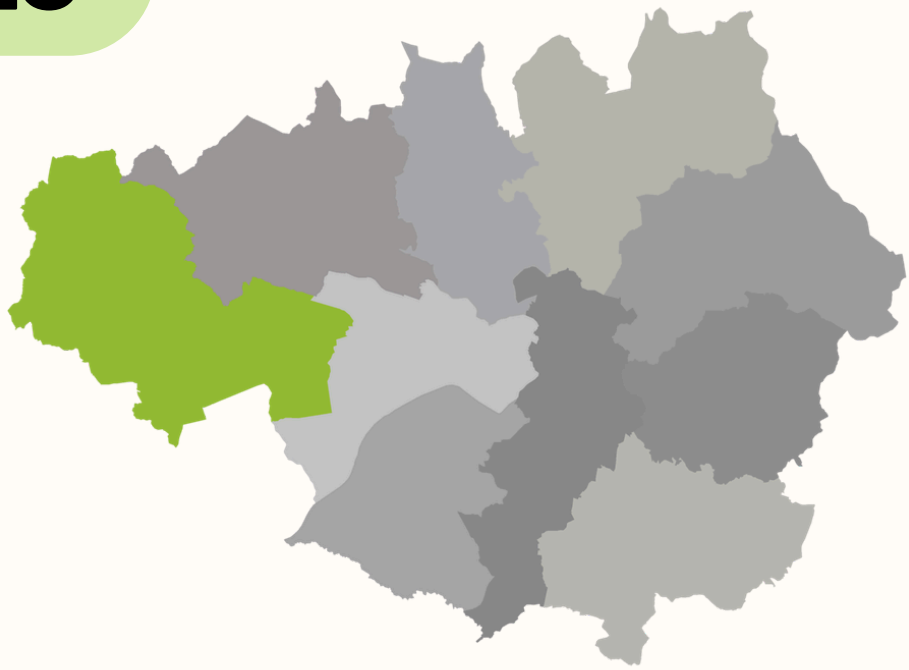
WIGAN BOROUGH COMMUNITY FIRST

10GM

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

Wigan 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 Wigan Borough Community First. The executive summary is co-authored by Nottingham Trent University (NTU) and Wigan Borough Community First. All other sections are authored by NTU. Wigan Borough Community First 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

This report lands at an important moment for Wigan Borough's Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) Sector. Our local organisations, community groups, social enterprises, volunteers and informal networks are doing the everyday work that helps people stay connected, well, active and supported.

Much of this work is highly visible: food, advice, activity, care, culture, youth provision, social connection and practical help. Some of it is quieter: a trusted conversation, a warm welcome, a volunteer checking in, a community leader noticing when something is changing. Together, it forms part of the social infrastructure that helps Wigan and Leigh work.

The findings show a sector of real scale and value, but also one carrying significant pressure. The estimated contribution of Wigan Borough's VCFSE sector is substantial, not only in financial terms but in the reach, relationships and unpaid time that sit behind the numbers. The figures on volunteering, paid staff, income and instances of support help make visible what many people locally already know: the Sector is not peripheral to public life here. It is part of how people access help, how communities organise, how prevention happens and how local knowledge reaches decision makers.

At the same time the report should not be read as a picture of resilience. Resilience hides the strain being absorbed by small teams, volunteers and community leaders.

Demand is rising, financial vulnerability is real, funding is not keeping pace with costs, and many organisations are using reserves, goodwill and unpaid time to keep services running. This matters because the VCFSE sector is closest to people experiencing the sharp end of health inequalities, poverty, isolation, trauma, caring responsibilities and barriers to opportunity.

The local context is also one of change. Wigan Borough Community First is developing its role as a Local Infrastructure Organisation with a clear purpose: to create the conditions for the VCFSE sector to lead, learn, connect, influence and deliver community-led work across the Borough. That means treating funding, volunteering, community research, training, collaborative spaces, social enterprise, place-based work and system influence as connected parts of one infrastructure system, rather than separate projects. The aim is not for one organisation to hold all voice or power, but to help voice, resource, learning and influence move more fairly through the sector and communities.

This report therefore gives us both evidence and responsibility. It strengthens the case for proportionate funding, better routes for smaller and grassroots organisations, clearer recognition of volunteering and trustee contribution and stronger investment in the capacity of the sector itself. It also reinforces the need for community-led insight to sit alongside formal data, so that decisions about funding, commissioning, prevention and neighbourhood working are shaped by people and organisations who understand local realities.

The message is clear: if we want fair opportunities and flourishing towns and neighbourhoods, the VCFSE sector needs to be understood as a strategic partner, not simply a delivery route. We don't just deliver activities; we work with trust, prevention, lived experience, civic action, local leadership and the ability to connect across communities and systems. The challenge now is to use this evidence well: to protect what is already strong, be honest about what is under pressure and build the conditions for a more sustainable, connected and community-powered sector.

Karen Parker, Chief Executive Officer, Wigan Borough Community First



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 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.

Wigan Borough sits within this national context as a growing and ageing Borough made up of distinct towns and neighbourhoods. Its population grew faster than the national average between 2011 and 2021, with growth particularly pronounced among people aged 65 and over. [1] Although Wigan Borough is less deprived overall than most other Greater Manchester boroughs, more than a quarter of residents live in neighbourhoods among England's most deprived 20%, with concentrations of income and health and disability deprivation across parts of the Borough. [2] Around one in four children aged under 16 live in relative poverty after housing costs. [3] The sector's work responds to these differing needs through a range of activities, including health, wellbeing and social care, alongside community development and inclusion.

This report provides an up-to-date picture of Wigan Borough's VCFSE sector in 2026, considering where and how organisations and groups work, the communities they support, their contribution to Wigan Borough and the pressures that must be understood if the Sector is to survive and thrive. It draws on 49 usable survey responses, a focus group, wider local and national evidence, and informed estimates of the sector's overall scale and contribution.

An estimated 1,804 VCFSE organisations and groups operate in Wigan and Leigh, generating around £145 million in annual income and supported by approximately 45,000 staff, volunteers and trustees or Board members. Together, they provide around 615,000 contacts or episodes of support each year. The findings in this report show a sector playing an important role across the borough, with organisations providing support across different life stages and communities while acting as trusted routes into wider services.

Organisations participating in the focus group and responding to the survey described the importance of relationships and equal partnerships in helping people find the right support at the right time. These relationships help people find support that may otherwise be difficult to access, but their care and commitment to their communities can also mean that pressures elsewhere in the system increasingly reach them. More than four in five report increased demand for their services, and the same proportion are supporting more people than a year ago. With two in five reporting difficulty recruiting paid staff and half finding it difficult to recruit volunteers, the risk is that this demand falls on the people sustaining these services. Half report increased stress and burnout among staff and volunteers, with many also reporting increased hours among staff and volunteers.

This support is being delivered at the same time as organisations report an increasingly challenging funding environment. Competition for funding is cited both as a leading challenge when seeking funding and as the biggest risk to organisations' financial sustainability. Even when funding is awarded, it rarely provides the conditions for stability: around seven in ten say less than half of the grants or contracts they have been awarded are multi-year, while a similar proportion say none have been uplifted to cover rising costs over the past year. Many organisations are responding through collaboration with other VCFSE organisations and increased fundraising efforts, but only 4% feel strong, secure and well-equipped for future challenges.

To navigate this uncertain landscape, Wigan Borough's VCFSE sector requires a holistic approach to support. Findings from this report suggest that organisations require proportionate and transparent funding routes, practical support for smaller and grassroots organisations, investment in volunteering and leadership, and funding that better reflects the full cost and longer-term nature of community work. It also requires partnerships in which community organisations can shape priorities and decisions, ensuring that their local knowledge, relationships and lived experience inform how services, prevention and neighbourhood support develop across Wigan.



Glossary

This table provides a glossary of terms, abbreviations, and acronyms used in the Wigan 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 VCFSE 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 VCFSE organisations based in Wigan Borough and include estimates of the scale and contribution of it'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 49 usable responses from VCFSE organisations based in Wigan Borough. It asked about organisations' activities, who they support, where they work, demand for services, staff and volunteers, and finances and funding. Wigan Borough Community First 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 Wigan Borough VCFSE 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 Wigan Borough Community First and follow-up contact with survey respondents. NTU analysed the discussions to identify common themes and understand participant experiences in more detail.

How to read the survey findings

Based on the 49 usable responses and an estimated 1,804 VCFSE organisations in Wigan Borough, the indicative margin of error is around ±13.8 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. For example, applying this margin to a finding of 60% gives a range of around 46% to 74%. 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 VCFSE organisations in Wigan and Leigh. 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). [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

Wigan Borough is estimated to have 1,804 VCFSE organisations: 542 registered organisations and 1,262 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 Wigan using ONS postcode data, and duplicate entries were removed. Below-the-radar groups were estimated using Office for National Statistics (ONS) population figures and the population-based approach developed by Mohan et al. [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 Wigan Borough 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 Wigan Borough 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 Wigan and Leigh's VCFSE sector as a whole. These informed totals are produced using survey data and an estimate of the number and profile of VCFSE organisations in Wigan. 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 Wigan Borough told us directly through the survey.

2.1. Estimated scale and contribution of Wigan Borough's VCFSE sector

1,804 organisations

Wigan's VCFSE sector is estimated to include 542 registered organisations and 1,262 below-the-radar organisations and groups not captured on formal registers.

£145.10 million annual income

Wigan's VCFSE sector generated an estimated £145.10 million in income during 2024/25.

Mostly micro and small

We estimate that micro organisations and groups account for four in five (80%) of the sector. Small organisations make up 11%, medium organisations 7%, and large, major and super-major organisations 1%.

41,618 volunteer and trustee roles

The sector's work is powered by an estimated 31,761 volunteers and 9,857 trustees or Board members.

615,053 instances of support

Wigan's VCFSE sector is estimated to provide 615,053 contacts or episodes of support to people and communities each year.

4.29 million volunteer and trustee hours

Volunteers and trustees contribute around 82,477 hours each week, equivalent to 4.29 million hours a year.

£57.62 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.

2,416 full-time equivalent paid staff

This represents an estimated 3,213 individual employees working in Wigan's VCFSE organisations.

£121.70 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 Wigan's VCFSE sector.

2.2. What Wigan Borough organisations told us

49 Wigan VCFSE organisations and groups made their voices heard, sharing their experiences of working with and supporting communities across the Borough.

> “We're person-centred, we're innovative, which means forward-thinking, and everything's about experience, our lived experience.”

Demand is rising
More than four in five organisations say demand for their services increased over the past year (82%), while the same proportion are supporting more people (82%).

Financial vulnerability
More than two in five describe their organisation as vulnerable or struggling (44%), while only 4% feel strong, secure and well-equipped for future challenges.

Volunteer capacity
More than half of organisations report difficulty recruiting volunteers (52%), while more than two in five say they do not have enough volunteers to carry out their work and meet their objectives (43%).

Reserves filling gaps
Among organisations using reserves, more than four in five have drawn on them for routine operating costs (82%), while almost half have used them to plug funding gaps (45%).

Funding risks
More than two thirds identify competition for funding as a leading financial risk (68%), followed by rising costs (51%) and short-term funding cycles (39%).

Funding not keeping pace
Seven in ten organisations receiving income from grants or contracts say less than half is multi-year (70%), and almost three quarters report no uplift over the past year to cover rising costs (73%).

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

Wigan Borough Community First reflections

In Wigan Borough, VCFSE organisations are part of the Borough's everyday social infrastructure. They work across health, wellbeing, social care, community development, inclusion, sport, culture, advice, family support, environmental action and local spaces. This breadth of activity matters because many organisations do more than one thing at once: they may run a group, provide informal support, connect people to other services, build confidence, reduce isolation and notice emerging pressures before they become visible elsewhere. This is particularly important in a borough made up of distinct towns, neighbourhoods and communities of identity, where trust and local knowledge shape how people access support.

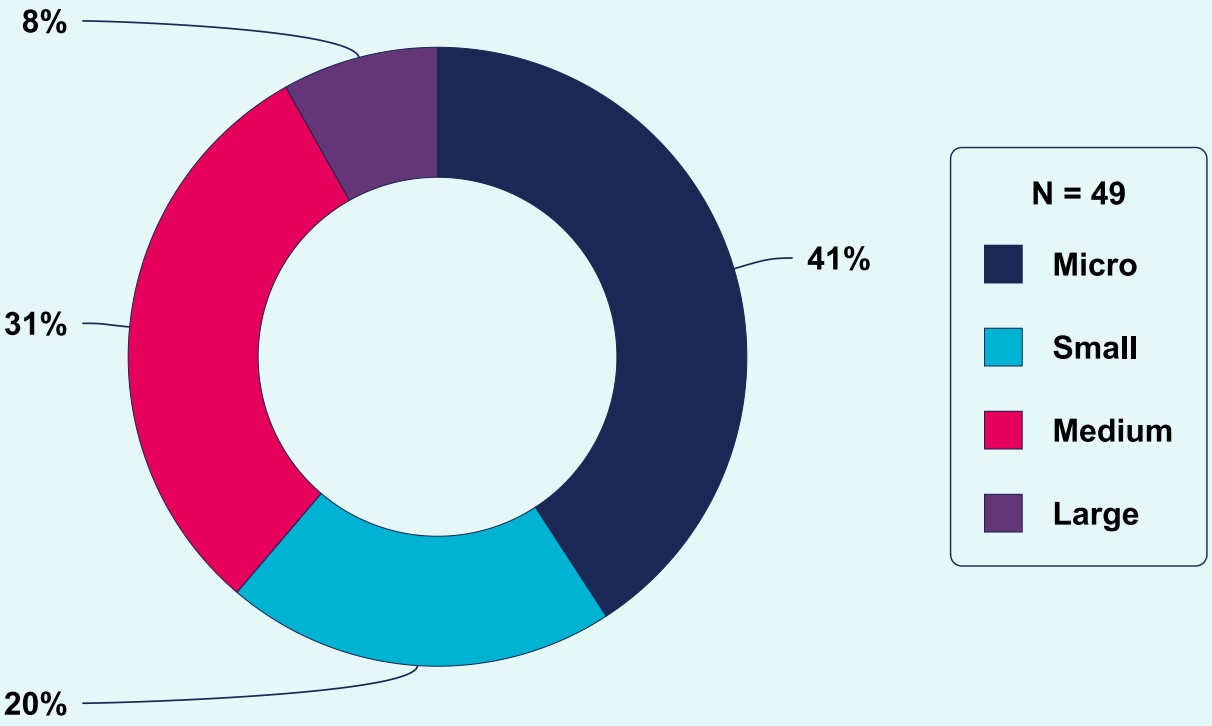
Although Wigan Borough is less deprived overall than most other Greater Manchester boroughs, more than a quarter of its residents live in neighbourhoods among the most deprived 20% nationally. There are particularly high levels of deprivation in Wigan's inner urban areas, but eastern and south-eastern areas also experience higher levels of income and health and disability deprivation. [2] Wigan and Leigh has a relatively homogeneous population that is both growing and ageing. Between the 2011 and 2021 censuses, the borough's population grew faster than the national average, with growth particularly pronounced in people aged 65 and over. [1]

This is the context in which the Boroughs VCFSE sector operates. This section sets out what Wigan Boroughs VCFSE sector does, where it operates, and who it supports.

