2023

State of the Sector report on the Voluntary, Community & Social Enterprise Sector in Warwickshire & Solihull

WARWICKSHIRE & SOLIHULL
CAVA
COMMUNITY & VOLUNTARY ACTION

Table of Contents

About Us

Warwickshire and Solihull Community and Voluntary Action (CAVA) are the local trusted Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) infrastructure organisation, providing vital support to the volunteers, groups, organisations, enterprises and charities who are working to strengthen all of our communities.

Every year our dedicated teams help lever significant investment into the area. Annually, the collective value of funding secured and volunteering opportunities developed is worth around £5.35million to the local economy. We were formed in 2008 through the merger of separate 'Councils for Voluntary Service' and 'Volunteer Centres' to provide a single point of access for everyone who wants to engage in community and voluntary action. We have a collective history of over 200 years of supporting local communities to thrive.

We are committed to providing all of our services locally and accessibly. Whether that's support accessing volunteering opportunities, starting a community group, accessing funding or strengthening governance. Our 2022/23 Annual Report showed, in that reporting period, that we worked with over 1,000 organisations, our events reached nearly 13,500 people and over 1,200 volunteers accessed support.

As the main point of contact between the 'VCSE Sector' and other strategic partners, such as local authorities and funders, we are committed to building better relationships and mutual understanding between and across all sectors. One of the ways we do this is by undertaking a bi-annual 'State of the Sector' survey which enables Voluntary and Community Organisations (VCOs) to raise their voice and highlight their successes and challenges, which in turn enables policy and decision makers to prioritise their work in and for communities.

We are pleased to present the findings of our survey undertaken in 2023, produced in partnership with Tiller Research.

An Overview of the Data

There are an estimated 13,000 VCSE organisations in Warwickshire and Solihull

13,000

75%

Organisation Size

75% of organisations consider themselves small or micro sized

£892.7m

Economic Value

£892.7m is the average annual economic value of volunteering in Warwickshire and Solihull

32%

Staff Team

32% of organisations have paid staff

89%

Volunteers

89% of organisations operate with less than 50 volunteers; a third have 11-25

70%

Finances

70% of organisations have seen an increase in their expenditure

43%

Impact

43% of organisations feel they confident identifying the impact of their work

Methodology

This is our fifth survey, using publicly accessible data and asking the VCSE about their organisations' ambitions and challenges.

Designed to be consistent with previous surveys, our evaluation partner Tiller Research opened the survey online in June 2023 to coincide with CAVA's Small Charities Week campaign. Access to the form was promoted through our E-Grapevine newsletters, links on our website, through social media and promoted directly by CAVA's frontline officers.

The online survey received 176 responses with data from representatives of 169 VCSE organisations across Warwickshire and Solihull. Of these, 127 completed the full questionnaire.

For the quantitative analysis, responses from multiple respondents from the same organisation were combined, providing an overall sample of 169 organisations. Reported percentages are based on the number of responses received for each question.

For the qualitative analysis, all individual responses were included, providing an overall sample of 176 individuals.

In addition, 15 semi-structured interviews were undertaken by Tiller Research, with a sample of survey respondents to explore their responses in more depth. Interviewees were invited from organisations based in different parts of Solihull (21%) and Warwickshire (79%). They represented a mix of micro, small, medium and large organisations working in mental health, community and family support, disability support, homelessness prevention, and environment.

Our experience and local knowledge shows us that the scope of respondents to the survey is very typical of the organisations that we regularly work with, and feel is a reliable and representative sample to report against. This is also in line with other statistical methodologies and survey response rates.

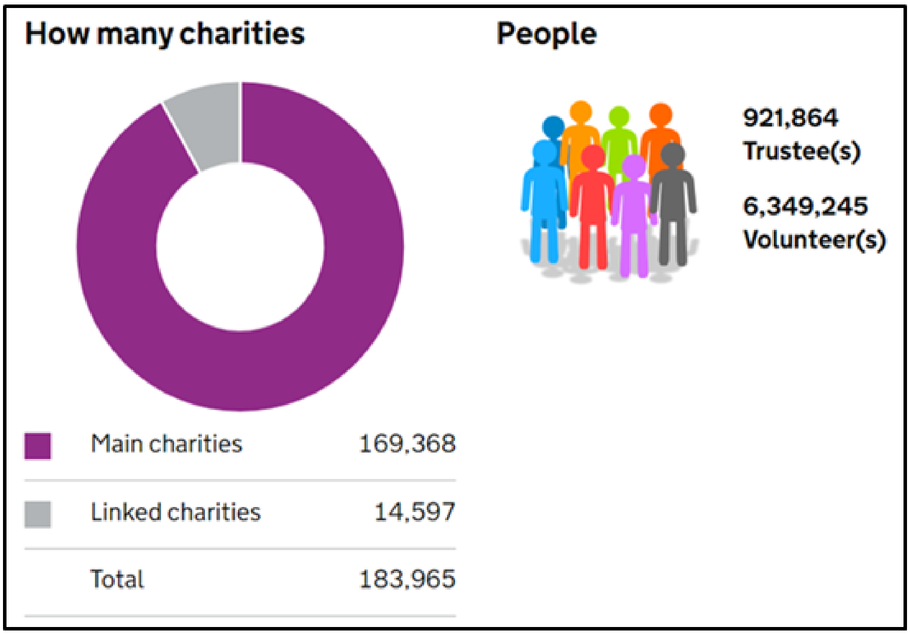
We accessed supplementary data from the Charity Commission for England and Wales, and for national comparison we have also quoted the NCVO UK Civil Society Almanac 2023 ('the Almanac') as the most comprehensive picture and analysis of the Voluntary and Community Sector.

A number of questions were analysed to identify key themes. Responses from smaller and larger organisations were analysed separately to see if the size of organisation affected a respondent's experiences or views.

Profile

How big is the 'Sector'?

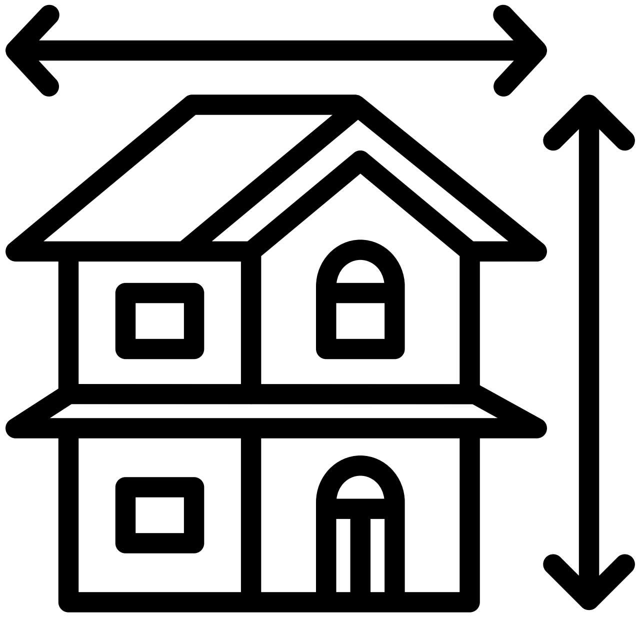
The Charity Commission lists 3,038 registered charities operating specifically in Warwickshire and Solihull*, across England and Wales there are nearly 184,000. The Almanac states there were nearly 164,000 organisations across the UK in 2020/21; this is based on Charity Commission data, and the application of their 'general charities' definition. We know however that the VCSE Sector is a lot broader than that as there is no single administrative database for all voluntary organisations. More information on this can be found here.



Source: https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/sector-data/sector-overview
*figures correct at 24/10/23

Compared to CAVA's last State of the Sector report in 2021, this indicates that the Sector is shrinking slightly, with 2.1% fewer charities in Warwickshire and 5.6% fewer in Solihull. This could mean that some have adopted different operating structures, but may account for the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. As this is the only evidenced data, we have to apply this reduction to our overall organisation number estimates. This decrease is echoed in the Almanac findings, who reported a 1% decrease between 2020/21 and 2019/20.

Profile



Based on Almanac data, Charity Commission figures and estimates of the wider ‘civil society’ (which includes sports clubs, unincorporated community associations, companies limited by guarantee etc.), we estimate that there are around 13,000 VCSE organisations currently operating in Warwickshire and Solihull; this has reduced from 13,300 in our 2021 report.

CAVA actively provides support to, and has a membership open to organisations from across the civil society. It is those organisations who have completed the State of the Sector survey and whose responses we refer to as ‘the Sector’.

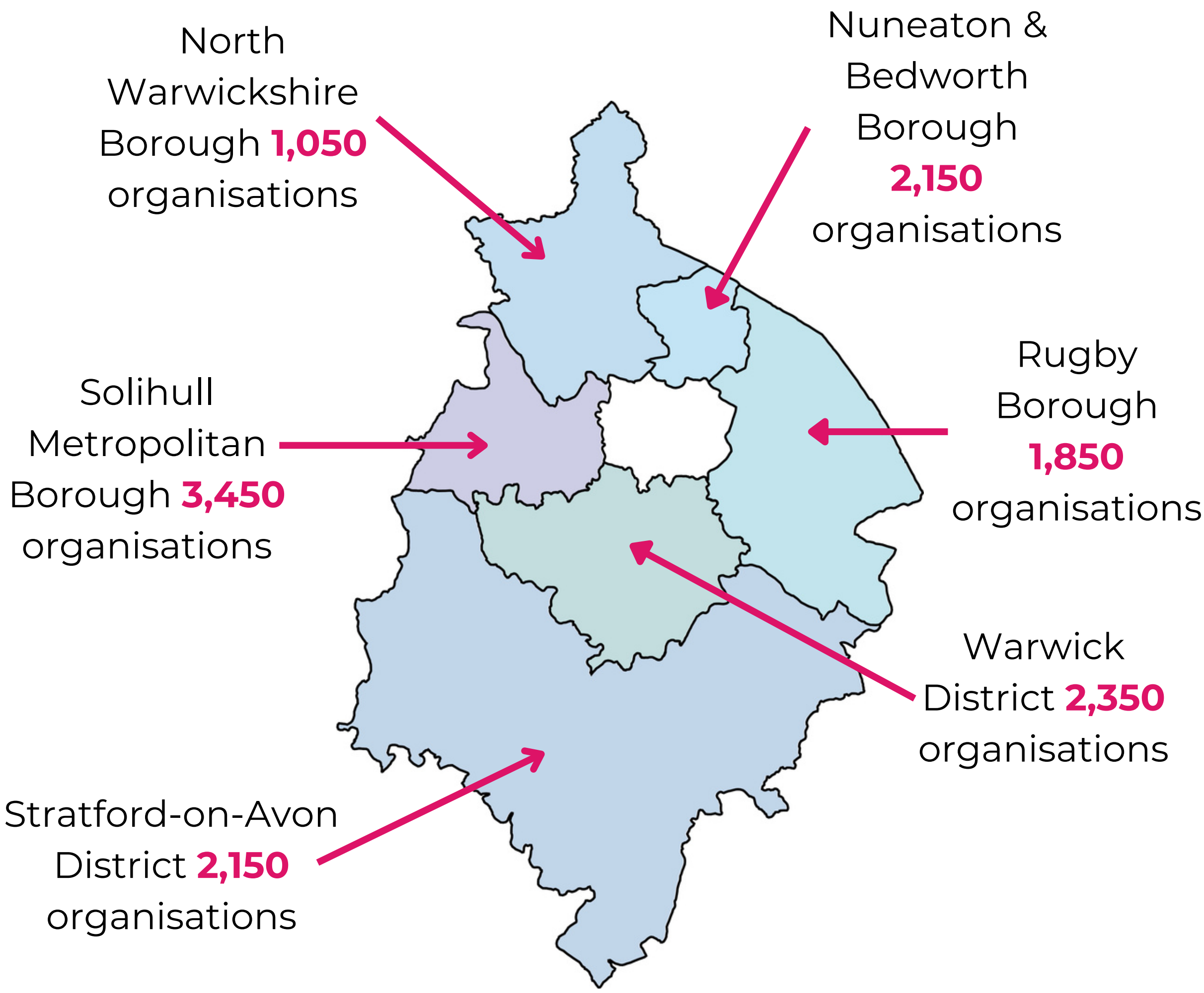
we estimate that there are around 13,000 VCSE organisations currently operating in Warwickshire and Solihull

Profile

Where are all these organisations?

