Trafford Community Collective

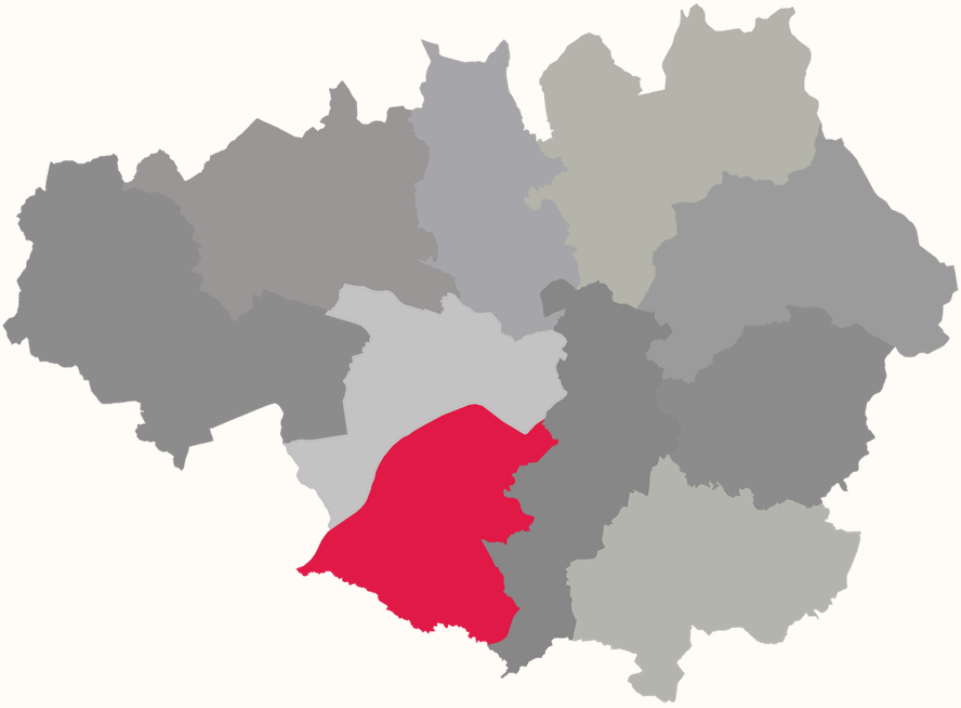
10GM

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

Trafford

State of the VCSE Sector

2026



Acknowledgements

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

Authorship and editorial responsibility

In this report, the foreword, conclusion, and highlighted reflections at the beginning of sections 3, 4, 5, and 6 are authored by Trafford Community Collective. The executive summary is co-authored by Nottingham Trent University (NTU) and Trafford Community Collective. All other sections are authored by NTU. Trafford Community Collective 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

The last few years have brought about huge changes for the VCSE sector in Trafford. The community recovery from COVID-19 and the legacy of the six community hubs set up during this period have meant the VCSE sector is embedded across the four neighbourhood areas of Trafford to provide a range of support to residents. Alongside this, the development of the Live Well programme and other Greater Manchester-wide initiatives have brought a new set of opportunities for VCSE organisations in the borough.

More recently there has been a change of Local Infrastructure Organisation (LIO) with Trafford Community Collective (TCC) taking on this role from October 2025 onwards. TCC is a small but fast-growing LIO and we are thrilled that Trafford has reached the level of responses to be included in this latest iteration of the GM wide State of the VCSE Sector report. As TCC's support to groups continues to develop this research is crucial in helping to see where the focus of this should be in the coming years. This report highlights that Trafford's VCSE sector brings enormous economic value into the borough – generating £212million of income to the borough and contributing £177.12 million per year to the local economy. The sector plays a crucial role in supporting residents of Trafford, especially those people that are struggling whatever their circumstances.

Volunteering is crucial to the operations of many VCSE organisations – and the research tells us that there are 42,000 volunteer and trustee roles in Trafford – with a value of £61.33 million. Without this capacity many organisations simply couldn't operate in the way that they do and the support underpinning this in terms of co-ordination is not secure into the future in Trafford. VCSE organisations are seen as a crucial part of the system in Trafford. Trafford Council has been historically underfunded from Central Government and as a result of this council officers have needed to think differently about how services are developed and delivered in partnership. It is recognised that the VCSE plays a vital role in this. e.g. Live Well, Fairer Trafford, Integrated Neighbourhood Health plans, Public Health strategies.

Trafford has large and, in some areas, growing disparities in health and wellbeing between its most and least wealthy places. This research shows that many VCSE groups are supporting the most vulnerable and marginalised groups in the borough. The majority of VCSE organisations are locally rooted, small in size and able to quickly respond to community needs. However, many of those same organisations are also struggling to secure longer-term funding, using their reserves to continue delivery and are ultimately unsure of their future. TCC wants to support the VCSE sector in Trafford to move to a place where the funding situation for organisations is secure, therefore enabling organisations to play a full part in supporting the long-term health and wellbeing of residents in Trafford.

Bernadette Ashcroft, Chief Executive, Trafford Community Collective

Executive summary

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

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

Trafford sits within this national context as an increasingly diverse borough.[1] Children make up a larger share of its population than across England, while the proportion of older residents is higher than across Greater Manchester.[2] On the 2025 Index of Multiple Deprivation, Trafford is the least deprived of Greater Manchester's ten boroughs and the 201st most deprived local authority in England. Even so, six of its small neighbourhoods are among the most deprived 10% nationally.[3,4] Local evidence also identifies a healthy-life-expectancy gap of around 16 years between the most and least deprived areas.[5]

This report provides an up-to-date picture of Trafford's VCSE sector in 2026, considering where and how organisations and groups work, the communities they support, their contribution to Trafford, and the pressures affecting their ability to continue delivering. It draws on 56 usable survey responses, a focus group, wider local and national evidence, and informed estimates of the sector's overall scale and contribution.

An estimated 1,626 VCSE organisations and groups exist in Trafford, driven by a diverse collective workforce of over 46,000 staff, volunteers and trustees, and generating approximately £212 million in annual income. The findings show the crucial role the VCSE sector plays in supporting the residents in Trafford to live healthy and happy lives, and to bridge the gap between the most and least deprived communities, some of which live side by side in the borough. There is a huge economic value associated with the VCSE sector in terms of income generated and in the value of volunteering hours, but this scale sits alongside strain for many organisations.

Most respondents have seen demand rise and half are supporting more people. Organisations are sustaining this work despite limited capacity and uncertain resources, with a third struggling financially. Many find it difficult to recruit volunteers, and workforce shortages mean existing staff and volunteers are contributing more time and experiencing stress or burnout.

Funding is often short term and uplifts are rare when costs rise, leaving some organisations to draw on reserves to plug gaps in funding and increasingly cover routine operating costs.

Sustaining the sector's role will require continued investment in the financial resilience and security of Trafford's VCSE sector, alongside partnerships in which community organisations have a meaningful role in shaping decisions so that the sector can continue to support communities, reduce inequalities and help the borough thrive.



Glossary

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

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

Glossary

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

1. Methodology

This report forms part of the 2026 Greater Manchester State of the VCSE Sector project. The findings in this report relate specifically to VCSE organisations based in Trafford and include estimates of the scale and contribution of Trafford'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 56 usable responses from VCSE organisations based in Trafford. It asked about organisations' activities, who they support, where they work, demand for services, staff and volunteers, finances, and funding. Trafford Community Collective 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 Trafford VCSE organisations between March and April 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 Trafford Community Collective and follow-up contact with survey respondents. NTU analysed the discussions 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 56 usable responses and an estimated 1,626 VCSE organisations in Trafford, the indicative margin of error is around ±12.9 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. For example, applying this margin to a finding of 60% gives a range of around 47% to 73%. 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. This margin of error means individual percentages are less precise, particularly where there is only a small percentage-point difference.

NTU compared the respondent profile with registered VCSE organisations in Trafford. 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. Success in funding applications describes experiences among applicants to each source rather than the value or number of awards. Where fewer than 10 organisations answered a question, findings may be described in the text but are not charted, as percentages based on low bases can vary substantially with small changes in responses.

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).[6] 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

Trafford is estimated to have 1,626 VCSE organisations, including registered organisations and 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 Trafford 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.[7] 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 Trafford 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 Trafford 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 Trafford'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 Trafford. 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 Trafford told us directly through the survey.

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

1,626 organisations

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

£212 million annual income

Trafford's VCSE sector generated an estimated £212 million in income during 2024/25.

Mostly micro and small

We estimate that micro organisations and groups account for seven in ten (70%) of the sector. Small organisations make up 19%, medium organisations 10%, and large, major and super-major organisations 2%.

42,000 volunteer and trustee roles

The sector's work is powered by an estimated 32,900 volunteers and 9,100 trustees or Board members.

738,087 instances of support

Traffords VCSE sector is estimated to provide 708,700 contacts or episodes of support to people and communities each year.

4.56 million volunteer and trustee hours

Volunteers and trustees contribute around 87,700 hours each week, equivalent to 4.56 million hours a year.

£61.33 million estimated value of volunteering

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

3,516 full-time equivalent paid staff

This represents an estimated 4,595 individual employees working in Trafford's VCSE organisations.

£177.12 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 Trafford's VCSE sector.

2.2. What Trafford organisations told us

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

> “Our role is to build the community, and I think that's what we have done over the last twenty-five years… when we started, the park was a no-go area… we formed to try and bring that back. And in doing so, what we found was it built the community spirit back… I think we were instrumental in bringing that community feel back... that feeling of belonging and of knowing who your community is.”

Demand is rising
Two thirds of organisations say demand for their services increased over the past year (67%), while half are supporting more people (50%).

Financial vulnerability
More than one in three describe their organisation as vulnerable, struggling or at risk of imminent closure (36%). In contrast, only 8% feel strong, secure and well-equipped for future challenges.

Funding not keeping pace
Among organisations receiving grant or contract income, almost three quarters say less than half of their funding is multi-year (74%), and more than two thirds report no uplift to reflect rising costs (69%).

Reserves filling gaps
Among organisations using reserves, more than half have drawn on them to meet general operating costs (57%), while more than two in five have used them to plug funding gaps (43%).

Funding risks
Almost two thirds identify rising costs as a leading financial risk (64%), followed by competition for funding (60%) and short-term funding cycles (34%).

Volunteer capacity
Almost half of organisations report difficulty recruiting volunteers (45%), while half say they do not have enough volunteers to carry out their work and meet their objectives (50%).

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

Trafford Community Collective reflections

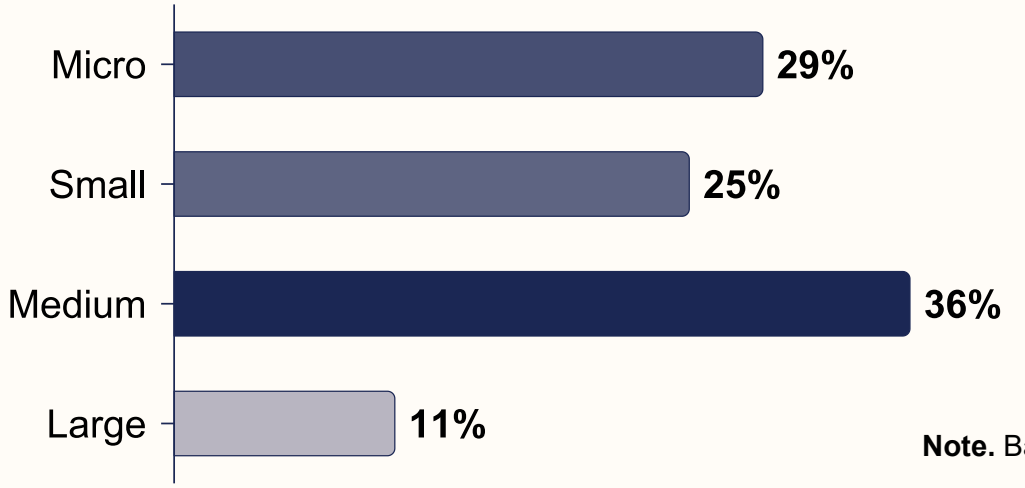
The inequality between the most and least deprived communities in Trafford is stark. The need to close this gap has led to a large proportion of VCSE groups in Trafford focussing on health and wellbeing and operating at a neighbourhood level. Many organisations support the more marginalised communities in the borough as identified in Fairer Trafford strategy. Trafford is also home to a number of larger charities and organisations that operate across Greater Manchester and beyond.

Trafford is the least deprived borough in Greater Manchester overall, with around a quarter of residents living in neighbourhoods among the least deprived 10% in England. Yet there are pockets of deprivation which are concentrated in parts of the north and west of the borough, including six small neighbourhoods among the most deprived 10% nationally,[4] making place-based approaches important. This section sets out what Trafford's VCSE sector does, where it operates, and who it supports.

3.1. Size, legal form and organisational age

More than a third of responding organisations are medium-sized (36%), while almost three in ten are micro organisations (29%) and a quarter are small (25%). Large, major, and super-major organisations account for the remaining 11%.

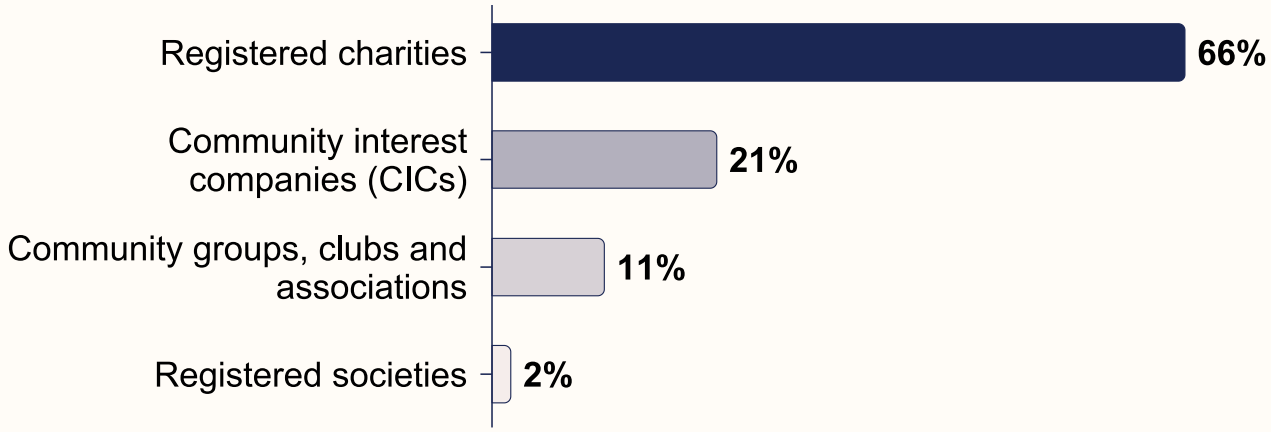
Figure 3.1. Proportion of responding organisations by size



Note. Base = 56.

Registered charities account for two thirds of responding organisations (66%). More than one in five are Community Interest Companies (21%), while 11% are community groups, clubs and associations and 2% are registered societies. Just under half (45%) of organisations identify as social enterprises, showing that trading and enterprise are part of how many organisations pursue their social purpose.