3.1. Size, legal form and organisation age

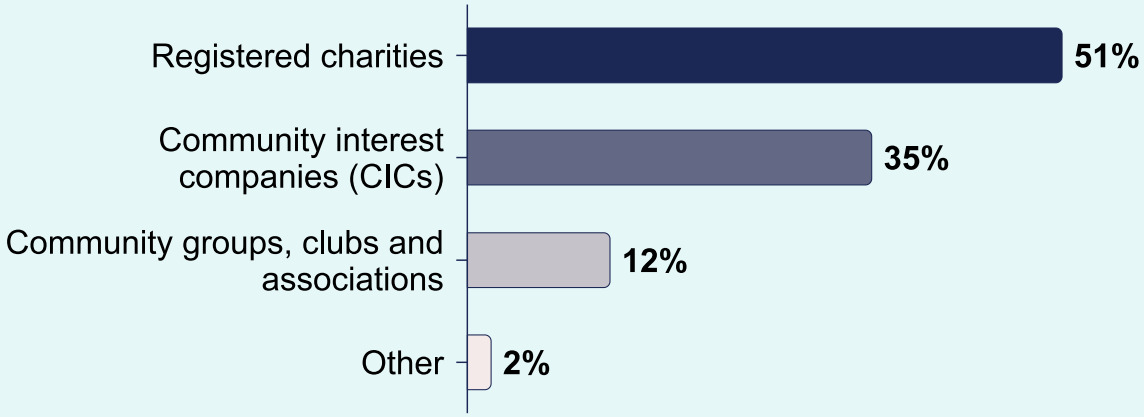
Three in five responding organisations and groups in Wigan Borough are micro (41%) or small (20%). Almost a third are medium-sized (31%), and less than one in ten are large (8%).

Figure 3.1. Proportion of responding organisations by size



Registered charities account for half of responding organisations (51%). More than a third are community interest companies (35%), and fewer classify as community groups, clubs and associations (12%). More than half identify as social enterprises (57%), showing that trading and enterprise form a substantial part of how many organisations pursue their social purpose.

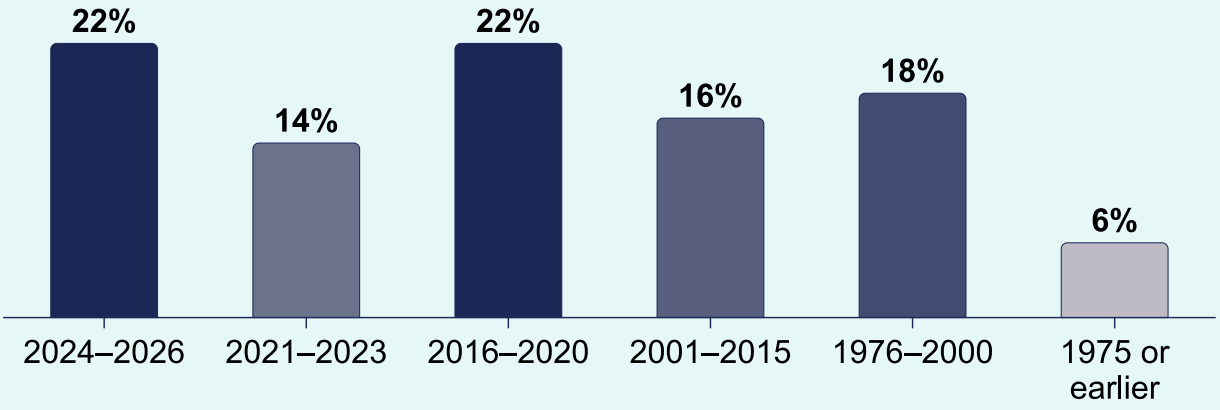
Figure 3.2. Proportion of responding organisations by legal status



Note. Base = 49.

A large proportion of responding organisations are recently formed and sit alongside those with a long-established presence. More than a third were established within the past five years (37%), while just over one in five were established between 2016 and 2020 (22%). Around one in six were established between 2001 and 2015 (16%), and around a quarter were established in 2000 or earlier (24%).

Figure 3.3. Year in which organisations were established



Note. Base = 49.

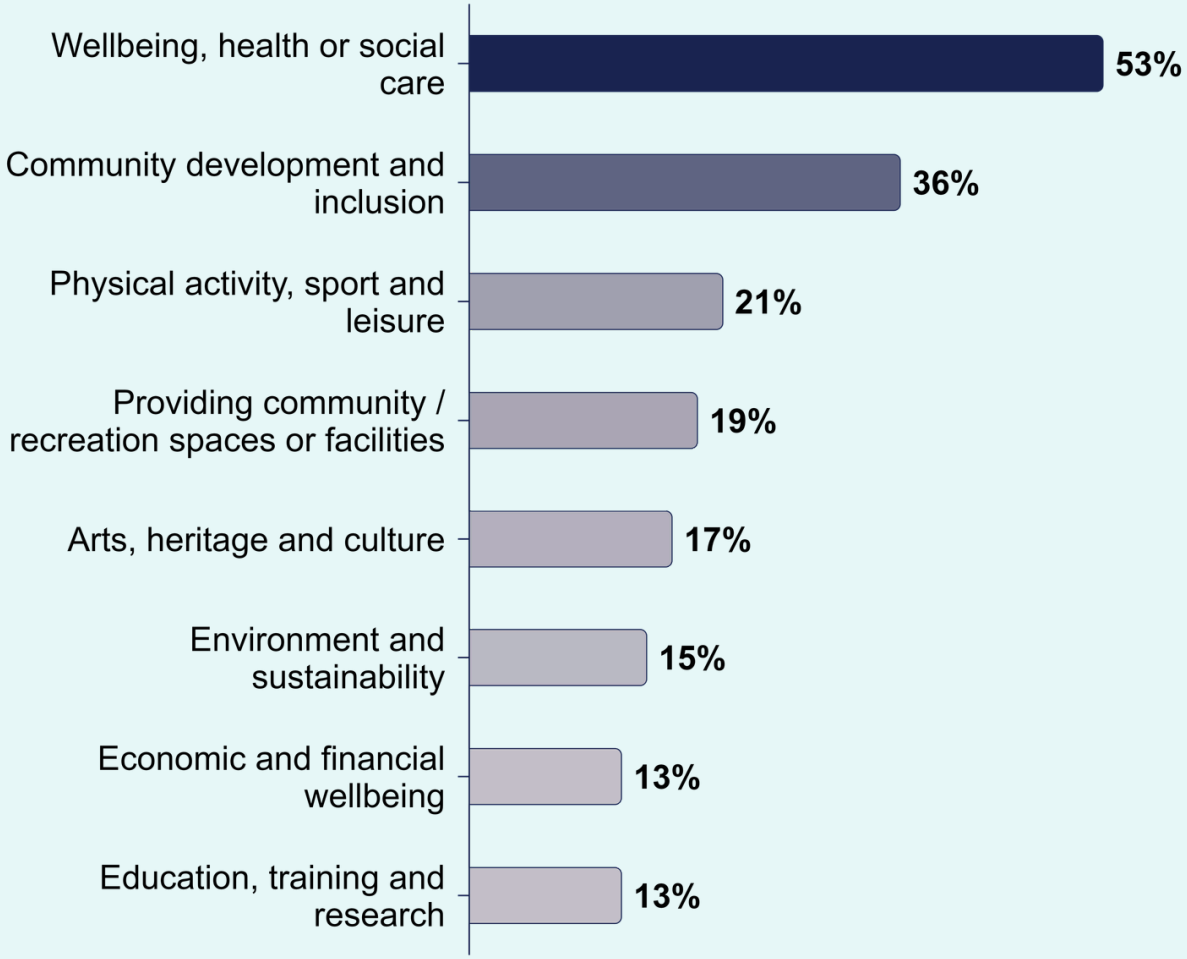
3.2. What organisations do

VCFSE organisations in Wigan Borough carry out work that cuts across several areas of health, wellbeing, and community inclusion. More than half of responding organisations work in wellbeing, health or social care (53%), delivering important work in a borough where more than one in five small neighbourhoods are among England's most deprived 10% for health and disability. [2]

Over a third work in community development and inclusion (36%). A further one in five deliver activities in physical activity, sport and leisure (21%) or provide community or recreation spaces (19%). Participants in the focus group described how these two areas intersect, from supporting people with more complex issues, to providing accessible spaces that offer respite and foster connection:

> "[We] provide space for women to come and do something creative that allows them to let go of the stresses of the day, and also pick up some little tools that support their ongoing health and wellbeing."

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

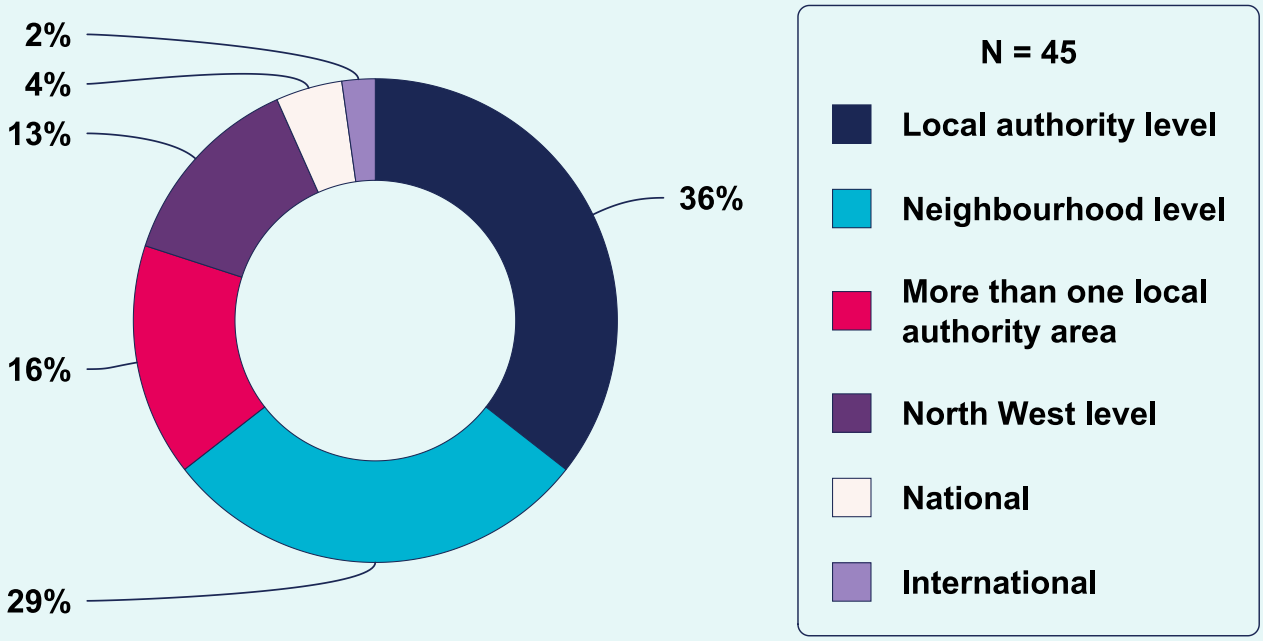


Note. Base = 47. Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%.

3.3. Where they operate

Many responding organisations work within Wigan Borough's neighbourhoods or across the Borough as a whole. More than a third operate primarily across Wigan Borough (36%), while more than a quarter work mainly at neighbourhood level (29%). One in six work across more than one local authority area (16%) and 13% across the North West, with fewer operating nationally (4%) or internationally (2%). This combination of locally rooted and borough-wide organisations is important in responding to deprivation across the borough in areas such as income, health, and disability.

Figure 3.5. Geographic scope of organisations' work



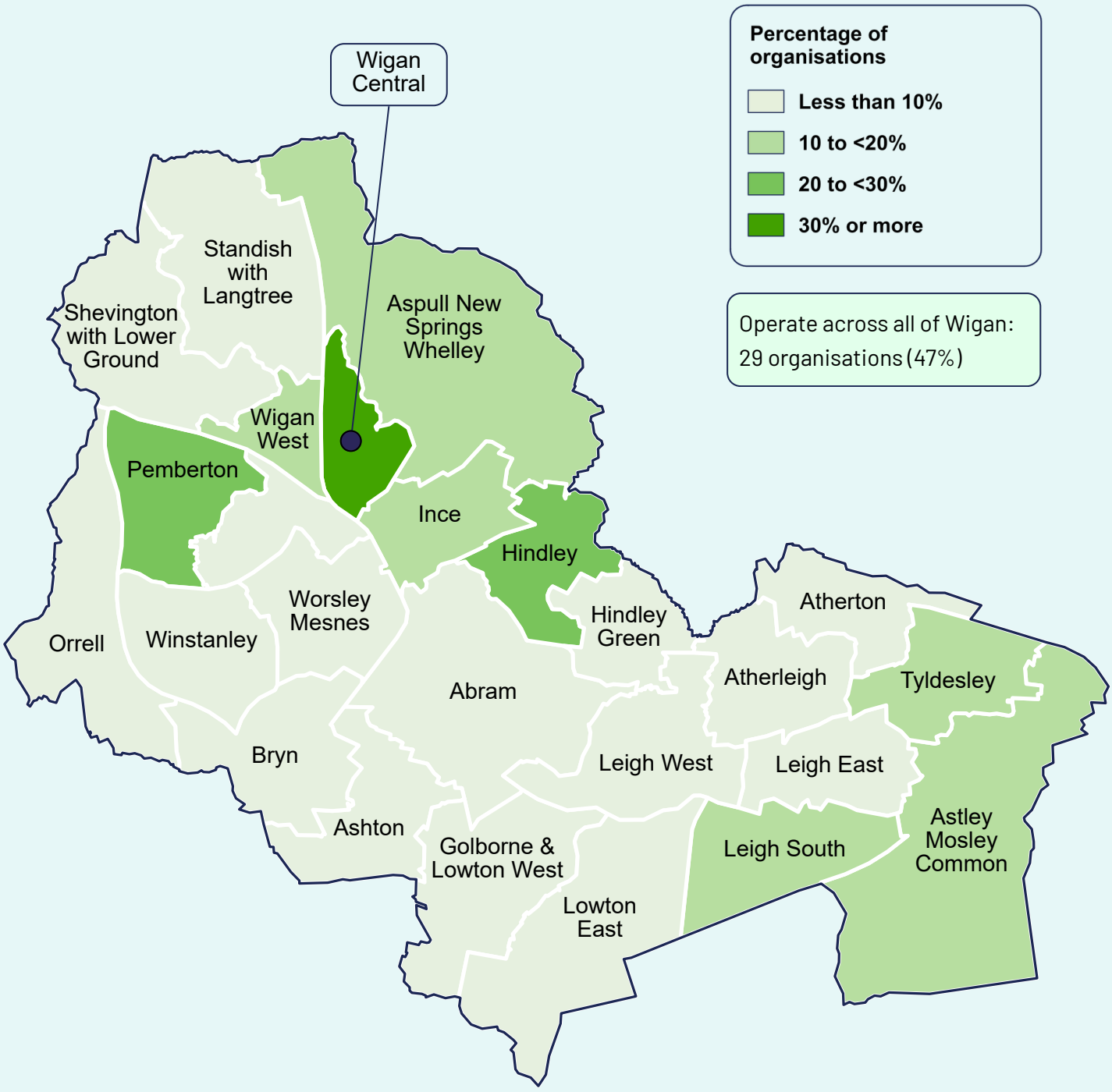
The people of Wigan Borough are also supported by VCFSE organisations based outside the Borough. We therefore asked all organisations that selected Wigan as one of the main areas in which they carry out their activities which parts of the borough they work in. Almost half say they operate across all of Wigan (47%).

Respondents who did not select 'All of Wigan' could identify one or more individual wards. Among this group, Wigan Central was the most commonly selected (33%), followed by Hindley (24%) and Pemberton (21%). Golborne and Lowton West and Lowton East were the least selected areas.

This suggests that responding organisations are active in several of Wigan's most deprived areas, such as Pemberton. [2] However, lower reported activity in other wards may indicate uneven provision, but could also reflect the composition of organisations responding to the survey. Ward-level coverage may therefore differ with a larger sample size.

