern also identified nationally.[21]

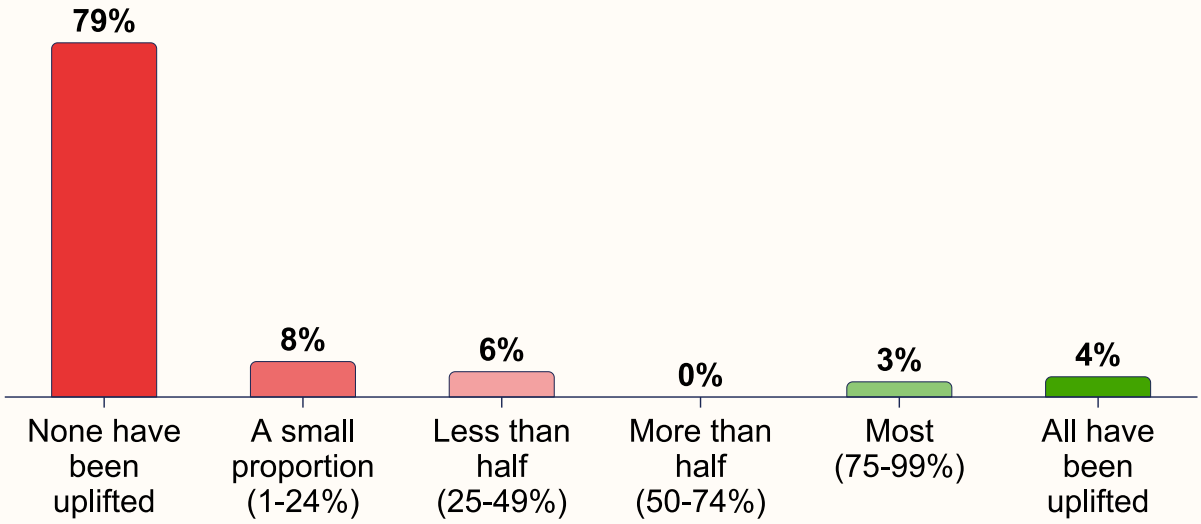
Figure 6.8. Full cost recovery



Note. Bases are shown in the chart. 'Don't know' responses excluded.

With national and international pressures increasing delivery costs, uplifts to grants and contracts are increasingly important. Action Together Tameside reports that it and Tameside Council provide annual uplifts to longer-term arrangements. However, almost four in five responding organisations say none of their awards had been uplifted to reflect rising costs over the previous year (79%), while only a small proportion say most or all had been uplifted (8%). As this covers funding from all sources, it should not be read as an assessment of any single funder.

Figure 6.9. The proportion of organisations' grants or contracts that have been uplifted over the past 12 months



Note. Base = 89. Question shown only to organisations receiving income from grants or contracts from any source.