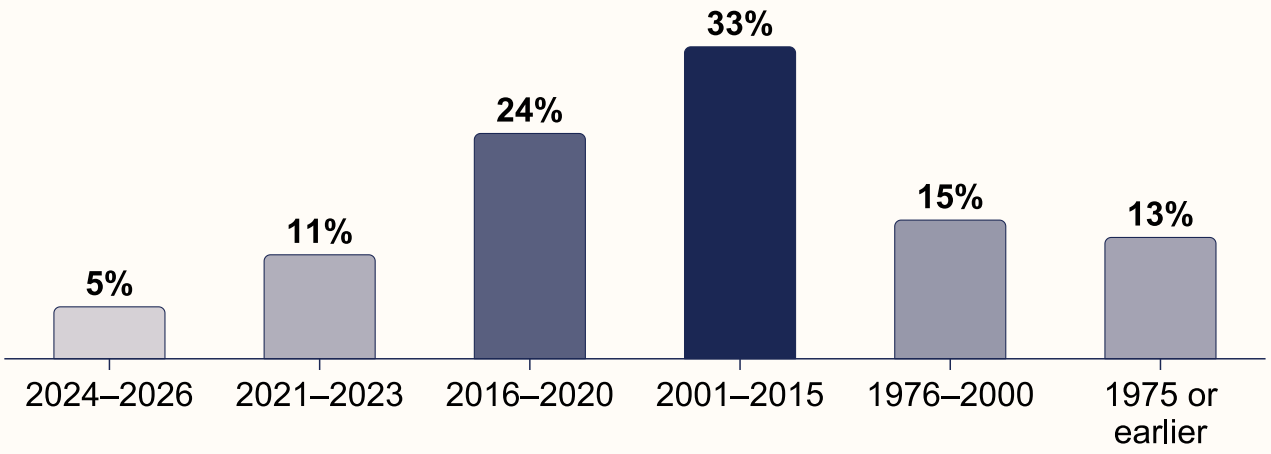
Figure 3.2. Proportion of responding organisations by legal status



Note. Base = 56.

Trafford's VCSE sector combines long-established organisations with newer groups. Around one in six were established within the last five years (16%), while almost a quarter were established between 2016 and 2020 (24%). A third were established between 2001 and 2015 (33%), and more than a quarter were established in 2000 or earlier (28%).

Figure 3.3. Year in which organisations were established



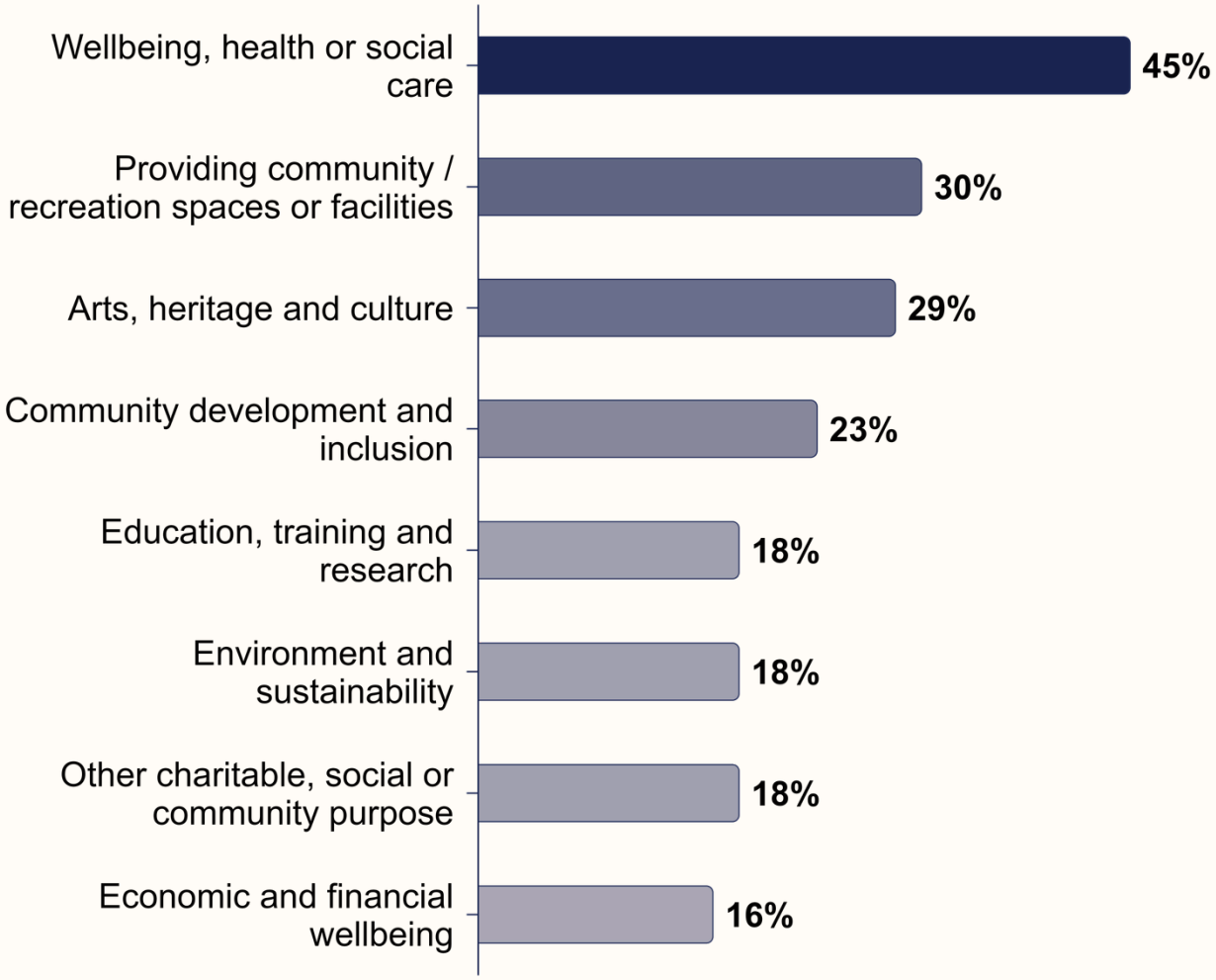
Note. Base = 55.

3.2. What they do

Trafford's VCSE sector combines a strong focus on health and care with community spaces, cultural activity and neighbourhood development. Almost half of responding organisations work in wellbeing, health or social care (45%), in a borough where favourable average health outcomes conceal substantial differences between communities. Although healthy life expectancy is above the England average across Trafford as a whole, local evidence identifies a gap of around 16 years between its most and least deprived communities.[2,5]

Just under one in three provide community or recreation spaces and facilities (30%), a similar proportion work in arts, heritage and culture (29%), and just under a quarter work to promote community development and inclusion (23%).

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

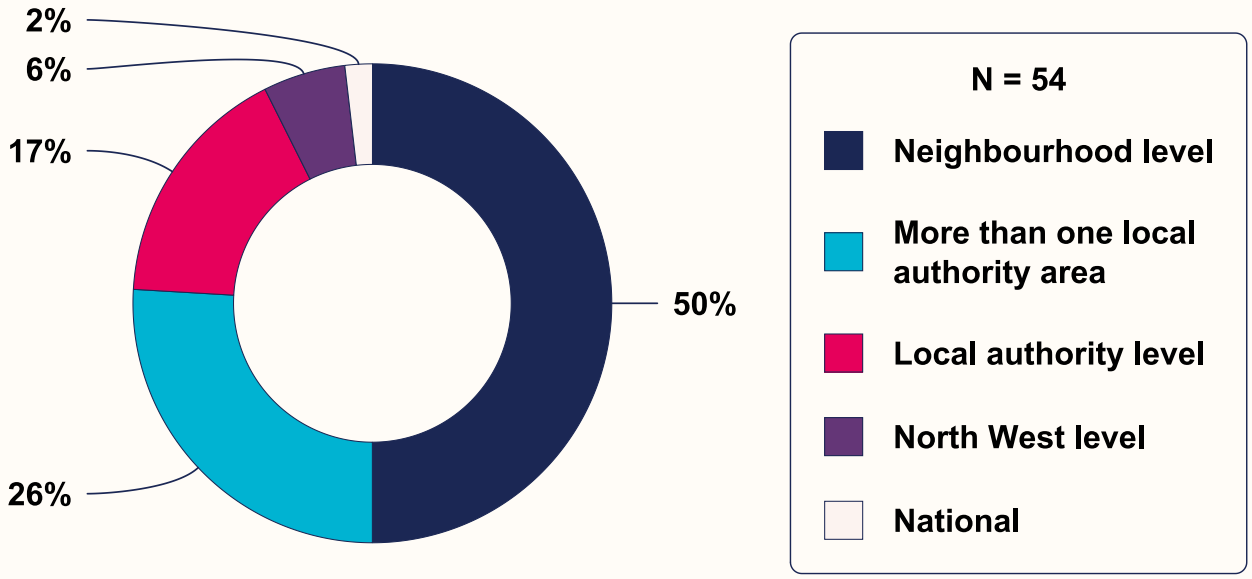


Note. Base = 56. Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%.

3.3. Where they operate

Many responding organisations work close to the communities they support, with half of responding organisations working primarily at neighbourhood level (50%). One in six work across Trafford as a whole (17%), while over a quarter work across more than one local authority area (26%). Fewer work mainly across the North West (6%) or nationally (2%).

Figure 3.5. Geographic scope of organisations' work



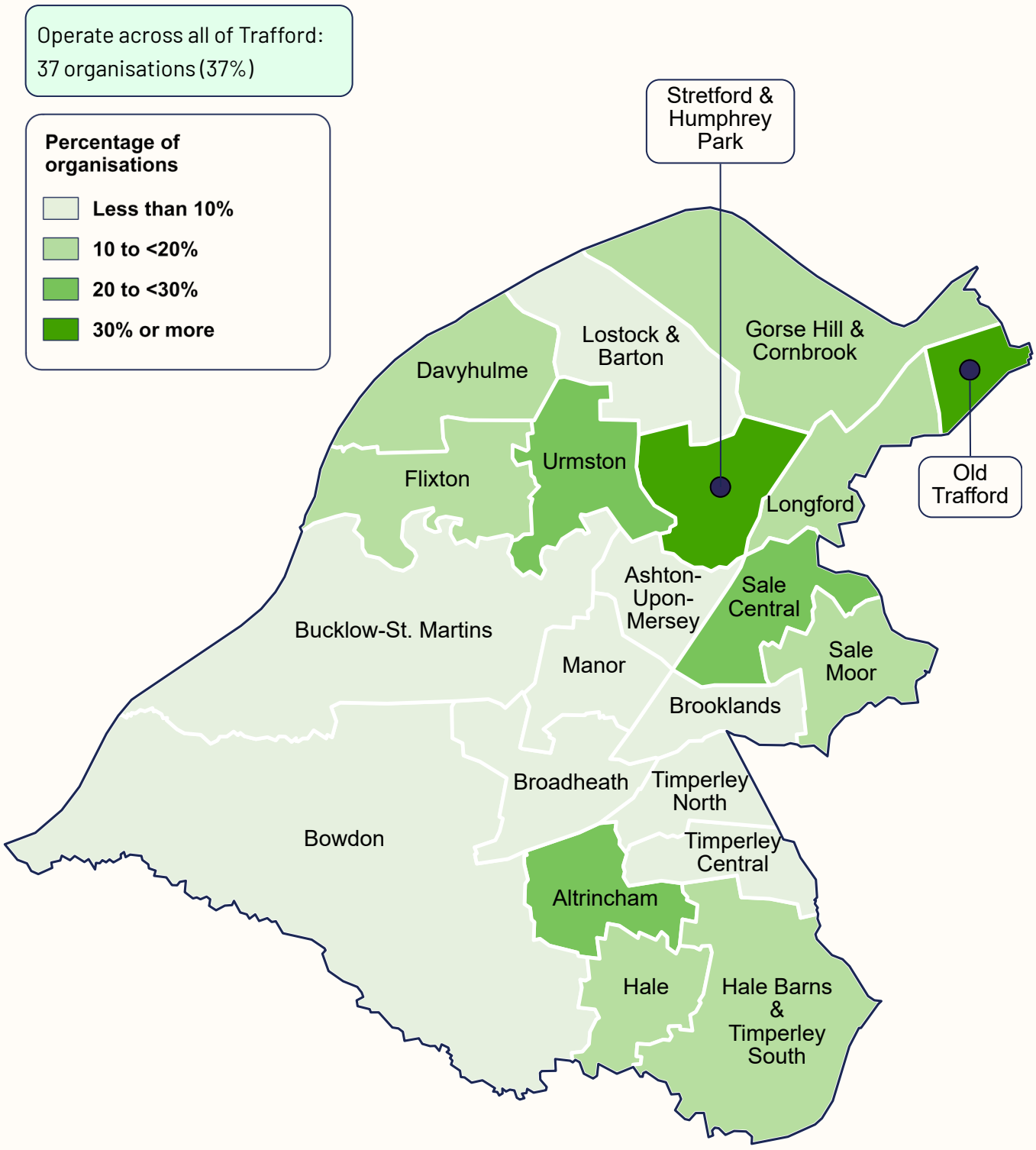
Residents of Trafford are also supported by VCSE organisations based outside the borough. We therefore asked all organisations that selected Trafford as one of the main areas in which they carry out their activities which parts of the borough they work in. More than a third say they operate across all of Trafford (37%).

Respondents who did not select 'All of Trafford' could identify one or more individual wards. Among this group, Old Trafford is the most commonly reported area of operation (41%), followed by Stretford and Humphrey Park (33%). Bucklow St Martins and Manor are the least-selected wards (both 3%).

Responding organisations report substantial activity in Old Trafford, one of the borough's most deprived wards. However, reported reach is much lower in Bucklow St Martins, which also experiences relatively high deprivation within Trafford.[8] Differences in reported activity across wards may reflect uneven provision, the number of organisations responding to the survey, and the types of organisations that responded. Ward-level coverage may therefore differ with a larger sample.

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

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



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

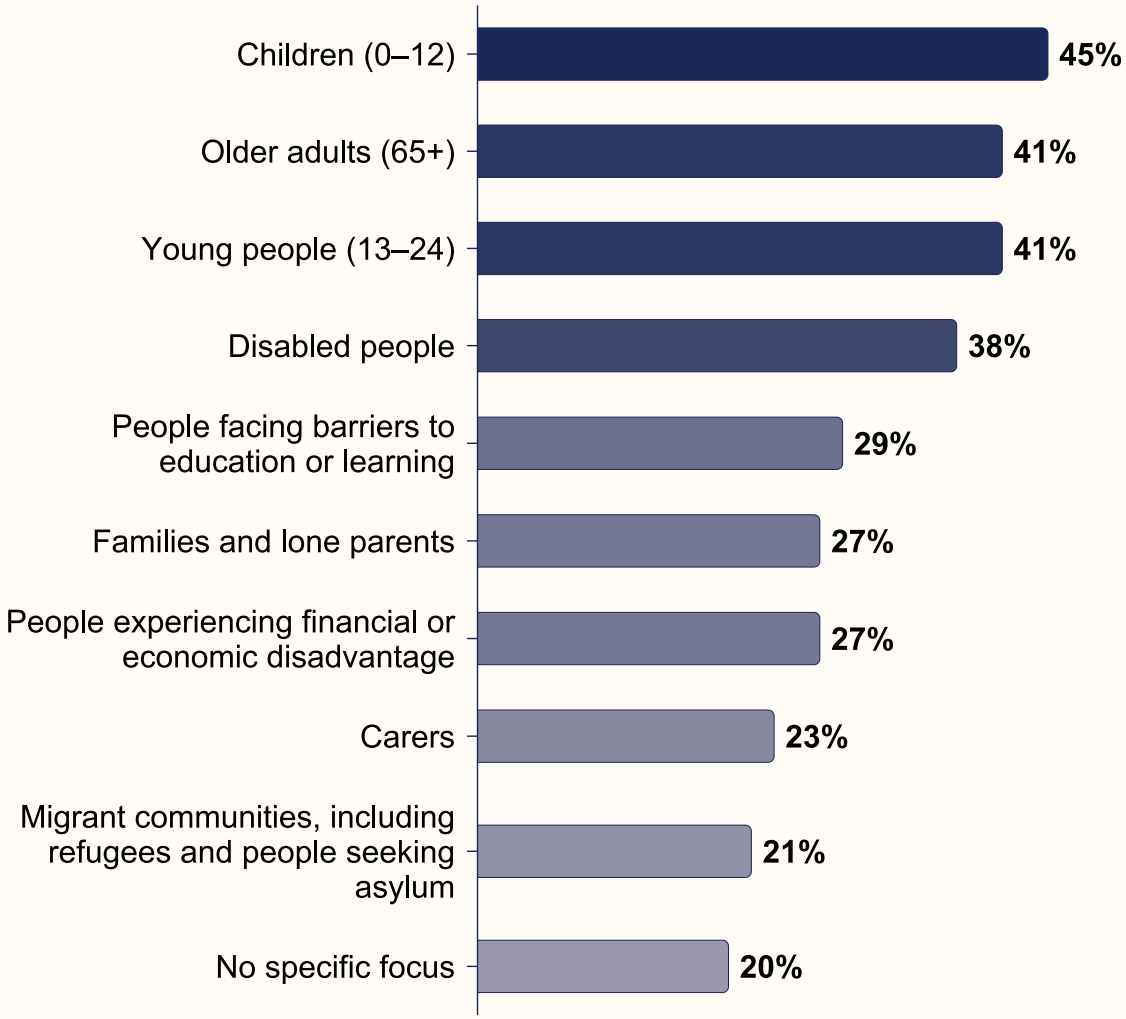
'All of Trafford' uses the full valid base (N = 100); individual ward percentages use respondents who did not select 'All of Trafford' (N = 63).