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

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



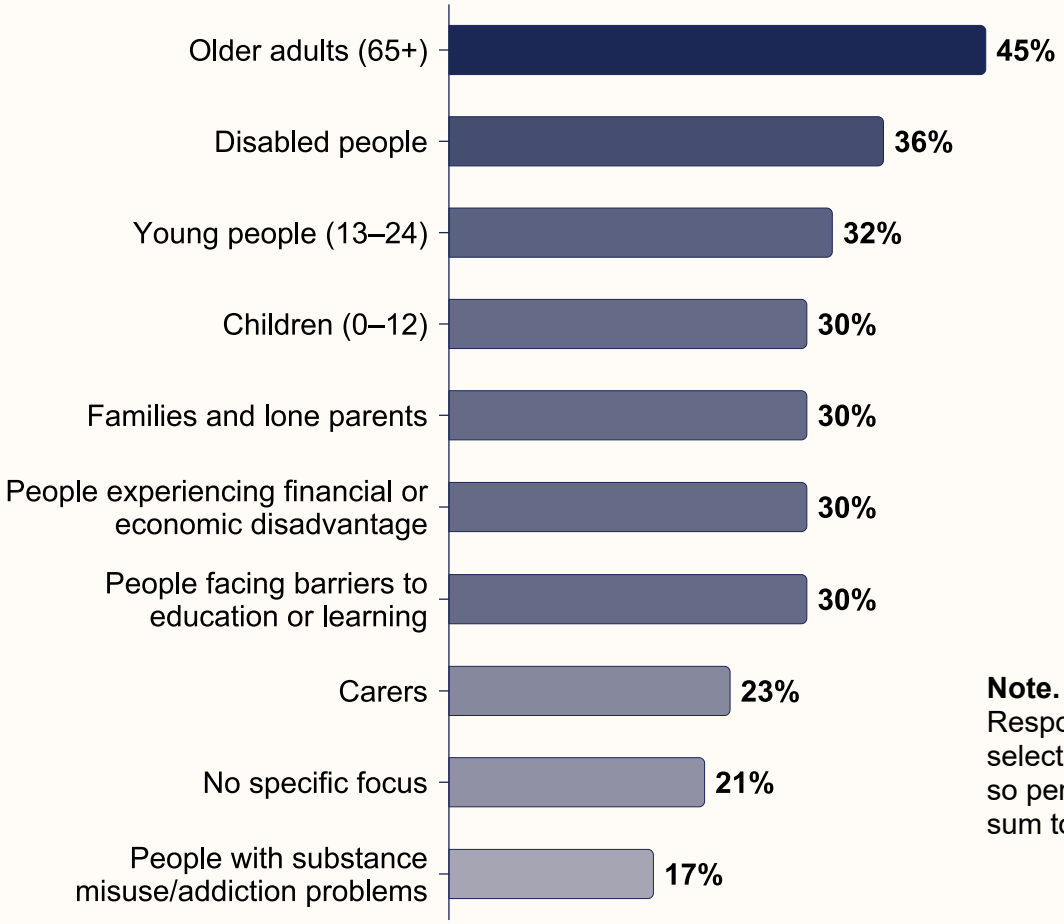
Note. Map uses Wigan Borough ward boundaries in place in December 2022, before the May 2023 electoral changes. Shows the proportion of organisations delivering activities in each Wigan ward, including organisations based elsewhere in Greater Manchester that reported operating in Wigan.

'All of Wigan' uses the full valid base (Base = 62); individual ward percentages use respondents who did not select 'All of Wigan' (Base = 33).

3.4. Who they support

Wigan's population growth, particularly among people aged 65 and over, together with concentrations of health and income deprivation in parts of the borough, means that support needs vary across Wigan. Many of Wigan's VCFSE organisations and groups therefore support people across different life stages and communities connected by identity, circumstance and experience. Almost half of responding organisations work with or support older adults (45%), in a borough where around one in five residents are aged 65 and over. [3] While Wigan's population is older than the national average, evidence points to higher levels of deprivation among its younger population. It is estimated that one in four children aged under 16 live in relative poverty after housing costs, [3] and more than a third live in income-deprived families. [6] Support for these groups was reported by responding organisations: around a third support young people aged 13 to 24 (32%), children aged 0 to 12 (30%) or families and lone parents (30%).

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



Note. Base = 47. Respondents could select multiple options so percentages do not sum to 100%.

Organisations also support communities connected by shared circumstances, experience, or identity, often including people who experience inequality and those facing additional barriers to services and community life. More than a third work with Disabled people and people living with long-term health conditions, including mental health conditions (36%). Wigan Borough is more deprived than 84% of local authority districts in England in terms of health and disability, with deprivation geographically dispersed across the borough. [6] Just under a third support people experiencing financial or economic disadvantage (30%) and the same proportion support people facing barriers to education or learning (30%), while almost a quarter support carers (23%).

4. Staff, volunteers and trustees

Wigan Borough Community First reflections

Locally, these findings should be understood alongside wider conversations about workforce pressure, volunteering, leadership and organisational sustainability. Wigan Borough's VCFSE sector depends heavily on people who hold relationships, memory and trust within communities. That is a strength, but it also creates vulnerability where responsibility is concentrated in a small number of staff, trustees, founders or volunteers. Strengthening the sector therefore means investing not only in recruitment, but in support, wellbeing, governance, succession, peer learning and practical routes for people to share leadership rather than carry it alone.

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

That commitment gives the sector much of its strength. It also creates risk when organisations rely on staff and volunteers to hold things together when pressures emerge. This workforce requires investment if it is to be sustained and supported effectively. The findings in this section illustrate the scale of staff and volunteers' contribution in Wigan's VCFSE sector, as well as the pressures they face.



4.1. Paid staff and employment

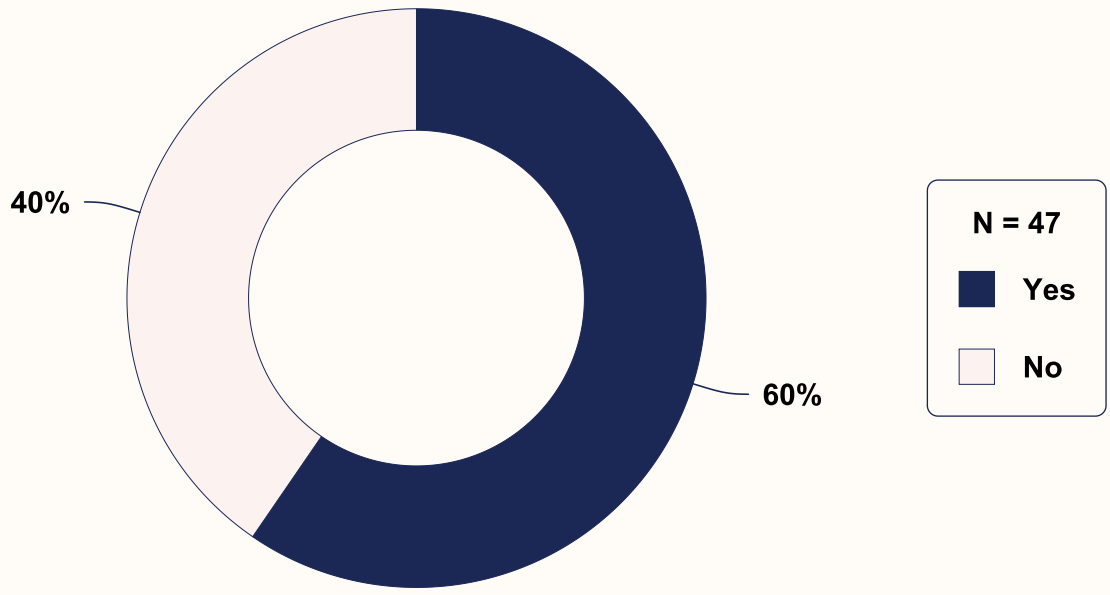
Wigan Borough's VCFSE sector is estimated to employ 2,416 full-time equivalent paid staff, corresponding to approximately 3,213 individual employees. The work carried out by these staff is estimated to contribute £121.70 million to the economy each year through the services and activities they deliver. These estimates highlight that the sector is not only a vital source of community support but also a key contributor to inclusive economic growth, job creation, and local economic resilience across Wigan.

2,416
full-time equivalent (FTE) paid posts in Wigan's VCFSE sector

Estimated contribution to the economy
£ 121.70 million

Three in five responding organisations have paid staff (60%), and more than four in five of these organisations say they pay the Real Living Wage to all eligible employees (82%). Paid employment is concentrated in larger organisations: all medium and large organisations report a paid workforce, compared with two thirds of small organisations (67%) and one in six micro organisations and groups (16%).

Figure 4.1. Organisations with a paid workforce



Almost two thirds of organisations with paid staff have fewer than five FTE employees (63%), while similar proportions have between five and 19 FTE posts or 20 or more (both 19%).

When asked about recruitment and retention over the past year, more than two in five organisations with paid staff report difficulty recruiting them (44%), while a quarter experienced difficulty retaining them (26%).

Figure 4.2. Staff recruitment and retention difficulties



Note. Question shown only to organisations with paid staff. Base: recruitment = 25; retention = 27. Shows the proportion answering 'Yes'. 'Don't know' responses excluded.

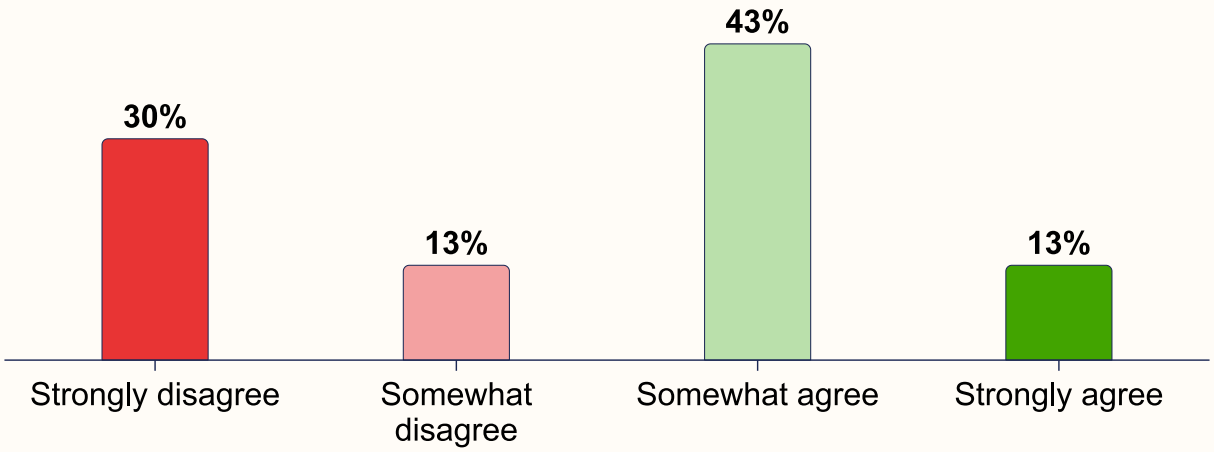
4.2. Volunteers and trustees

Across Wigan Borough, the Sector is estimated to involve around 31,800 volunteers and 9,900 trustees or Board members, contributing around 82,500 hours each week. Over a year, this is equivalent to 4.29 million hours spent supporting local people, running activities and governing organisations. Replacing that time with paid labour at the Real Living Wage would cost an estimated £57.62 million each year.

Half of responding organisations have fewer than ten volunteers (50%), while three in ten have 25 or more (30%) and one in five have between 10 and 24 (20%). The support organisations offer volunteers is both practical and developmental. Around three in five provide training, development or progression opportunities (59%) or reimburse expenses (57%), while half offer recognition or social activities (50%).

More than half say they have enough volunteers to carry out their work and meet their objectives (57%), leaving more than two in five that do not (43%). 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. [7] With one in five residents aged 65 or over, Wigan's VCFSE 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. [7,8] 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. [8]

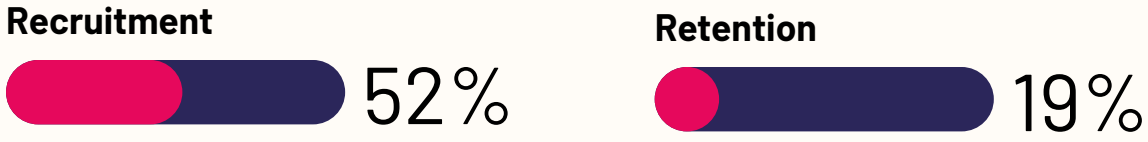
Figure 4.3. Whether organisations have enough volunteers to carry out work and meet their objectives



Note. Base = 46. 'Don't know' responses excluded.

Recruitment appears to be the greater pressure. More than half of responding organisations (52%) have found it difficult to recruit volunteers over the past year, compared to one in five that have found it difficult to retain volunteers (19%).

Figure 4.4. Volunteer recruitment and retention difficulties

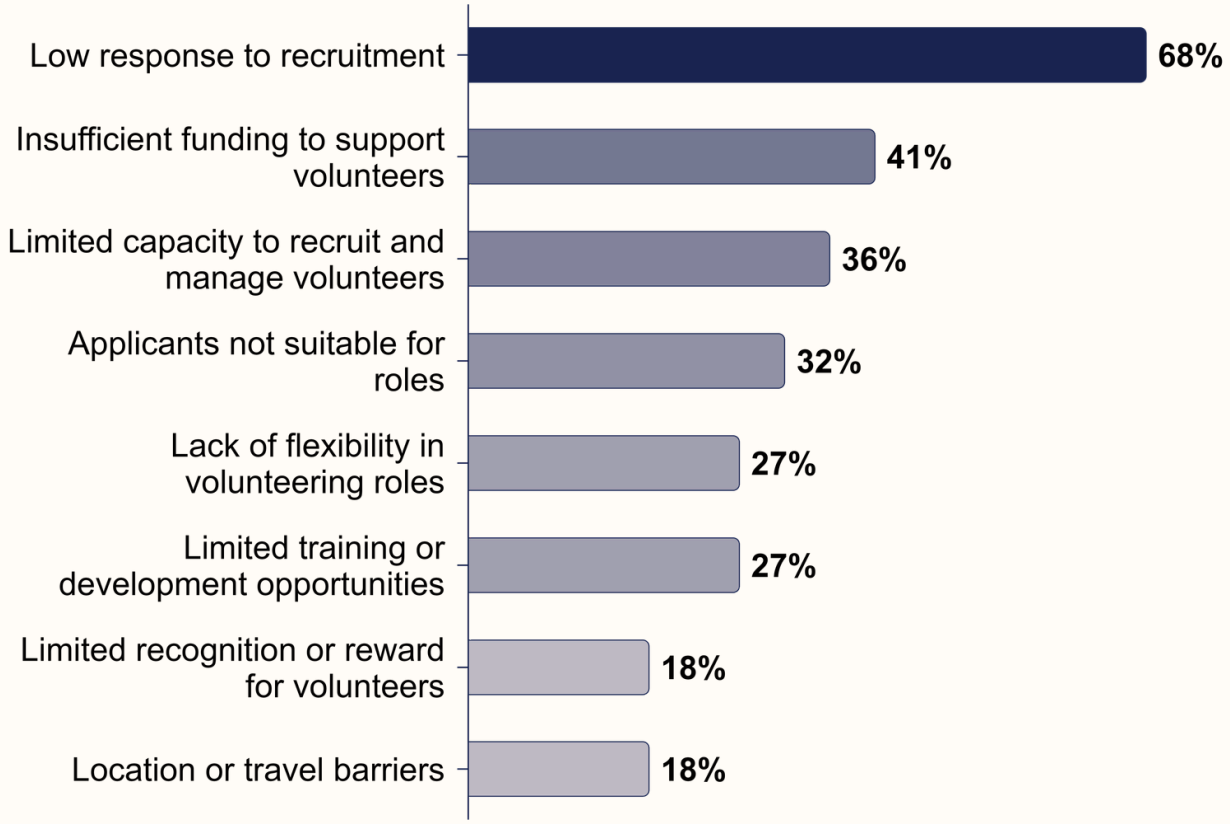


Note. Base: recruitment = 42; retention = 42. Shows the proportion answering 'Yes'. 'Don't know' responses excluded.

More than two thirds of those experiencing recruitment difficulties say that a low response to recruitment activities is a barrier (68%). Adults in the least deprived neighbourhoods are twice as likely to volunteer formally each month as those in the most deprived neighbourhoods, [7] and around one in six Wigan residents live in neighbourhoods among England's most deprived 10%. [2] This points to another potential challenge for VCFSE organisations: areas with greater need for support may also face lower uptake when recruiting local volunteers.