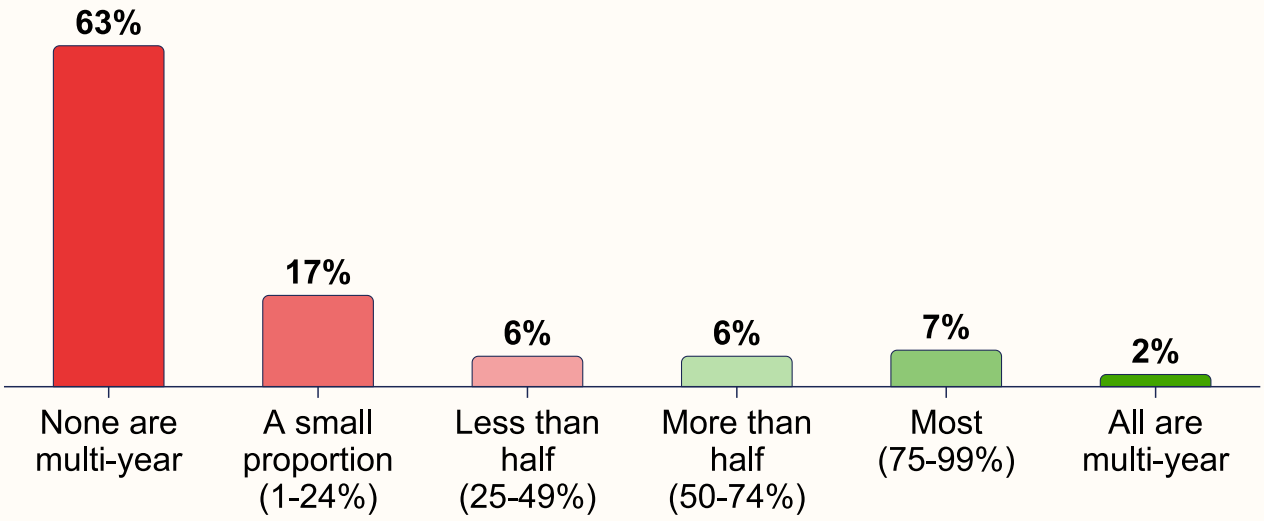
Longer-term funding gives organisations more scope to plan staffing and services, and IVAR's most recent funding experience survey found that multi-year grants were a leading priority for charities.[24] Yet among Tameside organisations receiving grant or contract income, more than four in five say less than half of this funding is multi-year (85%), including almost two thirds that say none is (63%).

A focus group participant described how the availability of short-term grants after the pandemic had since fallen away, leaving organisations competing for fewer opportunities and some funds closing early because of high demand:

> "It almost felt like we were awash with grants, but it was all quite short term. So that's gone away… grant funding that we can apply for has closed early because they've been overwhelmed… we're all competing and fighting with each other to get funding."

Where funding does not keep pace with costs or fails to provide the stability and certainty over several years, organisations are often left to absorb the difference through other income, reserves or unpaid work, a pattern also identified nationally in the VCFSE sector's delivery of public services.[21]

Figure 6.10. The proportion of organisations' grants or contracts that are multi-year (three years or more)