3.4. Who they support

Trafford's population includes relatively large shares of both children and older people, with around one fifth of residents aged under 16 and a similar proportion aged 65 or over.[1] This is reflected in the survey: more than two in five organisations support children aged 0 to 12 (45%) and young people aged 13 to 24 (41%), while a similar proportion support older adults (41%). More than a quarter also support families or lone parents (27%).

Organisations also support communities connected by health, circumstances and shared identity. More than a third work with Disabled people and those living with long-term health conditions, including mental health conditions (38%), while more than one in five support carers (23%). More than a quarter work with people facing barriers to education or learning (29%) or financial and economic disadvantage (27%), and more than one in five support migrant communities, including refugees and people seeking asylum (21%).

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



Note. Base = 56. Respondents could select multiple options so percentages do not sum to 100%.

4. Staff, volunteers and trustees

Trafford Community Collective's reflections

At time of writing, Trafford does not have a physical Volunteer Centre and volunteering is co-ordinated via dedicated staff in each Community Hub and via an online platform. Many organisations are reliant on volunteers not just in terms of governance but also as additional capacity to help meet demand for services and activities. A common message from organisations in Trafford is that they struggle to recruit the number of volunteers they require and these findings support this.

The people working in and with Trafford's VCSE 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

Trafford's VCSE sector is estimated to employ 3,516 full-time equivalent paid staff, representing around 4,595 employees. Their work is estimated to contribute £177.12 million in economic value each year through the services and activities they deliver.



Trafford's VCSE sector is estimated to employ **4,595** people

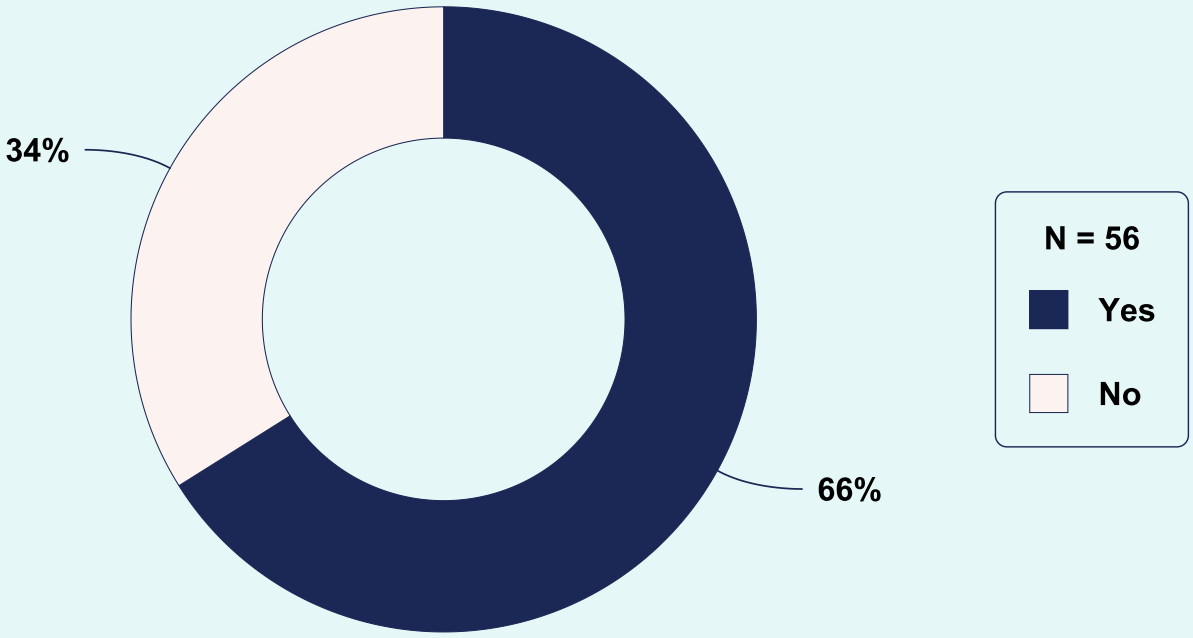
Estimated annual economic contribution from paid staff

£ 177.12 million

Two thirds of responding organisations have paid staff (66%), and almost all of these organisations say they pay the Real Living Wage to all eligible employees (92%). Paid employment is concentrated in larger organisations: all large organisations and almost all medium organisations (95%) report a paid workforce, compared with four in five small organisations (79%) and 6% of micro organisations and groups.

More than half of organisations with paid staff have fewer than five FTE employees (50%). Just under a third have between five and 19 FTE posts (31%), while almost one in five have 20 or more (19%).

Figure 4.1. Organisations with a paid workforce



Among organisations with paid staff, more than a third reported difficulties recruiting staff over the previous year (36%), while more than a quarter experienced difficulties with staff retention (27%).

Figure 4.2. Staff recruitment and retention difficulties



Note. Question shown only to organisations with paid staff. Base: recruitment = 33; retention = 33. Shows the proportion answering 'Yes'. 'Don't know' responses excluded.

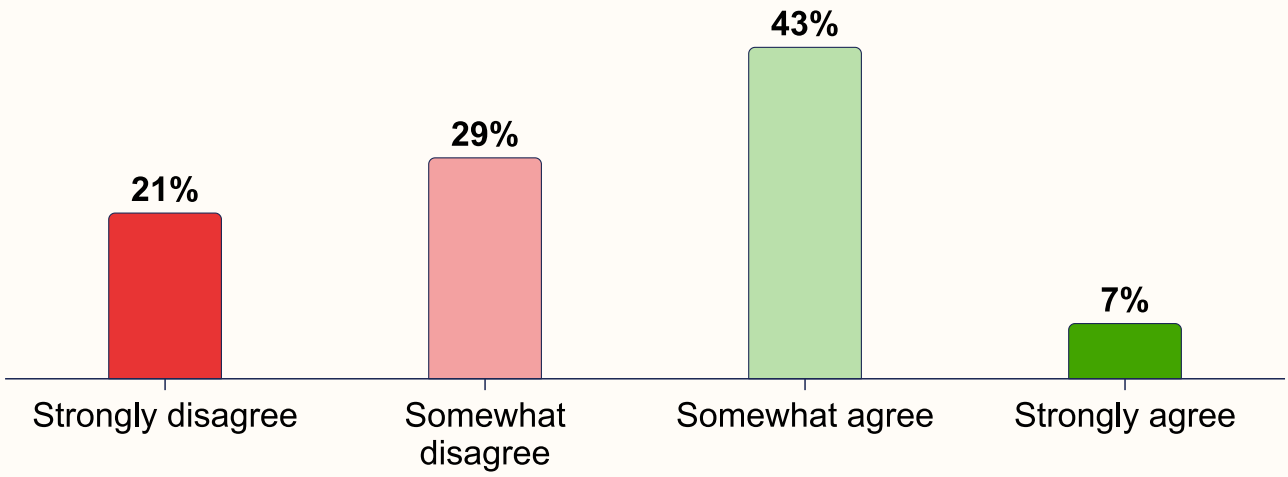
4.2. Volunteers and trustees

Across Trafford, the VCSE sector is estimated to involve an estimated 32,900 volunteers and 9,100 trustees or Board members, contributing around 87,700 hours each week. Over a year, this is equivalent to 4.56 million hours spent supporting residents and governing organisations. Replacing that time with paid labour at the Real Living Wage would cost an estimated £61.33 million each year.

Almost half of responding organisations have fewer than ten volunteers (48%), while a third have 25 or more (34%). Almost one in five have between 10 and 24 volunteers (18%). The support organisations offer volunteers is both practical and developmental. Three in five reimburse expenses or provide recognition or social activities (both 60%), while a similar proportion offer training, development or progression opportunities (58%).

Half of organisations say they have enough volunteers to carry out their work and meet their objectives (50%), leaving half that do not.

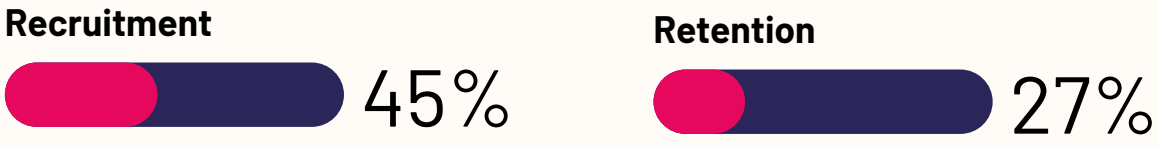
Figure 4.3. Whether organisations have enough volunteers to carry out work and meet their objectives



Note. Base = 56. ‘Don’t know’ responses excluded.

Recruiting volunteers appears to be a key pressure point. Almost half found it difficult to recruit volunteers over the previous year (45%), while more than a quarter had difficulty retaining them (27%).

Figure 4.4. Volunteer recruitment and retention difficulties



Note. Base: recruitment = 53; retention = 51. Shows the proportion answering 'Yes'. 'Don't know' responses excluded.

This pressure sits within a longer national decline in volunteering. In England, the proportion of adults volunteering formally at least once a month fell from 27% in 2013/14 to 17% in 2024/25. The decline has been particularly pronounced in the period since the COVID-19 pandemic, falling from 23% in 2019/20 to 17% in 2020/21.[9]

With around one in five residents aged 65 or over, Trafford's VCSE organisations may have also felt the decline in volunteering among older adults. 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.[9,10] 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.[10]

In the focus group, organisations described changes not only in the availability of volunteers but also in the traditional demographic profile. One participant reflected that older people who might previously have moved from retirement into dependable volunteering roles may now be working for longer or taking on other responsibilities, such as providing childcare for grandchildren. In their experience, this has reduced a source of volunteer capacity on which organisations have traditionally relied.

> "I think maybe before COVID, you would get volunteers, they were a little bit older and they'd retired and they wanted to give something back and they were very reliable. And now I just don't think people are retiring in the same way that they used to. And also a lot of older people are looking after their grandkids and offering free childcare. So that's changed... life's a bit harder for everybody... we'd be lost without our volunteers."

Two thirds of those experiencing recruitment difficulties say that limited organisational capacity to recruit and manage volunteers is a barrier (67%), while over half point to a low response to recruitment activities (54%). Almost two in five point to insufficient funding or a lack of flexibility in volunteering roles (both 38%).

Figure 4.5. Volunteer recruitment barriers (top 8)

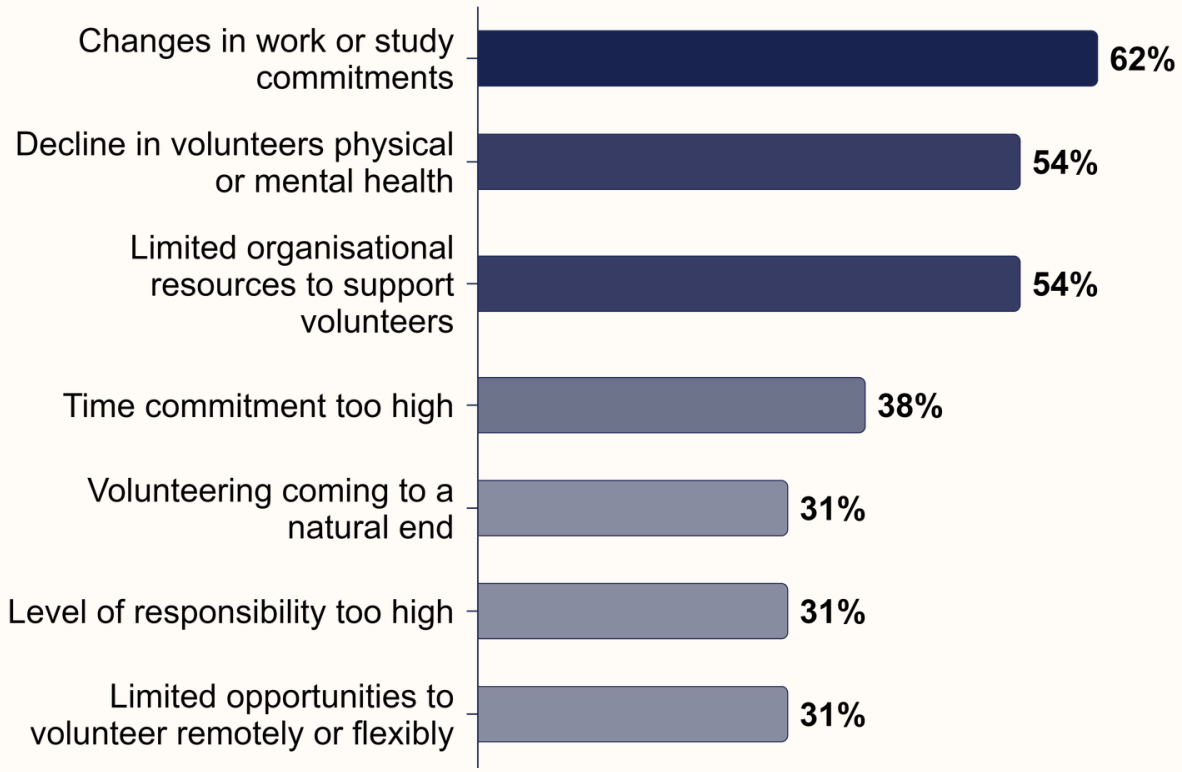


Note. Base = 24. Question shown only to organisations reporting volunteer recruitment difficulties. Figure shows the eight most commonly selected responses. Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%.

While recruitment difficulties are more widespread, more than a quarter also found it difficult to retain volunteers (27%). Among this group, more than three in five identify volunteers' work or study commitments as a barrier to retention (62%), suggesting that competing demands on people's time can limit their ability to remain involved. This reflects wider national evidence showing that work commitments are the most common barrier among adults who do not volunteer at least monthly, reported by more than half (51%).[9]

More than half point to the declining physical or mental health of volunteers (54%), the same proportion to limited organisational resources to support volunteers (54%), and almost two in five say the time commitment involved makes retention harder (38%).

Figure 4.6. Volunteer retention barriers



Note. Base = 13. Percentages derived from a low base are less precise and can change substantially with small changes in responses. Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%.