Organisations also report constraints on their ability to support new volunteers. Two in five say insufficient funding to support volunteers makes recruitment harder (41%), more than a third point to limited capacity to recruit and manage them (36%), and almost a third say applicants are unsuitable for the roles available (32%).

Figure 4.5. Volunteer recruitment barriers (top 8)



Note. Base = 22. Question shown only to organisations reporting volunteer recruitment difficulties. Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%.

Volunteer recruitment difficulties were notably more prevalent among responding organisations, while just under one in five found it difficult to retain volunteers over the past year (19%).

This smaller group linked retention difficulties to changing volunteer needs and motives, as well as the resources required to support them. Changes in work or study commitments, decline in volunteers' physical or mental health, and limited organisational resources to support volunteers were the top three reported barriers to retaining volunteers, reported by over half of responding organisations.

This reflects wider national evidence showing that changing health, home or work circumstances are among the leading reasons why older people stop volunteering, [8] while work commitments are cited as the most common barrier among adults who do not volunteer regularly. [7]

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.

Almost half of those experiencing difficulties say staff and volunteers have experienced increased stress or burnout (48%) as a result. More than two in five say employees are working increased hours (44%), and more than a quarter say volunteers are giving more time (28%). The national VCSE Barometer identified similar pressures in 2025, with around a third of organisations reporting increases in staff working outside normal hours (32%), volunteers working beyond agreed hours (30%) and staff exhaustion or burnout (32%). [9]

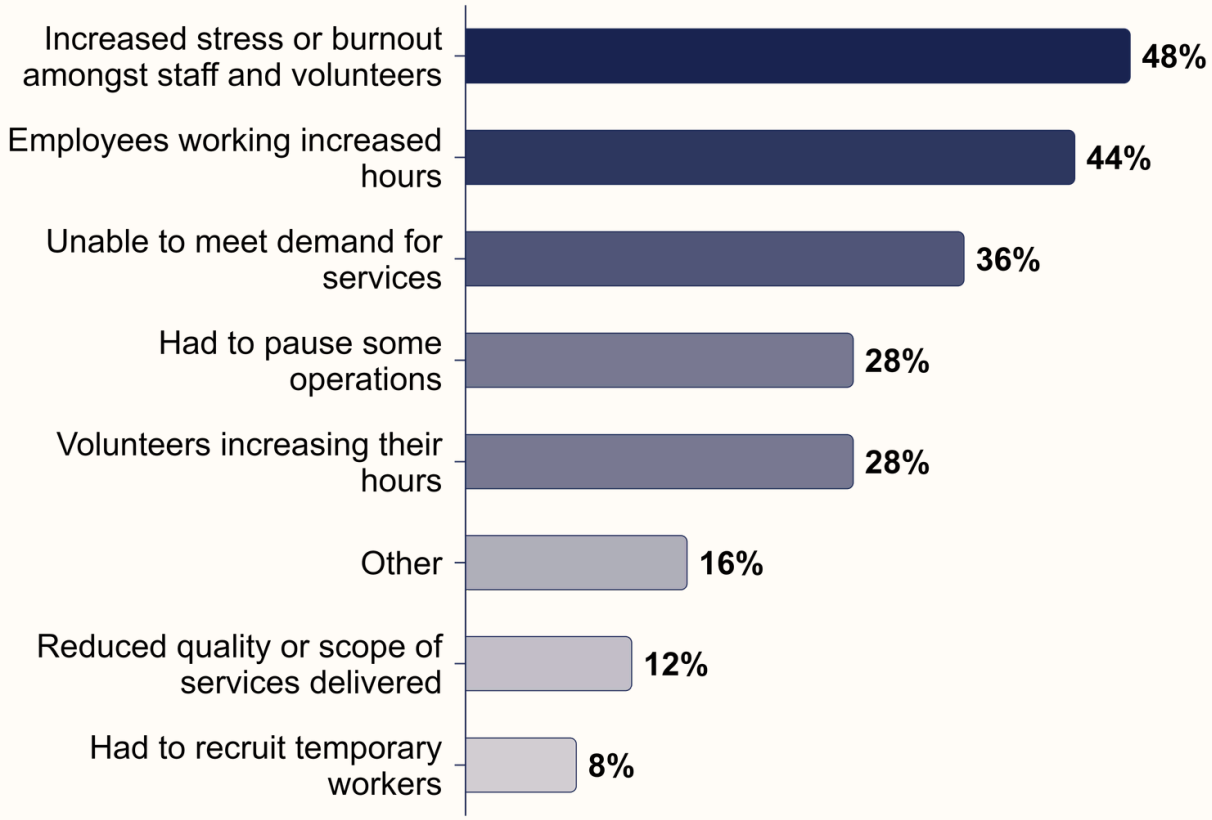
These findings were also echoed by participants in the focus group. One participant described how the demands of helping others could push the wellbeing of those doing the work aside:

> “It's a sector that has lost the ability to look after themselves while doing great things for other people.”

One reason for this is that people volunteering or working in the sector often do so because they are driven by purpose or a personal experience. That brings commitment, but also risk. One other focus group participant recognised that the care which was driving their work and support was also causing them to burn out because it made it more difficult to put down. They were also concerned about how people might take advantage of this.

> “We care so much about what we do… I'm the worst person to talk about burnout… I just cannot stop doing what we do. Just 24-7, it's just there, no matter what I do. And that's really how, when you've got a young family, you're trying to split yourself… I think as a sector, we do get taken advantage of because people know [that we] care so much.”

Figure 4.6. How recruitment or retention difficulties are affecting organisations



Note. Base = 25. 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%.

One other focus group participant who had experienced burnout described learning to set boundaries and share responsibilities as their organisation grew. Yet leaders do not always have support available to them. Fair Collective's research with leaders of small organisations in England, published in 2025, found that 85% said their role had negatively affected their mental health, while two thirds (67%) had no budget to support their own or their team's mental health.[16]

Alongside these pressures on staff and volunteers, more than a third of those experiencing workforce difficulties have been left unable to meet demand (36%), and just under a third have had to pause some operations (28%) because of workforce difficulties. This suggests that shortages are contributing to issues which affect not only staff and volunteers but also the communities they serve.

5. Communities supported, demand, and access

Wigan Borough Community First reflections

In Wigan Borough, access is strongly shaped by trust, relationships and local visibility. People often find support through word of mouth, direct contact, community connectors, schools, health and care routes, other VCFSE organisations, faith and identity-based networks, and informal neighbourhood relationships. This makes the sector an important bridge between our communities and wider systems, particularly where people may not recognise that help is available, may feel stigma or fear, or may face digital, financial, cultural or practical barriers. The access findings therefore point not only to service availability, but to the importance of trusted routes into support.

Wigan Borough's VCFSE groups and organisations provide an estimated 615,000 contacts or episodes of support each year.

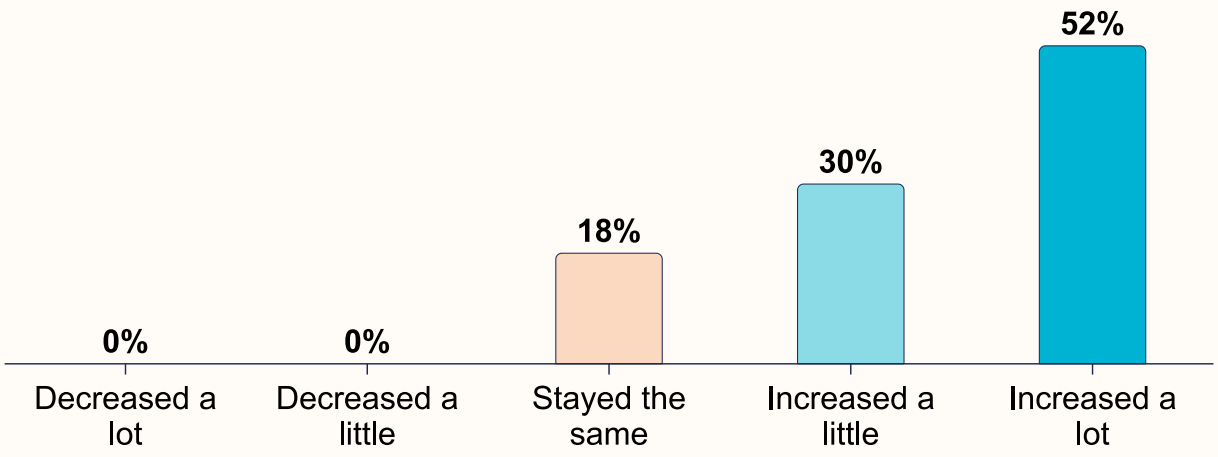
Evidence from both the survey and focus group paints a picture of Wigan Borough VCFSE organisations acting as everyday social infrastructure. They are places, people, connectors, relationships and trusted routes into support. Many people find support through informal, local routes, but this also means lack of awareness may be a barrier to those not already connected to community networks. More than four in five say demand for their services has risen, and a similar proportion say they are supporting more people compared to 12 months ago.



5.1. Demand for services

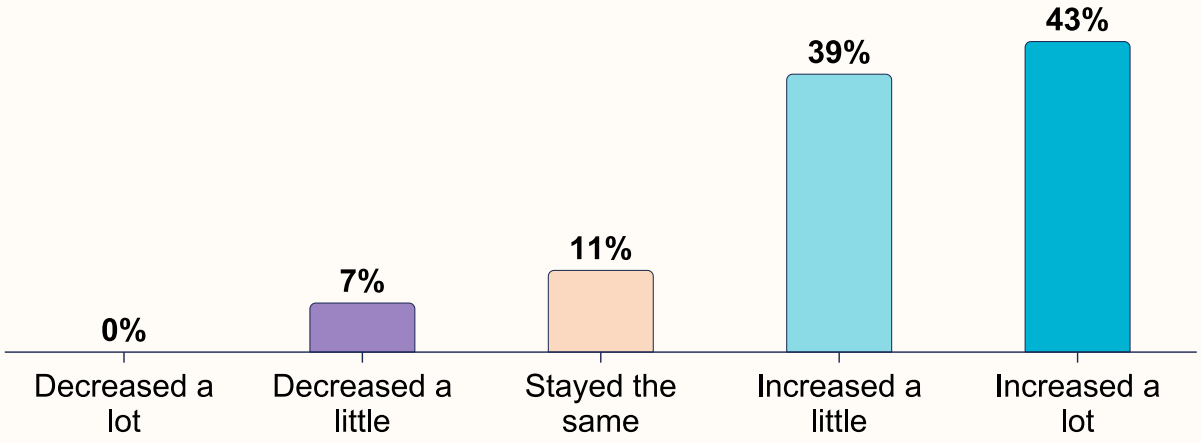
When asked how demand for services had changed over the past 12 months, more than four in five responding organisations report an increase (82%), including more than half saying it increased a lot (52%). More than four in five also say the number of people they support has increased (82%).

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



Note. Base = 44. 'Don't know' responses excluded. Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

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



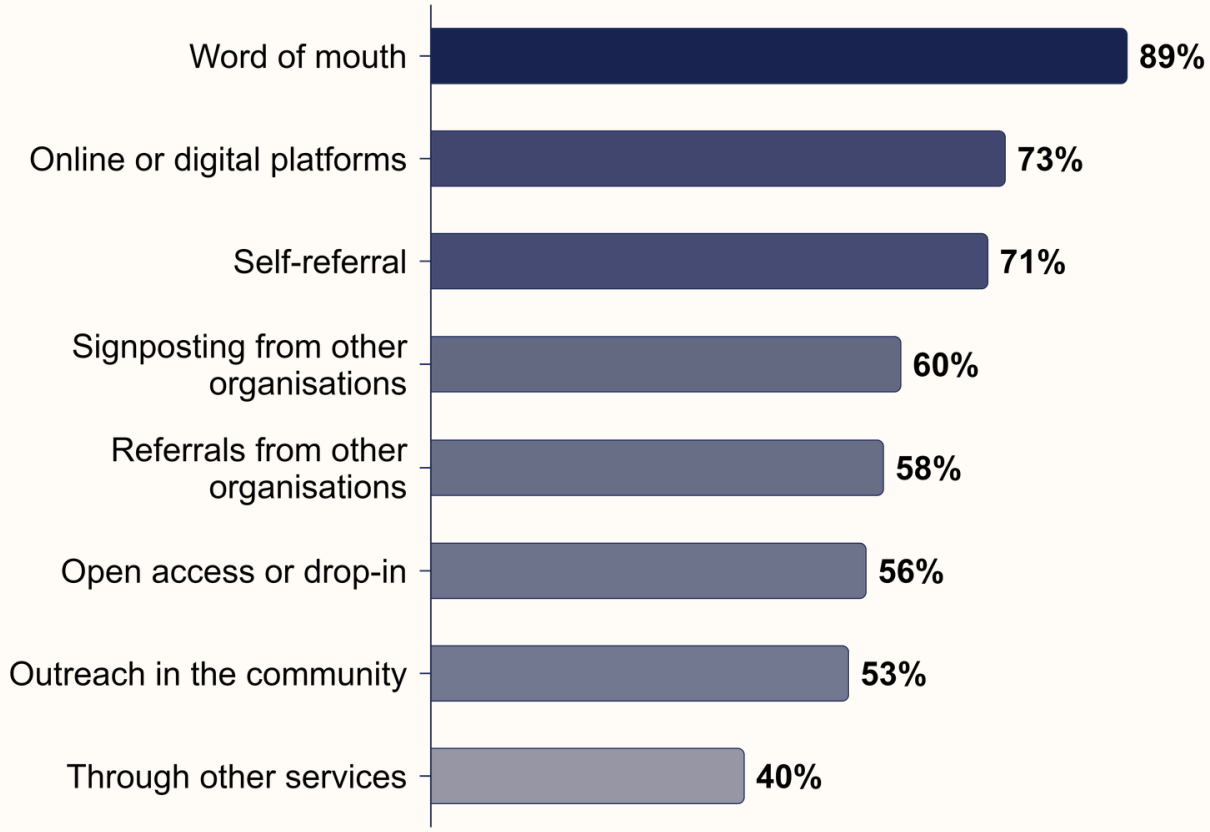
Note. Base = 44. 'Don't know' responses excluded. Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

This increase in demand is taking place alongside growing pressure on care services across the Borough. Wigan Council's financial plan for 2026/27 anticipates increases in both the number of people requiring adult social care and the complexity of their needs, including young adults moving from children's services, people leaving hospital and the needs of an ageing population. [11] With health, wellbeing, and social care the leading area of work among organisations, and with older adults, Disabled people and carers prominent among the communities they support, demand for their services in the coming year is likely to continue.

5.2. How people find and access support

VCFSE organisations described themselves as being embedded, trusted and known routes into support within their communities, often working with other VCFSE groups and networks to improve outcomes for communities. People reach support through a wide range of routes, many of them direct and relational. Word of mouth is the most common, reported by almost nine in ten organisations (89%), followed by contact through online or digital platforms (73%) and direct contact or self-referral (71%). Three in five say people are signposted by other organisations (60%), while more than half receive referrals (58%), provide open-access or drop-in routes (56%) or carry out community outreach (53%).

Figure 5.3. How people come into contact with VCSE organisations



Note. Base = 45. Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%.

Among organisations receiving referrals, more than nine in ten receive them from other VCFSE organisations or groups (92%), just under nine in ten receive referrals from public services (88%) and just under two in five from the private sector (38%). Referrals most frequently originate from services related to social prescribing and community wellbeing, adult social care, and children and family services.

These referral routes show that partnerships between statutory services and VCFSE organisations are helping to connect people to activities that support wellbeing and independence. In the focus group, organisations recognised the importance of building these relationships so that people receive the right type of support at the time they need it, supporting the Greater Manchester Live Well approach. [12]

> “We've got great relationships… Everything that we do in partnership always has the best outcomes, especially when it's people who genuinely want to work in partnership.”