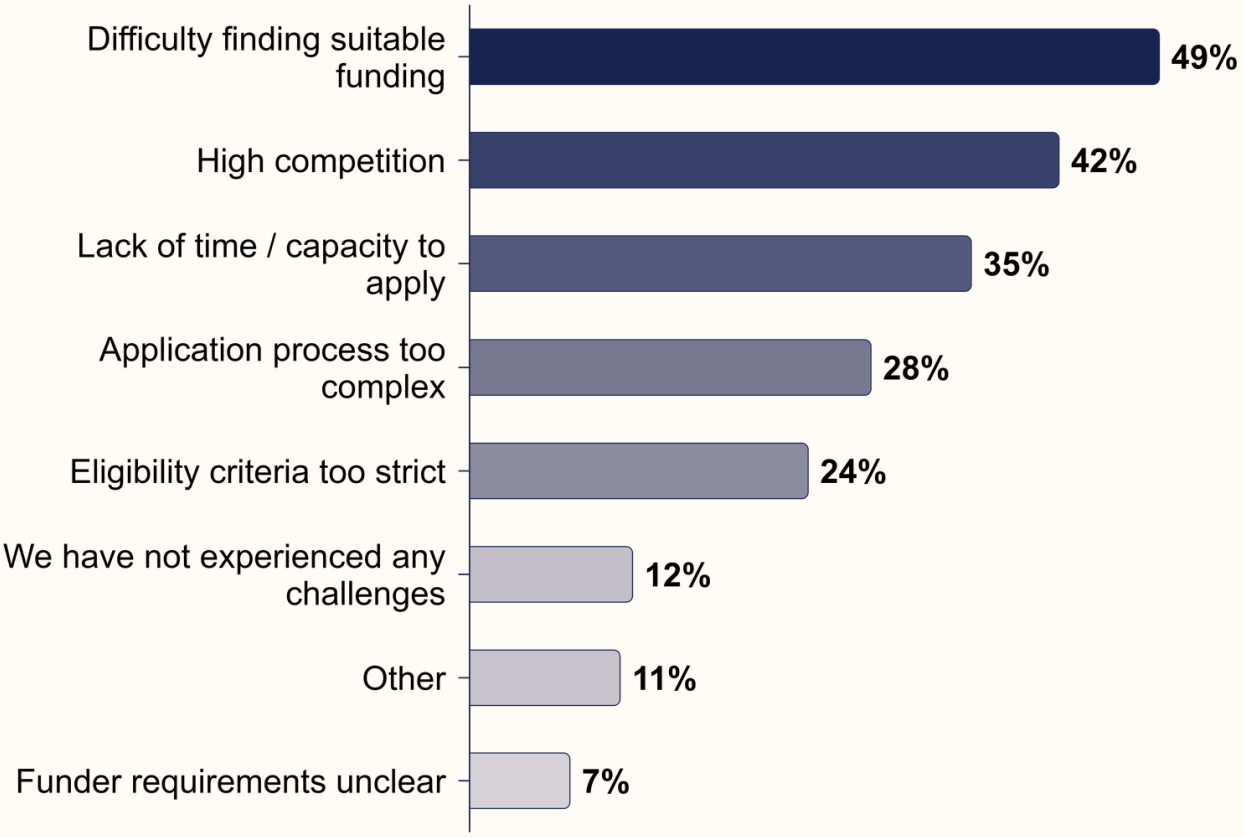


Note. Base = 89. Question shown only to organisations receiving income from grants or contracts from any source.

Finding additional income to cover these shortfalls is itself becoming more difficult. Nationally, some foundations are winding down grant-making, closing to applications or changing priorities, making suitable funding harder to find.[16] Those that remain are also reporting growing numbers of applications.[16]