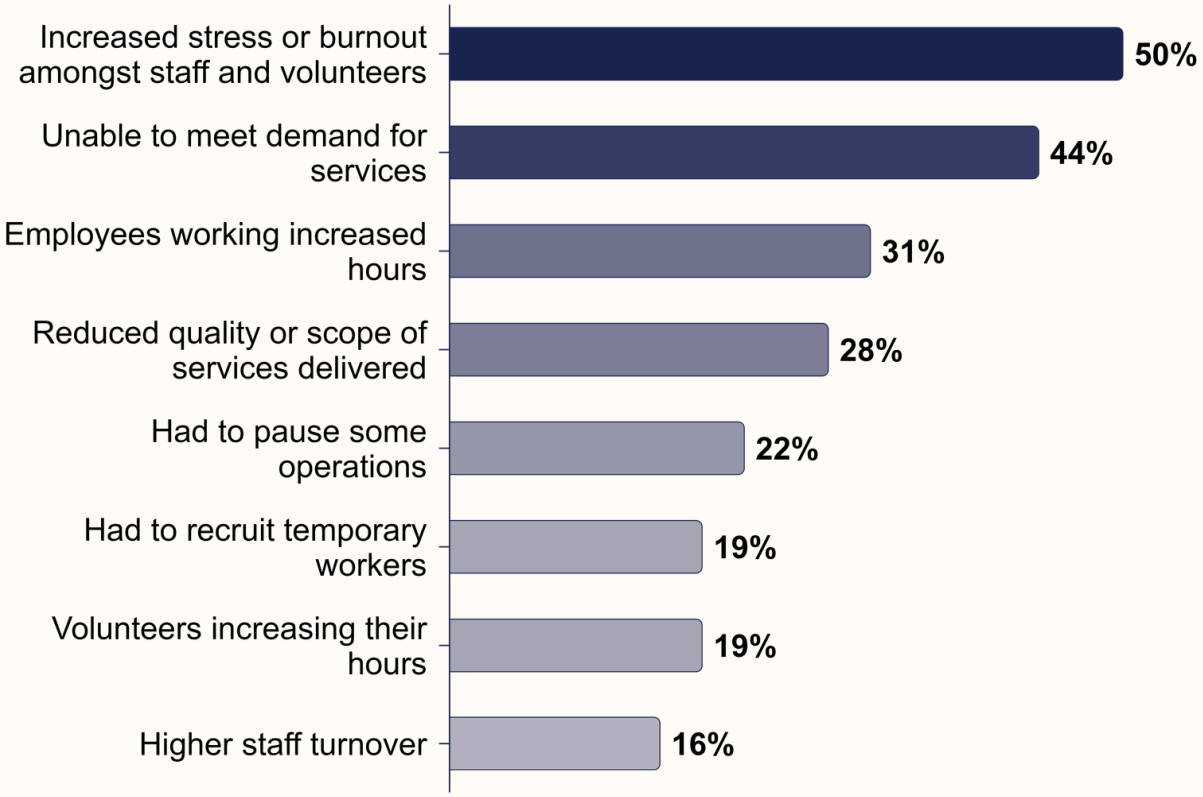
4.3. Consequences of workforce shortages

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.

Half of those experiencing recruitment or retention difficulties say staff and volunteers have experienced increased stress or burnout (50%) as a result. Almost a third say employees are working increased hours (31%), and almost one in five say volunteers are contributing more time (19%). These findings are supported by national evidence showing that people are contributing more of their time,[11] alongside consecutive Unite surveys of sector workers reporting high levels of stress, anxiety and emotional exhaustion linked to their work.[12,13]

Alongside these pressures on staff and volunteers, more than two in five say workforce shortages have left them unable to meet demand (44%), over a quarter have had to reduce the quality or scope of their work (28%), and more than one in five have had to pause some operations (22%). This suggests that shortages are contributing to issues which affect not only staff and volunteers but also the communities they serve.

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



Note. Base = 32. 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

Trafford Community Collective's reflections

It is clear from the number of referrals made from public sector partners and the increase in demand that the VCSE sector in Trafford plays a crucial role in supporting residents of Trafford. Many organisations would like to be able to meet this increased demand but funding and staffing are not always in place to allow this to happen.

Trafford's VCSE organisations and groups provide an estimated 738,087 contacts or episodes of support each year.

Although Trafford is the least deprived borough in Greater Manchester, this borough-wide picture masks important differences in health, deprivation and living conditions across different parts of the borough. Focus group participants described how the combined effects of financial hardship, insecure housing, pressures on mental health and cuts to services since the COVID-19 pandemic are making life harder for many residents and increasing the need for support from VCSE organisations:

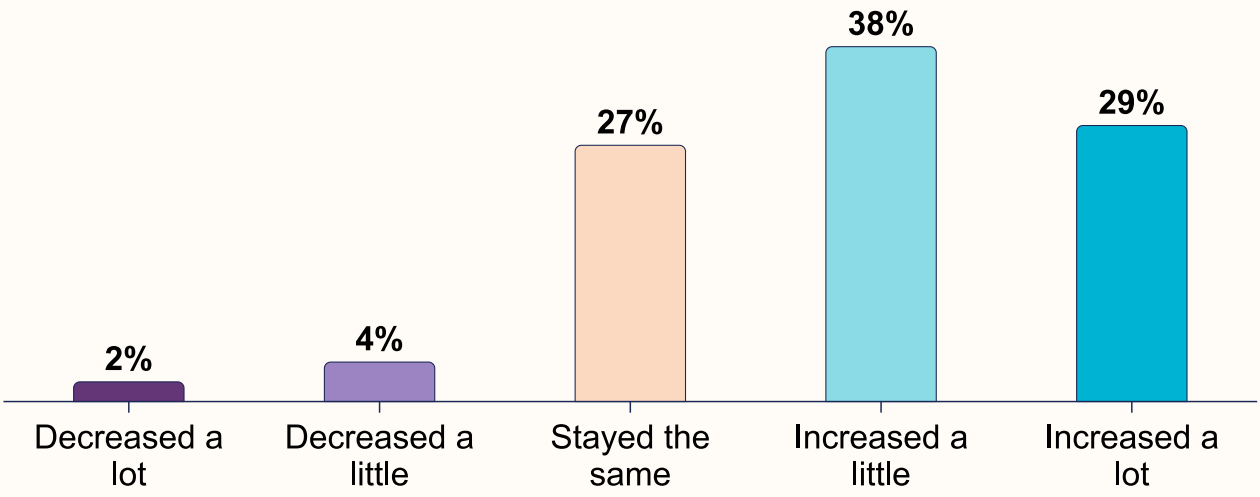
> "Life is just harder for people… poverty, money worries and unstable housing, all of that has a massive impact on people's mental wellbeing. It's really hard to have good mental health if you're worried about whether you're going to be able to pay your bills, or if you're living in private rented accommodation and it's rubbish. It's the lack of hope I think that a lot of people experience that has the biggest impact on the mental health, and I think cuts to services as well."

Many people find support through informal and local routes, although this can make services harder to find for those who are not already connected to community networks. More than half of responding organisations also receive signposting or referrals from other VCSE organisations and public services. Trafford's VCSE organisations therefore form part of the borough's everyday social infrastructure, providing community spaces, trusted relationships and routes into support.

5.1. Demand for services

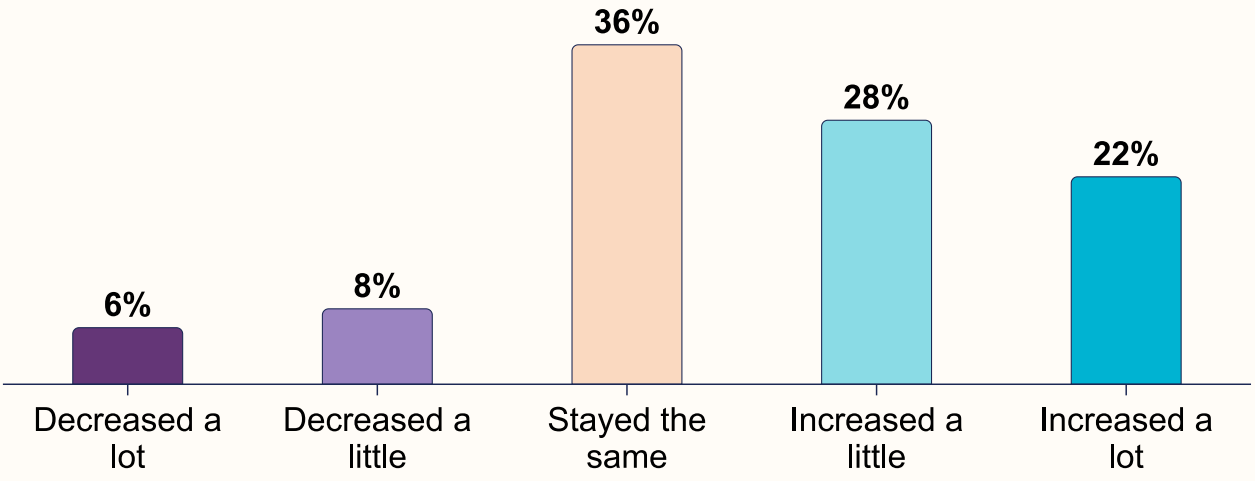
When asked how demand for services had changed over the past 12 months, two thirds report an increase (67%), including around three in ten saying it has increased a lot. Half of organisations say the number of people they support has also increased over the past year (50%).

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



Note. Base = 48. 'Don't know' responses excluded.

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

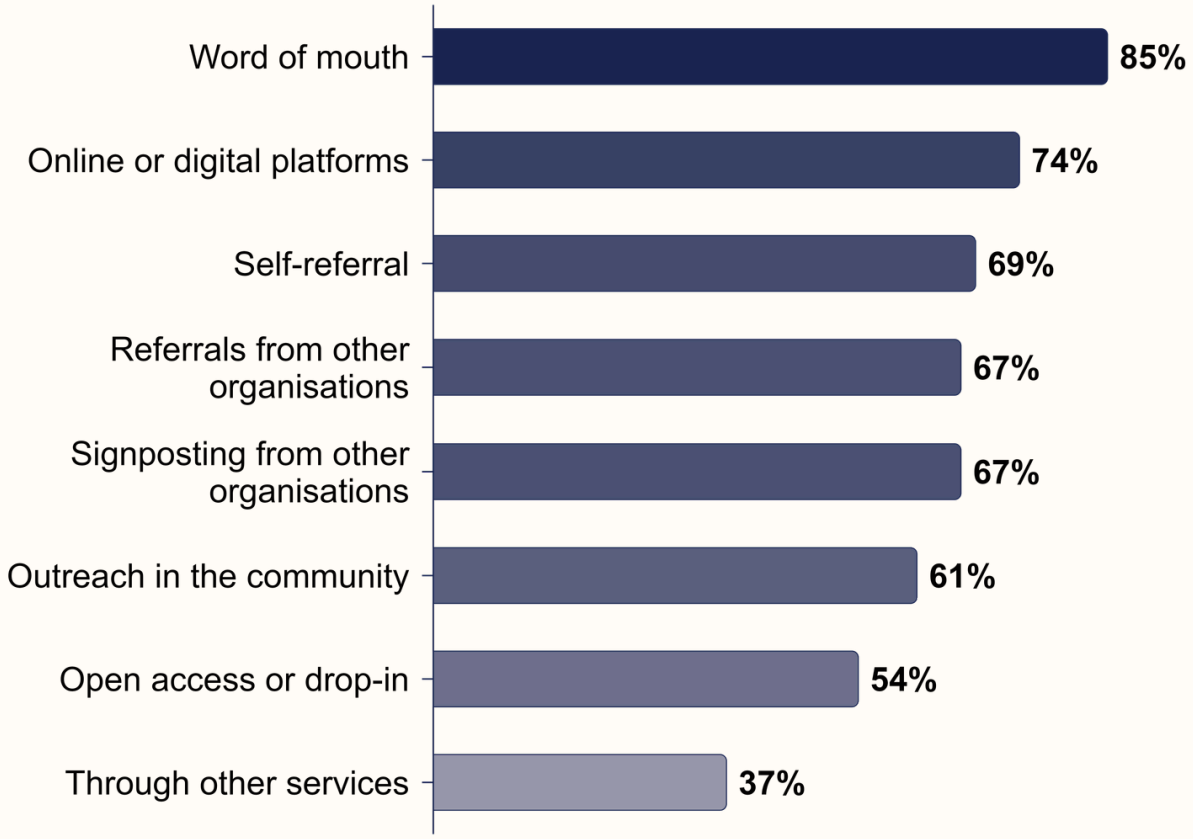


Note. Base = 50. 'Don't know' responses excluded.

5.2. How people access services

People reach support through a wide range of routes, many of them direct and relational. Word of mouth is the most common (85%), followed by online or digital platforms (74%) and contacting the organisation directly (69%). Two thirds say people are referred (67%) or signposted (67%) by other organisations or services, while three in five say people come into contact through community outreach (61%).

Figure 5.3. How people come into contact with VCSE organisations



Note. Base = 54. 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 nine in ten receive them from public sector organisations or services (94%) or other VCSE organisations (91%), while more than two in five receive referrals from the private sector (45%). Referrals most commonly come from NHS health services, social prescribing, education and learning services, and children and family services.

These pathways show how closely parts of Trafford's VCSE sector are connected to local public services, particularly around health and wellbeing. This is also reflected in local partnership arrangements. Trafford Community Collective has previously provided a VCFSE connector within the Living Well mental health model and a VCFSE broker within Trafford Team Together, helping to connect statutory services with organisations and support in the wider sector.[14,15]

Referrals play an important role in connecting communities to help, but they must also be accompanied by adequate resources and clear expectations about their role. In the focus group, one organisation described a change in both the purpose of social prescribing and the expectations placed on organisations receiving referrals. They described a shift from social prescribing being focused on giving people the time and support needed to access non-clinical help, towards greater pressure to see larger numbers of people:

> "I've noticed a real change in social prescribing… when it first became a thing, funding came through and paid for it. There was an understanding that it wasn't about numbers, but helping people access support and do things for themselves that GPs couldn't do. It was an alternative to a medical intervention... but now GPs are asking why we don't see more people."

They went on to say that this focus on numbers did not reflect the amount of support that people being referred could require. Social prescribing was not simply a matter of connecting someone to an activity: people could arrive with several overlapping financial, caring and welfare needs that first had to be addressed before they were in a position to benefit from community activities or social connection:

> "When people come to us for social prescribing… they have really complex issues. You can't just send somebody to a knit and natter group because they've got debt, they're an unpaid carer, or they've had PIP taken away. There's all the foundational work to get people to a point where they can even think about doing something for themselves and having that social connection."

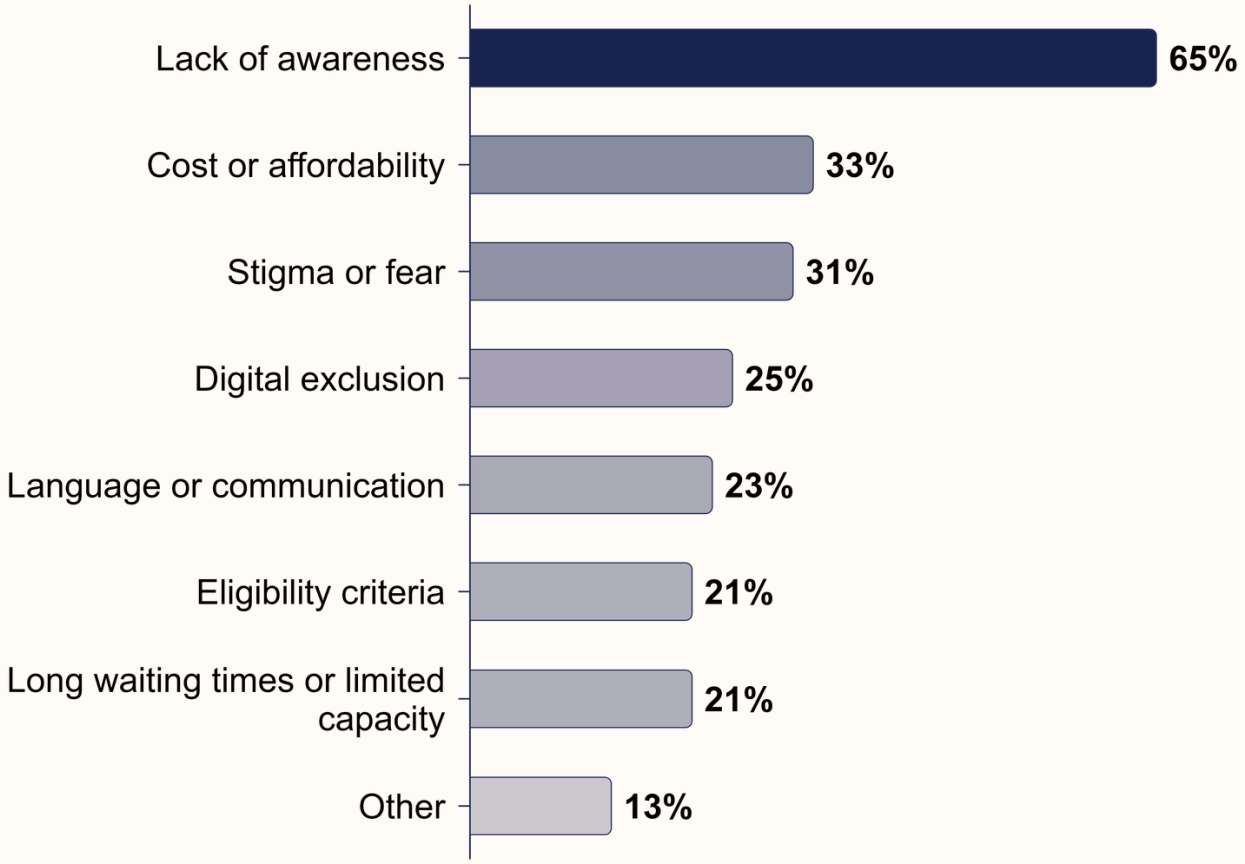
Where organisations are supporting people with multiple needs before they can take part in wider community activity, referral pathways also need to recognise the time, skills and resources required to provide that support.