We often get asked about the size and shape of the Sector. There is no single, up to date administrative database that lists every community group, sports club, faith organisation, charity or social enterprise, we can only ever use estimates. The Sector flexes and shapes to meet community need, organisations grow, shrink, establish and close regularly, for numerous reasons.

We have estimated that the 13,000 VCOs across Warwickshire and Solihull are located as follows:



There is no hard data to back up this; organisations have a range of different operating structures, activities, services and areas of benefit. There will be many that operate in small localities, or neighbourhoods, or they could operate borough/district-wide, county-wide, across the sub-region or nationally.

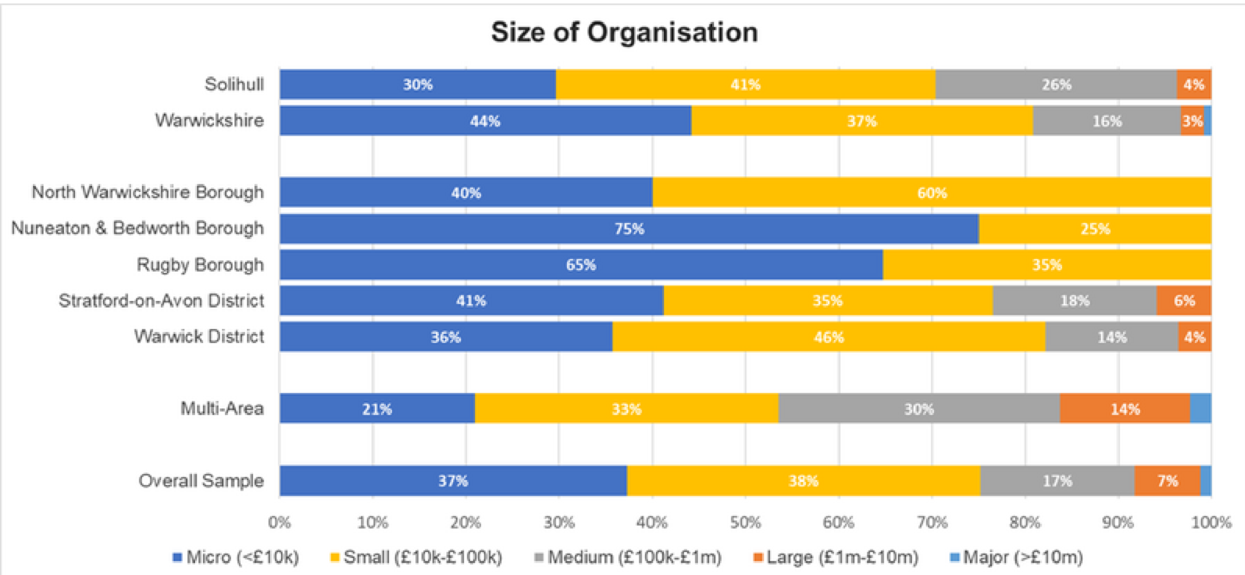
Profile

Organisation Size

NCVO's UK Civil Society Almanac categorises organisations by their size in relation to their income. Using their definitions, we found out that local data is largely comparable to the national picture:

	Overall		Warwickshire	Solihull	Multi-Area	UK data, NCVO Almanac
Major (annual income over £10million)	1%		1%	0%	2%	1%
Large (annual income between £1million and £10million)	7%		3%	4%	14%	3.5%
Medium (annual income between £100,000 and £1million)	17%		16%	26%	30%	15.5%
Small (annual income between £10,000 and £100,000)	38%		37%	41%	33%	33%
Micro (annual income up to £10,000)	37%		44%	30%	21%	47%

Below is a more detailed breakdown of the sizes of organisations responding, by area:



Profile

Organisation Size

Nuneaton and Bedworth have the largest number of micro organisations at 75%, with Rugby close behind at 65%, although we are aware of a number of medium – large organisations in both of these areas, their responses are not reflected in our survey.

In a national context, the Charity Commission shows that the majority of registered charities (34.65%) have an annual income of under £5k pa. Their income is only 0.07% of the total gross income of all charities in England and Wales; charities with an annual income of over £10m account for 63.5% of all income.

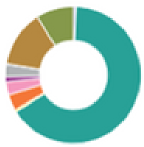
Charities by income band - 24 October 2023

This page groups charities by their size, using income bands. By grouping charities in this way we can get an overview of how resources are distributed within the sector and achieve better comparisons.

Tell us what you think about this service.

Charities

Gross income



Income Band	Charities	Total gross income	Total expenditure
£0 to £5k	58,684	£66,815,670	£266,720,942
£5k to £10k	16,648	£122,245,214	£150,156,719
£10k to £25k	26,056	£432,455,821	£477,967,154
£25k to £50k	15,695	£563,019,657	£590,303,367
£50k to £100k	14,783	£1,063,948,229	£1,094,477,866
£100k to £250k	16,543	£2,627,668,870	£2,613,248,926
£250k to £500k	7,867	£2,783,475,314	£2,793,864,966
£500k to £1m	4,953	£3,504,994,090	£3,422,336,807
£1m to £5m	5,557	£12,085,032,127	£11,733,517,135
£5m to £10m	1,148	£8,056,813,331	£7,761,587,640
Over £10m	1,434	£58,890,284,606	£57,212,180,435
Total	169,368	£90,196,752,929	£88,116,361,957

Source: https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/sector-data/sector-overview

Profile

Organisation History

To better understand the history and foundations of the Sector, we asked when the organisations responding had been founded; 46% of organisations have been in existence for 20 years and over:

	Overall		Warwickshire	Solihull	Multi-Area
Over 50 years ago	24%		20%	19%	23%
Within the last 20-50 years	22%		24%	22%	19%
Within the last 10-20 years	19%		23%	11%	19%
Within the last 5-10 years	15%		13%	22%	14%
Within the last 2-5 years	15%		14%	26%	23%
Within the last year	5%		7%	0%	2%

Profile

Organisation Structure

Whilst we appreciate there is no single administrative database for the Sector, our local surveys allow us to give a good overall picture of the make-up of the Sector, from formal, registered organisations, to those usually deemed 'under the radar'; we asked what respondents' legal organisational structure was:

	Overall		Warwickshire	Solihull	Multi-Area
Various Forms of Charity	64%		61%	63%	70%
Community Interest Company (CIC)	9%		7%	19%	12%
Unincorporated Association	25%		31%	19%	16%
Other	2%		2%	0%	2%

There are significantly more social enterprise organisations and significantly fewer, unregistered/ unincorporated organisations in Solihull compared to Warwickshire.

Profile

Activities

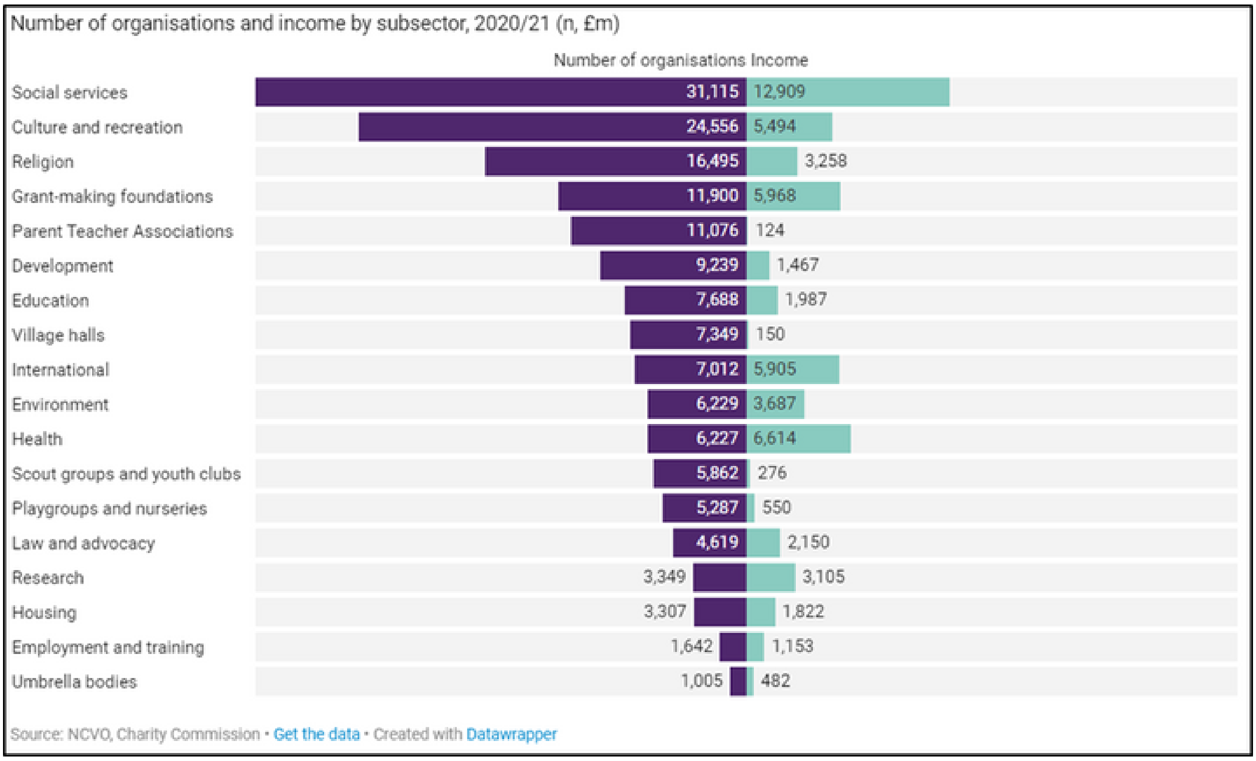
The range of activities and services across the Sector is broad. The main areas of work ranked by the highest number of responses were:

Community Services/ Facilities	20%
Mental Health	15%
Environment/ Conservation	14%
Youth Clubs/ Services	13%
Sports & Leisure	8%
Disability support	8%
Education/Training	7%
Physical Health	5%
Family Services	5%
Social Activities	5%
Community Development	4%
Faith/ Religion/ Culture	4%
Older Adults	4%
Social Isolation	4%
Advice/Info Services	4%
Financial Inclusion	4%
Food	4%
Other	19%

It is worth noting that many organisations provide a range of services and activities across a range of themes; these are a representative picture of the organisations that CAVA regularly works with.