This is reflected in the survey: difficulty finding suitable funding (49%) and increased competition (42%) are the most commonly reported challenges with finding, applying for and securing funding. The application process is another constraint, with more than a third lacking the time or capacity to apply (35%), more than a quarter pointing to complex processes (28%), and almost a quarter to strict eligibility criteria (24%).

Figure 6.11. Funding challenges



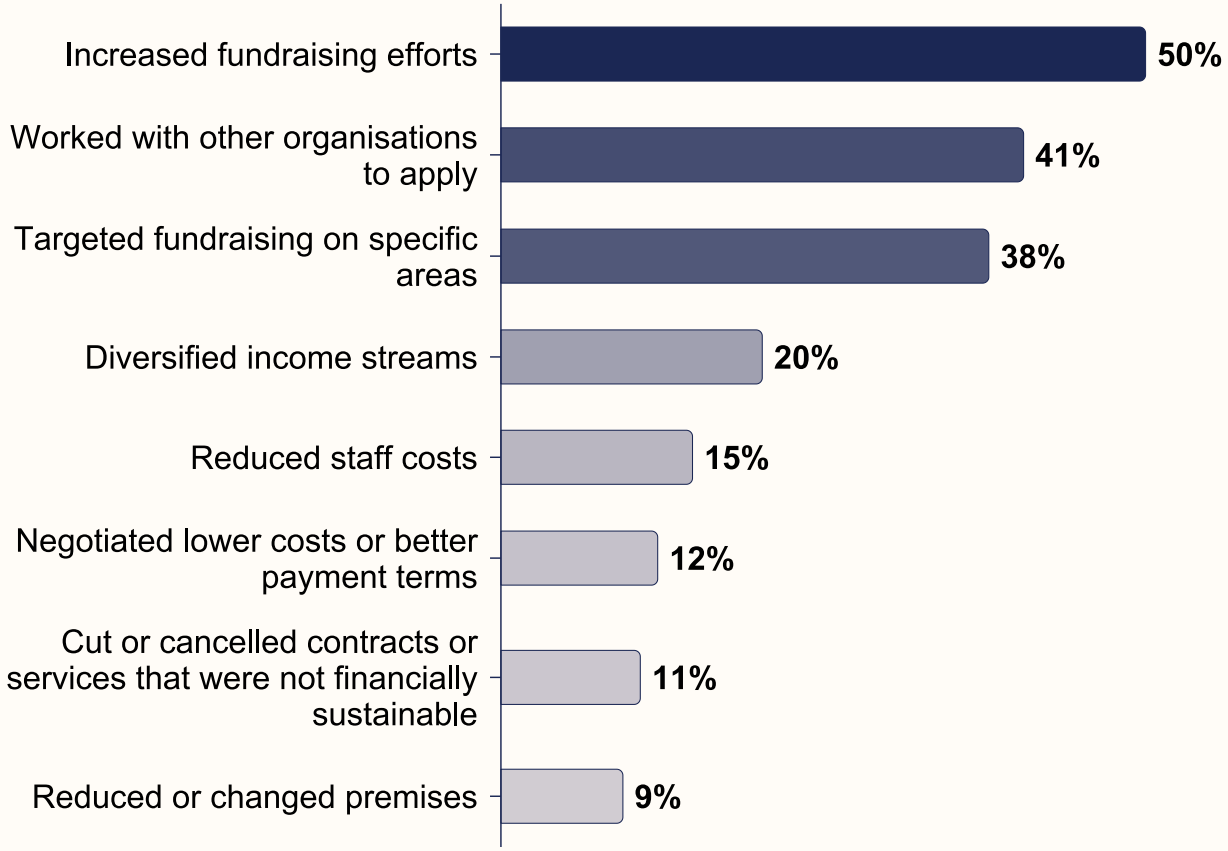
Note. Base = 113. Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%.