5.3. Barriers to access

Trafford's VCSE sector supports a diverse range of communities, some of which face practical or cultural barriers that can make it harder to find or engage with support.

The most commonly identified barrier to finding and accessing services is a lack of awareness of what services are available (65%). A third point to affordability or the cost of taking part (33%), while a similar proportion say stigma or fear (31%) may affect access. A quarter report digital exclusion (25%) and a similar proportion identify language or communication barriers (23%).

Figure 5.4. Barriers to accessing services (top 8)



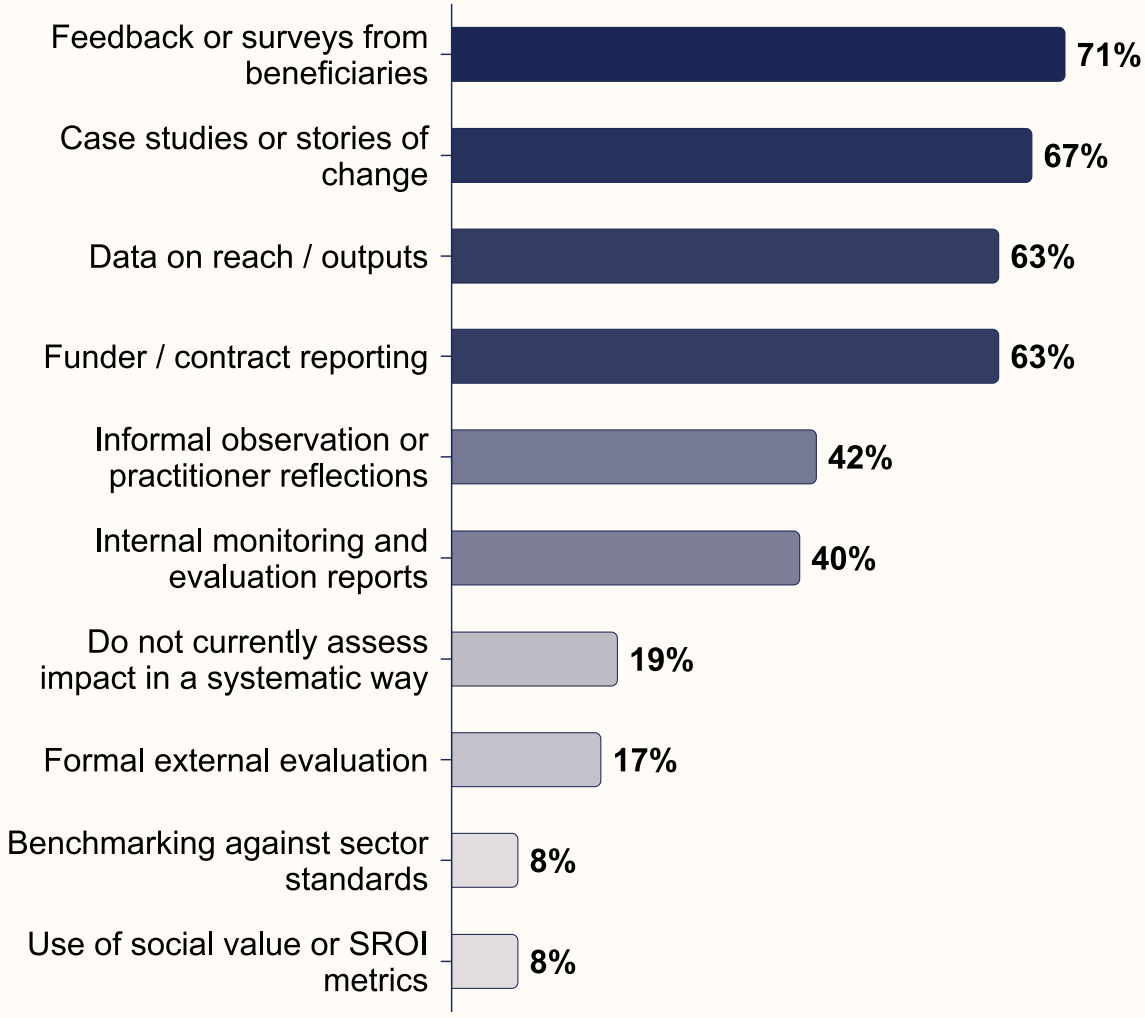
Note. Base = 52. Figure shows the eight most commonly selected responses. Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%.

5.4. Measuring impact and delivery quality

Organisations use a range of methods to understand and demonstrate what their work achieves. Seven in ten gather feedback from beneficiaries or service users (71%), while two thirds use case studies or stories of change (67%). Almost two thirds use data on reach and outputs (63%) or funder and contract reporting (63%), while two in five use informal observation or practitioner reflections (42%).

Using different forms of evidence allows organisations to show both the scale of their activity and what sits behind it. Feedback, case studies and practitioner reflections can capture changes that are less visible in evaluation or output metrics, including the time spent addressing people's immediate needs, the foundational work needed before they can engage in wider activities, and progress that may be gradual rather than easily counted.

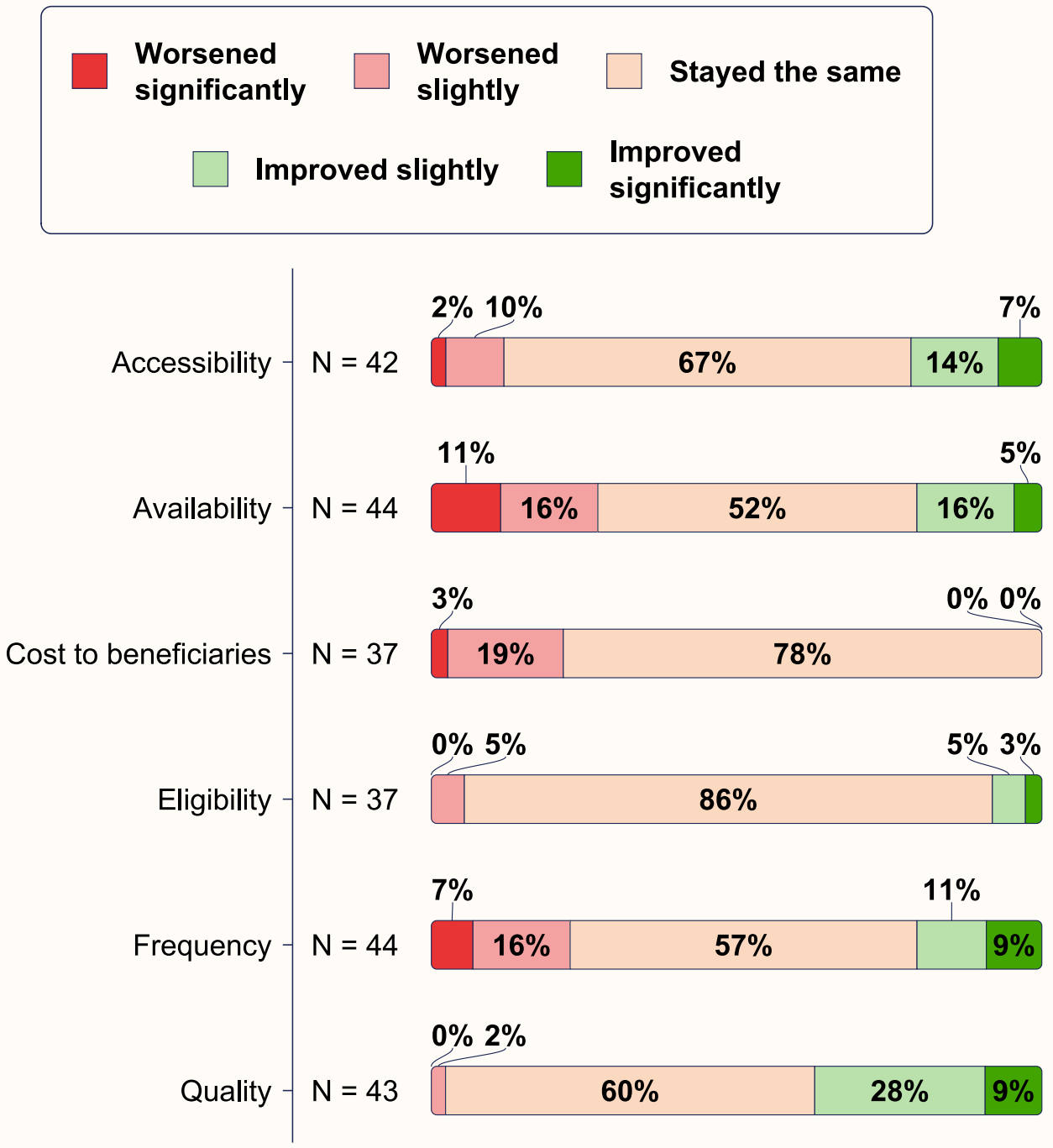
Figure 5.5. How organisations measure impact (top 10)



Note. Base = 52. Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%.

When asked how their services and support had changed over the previous year, more than a third report improvements in service quality (37%), while around one in five report better accessibility (21%) and availability (20%). More than a quarter report worsening availability (27%), almost a quarter report worsening frequency (23%), and more than one in five report increased costs to the people they support (22%).

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

Trafford Community Collective's reflections

Although there is optimism around programmes such as Live Well in terms of providing new funding opportunities to VCSE organisations, it is clear that a combination of factors has led to many organisations feeling concerned about their long-term sustainability and a significant number struggling to continue operating longer term. Short-term funding cycles, increased running costs and greater competition for funds are all part of the funding landscape making things tough for VCSE organisations operating in Trafford.

VCSE organisations across the UK have been navigating an increasingly challenging financial and funding landscape in recent years. Shrinking public budgets and reduced donations have made it harder to generate income, while rising energy, wage and overhead costs have increased the cost of delivery.[16,17] At the same time, the communities they support are facing greater pressures, driving demand during a period of constraint and uncertainty.

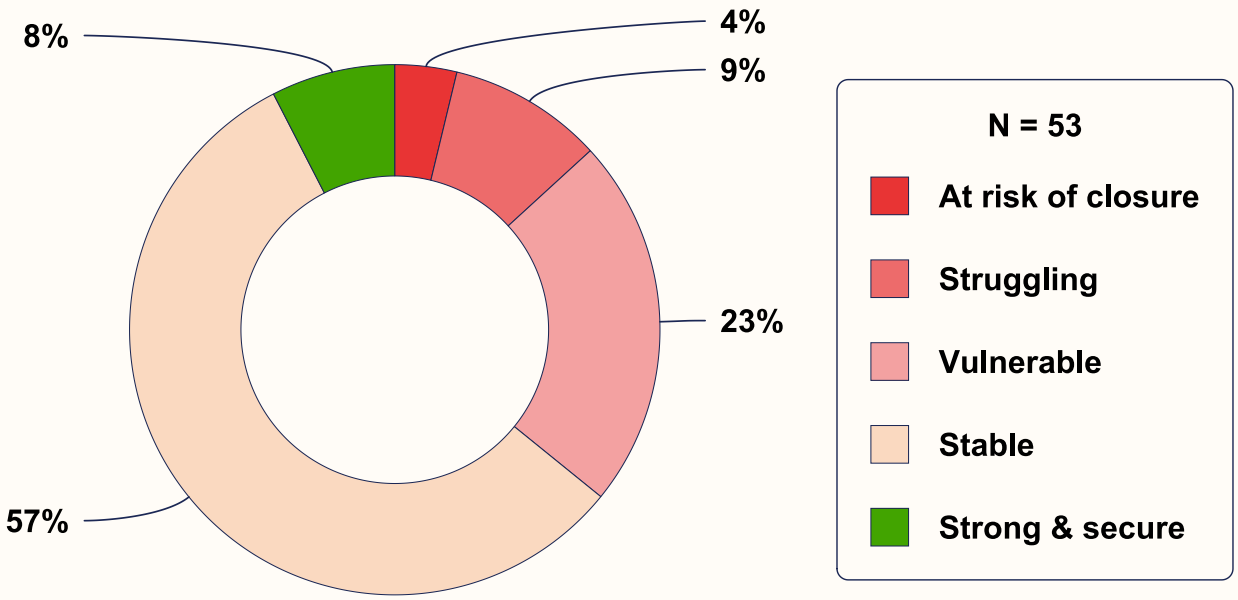
Trafford's VCSE organisations are facing similar pressures, with many operating in an increasingly competitive funding environment where funding is often short term and does not keep pace with rising delivery costs. Some are drawing on reserves to cover everyday operating costs and gaps in income, while difficulties finding suitable funding and the time required to apply add further pressure. Most expect to maintain or expand their activity, but relatively few feel financially secure, leaving organisations balancing the need to meet current demand with their ability to sustain services over the longer term.

Trafford's VCSE sector generated an estimated £211.92 million in income in 2024/25 and spent an estimated £207.50 million.

6.1. Financial position

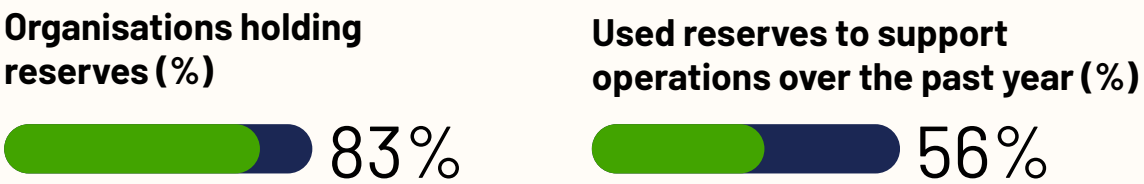
These estimates describe the scale of Trafford's VCSE sector, but they should not be read as a sign that individual organisations feel financially secure. Three in five respondents describe their organisation as stable but concerned about the future (57%). Almost a quarter say they are vulnerable and facing significant pressure, with sustainability uncertain without changes being made (23%). Around one in eight say they are facing more serious struggles (9%) or at risk of imminent closure (4%). Only 8% feel strong, secure, and well-equipped for future challenges.

Figure 6.1. Organisations' current financial and operational state



More than four in five responding organisations hold reserves (83%), and more than half have used them to support operations over the past year (56%).