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

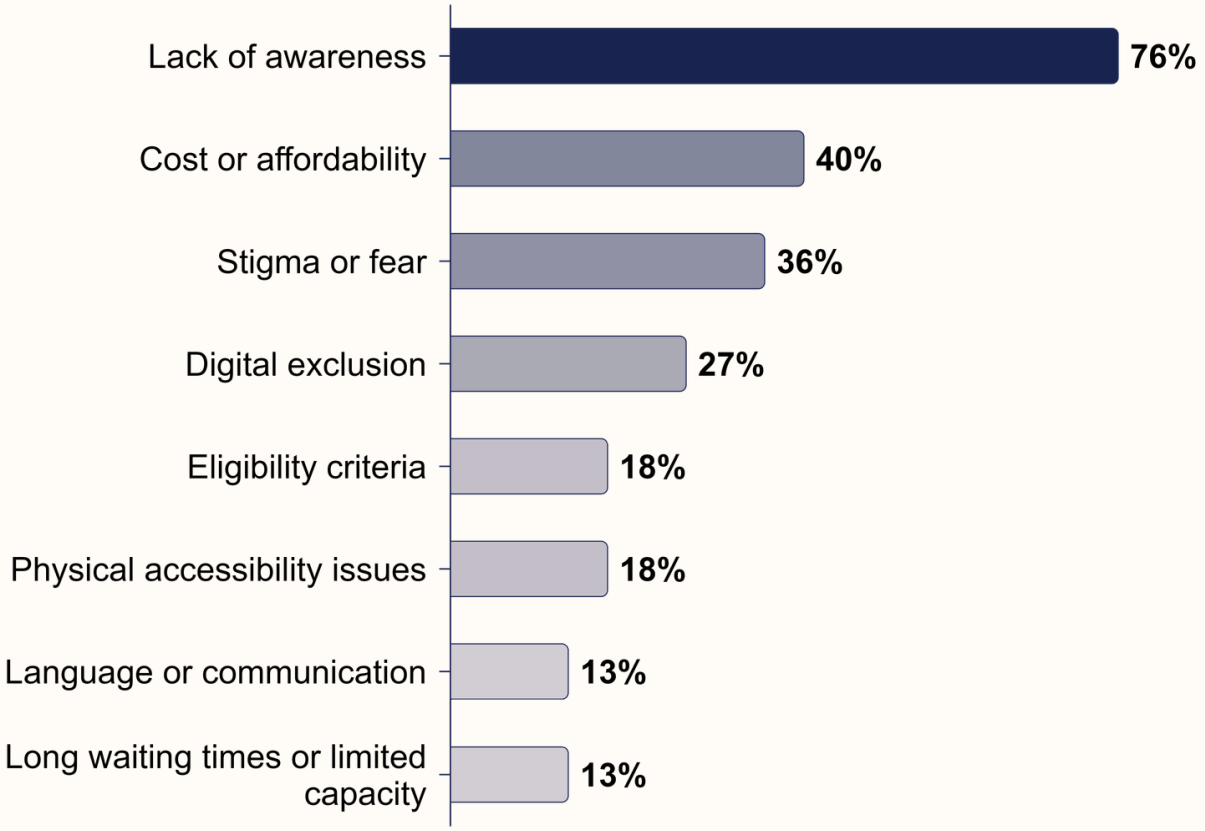
Wigan Boroughs VCFSE sector supports a diverse range of communities, some of which face structural barriers to services, while others encounter practical barriers that can make support harder to find or engage with.

One focus group participant described how these barriers can overlap. They explained that the cost of attending, alongside tiredness, lack of time and difficulties arranging childcare, could prevent people from taking part even when they wanted to.

> “I've been struggling to get people to the sessions [because] of cost and lack of energy, feeling too tired, no time.”

In the survey, the most commonly identified barrier is a lack of awareness of available services (76%), followed by affordability or the cost of taking part (40%). More than a third identify stigma or fear (36%), and more than a quarter say that digital exclusion (27%) affects access. The Digital Communities Partnership, [13] a collaborative network involving Wigan Council and local organisations providing digital-skills support, offers one local route for addressing digital exclusion across Wigan Borough's communities.

Figure 5.4. Barriers to accessing services

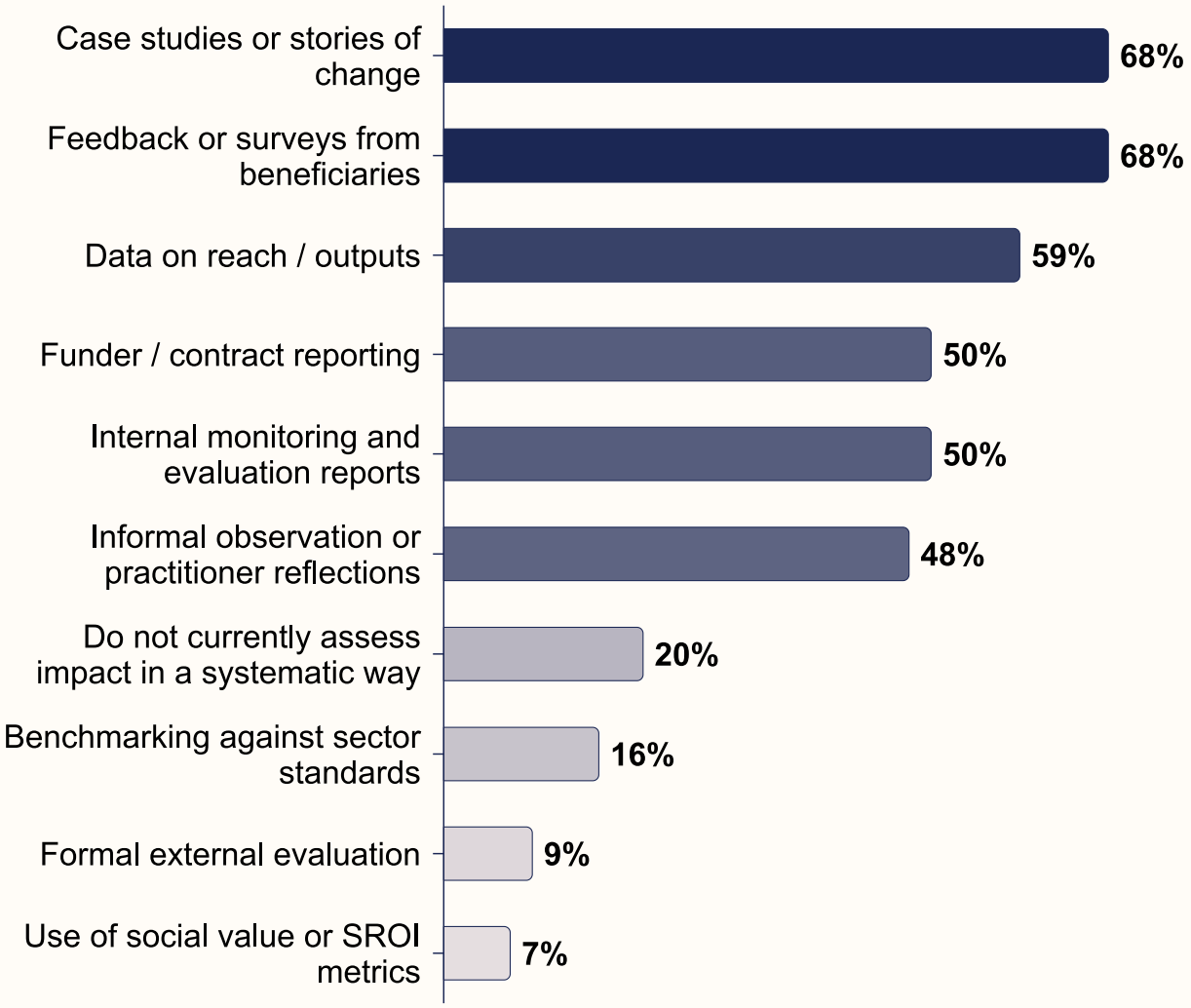


Note. Base = 45. Figure shows the eight most commonly selected responses. Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%.

5.4. Measuring impact and delivery quality

Organisations use a range of methods to understand and demonstrate what their work achieves. Case studies or stories of change and feedback from beneficiaries are the most common (both 68%), followed by reach or output data (59%). Half use funder or contract reporting and half use internal monitoring and evaluation, while almost half draw on informal observation or practitioner reflection (48%).

Figure 5.5. How organisations measure impact



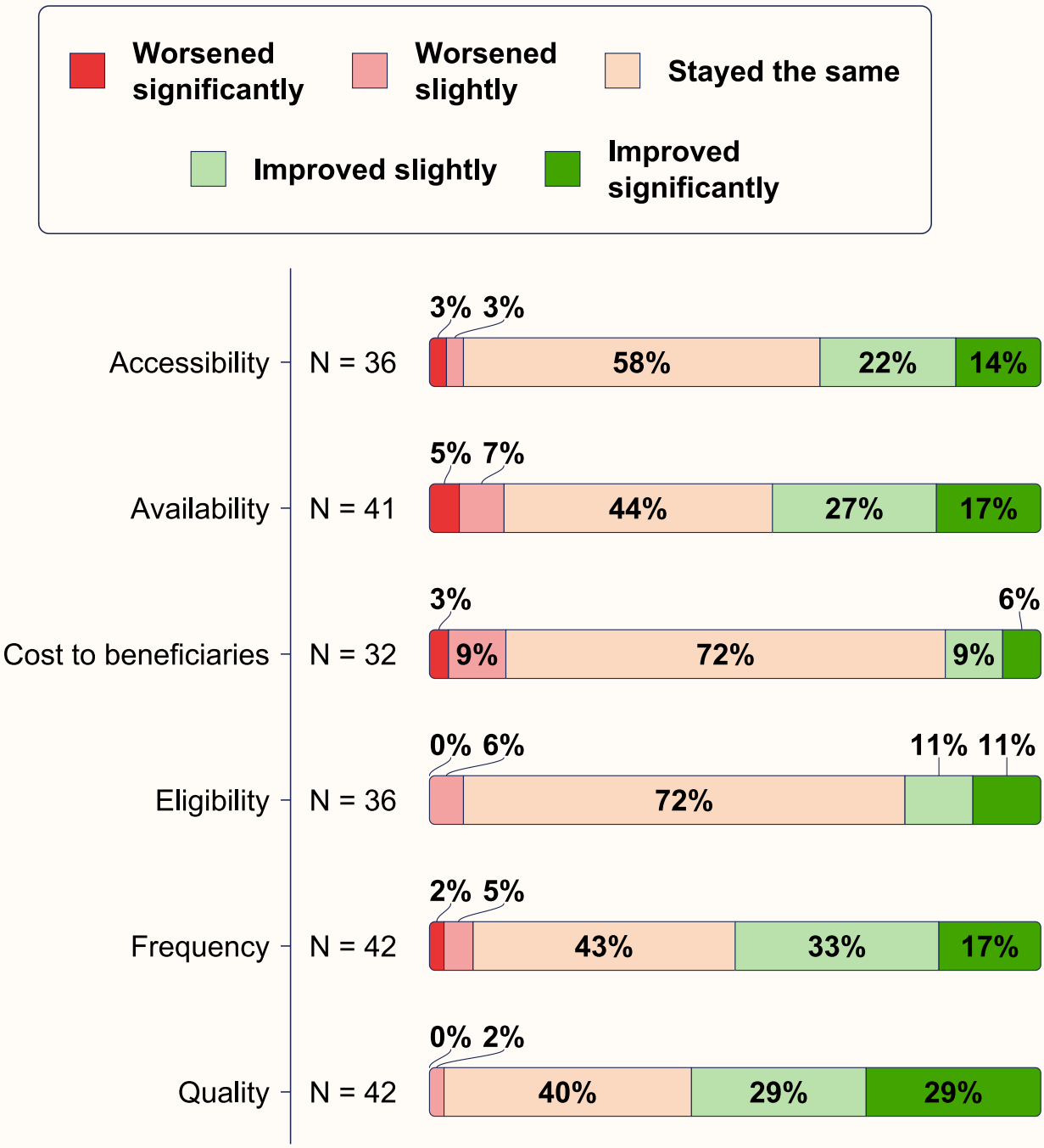
Note. Base = 44. Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%.

In the focus group, one participant described how feedback from beneficiaries helps shape how support is offered. After receiving feedback from parents about the difficulty in accessing support due to limited time or access to childcare, they introduced an online session:

> "I just started one online session because of feedback that I got. There was a lot of parents struggling with childcare, so I wanted to offer an opportunity for them to access."

Although most organisations are supporting more people compared to a year earlier, almost three in five report improvements in service quality over the previous year (57%). Half report improved frequency of services (50%), while more than two in five report better availability (44%). Fewer report deterioration in the support they offer. Around one in eight say costs to people using their services or the availability of support have worsened (both 12%).

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

Wigan Borough Community First reflections

Locally, the finance findings need careful interpretation. The overall scale of sector income does not mean that resources are evenly distributed or that organisations feel secure. Many smaller organisations operate with no security, short funding cycles and high dependency on unpaid labour, while also being asked to respond to increasingly complex need. In Wigan, future funding practice will need to balance accountability with proportionality, reduce unnecessary burden, support full-cost recovery, and create routes for collaboration, social value, enterprise, asset development and longer-term sustainability.

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, while rising energy, wage and overhead costs have increased the cost of delivery. At the same time, the communities they support are facing greater pressures, driving demand during a period of constraint and uncertainty. [14,15]

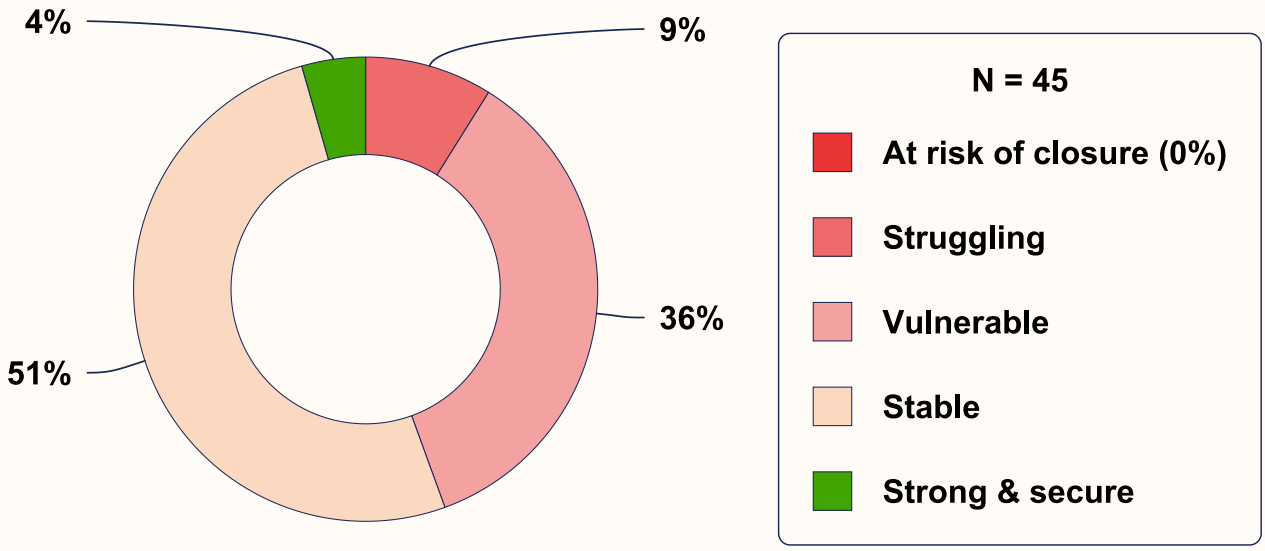
Wigan Borough VCFSE organisations face similar pressures, with more than a third describing their organisation as vulnerable and facing significant pressures. Many describe an increasingly competitive funding landscape and funding arrangements that are often short-term and rarely provide uplifts to cover increasing delivery costs. Almost half of those holding reserves have drawn on them in the past year, but the main reasons for doing so are to cover day-to-day running costs and plug gaps in funding, rather than as a buffer for emergencies. Most expect to maintain or expand their work, but few feel strong and secure, and some face difficult choices between maintaining services now and protecting their ability to continue in the longer term.

Wigan and Leigh's VCFSE sector generated an estimated £145.10 million in income in 2024/25 and spent an estimated £141.28 million.