To understand how organisations are responding to these funding challenges, we asked what steps they had taken over the previous year. Almost two thirds (65%) had taken at least one action. Of this group, half increased their overall fundraising efforts (50%), while around two in five worked with other organisations on applications (41%) or targeted specific funding areas or opportunities (38%). For the more than a third taking no new action over the previous year (35%), this may reflect limited scope to respond or measures already introduced before that period.

For some organisations, these pressures are changing how they think about generating income. One focus group participant described how their organisation had previously relied on self-funding, but growing numbers of people using its services and the rising costs of supporting them meant this was becoming harder to sustain. They were therefore beginning to consider grants and other fundraising for the first time:

> “We're getting 30, 40 people every single week. We are self-funded… We have not got the money to afford that… we've got to get this money from somewhere. I've got no money coming in any way, shape, or form.”

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



Note. Base = 74. Excludes respondents selecting ‘No actions taken’ (N = 39). Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%.

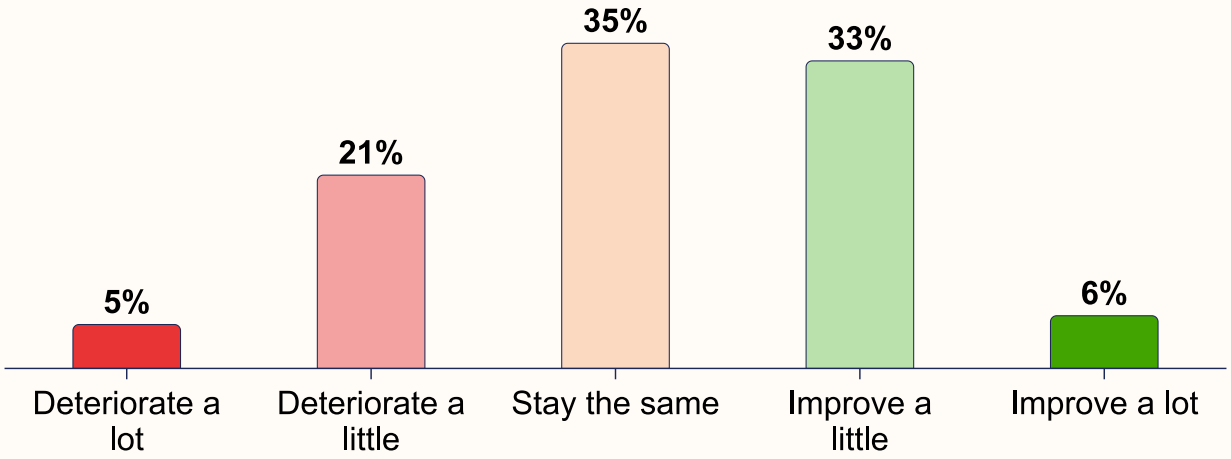
6.4. Premises

Physical premises are part of the sector's contribution, providing places where people can meet, take part in activities and access support. Responding organisations use a mix of premises arrangements: almost half lease or rent premises (49%), more than a quarter use premises with shared or free access (29%), and almost a quarter use premises they own (24%). 7% do not use physical premises.

6.5. Future outlook

Tameside's VCFSE sector is facing rising demand, supporting more people and managing pressures around volunteer recruitment and short-term funding. Despite this, almost two in five organisations expect their financial position to improve over the next 12 months (39%). More than a third expect it to remain the same (35%), while a quarter expect it to deteriorate (26%).

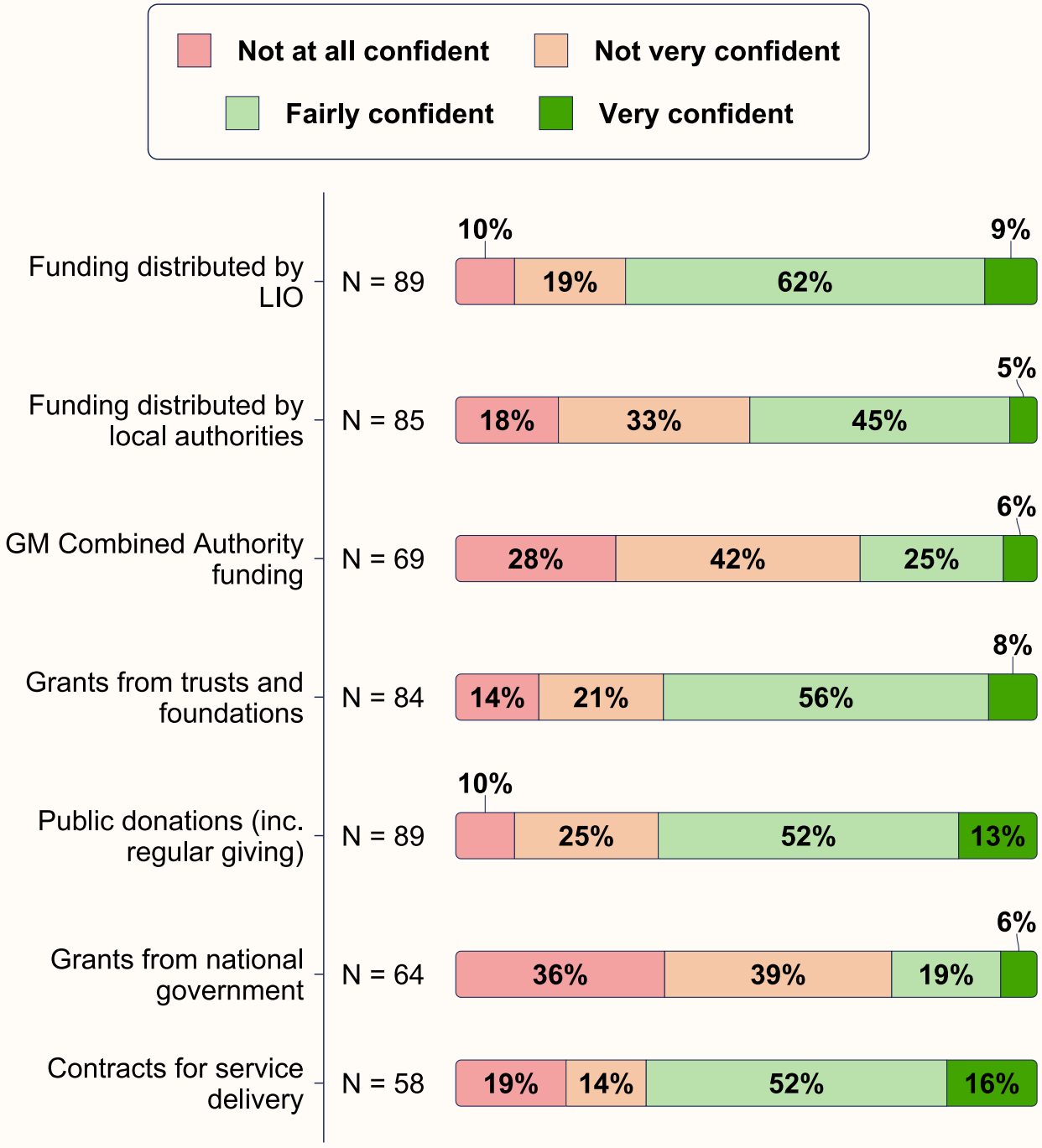
Figure 6.13. Expected financial position over the next 12 months