Slightly different to our classifications, the Almanac* uses the International Classification of Non-profit Organisations (ICNPO) to describe the activities of voluntary organisations. Some of these categories are very broad, e.g. social services include youth services, family services including domestic violence shelters, services for disabled and elderly people and support groups. Below you can see the number of general charities by subsector and income.

Profile



Source: https://www.ncvo.org.uk/news-and-insights/news-index/uk-civil-society-almanac-2023/profile/what-do-voluntary-organisations-do/

Profile

Beneficiaries

The main beneficiaries for our sample are:

All Beneficiaries (no specific beneficiary group)	63%
Children and Young People	26%
Families/ Parents	13%
Older People	11%
People with Mental Health Problems	8%
Women	6%
Carers	5%
Low Income Households	5%
People with Learning Disabilities	4%
People with Long Term/ Chronic Illness	4%
People with Physical Disabilities	4%
Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups	3%

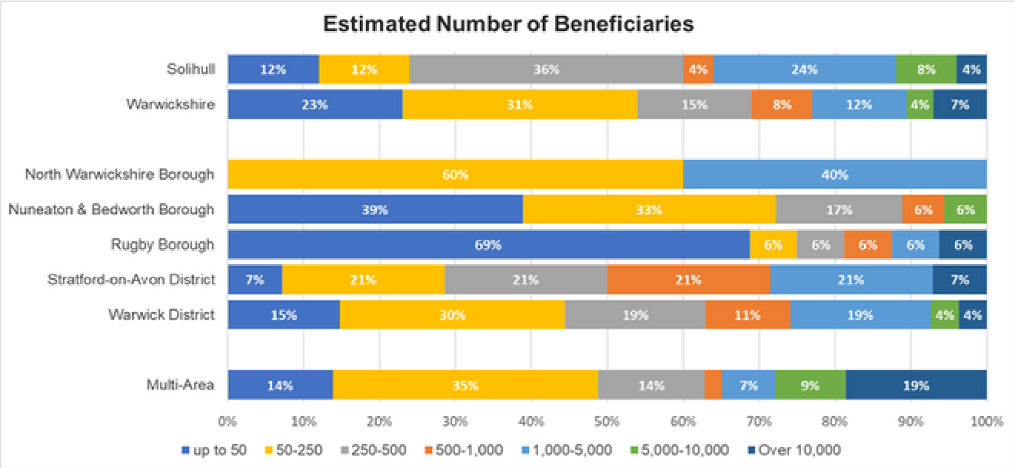
Other beneficiaries mentioned: men; refugees and asylum seekers, survivors of abuse, LBTQ+, homeless people, faith groups.

Respondents estimated the number of beneficiaries they had worked with in the last year, this shows that the majority (48%) worked with up to 250 annually:

0-50	22%
50-250	26%
250-500	18%
500 – 1,000	7%
1,000 – 5,000	14%
5,000 – 10,000	5%
10,000+	8%

Profile

We broke these figures down further by area of operation:



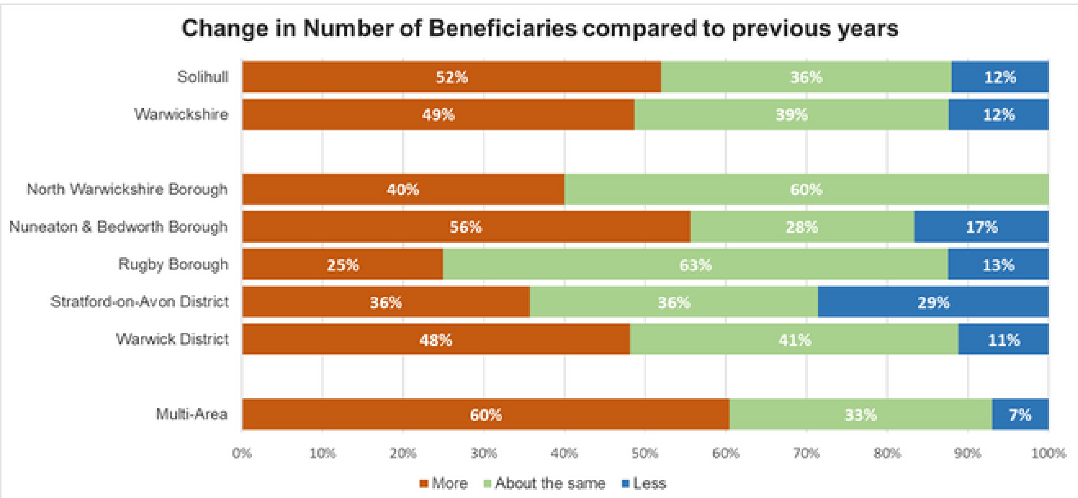
This shows a pattern again, that smaller organisations in Nuneaton and Bedworth and Rugby boroughs worked with fewer beneficiaries, which demonstrates a limit of capacity.

We further asked how these numbers compared to previous years:

49% **Seeing more people**

39% **Seeing about the same number of people**

12% **Seeing less people**



Profile

Beneficiaries - Trends

The most mentioned themes were:

- 27% noted an increase in financial pressures for beneficiaries, with cost of living pressures resulting in increased demand for support, as well as a reduction in engagement with paid for wellbeing or social activities.
- 22% of survey respondents noted an increase in demand for their services over the last year, with organisations providing mental health, cost of living or crisis support most likely to note a significant increase. In contrast, 6% of respondents noted a drop in participation, almost all of whom were membership organisations or providing charged leisure activities.
- 16% noted an increase in mental health challenges.
- 8% noted an increase in loneliness and isolation, in particular among older men, disabled people, and young people.
- 7% noted an increase in the complexity of beneficiary needs, in particular among people referred to organisations providing mental health or social support. Respondents attributed this to a combination of a knock-on effect of reductions in public sector services and the impact of the rise in the cost of living.

The scope of an organisation's work appeared to be an important factor in understanding the recent experience that interviewees had of changes in the requests, interests or needs of beneficiaries. Those working in mental health or social support noted an increase in both the volume and complexity of requests:

> "What we're finding is that we're getting far more participants or clients referred to us or self-referring with higher needs than they would have done in the first year, because they can't wait for the amount of time that they're required to do to access statutory services."

Profile

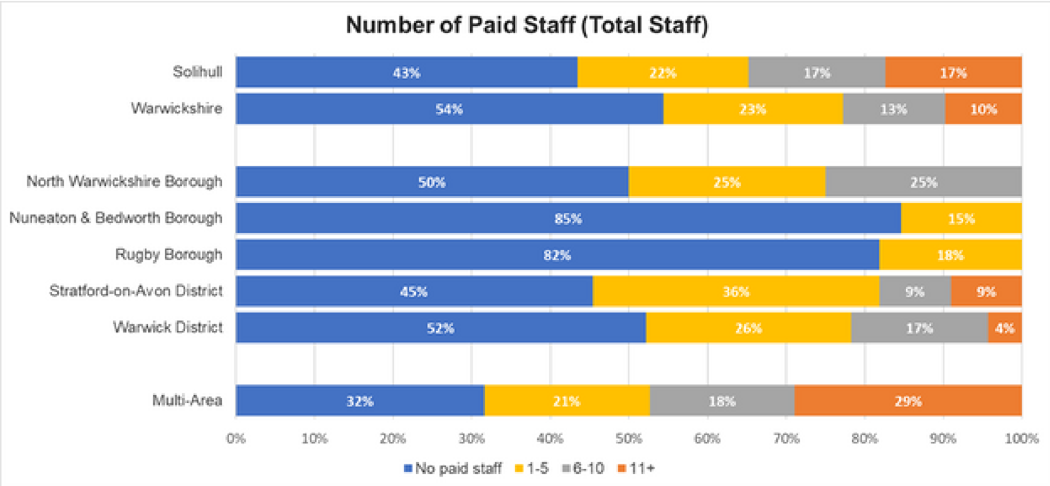
“What we’ve noticed is a very significant increase in demand for our services… So, if I go back to 2019, we helped something like about 170 or 180 adults and because you deal with families as well there’s always a number of what I term ‘associated children’… When we got into 2020 the number jumped from about 180 to just over 210… just looking at the end of July reports, so far to the end of July, cumulatively we’ve got 160 adults, and that compares with 121 at the same stage last year… What that means is that our funds go down because generally we are spending more money… even allowing for grant income.”

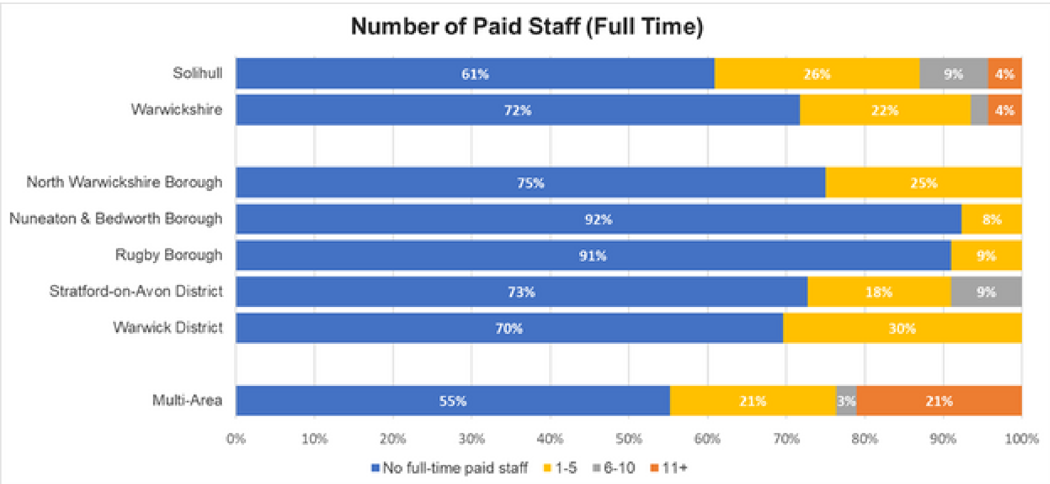
“I think when we started out it was - I think the NHS and the public sector liked to call it low level mental health issues… but in terms of complexity, that has increased over time and was getting worse before Covid, I think mainly due to the public sector cuts and the lack of support for mental health in the public sector and the lack of available services then and now.”