6.1. Financial position

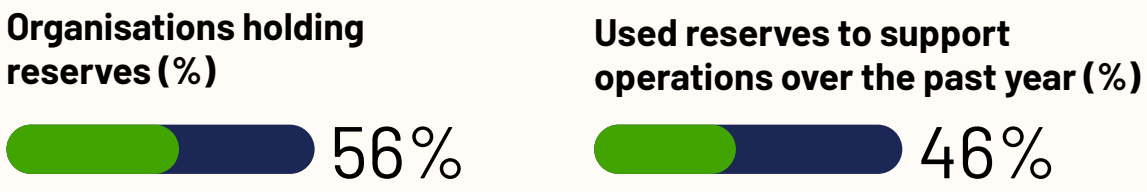
These estimates describe the scale of Wigan Borough VCFSE sector, but they should not be read as a sign that individual organisations feel financially secure. Just over half of respondents describe their organisation as stable but concerned about the future (51%). More than a third say they are vulnerable and facing significant pressure, with sustainability uncertain without changes being made (36%), while 9% are struggling. No organisations report being at risk of imminent closure, but only 4% feel strong, secure and well-equipped for future challenges.

Figure 6.1. Organisations' current financial and operational state



More than half of responding organisations hold reserves (56%), and almost half of these had drawn on them over the previous year (46%).

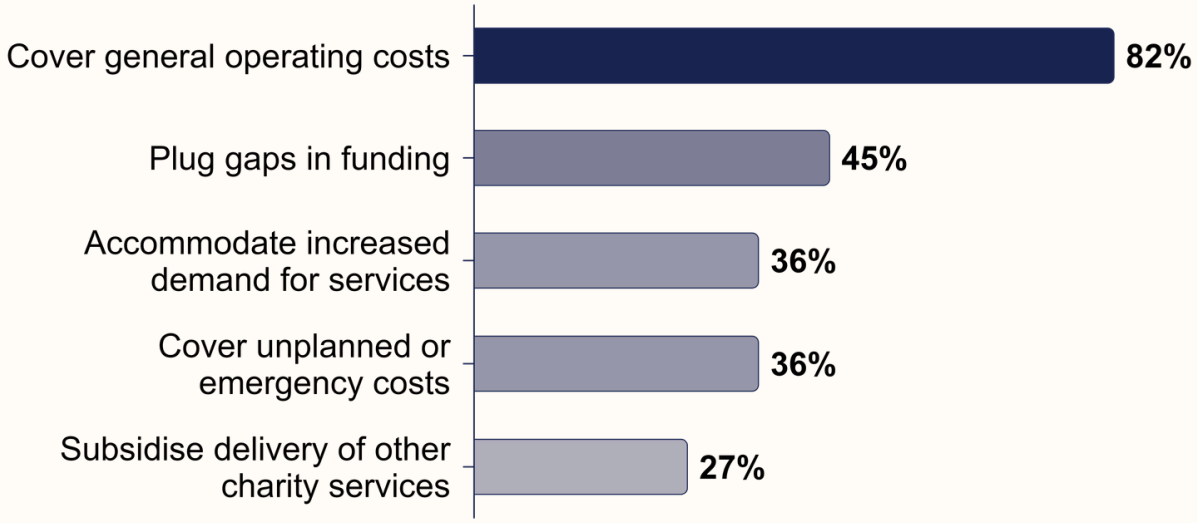
Figure 6.2. Use of financial reserves



Note. Base: holds reserves = 43; used reserves = 24. Figure shows the proportion answering 'Yes'. The 'used reserves' question was asked only of organisations that hold reserves.

More than four in five have drawn on reserves to meet general operating costs (82%), while more than two in five have used them to plug gaps in funding (45%). More than a third have used reserves to cover unplanned or emergency costs (36%) or to accommodate increased demand for their services (36%).

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



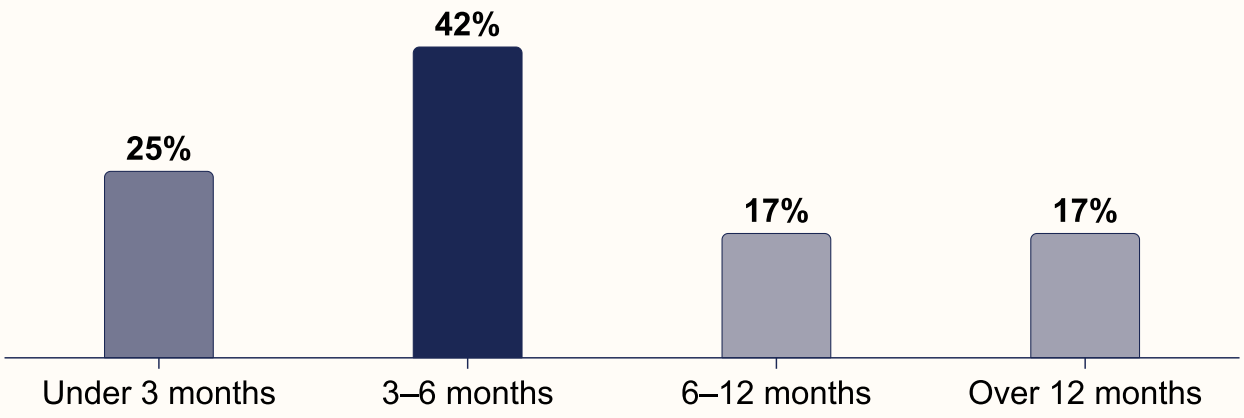
Note. Base = 11. Percentages derived from a low base are less precise and can change substantially with small changes in responses. Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%.

Using reserves to cover everyday costs 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. This risk is compounded for organisations with limited financial reserves.

When asked how long they expect their reserves to last, based on current levels of income and expenditure, a quarter of organisations expect them to last less than three months (25%). More than two in five have between three and six months (42%), and around one in six have six to twelve months or more than a year (both 17%).



Figure 6.4. Number of months reserves are expected to last



Note. Base = 24. 'Don't know' responses excluded.

6.2. Income and expenditure

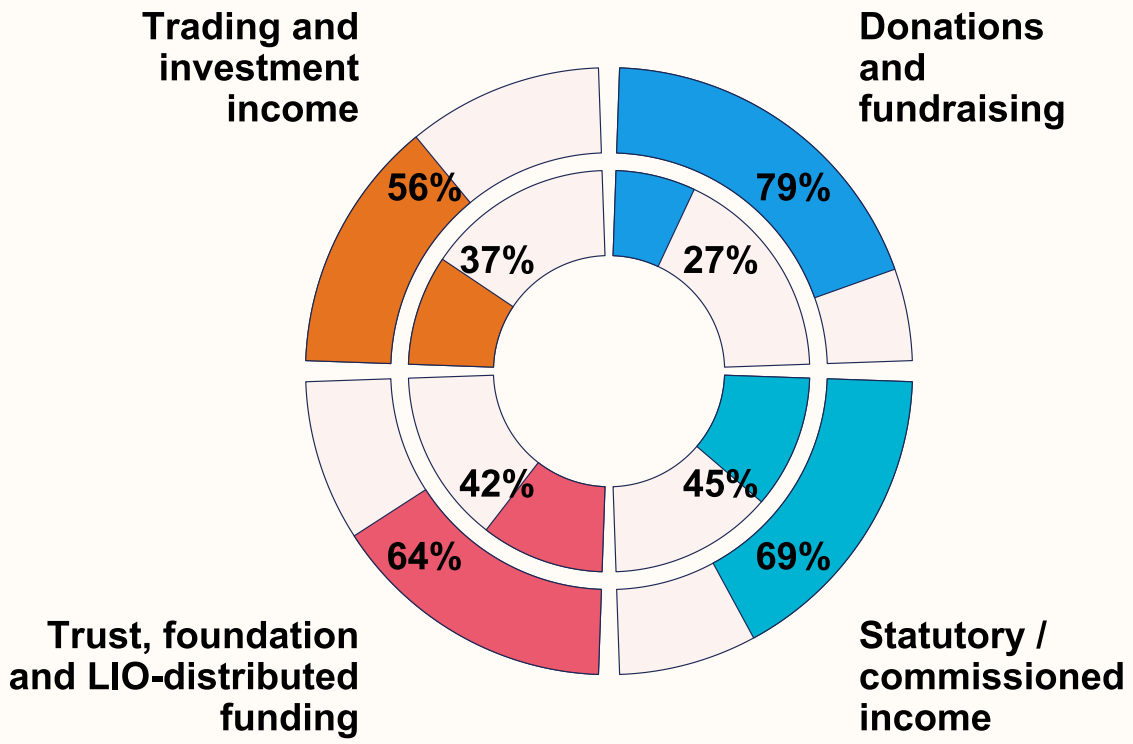
The ways in which VCFSE organisations generate income have changed in recent years. Nationally, the number of people donating has fallen by around six million over the past decade, and the total value of public donations in 2025 was 10% lower than the previous year. [16] Some organisations are looking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

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

Survey findings suggest that responding organisations draw on a mix of income sources rather than relying heavily on any single stream. Four in five receive income from donations and fundraising (79%), seven in ten from statutory funding and commissioned income (69%), and almost two thirds from trusts, foundations or local infrastructure organisations (64%). With almost two in three responding organisations identifying as a social enterprise, trading income also features in organisations' income models, reported by almost three in five (56%).

While most organisations receive at least some income from donations and fundraising, this accounts for the smallest average share of total income (27%). Statutory and commissioned funding accounts for the largest share (45%), followed by funding distributed by LIOs, trusts and foundations (42%), and trading and investment income (37%).

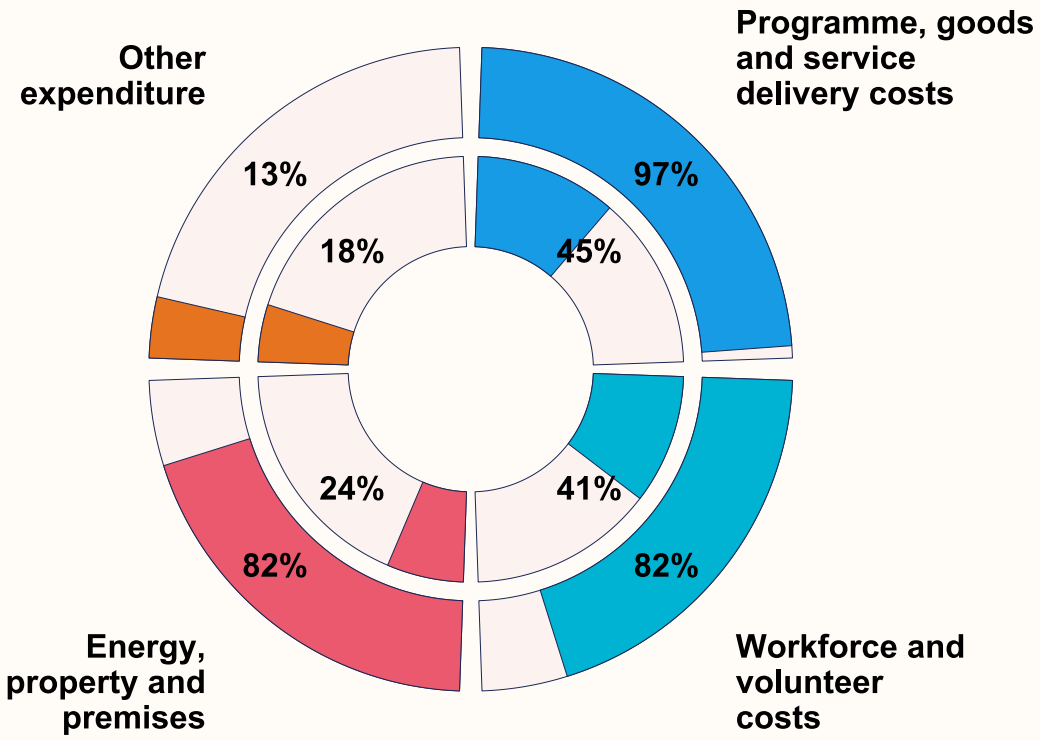
Figure 6.5. Income sources received and their average share of total income



Note. Outer ring shows the percentage receiving any income from each source (base = 39); inner ring shows the average share of total income among organisations receiving that source (base = 22-31, depending on source).

Expenditure was analysed in the same way as income, showing both the proportion of organisations reporting each category and its average share of total expenditure. Almost all organisations report programme, goods and service-delivery costs (97%), which also account for the largest share of total expenditure (45%). More than four in five report workforce and volunteer costs or energy, property and premises costs (both 82%), accounting for 41% and 24% of total expenditure respectively.

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

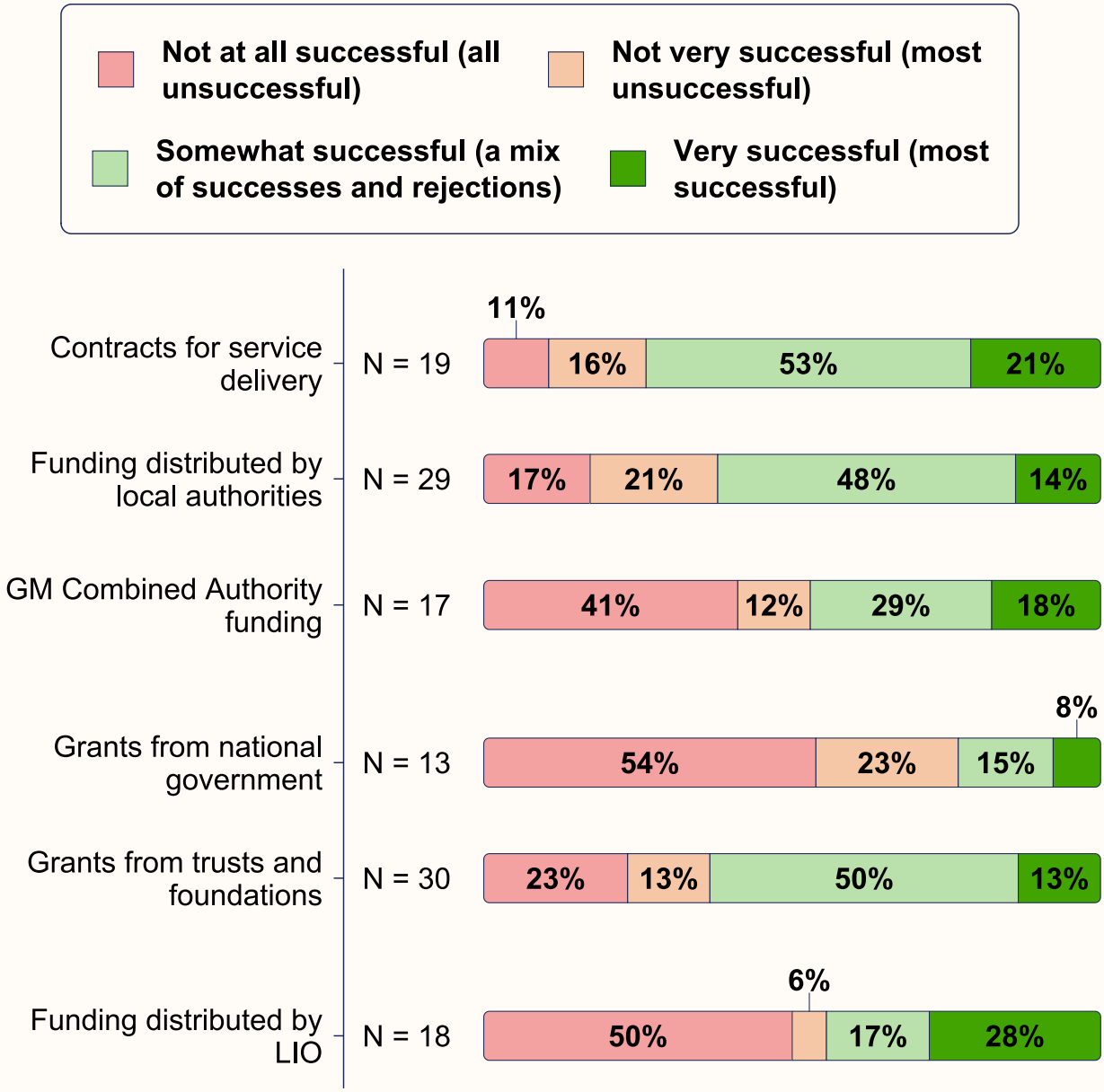


Note. Outer ring shows the percentage reporting any expenditure in each area (base = 39); inner ring shows the average share of total expenditure among organisations reporting expenditure in that area (base = 5-38, depending on area). 'Other expenditure' (base = 5) should be interpreted with caution due to low base.