Note. Base = 105. 'Don't know' responses excluded.

When asked about confidence in securing funding over the next 12 months, organisations are most confident in locally rooted sources and those where they have had previous success. Among organisations that considered each source relevant, more than seven in ten feel fairly or very confident about funding distributed by LIOs (71%), which also had the highest success rate among previous applicants. Around two thirds feel confident about service-delivery contracts (67%), public donations (65%) or grants from trusts and foundations (64%). In contrast, three quarters are not very or not at all confident about national government grants (75%), while seven in ten are not confident about GMCA funding (70%).

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

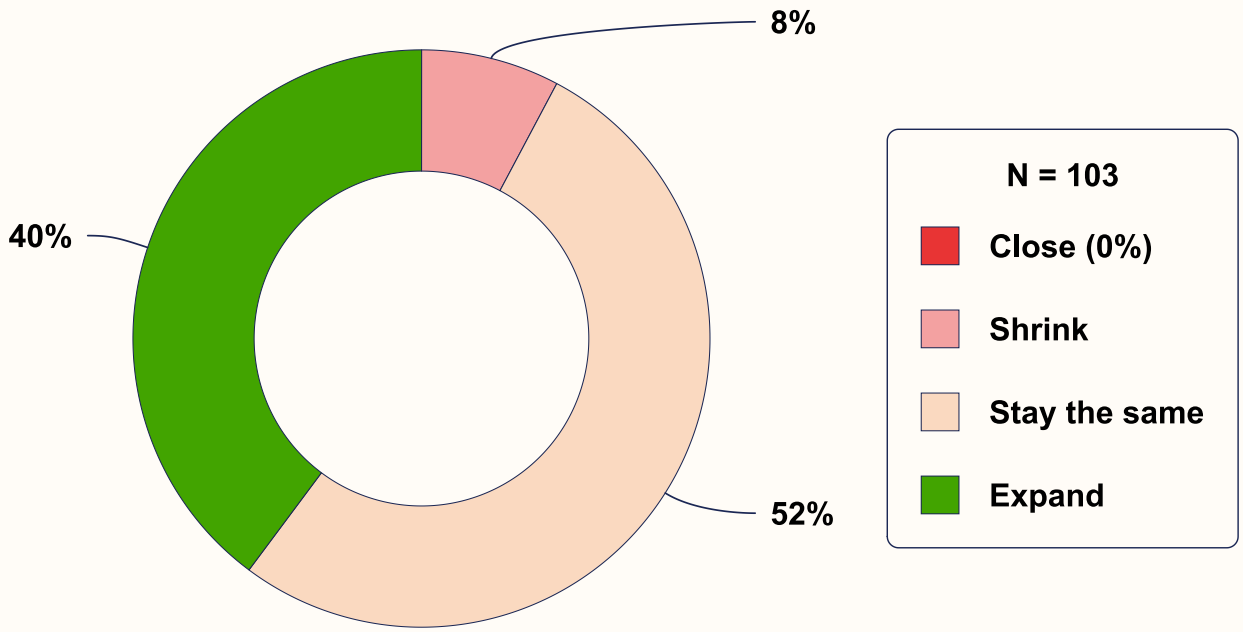


Note. Bases are shown in the chart and vary by source. 'Not applicable' responses excluded for each source. Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

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 may face significant pressures on their own resources.