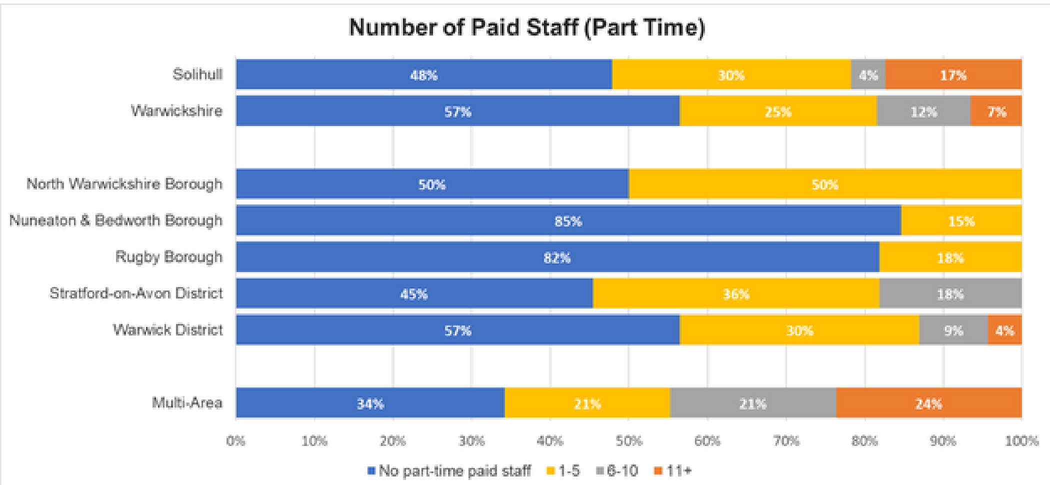
Workforce

Paid Staff

If organisations had paid employees, we asked how many they had; of the sample, 39% employed between 1-10 employees:







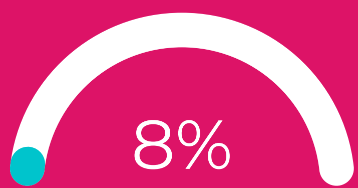
Workforce

Of those organisations who responded to the survey, those in Warwickshire have fewer paid staff than Solihull, however there were large difference across districts and boroughs in the county, for example 85% of VCOs in Nuneaton and Bedworth operated with no staff compared to Stratford district at 45%. Respondents from North Warwickshire and Rugby boroughs had comparatively smaller teams, with none of these organisations employing over 11 staff. The organisations that operate across multiple areas are more likely to have paid staff and employ more people.

The Almanac states* that 56% of voluntary sector employees worked for smaller organisations with fewer than 50 employees. In 2023, the voluntary sector employed about 925,000 people nationally, which remains around 3% of the total UK workforce. In the West Midlands those working in the voluntary sector made up 8% of the total workforce; this compares to 16% in the South East and 3% in the North East. Since the first quarter of 2020, the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, the voluntary sector workforce increased by about 4% up to 2022. However, the voluntary sector workforce in 2023 decreased by 4% from 2022 to 2023. In contrast, the public sector workforce has been growing each year, with a 2% increase from 2022.

*Source: https://www.ncvo.org.uk/news-and-insights/news-index/uk-civil-society-almanac-2023/workforce/

In the West Midlands those working in the voluntary sector made up 8% of the total workforce



Workforce

Paid Staff - changes, opportunities and challenges

We asked, if respondents have paid staff, what have been the changes, opportunities and challenges over the last five years in relation to the paid staff team. We gave examples such as recruitment and retention, changes in working patterns, impact of hybrid working, etc.

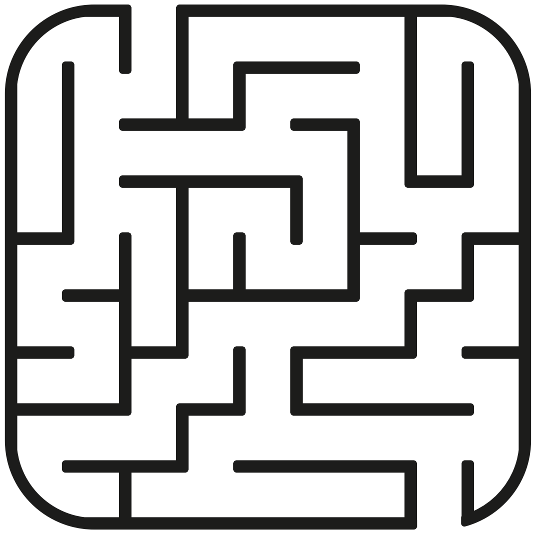
Changes and Opportunities:

- 49% of survey respondents either had no paid staff or reported no changes to their staff team.
- 15% of survey respondents noted recent changes to working patterns. This included a permanent shift to hybrid working (11%), which was associated by some with more efficient service delivery, better work-life balance and a more positive working environment. Others noted a greater proportion of part-time staff, and increased flexibility of working hours.*
- 6% reported a recent increase in staff capacity, which in most cases has been made possible by a sizable grant or contract award.
- 5% reported opportunities relating to training and development. This included noting an increase in high quality and affordable online training. Initiatives to support volunteers and previous service users to develop skills and take on paid roles were also highlighted, an approach seen as providing the dual benefit of addressing challenges in recruitment and providing opportunities for personal development for individuals.

*The Almanac states that more than a third worked at least partially remotely - 28% worked from their own home and 10% worked from different places with home as a base (hybrid).In December 2022, over five times as many voluntary sector workers worked from home as in March 2020. Those in hybrid working rose from 7% to 10%.

Workforce

Challenges:



- 32% of survey respondents noted financial pressures affecting staff teams. This included reducing staff numbers and/or hours, limiting capacity for service delivery.
- 16% reported challenges in recruitment, especially for roles requiring specific skills or qualifications such as youth work, but also for more general roles. Pay levels were identified as one factor, though a skills shortage was noted more often.
- 10% reported a high turnover of staff. A lack of funds to increase salaries to match inflation was identified as a key factor leading to staff leaving, along with increasing workload and challenges of hybrid working.
- 7% noted insufficient staff capacity to meet service demand, with 3% expressing concern at the increasing demands on staff and risk of burnout this presented.

Workforce

Volunteers

We recognise and know the value of volunteering within the Sector. The Almanac states* that an estimated 14.2m people in the UK have volunteered through a group, club or organisation at least once in 2021/22; levels of formal volunteering have declined since 2020/21 and remain well below pre-pandemic levels. These are the lowest rates recorded by the Community Life Survey. Regular informal volunteering had increased to 33% in 2020/21, but in 2021/22 had dropped back to 26%; this shows a direct correlation to the profile of volunteering across the Covid-19 pandemic, and is the picture we see in Warwickshire and Solihull also.

*Source: https://www.ncvo.org.uk/news-and-insights/news-index/uk-civil-society-almanac-2023/volunteering/

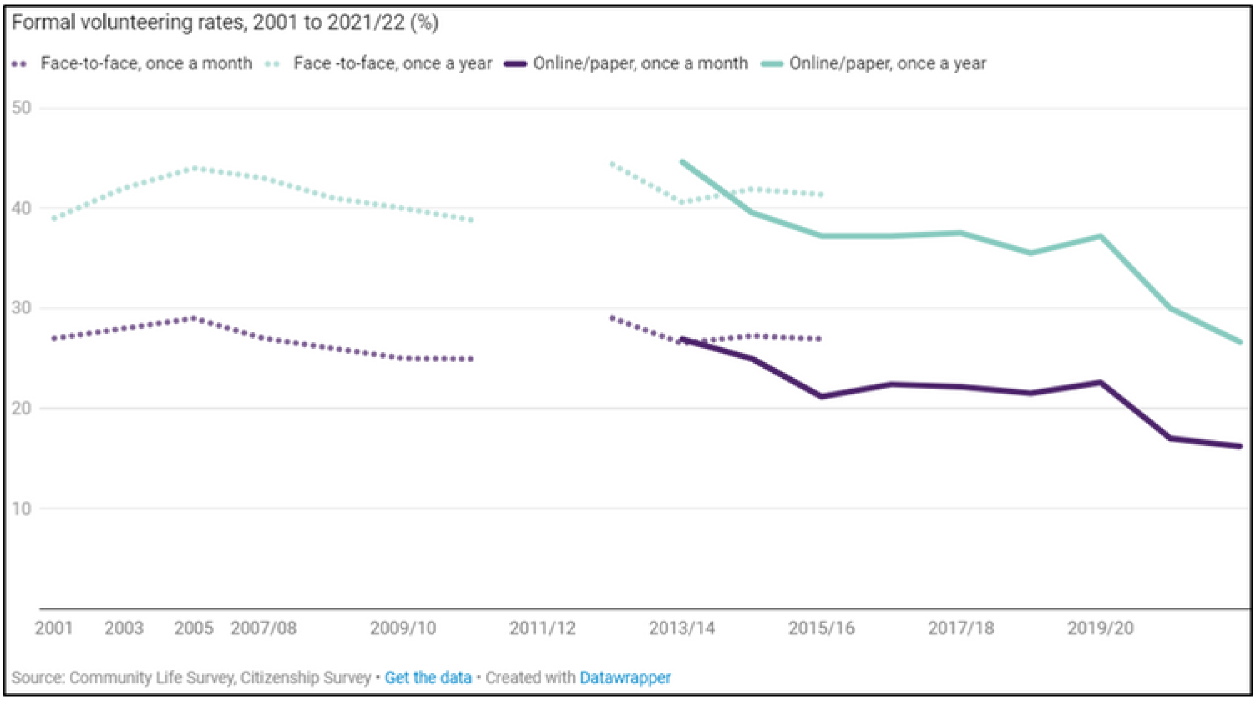
4 Average weekly hours per volunteer

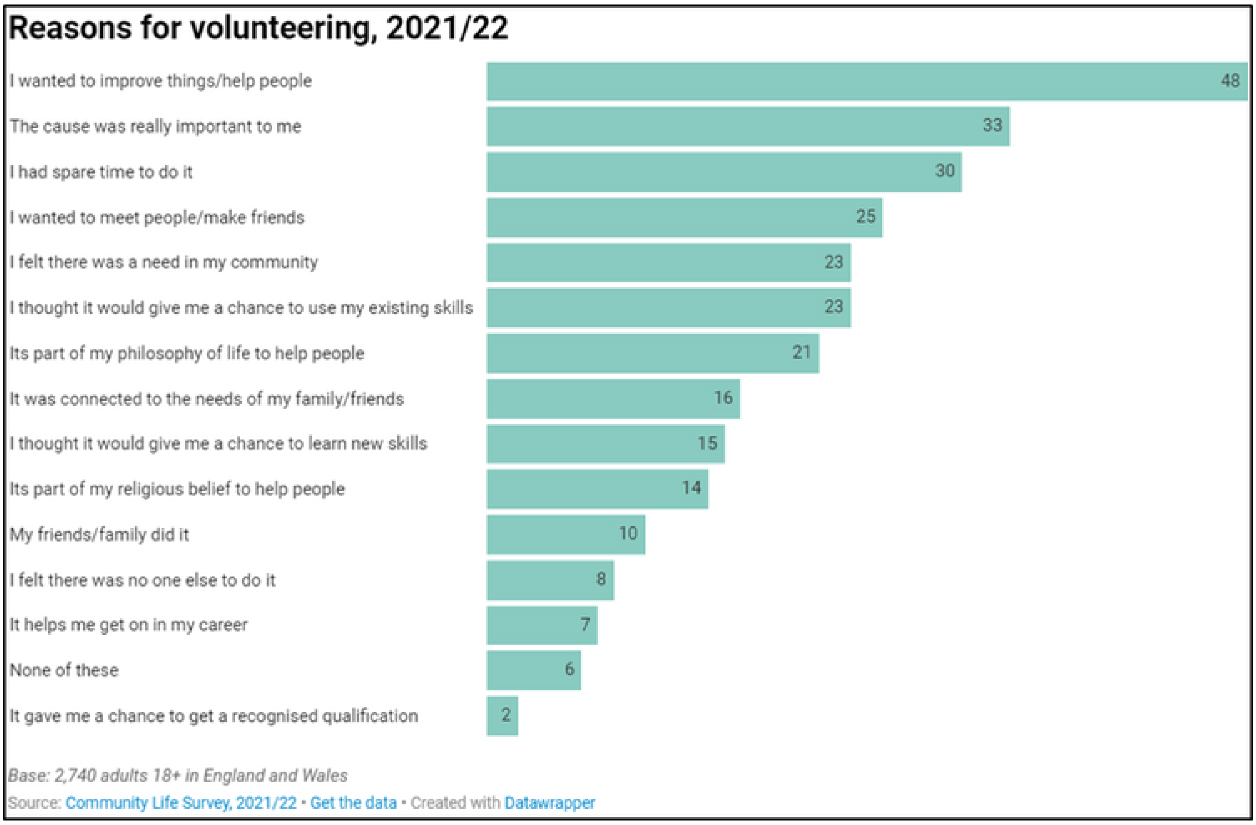
£68,700 Average annual value of volunteering* per organisation

£892.7m Average annual economic value of volunteering in Warwickshire & Solihull**

*Data from the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings.
**Based on an estimated 3,450 organisations in Solihull the economic value is £236.9million; based on an estimated 9,550 organisations in Warwickshire the economic value is £655.8million.