6.3. Funding

When asked how successful they were in applying for funding sources relevant to them, three quarters of responding organisations report being very or fairly successful when applying for service delivery contracts (74%). More than three in five report at least some success with grants from trusts and foundations (63%), or local authority funding (62%). More than two in five report success with funding from GMCA (47%) or LIOs (44%).

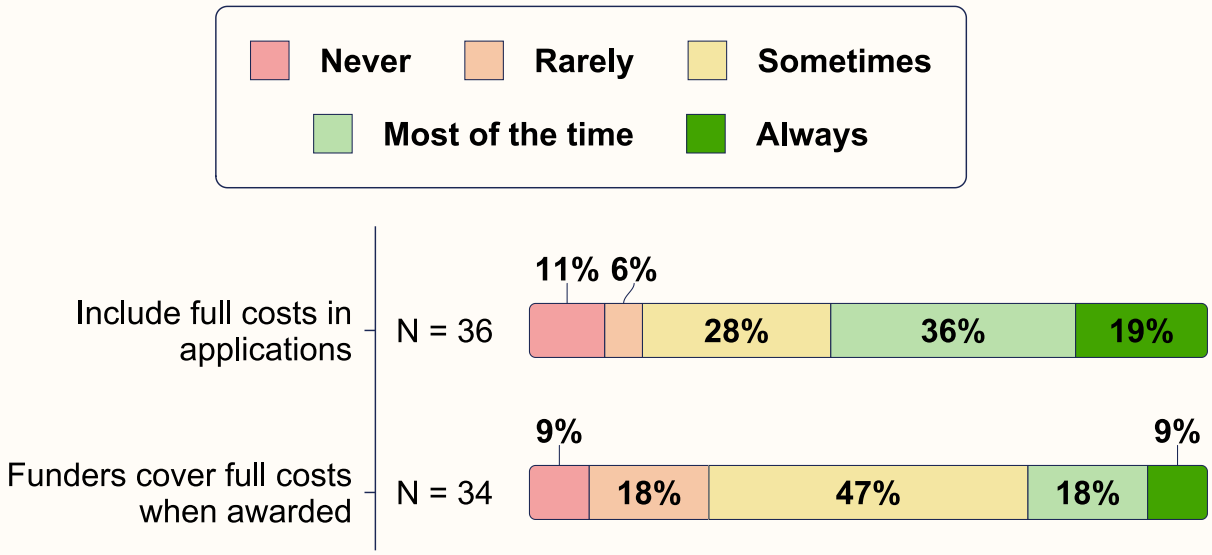
Figure 6.7. Success in funding applications over the past 12 months



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 three in five organisations say they either always (36%) or mostly (19%) include full costs in funding applications, but just over a quarter say funders always (9%) or mostly (18%) cover these costs when funding is awarded. 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. [19]

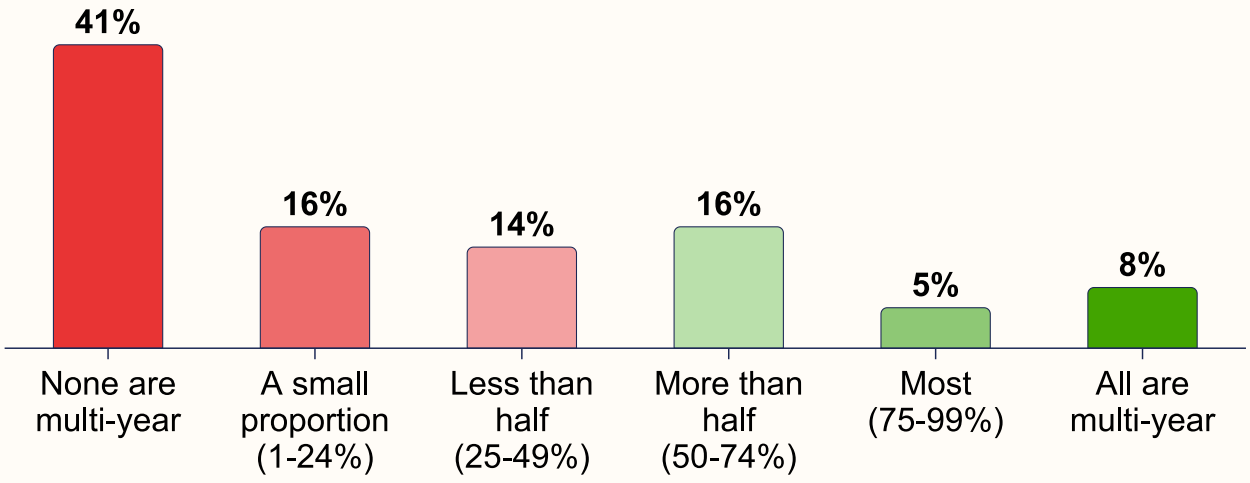
Figure 6.8. Full cost recovery



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

Longer-term funding gives organisations more scope to plan staffing and services, and IVAR's 2026 funding experience survey found that multi-year grants were a leading priority. [20] Yet among Wigan Borough's organisations receiving grant or contract income, seven in ten say less than half of their funding is multi-year (70%), including two in five that say none is (41%).

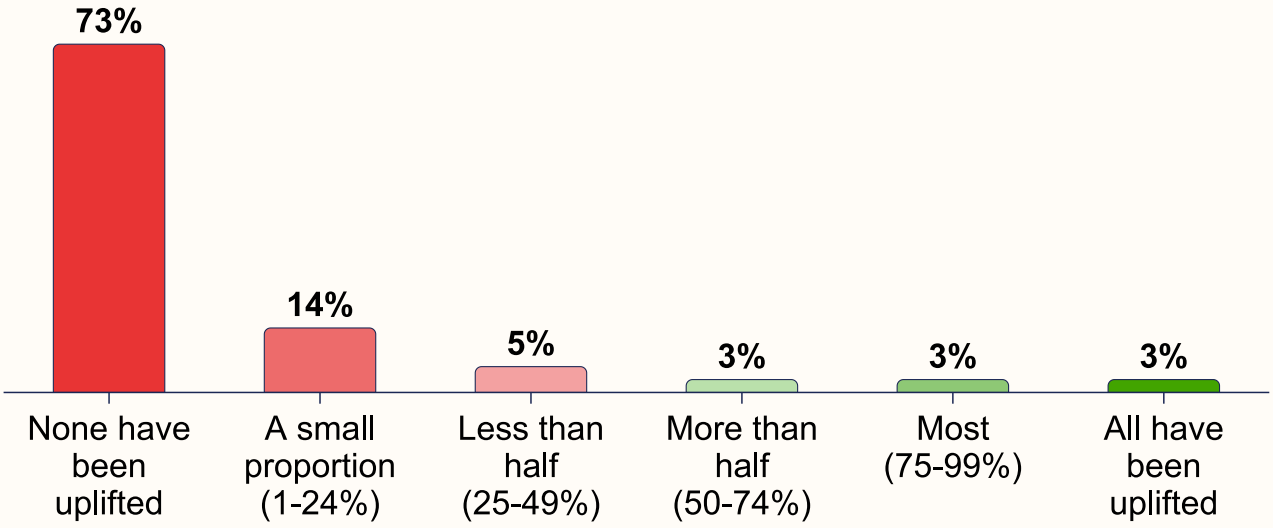
Figure 6.9. The proportion of organisations' grants or contracts that are multi-year (three years or more)



Note. Base = 37. Question shown only to organisations receiving income from grants or contracts from any source.

Rising delivery costs also reduce what existing awards can cover, yet national evidence shows that uplifts remain uncommon, particularly for shorter-term funding. [15] Almost three quarters of responding organisations receiving grant or contract income say none of this funding had been uplifted to reflect rising costs over the last year (73%), while only 5% say most or all had been uplifted. However, it is important to recognise that this covers grants and contracts from all sources, so it should not be read as an assessment of any single funder.

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



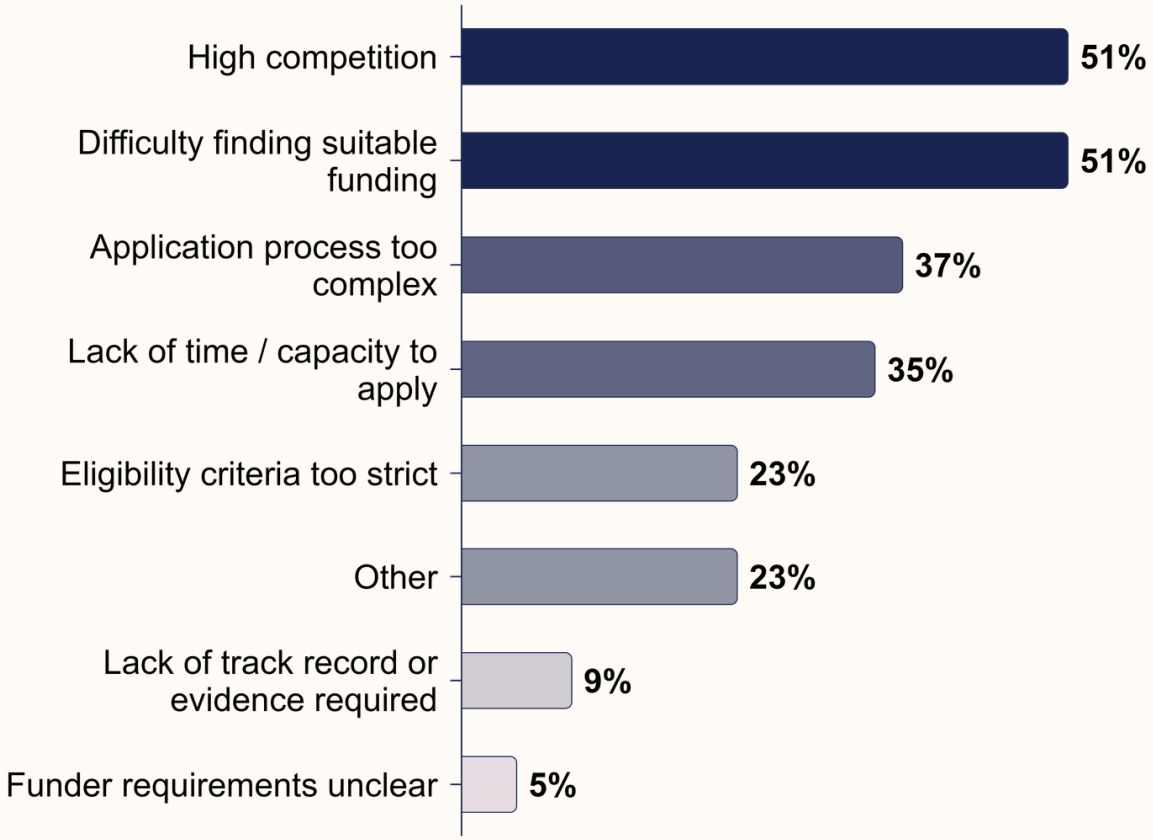
Note. Base = 37. Question shown only to organisations receiving income from grants or contracts from any source. Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

When asked what the biggest challenges are with finding, applying for, and securing funding, organisations most commonly point to competition and difficulty finding suitable opportunities (both 51%). One focus group participant described how these pressures can put organisations working in similar areas in direct competition for the same funding, sometimes encouraging them to undercut one another in ways that may weaken both organisations over time.

> "We've never wanted to go for the same funding pots… we want to work with everyone… sometimes it sees great organisations competing against each other and it can sometimes [lead to] undercutting."

More than a third find application processes too complex (37%) or lack time and capacity to apply (35%), while almost a quarter find eligibility criteria too strict (23%).

Figure 6.11. Funding challenges



Note. Base = 43. Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%.

Focus group participants also emphasised the importance of funders understanding the communities and lived experiences that shape organisations' work. For many VCFSE organisations, a key strength is that the people leading, working and volunteering within them have direct experience of the inequalities and exclusion they seek to address. One participant described the additional support this can require within the workforce and questioned whether funding panels sufficiently understand or account for these needs when making decisions.

> "I think our biggest challenge is that people with lived experience of disability aren't the ones making the decisions or influencing the decisions, ever… that lack of understanding, authentic representation … if we go for funding, is there someone on that panel that actually truly understands the barriers that our team face? The support that every single person in our whole workforce has to have around them just keeps increasing … the support they need… it's huge."

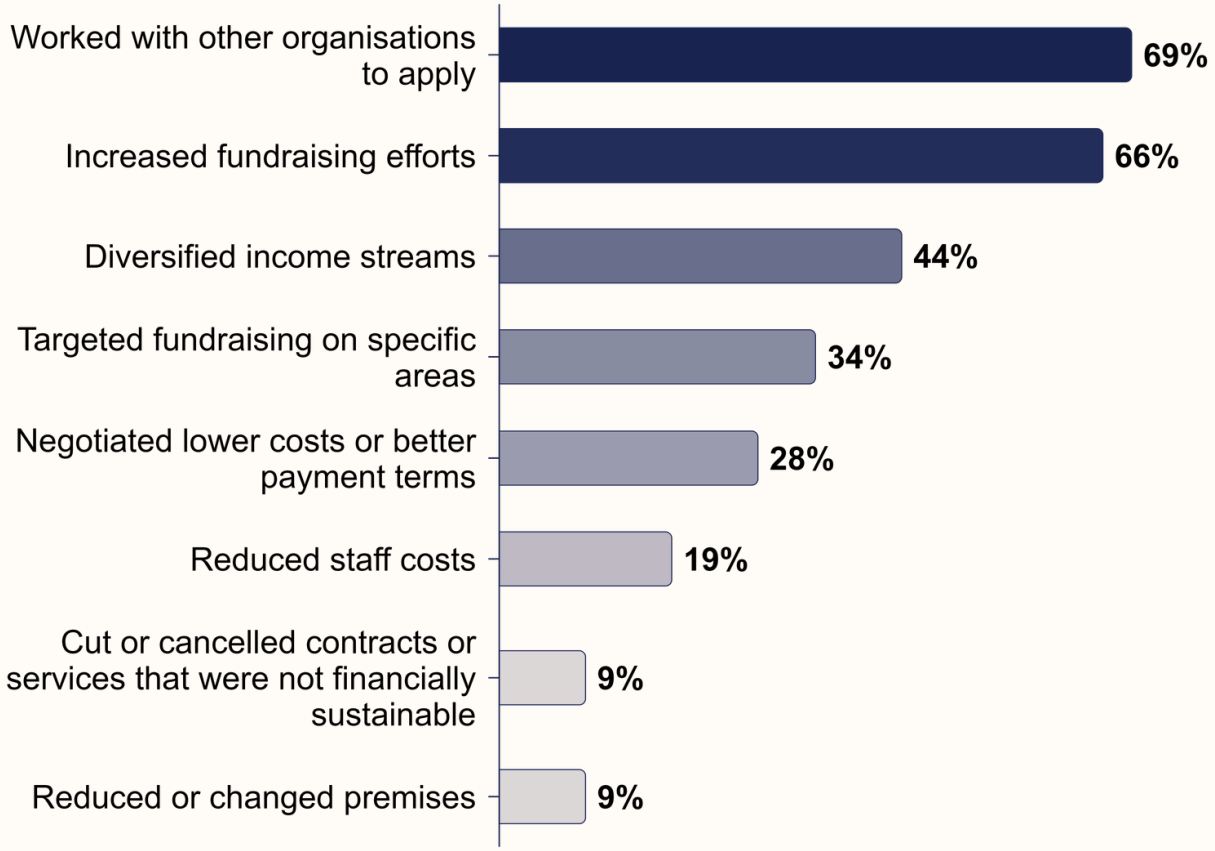
To understand how organisations are responding to these funding challenges, we asked what steps they had taken over the previous year. Just over three quarters (76%) had taken at least one action, leaving just under a quarter taking no new action over the previous year (24%), which may reflect limited scope to respond or measures already introduced before that period.