Looking ahead, more than half of responding organisations expect their operations to continue at a similar level (52%) over the next year. Two in five expect to expand (40%), while 8% expect to shrink. None of those answering the question expect to close.

Figure 6.15. Organisational expectations for the year ahead



Ambitions to maintain, sustain, or grow activity sit alongside a number of financial risks, with organisations pointing to competition for funding (58%) and rising costs (53%) as the main risks to their financial sustainability. A third also say a risk is posed by reduced donations or trading income (33%), while more than a quarter say the same about short-term funding cycles (28%).

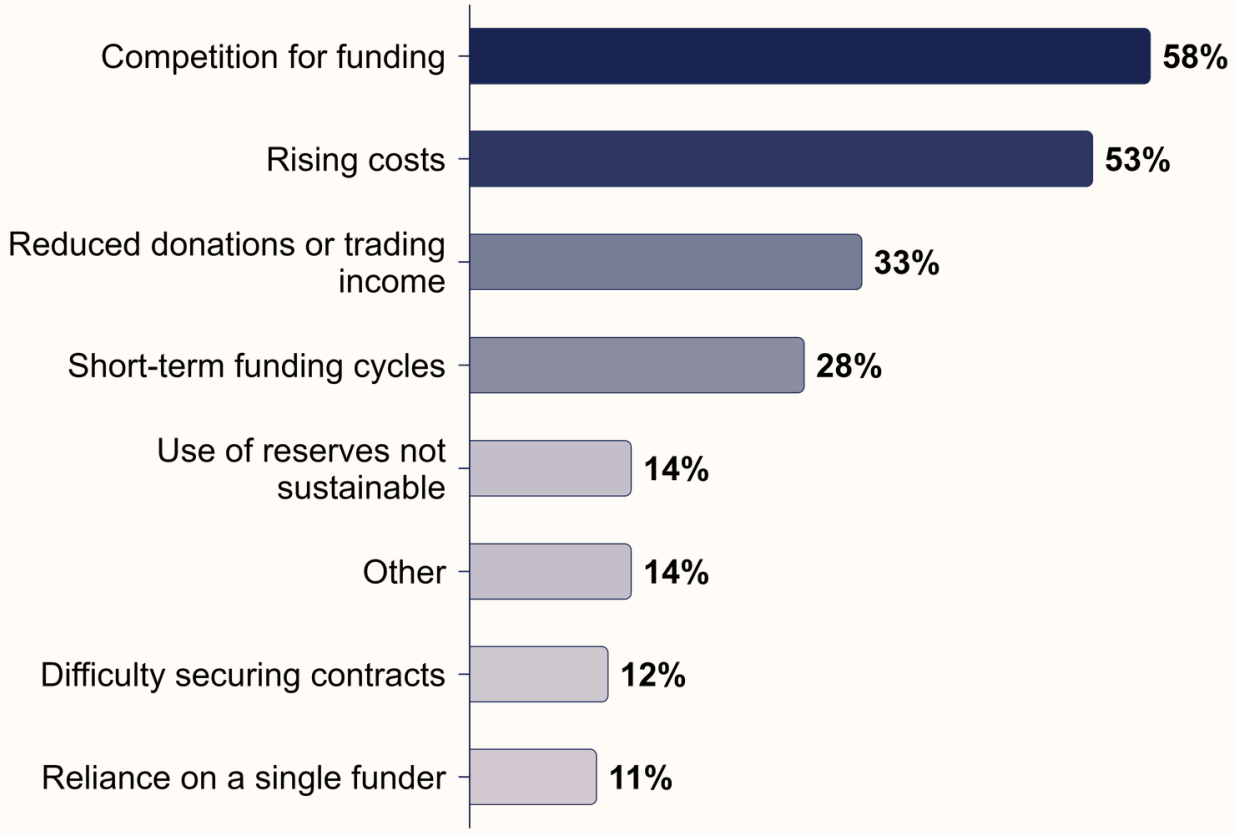
Collectively, these interconnected pressures can have a cumulative impact on organisations. Rising costs make services more expensive to run while leaving residents with less money to donate or spend on the activities organisations provide. As more people also turn to the sector for support, organisations 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.