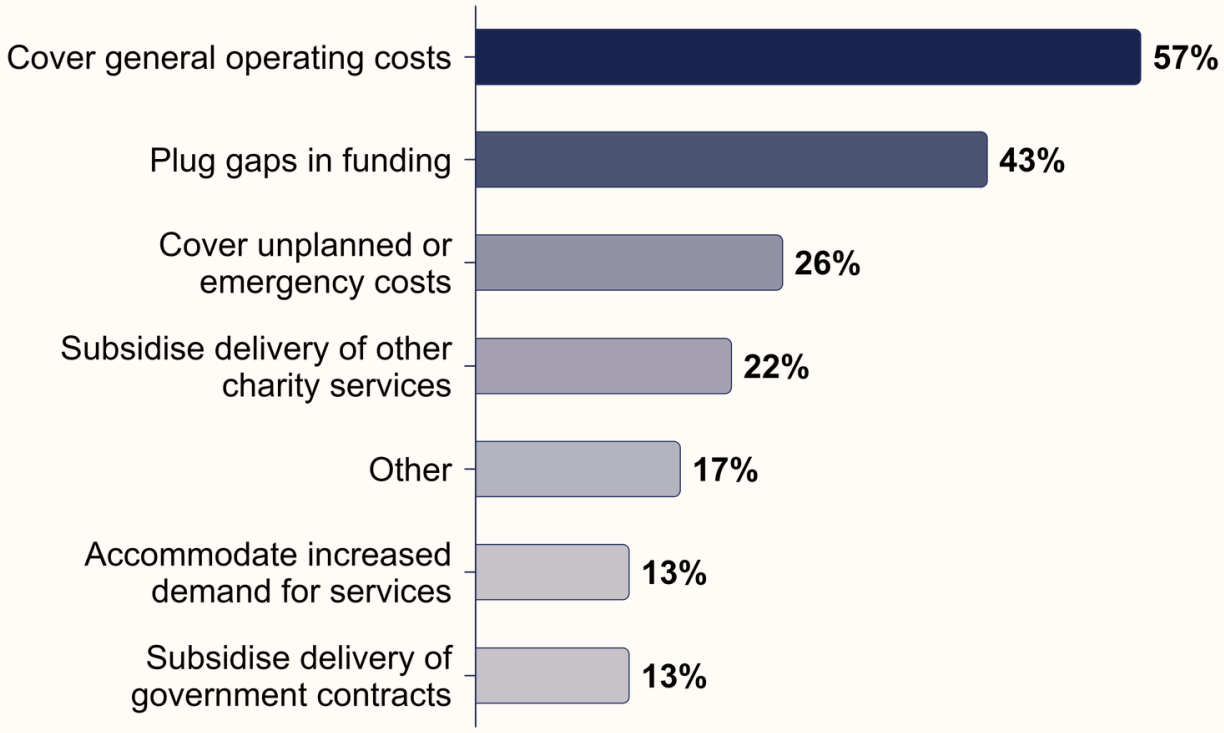
Figure 6.2. Use of financial reserves



Note. Base: holds reserves = 53; used reserves = 43. Figure shows the proportion answering 'Yes'. The 'used reserves' question was asked only of organisations that hold reserves.

Almost three in five have drawn on reserves to meet general operating costs (57%), more than two in five have used them to plug gaps in funding (43%), and over a quarter have used reserves to cover unplanned or emergency costs (26%).

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

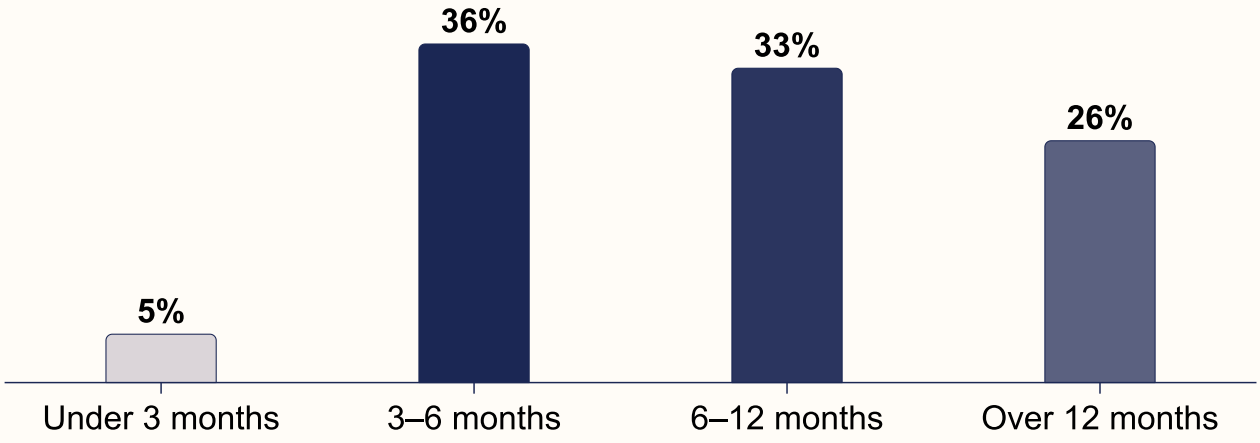


Note. Base = 23. Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%.

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

When asked how long their reserves would last at current levels of income and expenditure, more than a third of organisations with reserves expect them to last between three to six months (36%), while a similar proportion have six to twelve months (33%). One in twenty have less than three months (5%), while a quarter have more than a year (26%).

Figure 6.4. Number of months reserves are expected to last



Note. Base = 39. 'Don't know' responses excluded.

6.2. Income and expenditure

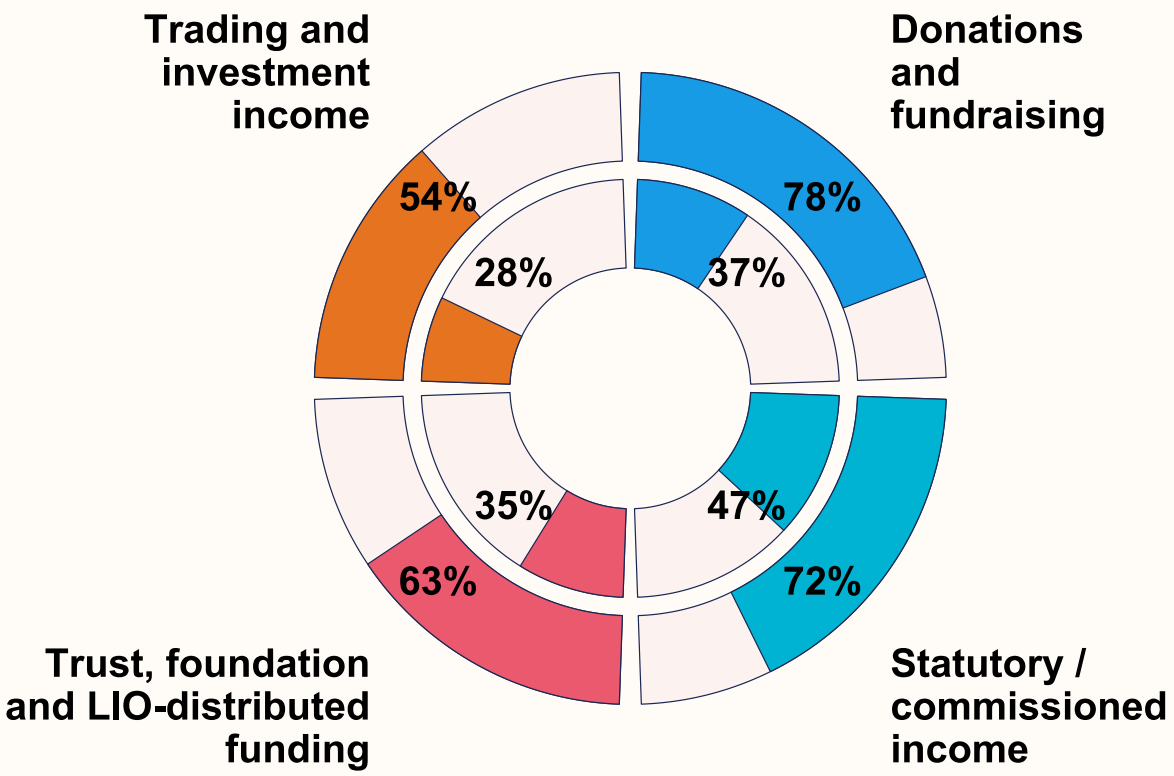
The ways in which VCSE organisations generate income have changed in recent years. The number of people donating has fallen by around six million over the past decade, and the total value of public donations in 2025 was almost 10% lower than the previous year.[18] Some organisations are looking to legacy fundraising, a source with long-term growth potential but uncertain time horizons.[19] While the number of government contracts delivered by VCSE organisations continues to increase,[20] evidence shows that these often do not cover the true cost of delivering services.[21] Diversifying income offers a way to reduce reliance on a single source, but developing different income streams requires time, skills and investment.[16]

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%.

Almost four in five responding organisations receive income from donations and fundraising (78%), while almost three quarters receive statutory funding or commissioned income (72%). Three in five receive funding distributed by trusts, foundations or LIOs (63%), and over half receive income from trading or investments (54%).

Statutory funding and commissioned income (47%) accounts for the largest average share of organisations' total income, followed by donations and fundraising (37%), funding distributed by trusts, foundations or LIOs (35%), and income from trading or investments (28%).

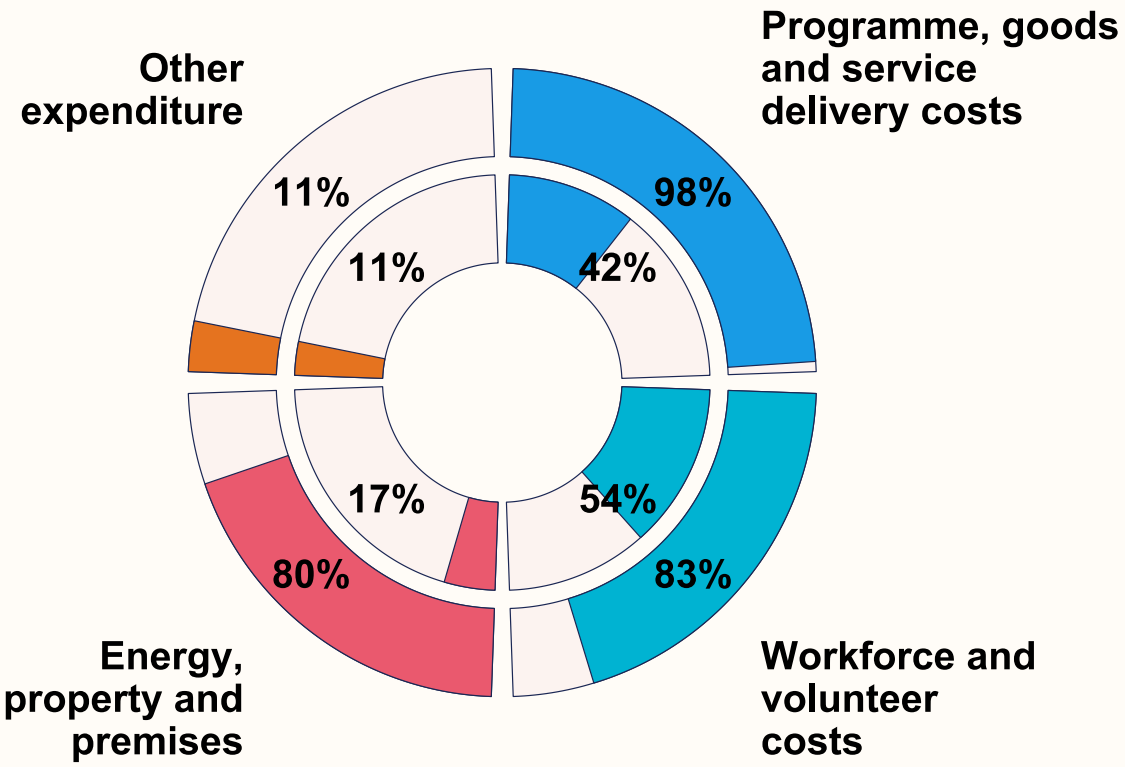
Figure 6.5. Income sources received and their average share of total income



Note. Outer ring shows the percentage receiving any income from each source (base = 46); inner ring shows the average share of total income among organisations receiving that source (base = 25–36, depending on source).

Expenditure was analysed in the same way as income, showing both the proportion of organisations reporting each category and its average share of total expenditure. Almost all organisations report programme, goods and service-delivery costs (98%), accounting for 42% of total expenditure. More than four in five report workforce and volunteer costs (83%), which account for the largest share of total expenditure (54%). Four in five report energy, property and premises costs (80%), accounting for 17% of total expenditure.

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



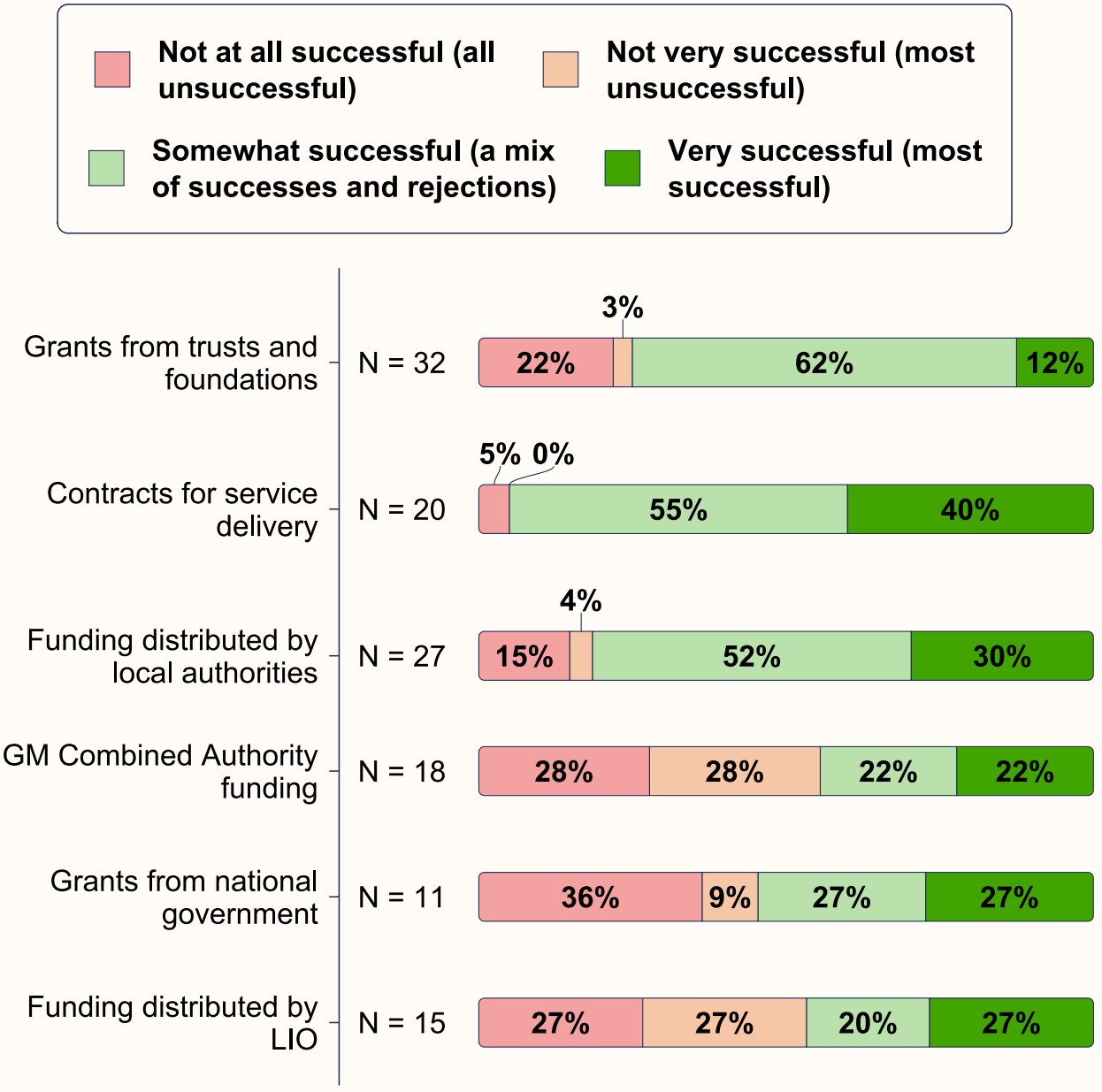
Note. Outer ring shows the percentage reporting any expenditure in each area (base = 46); inner ring shows the average share of total expenditure among organisations reporting expenditure in that area (base = 5–45, depending on area). 'Other expenditure' (base = 5) should be interpreted with caution due to low base.