Workforce



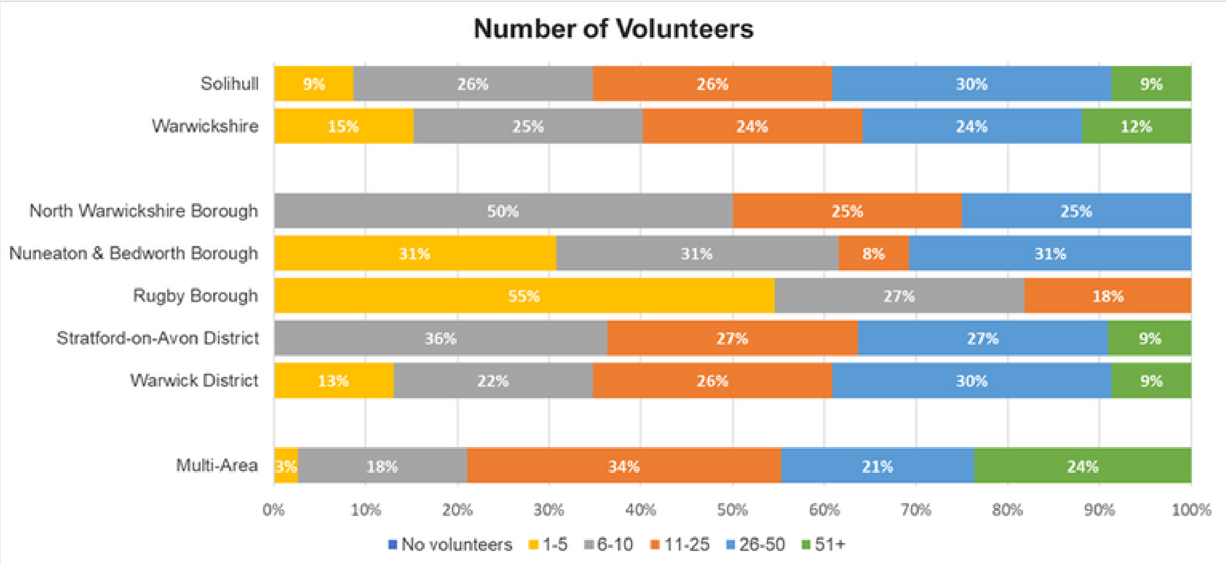


Source: https://www.ncvo.org.uk/news-and-insights/news-index/uk-civil-society-almanac-2023/volunteering/

Workforce

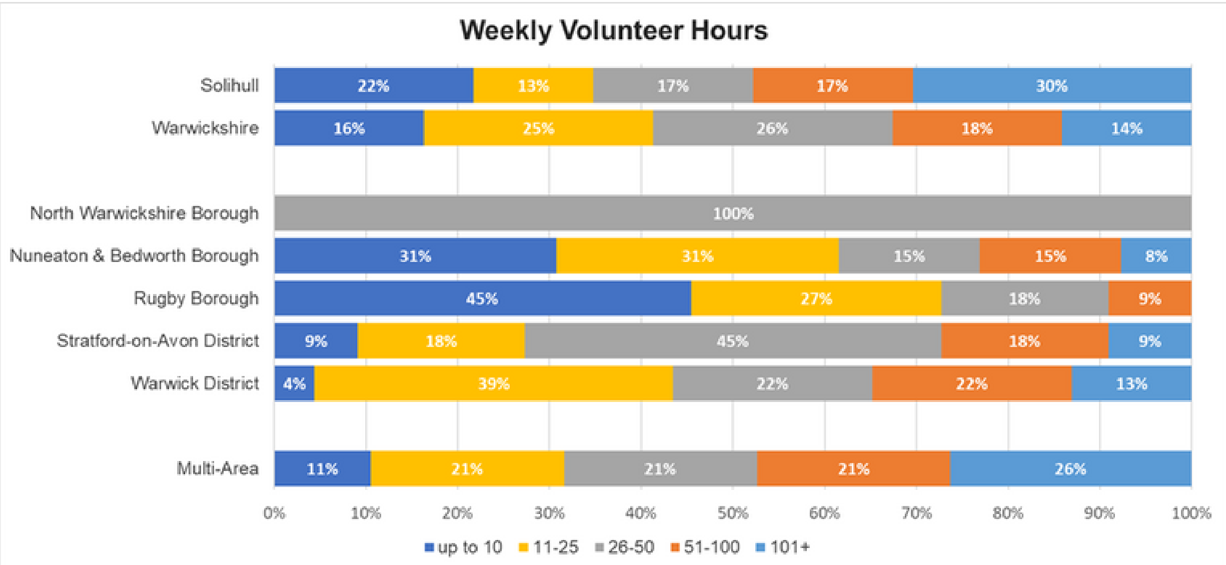
Respondents to our survey were asked how many volunteers, including Committee/Board members/Trustees organisations they had; of the sample, on average this was 34 (mean), 18 (median), i.e. 'formal volunteering'.

11% of responding organisations had more than 50 volunteers. The 89% of responding organisations with fewer than 50 volunteers, have an average of 19 volunteers.



We asked, approximately what is the total overall number of hours contributed by volunteers to respondents organisation each week:

- Overall average volunteer hours per organisation per week: 90
- Average volunteer hours for organisations with fewer than 50 volunteers: 68
- Average number of hours per volunteer per week: 4



Workforce

As 89% of VCOs have less than 50 volunteers, giving an average of 68 hours per week, we have used this to calculate that the annual economic value of volunteering in Warwickshire and Solihull is a staggering £892,698,560*.

(*884,00 volunteer hours weekly x £19.42 (average hourly wage - the mean figure of Gross Hourly Pay, Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE), 2022 (provisional)).

The annual economic value of volunteering in Warwickshire and Solihull is...

£892,698,560

Workforce

Volunteers - changes, opportunities and challenges

We asked respondents what have been the changes, opportunities and challenges over the last five years in relation to volunteer recruitment, management and retention. We gave examples such as methods of recruitment, approaches to volunteer support, the types of role and/or volunteering environment preferred by volunteers, demographics of volunteers, etc.

Changes and Opportunities:

- 9% of survey respondents noted an increase in volunteers. Reported factors in recruitment success included offering volunteering opportunities as an extension or progression of participating in an activity or using a service, offering short-term volunteer roles, and recruiting via social media. Community based organisations typically reported more positive experiences of volunteer recruitment than did service-focussed organisations.

Challenges:

- 64% of survey respondents noted increased challenges in recruiting volunteers. Key factors included a reported drop in the number of retired people looking to volunteer since the pandemic, and less flexibility of potential volunteers due to an increase in competing demands such as childcare or undertaking part-time work.
- 19% noted challenges related to ensuring a positive volunteer experience. Pressures on staff capacity meant that time available for training and supporting volunteers was reduced. In some cases, this was combined with a noted increase in the average support needs of volunteers, with a reported increase in particular in the proportion of volunteers with mental health challenges.
- Volunteer retention was a mixed picture. Many organisations reported an overall drop in volunteer numbers compared with before the pandemic, often as a result of older volunteers not returning. 7% of respondents reported continued retention challenges, with cost of living pressures often cited. However, 6% of respondents reported high levels of volunteer retention. Typically, smaller volunteer-led organisations reported more confidence with volunteer retention than did larger organisations, even where volunteer numbers were lower than desired and recruitment was difficult.

Workforce

- 4% of respondents noted an ageing demographic of volunteers, and the risk this posed to the future sustainability of their organisation even where there were no current issues.

Interview participants highlighted the declining numbers of volunteers overall, increased recruitment challenges, and an ageing demographic:

> "There's probably been times in the past where we've been a bit low on volunteers because generally our volunteers are people who have retired, not exclusively, but in general and I think... life has just got busier for retired people. As a for instance, there's more looking after grandchildren because both parents work. That wasn't necessarily the case a few years ago."

The most notable successes regarding volunteer recruitment were from organisations that had successfully supported beneficiaries to become volunteers:

> "I think our new volunteers volunteer with us because they've come and used the service initially and found that they've liked the atmosphere and they like what we've got in the place and also that they want to help... They feel respected and wanted really and that they can make a difference to other people."

Workforce

Others noted the potential benefits to both individuals and organisations of supporting beneficiaries to volunteer and also offering volunteering as a route to developing personal and workplace skills. However, this requires capacity and resources to be in place to ensure appropriate support for volunteers:

> "For example, our volunteers... they're on their journey... They totally lack confidence. They've been out of work for a number of years... I think we need the really more basic stuff like interaction skills, confidence, assertiveness... It's almost like somebody leaving school and never having worked before. It's about the volunteer opportunities and volunteer training for people."

> "I know that maybe some people are being made to go into the volunteering route... perhaps if they are on jobseeker's and they have been told that they have to do the work, it's a bit hit and miss sometimes."

> "The other thing with volunteering is it's not free, because we still have to provide... training and make the role as interesting as possible in order to retain them."

Impact

We asked respondents to describe the impact of their organisation in three words. The word cloud below shows the responses received.

The size of the word indicates relative frequency, with the largest words mentioned the most:

We asked respondents what they believed were their organisation's distinguishing features:

- 36% of survey respondents identified their organisation's holistic client focus as its distinguishing feature. Examples given included: recognising the need to consider the complexity of people's lives, rather than simply address presenting issues in isolation, if sustained long-term change is to be achieved; designing services to be responsive and accessible, such as recognising access needs due to disability, language, culture, social circumstances, etc.; being flexible in support offered rather than relying on a prescribed formula; providing a safe space designed in partnership with target beneficiaries.

Impact

- 14% noted their organisation's connection to their local community, such as being led by local people or based on a model of community empowerment where individuals are both beneficiaries and volunteers supporting others.
- 7% identified a physical asset, with their organisation focussed on maintaining a building, environment or open space for use by other groups and individuals.
- 6% identified the specific focus of their organisation or service, typically providing a unique or highly specialised service and/or support for a specific target group of beneficiaries.
- 6% referenced their organisational culture, with examples including a focus on building positive relationships, working in partnership, and being innovative and/or responsive to emerging opportunities.