Of those taking action, seven in ten had worked with other organisations to apply for funding (69%), two thirds had increased their overall fundraising efforts (66%). More than two in five had diversified their income sources (44%) and a third targeted specific funding areas or opportunities (34%).

One focus group participant described a different approach to diversifying income, exploring whether income from one-to-one coaching could support their CIC and reduce its reliance on grant funding:

> "I'm looking at whether I can merge my limited company and CIC and use the income from my one-to-one coaching as an income stream within my CIC."

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



Note. Base = 32. Excludes respondents selecting 'No actions taken' (N = 10). Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%.

6.4. Premises

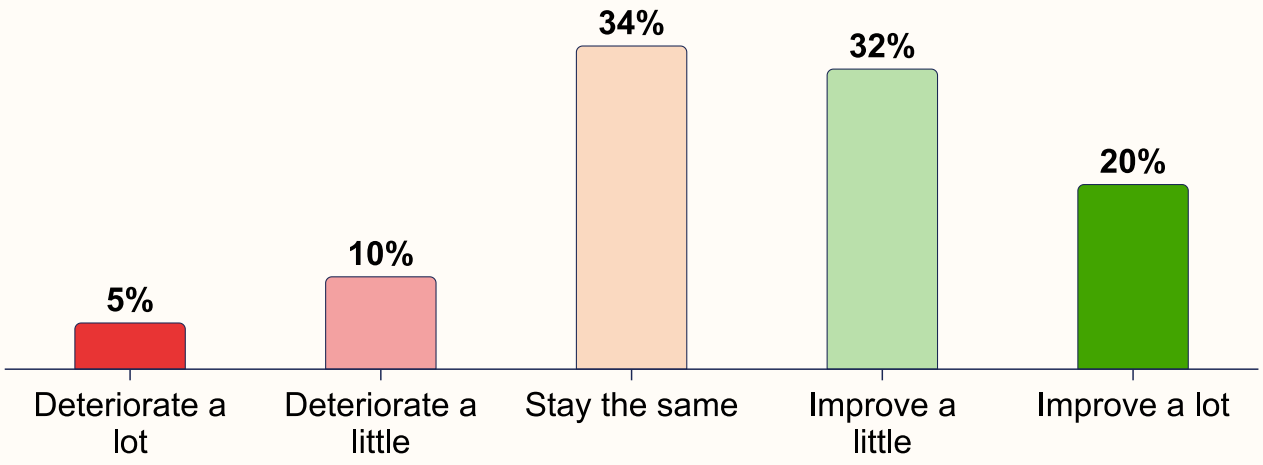
Physical premises and spaces are part of the sector's contribution, providing places where people can meet, connect, and access support. In 2026 and as part of Greater Manchester Live Well, Wigan Borough Community First invested over £450,000 in spaces across the Borough to upgrade facilities, improve accessibility and increase the capacity and use of community spaces. [21]

Organisations use a mix of premises arrangements: half of responding organisations operate from premises they rent or lease (51%), while more than two in five use shared or free space (42%). Around one in eight own premises (12%) and 9% do not use physical premises.

6.5. Future outlook

Findings from this report suggest that Wigan Borough's VCFSE sector is supporting more people and facing increased demand for their services within an increasingly competitive funding landscape. Despite these pressures, half expect their financial position to improve over the next 12 months (51%), compared with a third expecting it to stay the same (34%) and 15% expecting it to deteriorate.

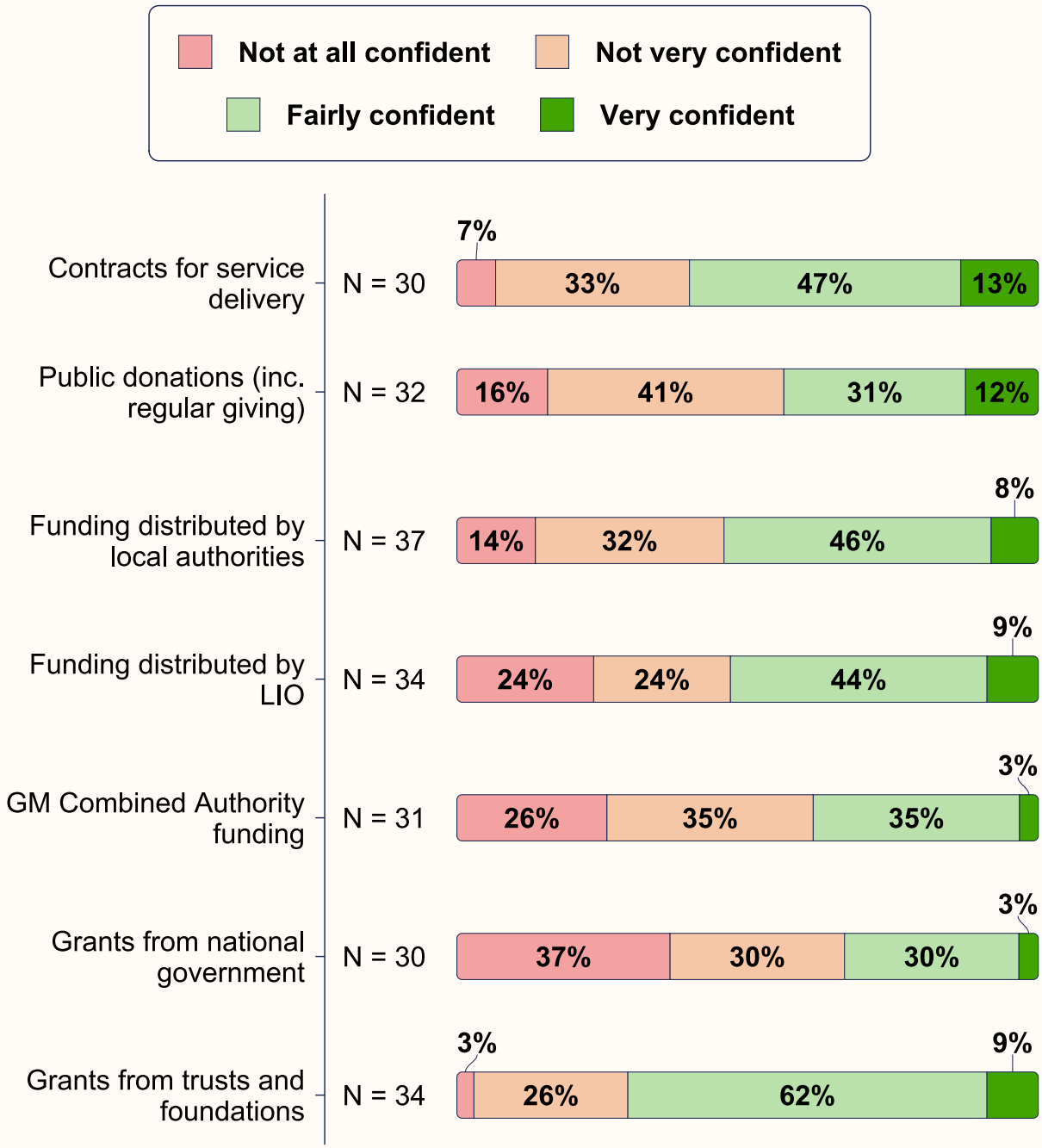
Figure 6.13. Expected financial position over the next 12 months



Note. Base = 41. 'Don't know' responses excluded.

While a minority expect their financial position to deteriorate, organisations have varying degrees of confidence in being able to secure funding from different sources. Among organisations that consider each source relevant, seven in ten feel very or fairly confident about grants from trusts and foundations (71%), while three in five are confident about service-delivery contracts (60%). More than half are confident about local authority funding (54%) or funding distributed by LIOs (53%). Confidence is lower for sources where fewer applicants reported success: two thirds are not very or not at all confident about national government grants (67%), and three in five feel this way about GMCA funding (61%).

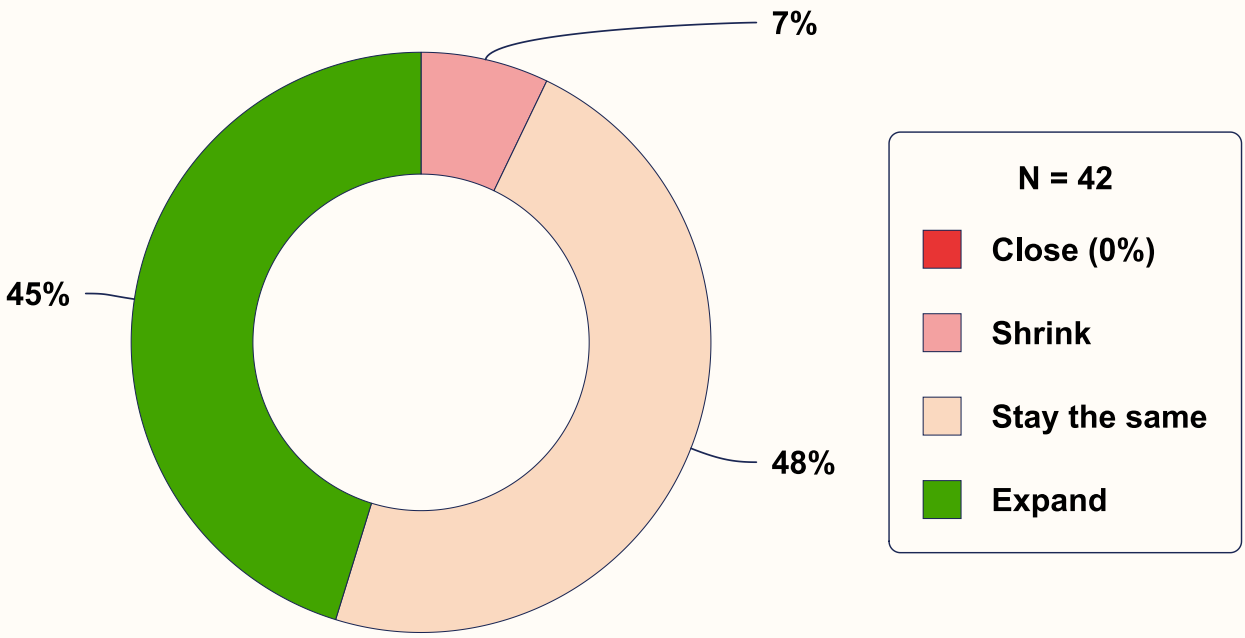
Figure 6.14. Confidence levels in funding over the next 12 months



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.

Looking ahead, most organisations also expect to maintain or increase their level of activity over the next year. Almost half expect to remain at a similar level (48%), and a similar proportion expect to expand (45%). Fewer expect to shrink (7%), and none expect to close.

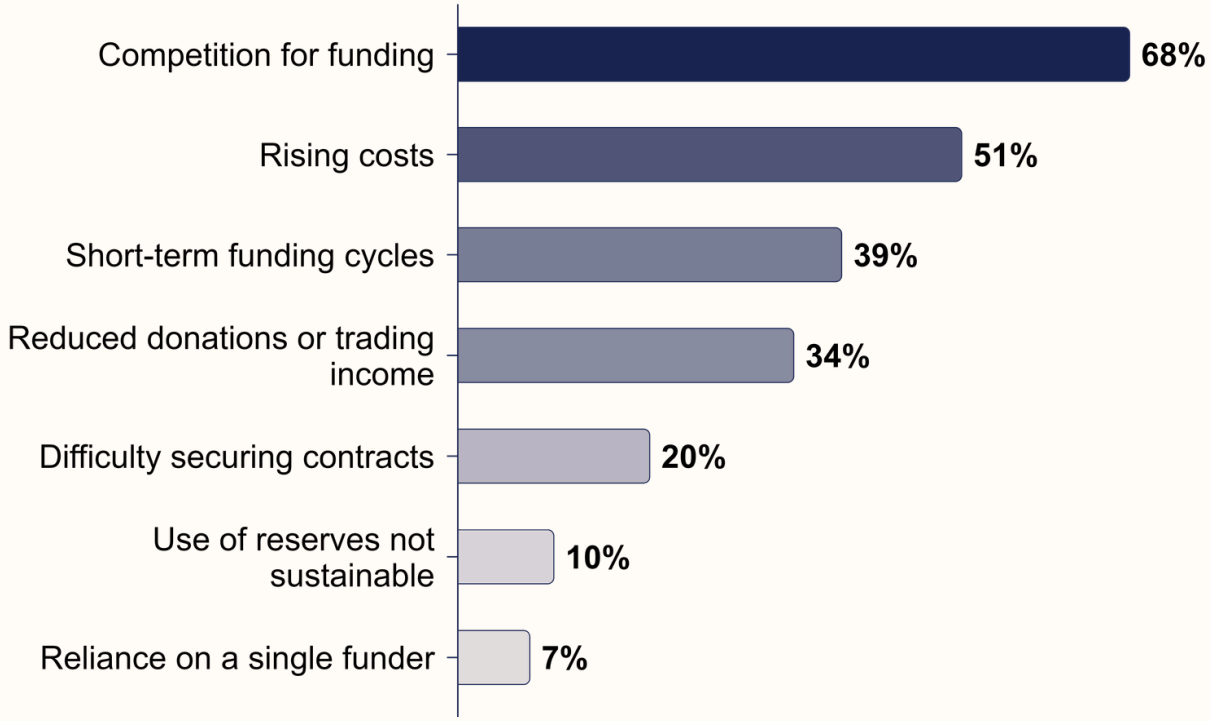
Figure 6.15. Organisational expectations for the year ahead



Ambitions to maintain, sustain, or grow activity sit alongside a number of financial risks, with organisations pointing to competition for funding (68%), rising costs (51%), and short-term funding cycles (39%) as the top risks to their financial sustainability. For smaller, emerging organisations, these risks can make it difficult to break through, build momentum, and provide a solid foundation on which to deliver support:

> “The thing I find hard is the waiting time … in order to build any kind of momentum, I feel like I'm sat on all these ideas that could have really great impact and I don't really know how to action them until I've got some kind of funding behind me … even if there was something that was a bit more accessible for getting some smaller amounts to get things started … I'm finding even those are quite difficult to break into.”

Figure 6.16. Risks to financial sustainability



Note. Base = 41. Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%.

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.



7. Conclusion

The overall picture is of a Wigan Borough's VCFSE sector that is essential, active and deeply connected to local people, but also under sustained pressure. The findings show considerable economic, social and civic value: thousands of volunteers and trustees, millions of hours of unpaid contribution, a significant workforce, and hundreds of thousands of instances of support. They also show a sector that is absorbing increased demand, financial uncertainty, workforce strain and access barriers while continuing to adapt and respond.

For Wigan Borough, the key interpretation is that sustainability cannot be separated from capacity, equity, volunteering, community power and system influence. A sector can be highly committed and still be fragile. It can deliver significant value and still need better support. It can be close to communities and still be excluded from the decisions that shape funding, prevention, neighbourhood working and service design. The task for our local partners is to treat these findings as a shared responsibility, not simply as a description of need.

The report strengthens the case for Wigan Borough to invest in connected local infrastructure: proportionate and transparent funding routes, practical support for smaller organisations, collaborative spaces where the sector can shape priorities, community-led insight that informs decisions, and clearer recognition of volunteering, trusteeship and relational work. It also supports a shift from funding activity in isolation towards building long-term sector capacity, confidence and resilience.

The opportunity now is to use this evidence to make better local decisions. That means listening to what the sector is already telling us, recognising where pressure is becoming risk, and designing future investment, commissioning and partnership practice around what helps communities lead, connect and thrive. If the findings are acted on well, this report can become more than a snapshot of the sector in 2026. It can help shape a stronger, fairer and more sustainable VCFSE system for Wigan Borough.



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WIGAN BOROUGH COMMUNITY FIRST

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