6.3. Funding

When asked how successful they were in applying for funding sources relevant to them, more than nine in ten responding organisations applying for service delivery contracts reported being very or somewhat successful (95%). More than four in five reported success with local authority funding (81%), while three quarters reported success with grants from trusts and foundations (75%).

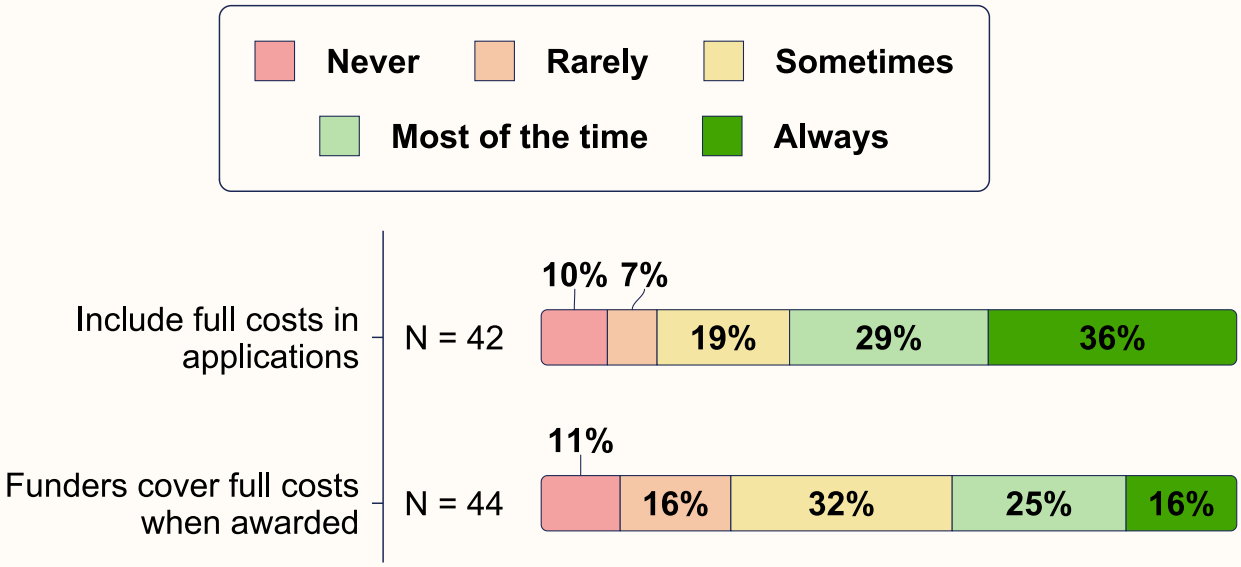
Figure 6.7. Success in funding applications over the past 12 months



Note. Bases are shown in the chart and vary by source. Percentages derived from a low base are less precise and can change substantially with small changes in responses. 'Didn't apply' responses excluded for each source. Shows outcomes among organisations that applied to each source. Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

A successful funding application does not always translate into financial security if the money is short term, restricted, or does not cover the real cost of delivering services. Almost two thirds of organisations say they always or mostly include full costs in applications (64%), but only two in five say funders always or mostly cover them when funding is awarded (41%). National research has shown that, when there is a mismatch between the funding required and what is awarded, organisations are often left drawing on reserves or income from other sources, or rely on unpaid work to subsidise delivery.[21]

Figure 6.8. Full cost recovery

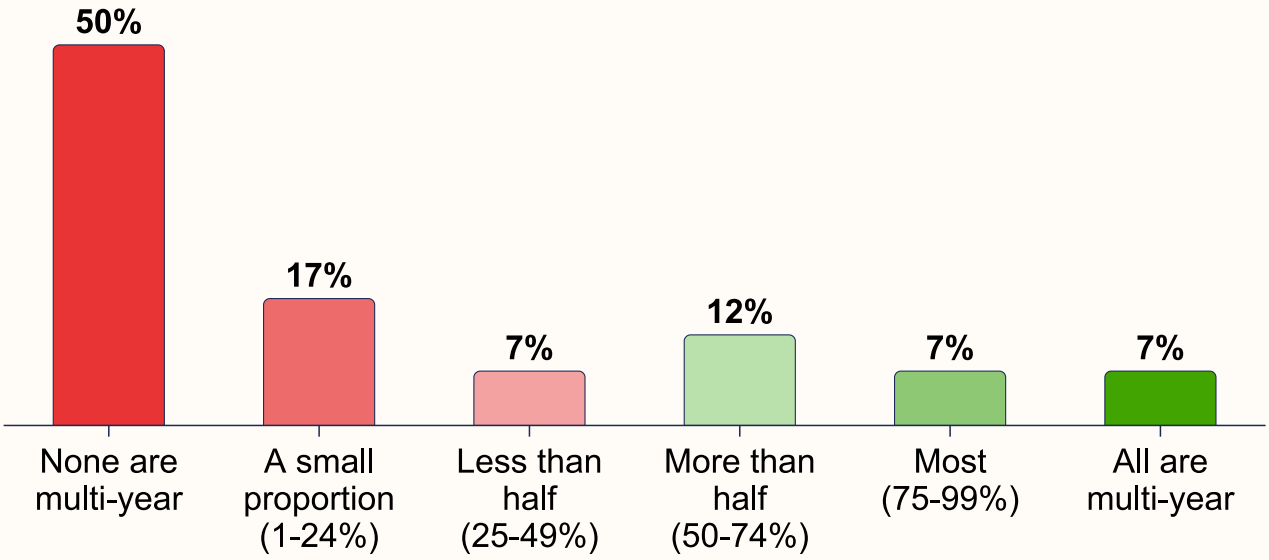


Note. Bases are shown in the chart. 'Don't know' responses excluded. Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Evidence shows that longer-term and more flexible funding is a leading priority across the sector.[22] Such funding provides greater scope to plan staffing and services over several years rather than around successive short-term awards. Yet among Trafford organisations receiving grant or contract income, almost three quarters say less than half of this funding is multi-year (74%), including half that say none is multi-year (50%).

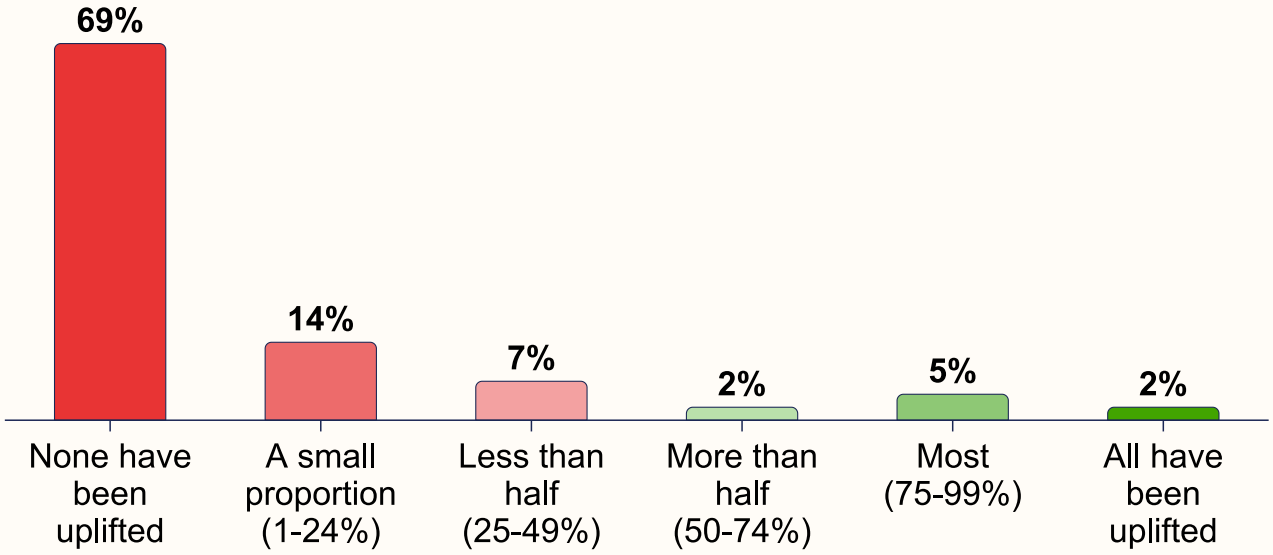
Rising delivery costs also reduce what existing awards can cover, yet national evidence shows that uplifts remain uncommon, particularly for shorter-term funding.[17] More than two thirds of organisations receiving grant or contract income say none had been uplifted to reflect rising costs over the previous year (69%), while only 7% 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 6.9. The proportion of organisations' grants or contracts that are multi-year (three years or more)



Note. Base = 42. Question shown only to organisations receiving income from grants or contracts from any source.

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



Note. Base = 42. Question shown only to organisations receiving income from grants or contracts from any source.

Focus group participants described several, interconnected issues around funding that was unsuitable for long-term and meaningful change. Projects can be funded initially, but restrictions on what grants will pay for, short funding periods and limited provision for ongoing costs can make it difficult to keep that work going. One participant described how projects can be established without sufficient funding for the staff and overheads needed to sustain them, creating a risk that activity is scaled back or stops altogether once the initial funding ends:

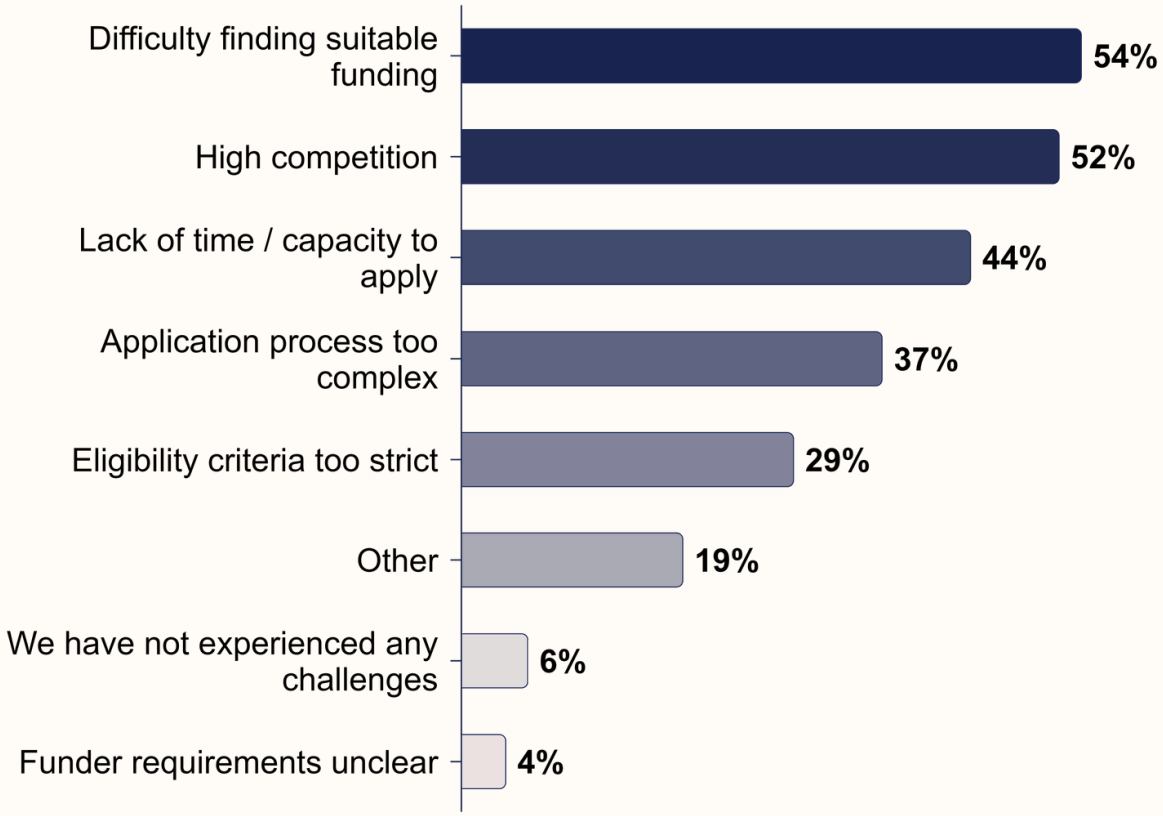
> “[A challenge is] the nature of what you can spend the funding on… We can cite any number of projects that are left lying, destitute somewhere, where somebody's had funding… [because] there hasn't been the ability to take those forward. You can't pay people to actually run the sessions… and certainly getting any payment towards overheads is nigh impossible.”

A second participant described how these funding pressures can begin to affect the way organisations operate. Where core costs are not fully covered and some activity is effectively subsidised by the organisation itself, there is a risk that financial pressures start to shape the services provided and the role organisations are able to play:

> “I think one of the biggest challenges is trying to trying to keep hold of those values... we find ourselves constantly battling with not being sucked into just being a cheaper version of a statutory sector service... our contract funding isn't going up but the cost of employing people is going up... [our buildings] are amazing, but they cost a fortune... some stuff, we're doing it for free. but it's actually a really vital service that we're not getting any funding for.”

When survey participants were asked about the biggest challenges with finding, applying for and securing funding, they most commonly pointed to difficulty finding suitable opportunities (54%) and increased competition (52%). This reflects wider evidence of a more competitive funding environment, with funders reporting growing numbers of applications.[16] More than two in five also identified a lack of time or capacity to apply (44%) as a challenge, while just under two in five pointed to complex application processes (37%).

Figure 6.11. Funding challenges



Note. Base = 52. Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%.

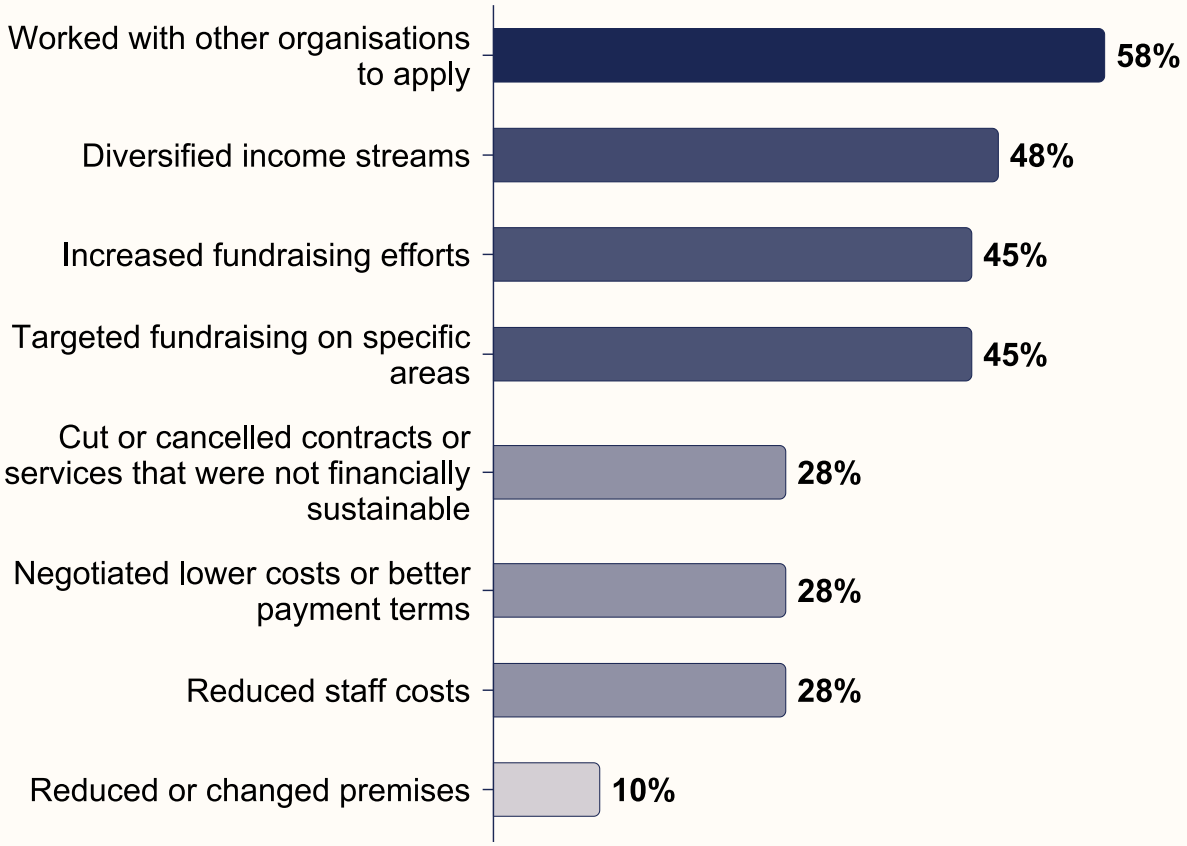
To understand how organisations are responding to these funding challenges, we asked what steps they had taken over the previous year. Almost four in five (78%) had taken at least one action. Of this group, almost three in five had worked with other organisations to apply for funding (58%), while almost half had diversified their income sources (48%), increased overall fundraising efforts (45%), and targeted specific funding areas or opportunities (45%). For the more than a fifth taking no new action over the previous year (22%), this may reflect limited scope to respond or measures already introduced before that period.