Interview participants reflected on the contribution that their status as a VCSE organisation made to their impact. For a small number of respondents, this wasn't viewed as affecting how beneficiaries engage with their service or the impact achieved, with the nature of service provided identified as the most important factor:

> "It just all depends on the volunteers and the lead people. Being a charity, I don't think it makes a great deal of difference."

Impact

However, the majority of interviewees identified distinctive features of VCSE organisations which they felt made a tangible positive difference to engagement and outcomes achieved. The most prominent themes were:

Client-focussed holistic services

Interviewees providing support to clients with complex needs noted the importance of providing holistic support - either directly or in partnership with other organisations - in order to achieve sustained long-term outcomes. VCSE organisations were considered to be in a stronger position to provide this than public sector services, which are mostly issue or process focussed.

> “The voluntary sector has the ability to be with people in the long term… and I think that plays a significant role in people’s wellbeing and people’s engagement because … they are there for me. Any time I need help, they are there for me.”

> “Okay, if you’ve debts, say, we refer you to the Citizens Advice Bureau to get support around your debts, we refer you to the family support services, so you get support around managing children’s behaviour. We refer you to therapy so you can talk about trauma of the past. So, what we’re doing is we’re helping people holistically and I think if we’re looking at maintaining people’s wellbeing, giving them the tools to manage their own wellbeing and increasing their support network, we’ve got better chances of having more sustained outcomes.”

Impact

Flexibility and responsiveness

Several interviewees talked about their relative freedom as VCSE organisations to innovate, respond to opportunities, or to redesign or stop doing things that aren't working as intended.

> "So, they either really like the idea, or the concept of our approach, or they have had fairly negative experiences with statutory services, or private services."

> "The pandemic showed us that we need to be flexible and we need to be open minded. We don't know what's around the corner but if we are willing to be flexible and work in collaboration and be positive, I think that's a good thing."

> "We don't like to use it, but there is a term we use- 'fail fast'... it's being not afraid to try something, tweak it, change it, substitute it."

> "I think the freedom to experiment, innovate, be entrepreneurial, try new approaches, not seek political approval for entering new partnerships, that's just a list of half a dozen things of advantages that we within the VCS enjoy over anybody within a public sector organisation."

Impact

Proximity to the community

Interviewees from smaller, community-focussed organisations highlighted their organisation's proximity to their community as a key strength. In many cases, relationships built up over time were a key enabler to ensuring effective engagement with specific support or activities:

> "A sense of belonging is extremely important. So, I think that's what we do really well and we see we have made an impact. Every other outcome that we manage to achieve is based on that. First, they have a sense of belonging to this place, they come here and by coming regularly they may see their health improving or they may see friendships being built or they may see aspirations being formed and maybe even a sense of purpose..."

> "It's like-minded people helping other people, so they all get around the table, have a chat, have a cup of coffee and they've got the same- perhaps- issues but also, they've got the same mentality so they all rub along well together really. That gives a good atmosphere."

> "So, that's what makes it is the fact that you're boots on the ground, you're listening to what the community say and then you will go and try and deliver it as well, so I think that's why it works."

Impact

Trust

Interviewees noted that beneficiaries would often display a greater level of trust in their organisation because they are a VCSE organisation, and/ or are distinct from public sector services:

> “I think there are some people who specifically come to us because they feel more comfortable with the fact that it’s a charity, they like to feel it’s a charity.”

> “The fact that we are non-clinical means that people trust us more… People won’t access statutory services unless they absolutely have to, because they feel like they’re being judged…”

> “I think the counselling relationship in particular is based on trust, so building that trust and then to be able to work with people who are discussing and examining and visiting really difficult traumas that they’ve had in their lives… From our experience and from the feedback we have had, people feel much more comfortable with us doing that rather than within the NHS. I think we had a comment, not a lot, but we’ve had a couple of comments that people don’t want what they are discussing on their medical records, for example, and they’re not sure if it would be.”

Impact

Case Study - Healthy Living Network

Ediblelinks is a food surplus project in northern Warwickshire, run by the charity the Healthy Living Network. Running for nearly 10 years, the project provides food bank parcels to residents in North Warwickshire, but also have a thriving community food offer for local groups and organisations and run a Social Supermarket in Atherstone. They rely heavily on food surplus donations from local businesses and have nearly 40 regular volunteers who stock and manage the food hub and Supermarket, pack parcels, drivers to pick up and deliver food and Supermarket buddies to assist shoppers.

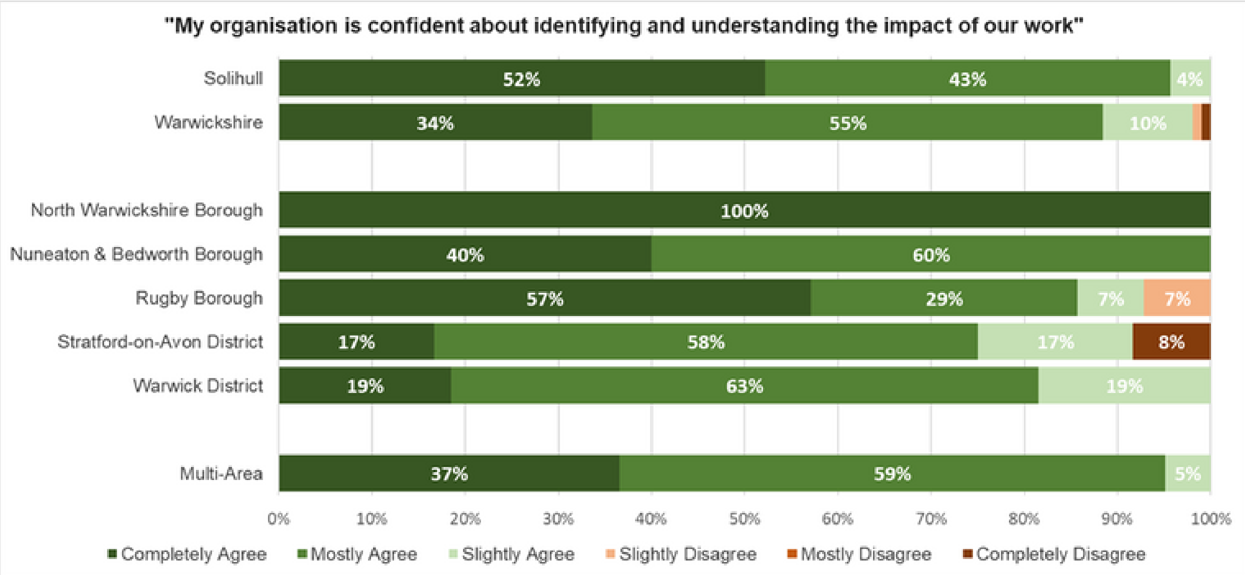
The value of the project to residents struggling throughout the year is indescribable, but best said by one of their users:

"The social supermarket has absolutely thrown me a lifeline this week. With the cost of living rising I had £56 left in my bank to feed my family and pay bills. Every single night I have been awake thinking of what I can do...I wasn't judged, the volunteers made me feel so welcome and at ease. Knowing that my children had full tummies and happy hearts is absolutely priceless, and I can't thank your volunteers and this service enough."

Impact

Reflections

We further asked respondents to reflect on the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the following statements:

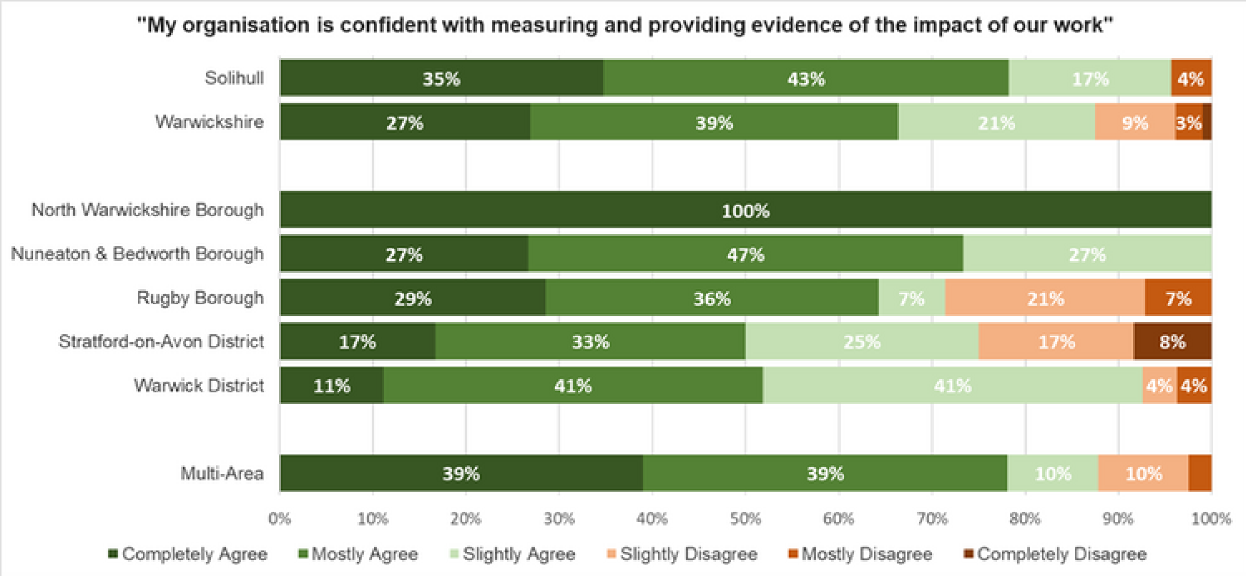


Overall, organisations have a high level of confidence in their understanding of the impact of their work. However, there are notably lower levels of confidence in measuring and communicating this impact.

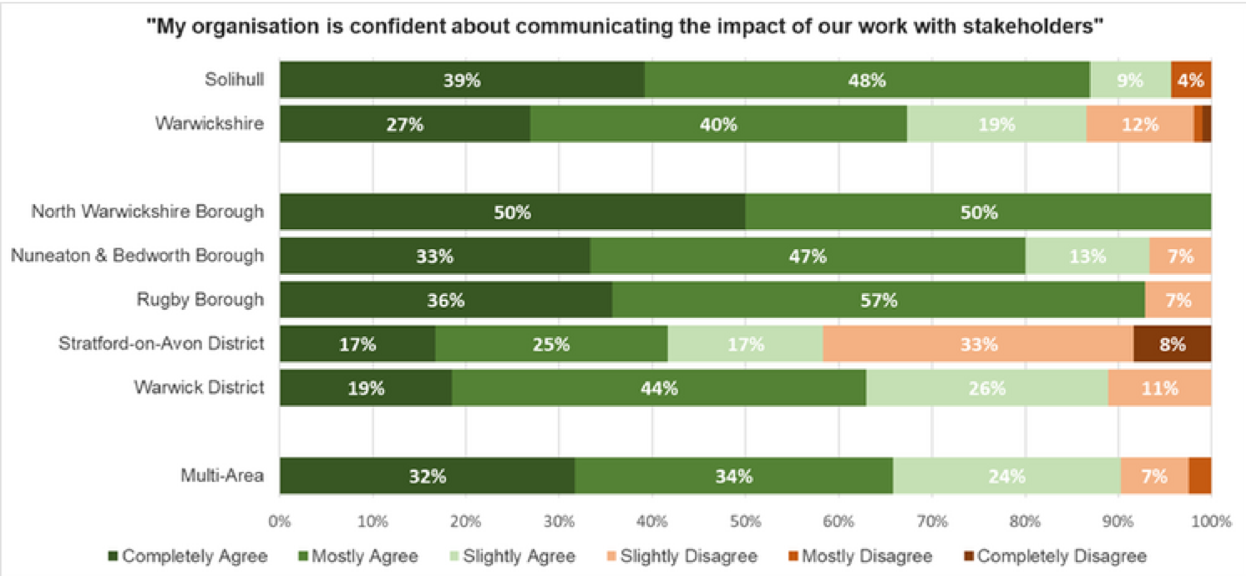
Key challenges identified include:

- A lack of capacity/funding to undertake evaluation exercises, particularly for smaller organisations;
- A lack of capacity to communicate the impact of work undertaken, with a focus on service delivery as demand increases;
- A view that the nature of the work undertaken has an impact that is intrinsically hard to measure.