This creates a wider tension for the sector. Tameside's VCFSE organisations are contributing to communities, supporting people who may otherwise struggle to access help, and generating wider social and economic value, but many are doing so from a financially uncertain position. One focus group participant captured the sense that this contribution is not always matched by the support available to sustain it:

> "We are like the unpaid carers of the economy. We must be saving the economy or making it a huge amount of money. We have a Charity Commission that regulates, but we don't have a commission that supports."

The value the sector provides depends on organisations having the stability and capacity to sustain it. Attention therefore needs to be paid to the conditions that allow them to remain financially viable. Longer-term funding, realistic coverage of delivery costs and accessible routes into funding are important not only for organisational sustainability, but for protecting the support and wider value the sector provides across Tameside.

Figure 6.16. Risks to financial sustainability



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

7. Conclusion

This report shows that Tameside's VCFSE sector is essential social infrastructure: rooted in our towns and neighbourhoods, trusted by local people, and increasingly relied upon as need becomes more complex. The conclusion for local partners is clear: the sector cannot be treated as a useful add-on or a route to low-cost delivery. It must be recognised as a strategic partner in prevention, early help, community connection and local system change.

Partners must act on the findings in five practical ways. First, involve VCFSE organisations earlier in planning, not after priorities, pathways or funding models have already been designed. Local groups hold insight into what people need, how they seek support, and where systems are not working. That knowledge should shape commissioning, service redesign and neighbourhood planning from the start.

Second, fund the real cost of delivery. Short-term grants, restricted funding and awards that do not cover rising costs limit what organisations can do and make it harder to retain staff, support volunteers, manage safeguarding and evidence impact. Funding should include full-cost recovery, realistic inflation uplifts, proportionate monitoring and, wherever possible, multi-year commitments that allow organisations to plan.

Third, protect and invest in community spaces. Many organisations are effective because they are visible, accessible and embedded in places people already know. Premises, shared spaces and open-access community settings are not simply overheads; they are part of Tameside's preventative infrastructure, and essential given the geography of the borough and the hyper-local, place-based nature of the sector.

Fourth, support volunteering as a system priority. Volunteers and trustees are central to the sector's reach, but recruitment, retention and burnout cannot be left to organisations alone. Partners should invest in volunteer support, training, expenses, wellbeing and accessible routes into volunteering, recognising that many volunteers are also navigating pressures in their own lives.

Finally, build simpler, more trusted funding and partnership routes. The findings show that language, processes and funding categories can be confusing or inaccessible for smaller groups. Local infrastructure routes are valued because they understand local organisations and can combine funding with development support. Commissioners and funders should work with these routes, not around them, while also making public sector pathways clearer and easier for residents and organisations to navigate. Insights from local organisations also point to a lack of awareness of where to direct people for support in the system, so clearer links and pathways between the public and VCFSE sector would benefit residents.

Tameside's VCFSE sector is already responding to the needs of the borough with creativity, commitment and deep local knowledge. The task now is for partners to match that commitment with investment, shared decision-making and long-term support. If we want communities to be healthier, more connected and more resilient, we must strengthen the organisations that are already holding much of that work in place.

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Tameside's State of the VCFSE Sector dashboard:
https://action-together.gmstateofthesector.org/

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