While many are working with others on funding applications, one focus group participant described how commissioning and grant processes can place organisations in direct competition, even as partnership working is encouraged:

> “The voluntary sector is pitted against each other through commissioning and grant funding processes… but we're also expected to work in partnership. I spend a lot of time trying to find ways to collaborate with and support people, but that's a challenge.”

This leaves organisations being asked to build partnerships and collaborate, while the funding processes they work within can simultaneously place them in competition for the same limited resources.

Figure 6.12. Actions taken in response to funding and income challenges (top 8)



Note. Base = 40. Excludes respondents selecting 'No actions taken' (N = 11). 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. One organisation described the value of their premises and the expense of maintaining them:

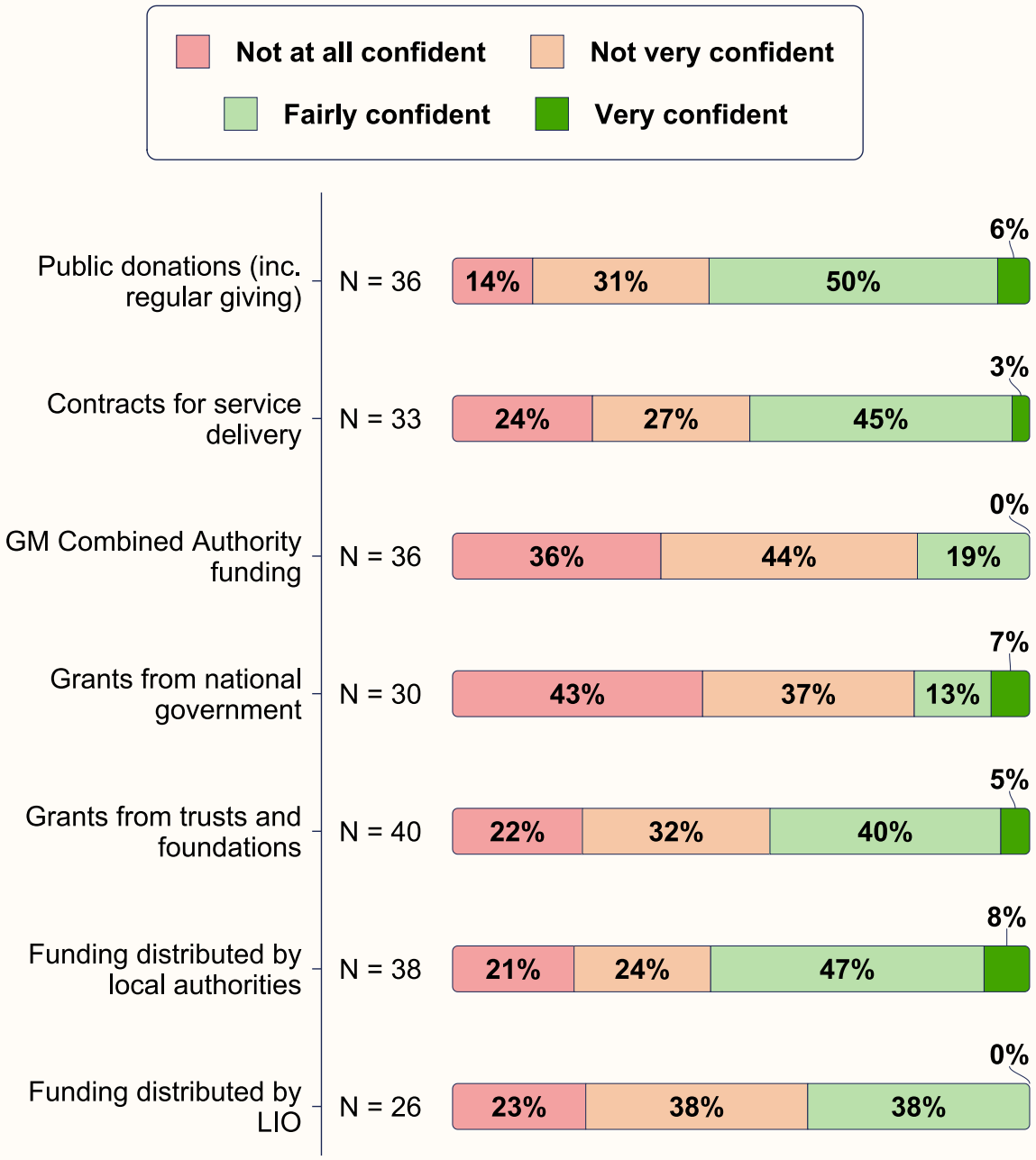
> "The buildings are both a blessing and a curse. They're amazing, but they cost us a fortune."

Organisations use a mix of premises arrangements: almost three in five responding organisations operate from premises they lease or rent (58%), while almost two in five use premises with shared or free access (38%). Almost one in five use premises they own (19%), and 13% do not use physical premises.

6.5. Future outlook

Findings from this year's State of the Sector suggest that Trafford's VCSE sector is operating amidst uncertainty, coping with rising demand and with funding arrangements that fail to provide stability and longevity. We asked organisations about their confidence in securing funding over the next 12 months. Among organisations that considered each source relevant to them, almost three in five feel fairly or very confident in local authority funding (56%) and public donations (56%), while almost half feel confident about service delivery contracts (49%). In contrast, four in five are not very or not at all confident about GMCA funding (81%) and grants from national government (80%).

Figure 6.13. Confidence levels in funding over the next 12 months

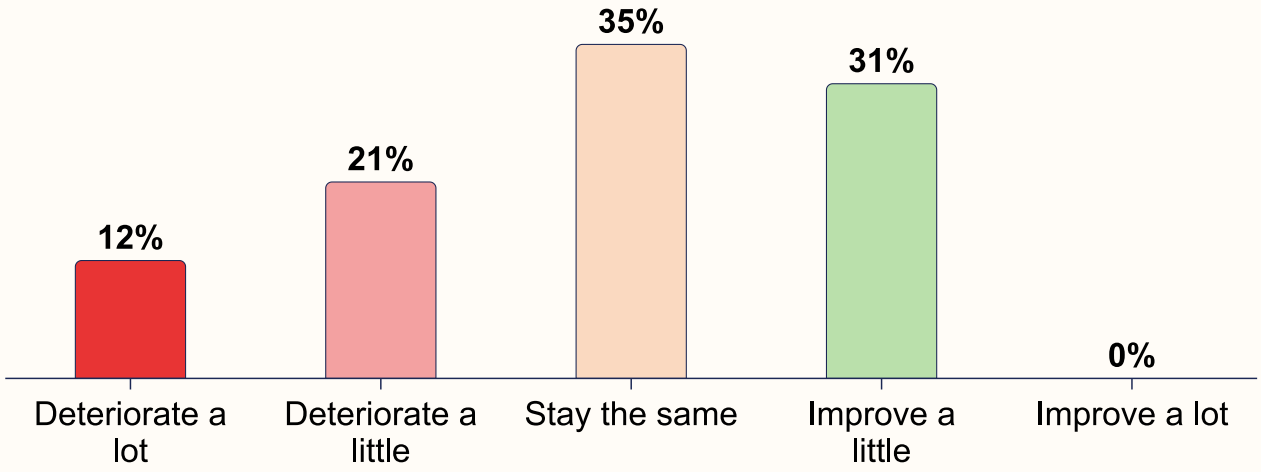


Note. Bases are shown in the chart and vary by source. 'Not applicable' responses excluded for each source. Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Looking ahead, organisations have mixed expectations for the year ahead. In terms of financial position, more than a third of responding organisations expect no change (35%), while similar proportions expect their financial position to deteriorate (33%) or improve (31%).

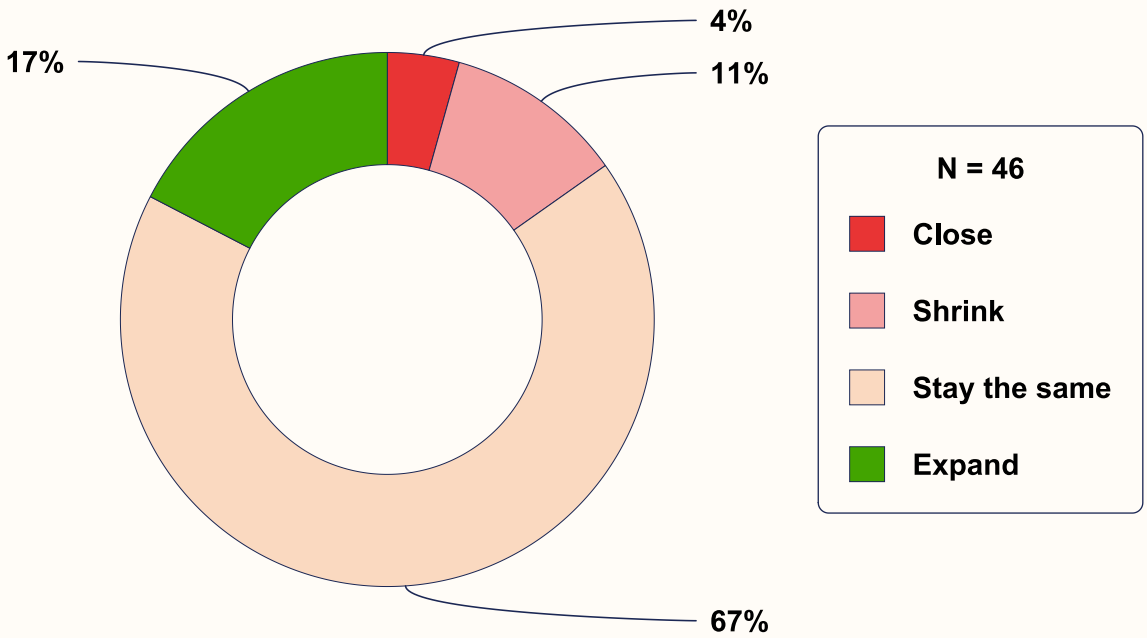
Operationally, two thirds expect to continue at a similar level (67%) over the next year, while around one in six expect to expand (17%). Around one in ten expect to shrink (11%) and 4% expect to close.

Figure 6.14. Expected financial position over the next 12 months



Note. Base = 48. 'Don't know' responses excluded.

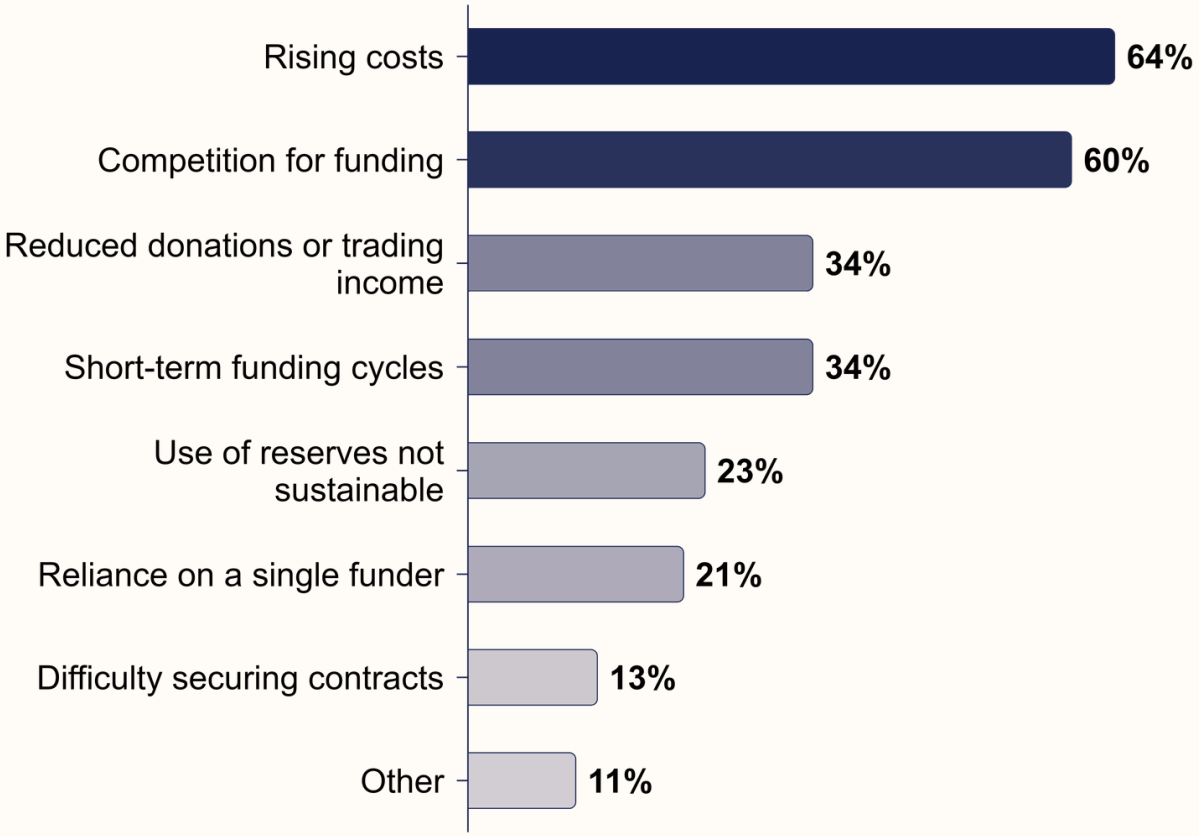
Figure 6.15. Organisational expectations for the year ahead



Ambitions to maintain, sustain, or grow activity sit alongside a number of financial risks, with organisations pointing to rising costs (64%), competition for funding (60%), reduced donations or trading income (34%), and short-term funding cycles (34%) as the main risks to their financial sustainability.

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

Figure 6.16. Risks to financial sustainability (top 8)



Note. Base = 47. Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%.

Conclusion

The findings of this research highlight that Trafford's VCSE sector is delivering significant social and economic value for local communities, while increasingly acting as a critical partner in meeting rising levels of need. Furthermore, they highlight the strengths and vulnerabilities of the sector.

Trafford’s VCSE sector is making a substantial contribution to communities through service delivery, volunteering opportunities, community leadership and social connection. However, the ability of the sector to continue delivering this impact cannot be taken for granted. Increasing demand, workforce pressures and financial uncertainty are creating challenges for many organisations, with more than one in three reporting that they are vulnerable, struggling or at risk.

The priorities emerging from this research are clear. There is a need for more sustainable and flexible funding, greater use of multi-year agreements, improved support for volunteer recruitment and retention, and increased awareness of the services available across Trafford. Trafford now has an opportunity to use the evidence in this report to strengthen the foundations of its VCSE sector and ensure that organisations are equipped to meet future challenges while continuing to improve the lives of residents across the borough.



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