Impact



"My organisation is confident with measuring and providing evidence of the impact of our work"
Solihull
35%
43%
17%
4%
Warwickshire
27%
39%
21%
9%
3%
North Warwickshire Borough
100%
Nuneaton & Bedworth Borough
27%
47%
27%
Rugby Borough
29%
36%
7%
21%
7%
Stratford-on-Avon District
17%
33%
25%
17%
8%
Warwick District
11%
41%
41%
4%
4%
Multi-Area
39%
39%
10%
10%
0%
10%
20%
30%
40%
50%
60%
70%
80%
90%
100%
Completely Agree
Mostly Agree
Slightly Agree
Slightly Disagree
Mostly Disagree
Completely Disagree

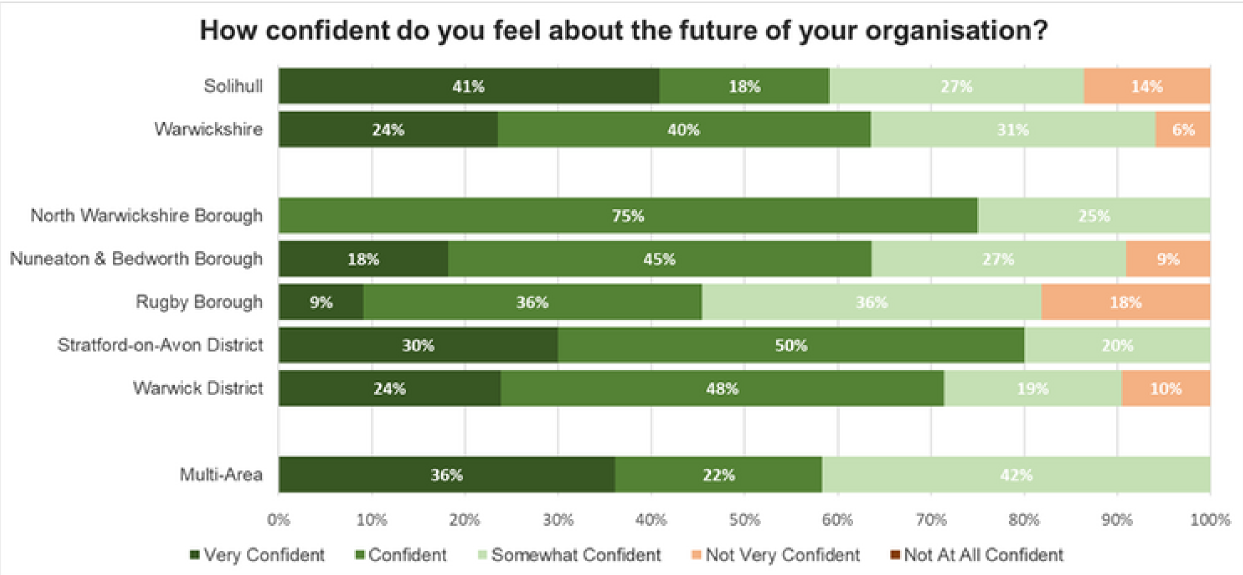


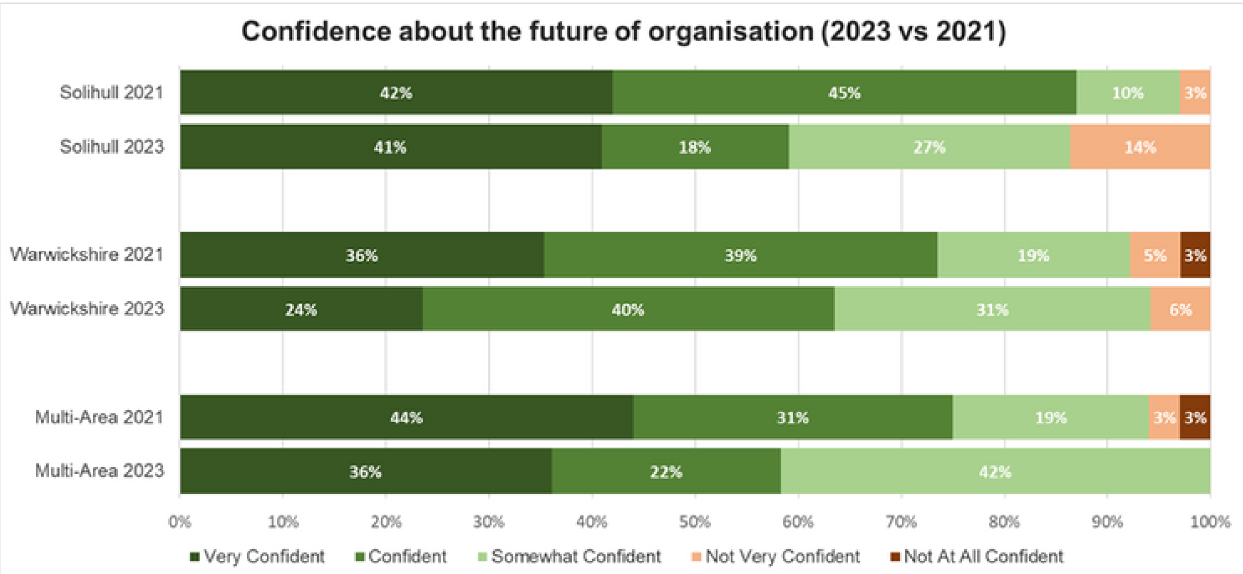
"My organisation is confident about communicating the impact of our work with stakeholders"
Solihull
39%
48%
9%
4%
Warwickshire
27%
40%
19%
12%
North Warwickshire Borough
50%
50%
Nuneaton & Bedworth Borough
33%
47%
13%
7%
Rugby Borough
36%
57%
7%
Stratford-on-Avon District
17%
25%
17%
33%
8%
Warwick District
19%
44%
26%
11%
Multi-Area
32%
34%
24%
7%
0%
10%
20%
30%
40%
50%
60%
70%
80%
90%
100%
Completely Agree
Mostly Agree
Slightly Agree
Slightly Disagree
Mostly Disagree
Completely Disagree

Challenges and Support Needs

Organisational confidence

We asked about the current challenges and support needs experienced by organisations.





Overall, 63% of respondents are ‘confident’ or ‘very confident’ about the future of their organisation. This compares to 77% who selected 4 or 5 out of 5 in 2021. On the face of it this does feel like a notable drop, however it is important to focus on the fact that almost two-thirds of respondents are confident.

Challenges and Support Needs

Lessons learned

We further asked, what, if any, lessons have you learned or recent changes will you keep in the future:

- 16% of survey respondents identified attempts to diversify funding streams. With respondents viewing grant income as becoming increasingly more difficult to obtain, and the short-term nature of many grants that are available, other sources of income had been explored. This was viewed as particularly important for covering core costs, for which grant income was seen as significantly more difficult to obtain than for project funding. Typically, these attempts were in the early stages, with limited success to date.
- 13% noted the importance of getting to know their community. Examples were shared of organisations communicating with, listening to, and developing new activities or projects based on engagement with their target beneficiary group or geographic community.
- 13% highlighted investment in their staff and volunteers. This included an active focus on the welfare of staff and volunteers in the face of increased demands, such as adjusting practices to enhance work-life balance. Promoting training and development opportunities and celebrating the contributions of staff and volunteers were also mentioned.
- 9% mentioned the importance of networking, with conscious efforts made to have more face-to-face contacts with partners and stakeholders. Although many organisations have seen benefits from increased hybrid and remote working, some respondents were of the opinion that this is a barrier to identifying potentially fruitful new referral or partnership relationships, which are often developed on the informal margins of face-to-face meetings.
- 8% identified significant benefits from hybrid or co-located working, which they intended to retain. However, there was a recognition that these arrangements were less suited to frontline service delivery, and so could have negative consequences that need to be identified and managed.
- 7% noted the importance of 'being realistic' about what could be achieved with available resources, including 'learning to say no' and remembering that changes and developments often take a considerable amount of time to come to fruition.

Other learnings included the benefits of focussing on impact when making plans, focussing on core values when selecting priorities, and the importance of developing and utilising robust processes to deliver effective organisational management.

Challenges and Support Needs

Strengths and opportunities

When asked about the most significant strengths and opportunities for organisations over the next two years, respondents noted:

- 24% of survey respondents noted their organisation's awareness of community needs as their biggest strength. This included noting established trusting relationships with communities of interest and/or geography, and specialist skills and/or established practice to deliver positive outcomes.
- 20% noted strong organisational management. This was often characterised by stable and consistent staff and/or volunteer teams, with positive features of organisational culture highlighted such as responsiveness, strategic review and focus, and effective partnerships to enhance outcomes for beneficiaries.
- 19% noted the skills and commitment of their volunteers and/or staff team as a significant strength.
- 12% identified recognition and positive reputation of their work among the wider population as a strength and opportunity.
- 11% highlighted financial stability, typically provided by a longer term grant or contract, with 5% noting a physical asset such as a building.
- 6% identified the relevance of their work to the priorities of public sector organisations, in particular health services and local councils, as being an opportunity to raise their profile and/or secure funding.

Challenges and Support Needs

Building on the questionnaire responses, interviewees identified building or rebuilding partnerships and networking as the most significant opportunity for the next two years. Clear examples were given of opportunities to achieve a greater level of impact by working in partnership to achieve shared objectives:

> "I think that when you've got the support of other organisations, that really does help especially when you're a small organisation. In terms of mentoring and bouncing ideas off each other, shared practices, I think that's imperative. In terms of delivering more holistic support and more sustained outcomes I think it's important that we work in partnership."

> "I think when we look at partnerships we are always looking for synergy… a lot of different organisations we try to achieve the same thing which is the wellbeing of the residents and support them to do the best they can… we all have a strength in different areas and… we want to achieve the same things but how we achieve that is different, but instead of competing we're looking at how can we add value to each other."

> "We are particularly good at using the funding that the public sector can provide and then leveraging other funding from elsewhere on top of that. That's a real strength of ours and quite often our public sector partners will ask us to do exactly that."

Challenges and Support Needs

Challenges over the next 2 years

We asked what respondents anticipated will be the biggest challenges their organisations will face over the next two years:

- 55% of survey respondents anticipated funding and/or cost pressures to be their biggest challenge over the next two years. It was felt that funding is increasingly difficult to secure, with public sector contracts often designed in a way that gives advantages to national charities or private sector providers at the expense of established local VCSE organisations, in addition to the value of grant funding having reduced.
- 35% highlighted concerns regarding staff and volunteers, noting the effect of limited finances on staff numbers and the risk this poses for consequent negative impacts on the support and welfare of staff and volunteers. Challenges recruiting both staff and volunteers were noted, along with the risk this poses for the quality and sustainability of service delivery.
- 23% noted an expectation of increased demand for their services, alongside a concern that they would not be able to meet the anticipated volume of requests for help.
- 5% expressed concern about a hostile and unstable national policy environment, and the barrier this presented for effective engagement with local public sector organisations.

Interviewees built on the questionnaire responses by identifying three main anticipated challenges for the next two years: responding to the increasing scale and complexity of demand, organisational capacity, and funding. These are clearly interrelated, and indicate growing pressure on the VCSE sector, as expectations and demand grow without a matching increase in resources:

> "Capacity is one issue because it's been quite a difficult time to recruit people... what I've seen is in general, it seems like there is an issue of recruiting people. Then that's definitely one thing that we are trying to address."

Challenges and Support Needs

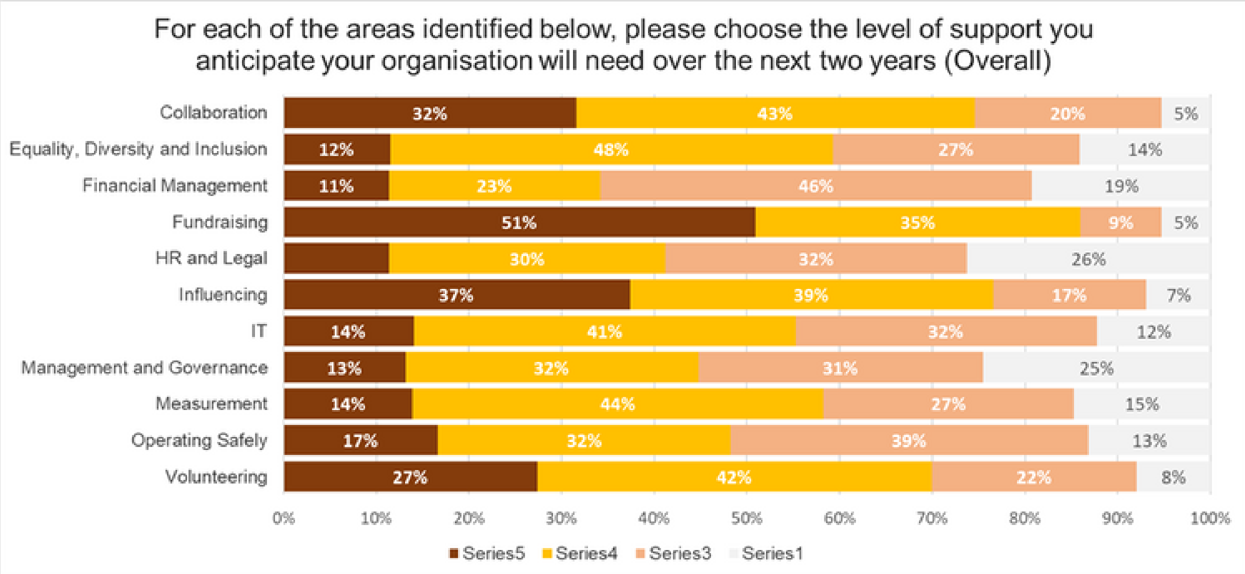
“At the moment with only the one paid staff member, it’s pretty much like having to do the funding, having to sort out the services and the general administration, all of that, so it is quite difficult…”

“So, this year though we have pared back our offer because of the funding, so we have to at the moment, but it’s okay, we’ve got a plan to rebuild, but we are very aware of the impact that has had on the referrals.”

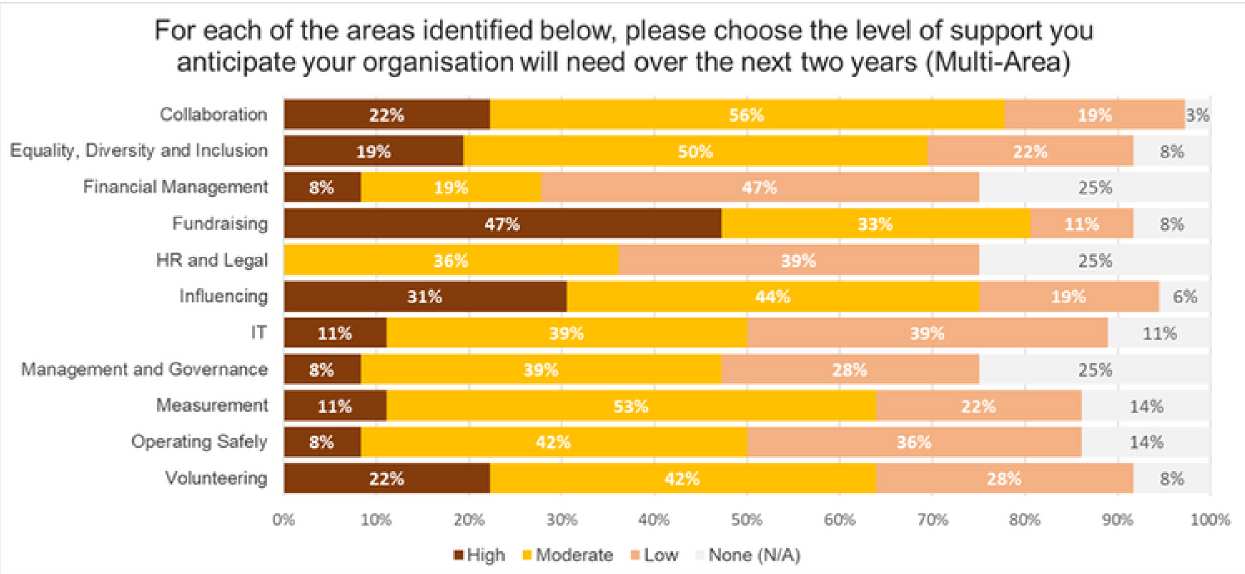
“You get twelve months of funding and that’s it, you can be in a situation where you’ve got to stop what you’ve been doing because you’ve got no money to make it happen. That’s a big issue. One of the biggest issues is having funding for long enough. Every funding bid that you go for gives you twelve months funding and it’s not enough. You need three, four, five years’ worth of funding to make a proper difference really.”

Challenges and Support Needs

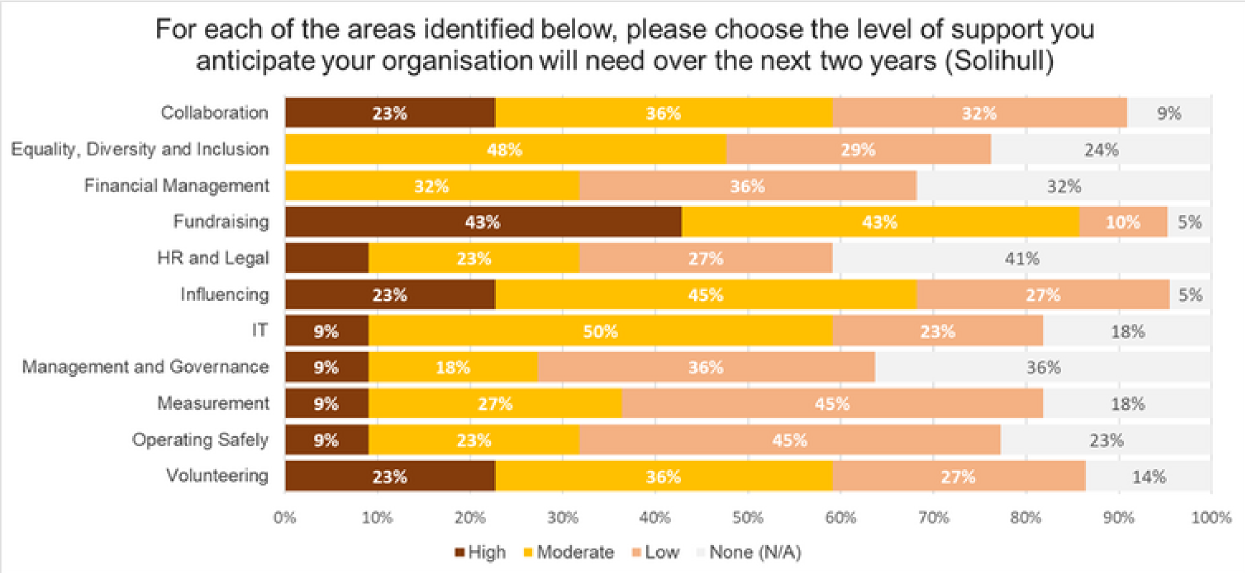
We gave a range of support areas that organisations might need; we asked respondents to choose the level of support they anticipated they may need over the next two years:

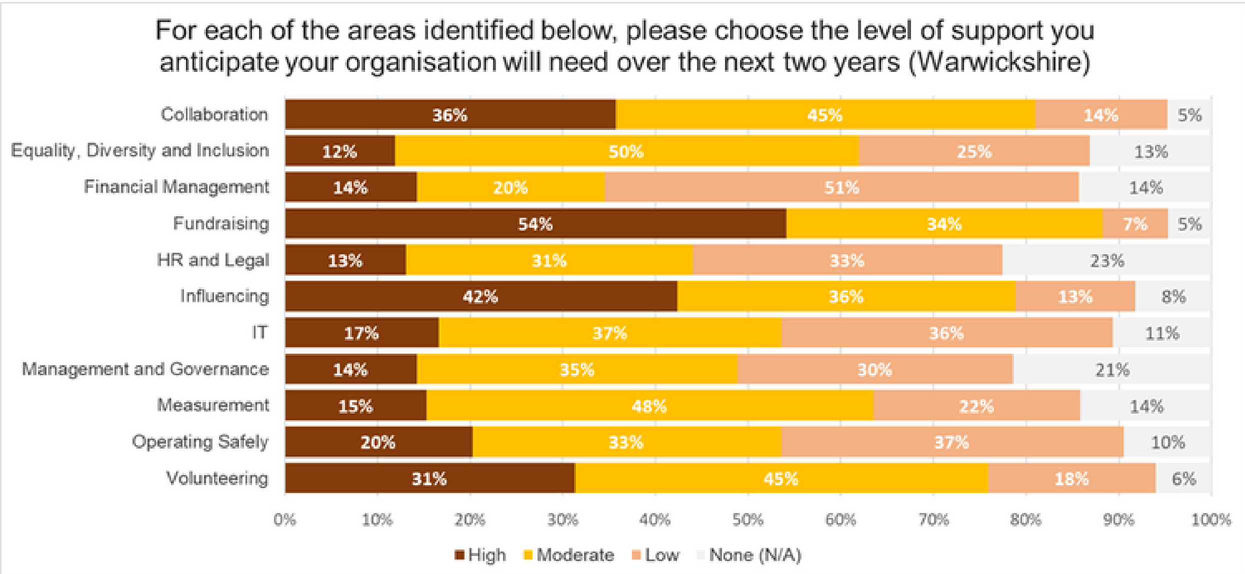


Breakdown of responses by area:



Challenges and Support Needs



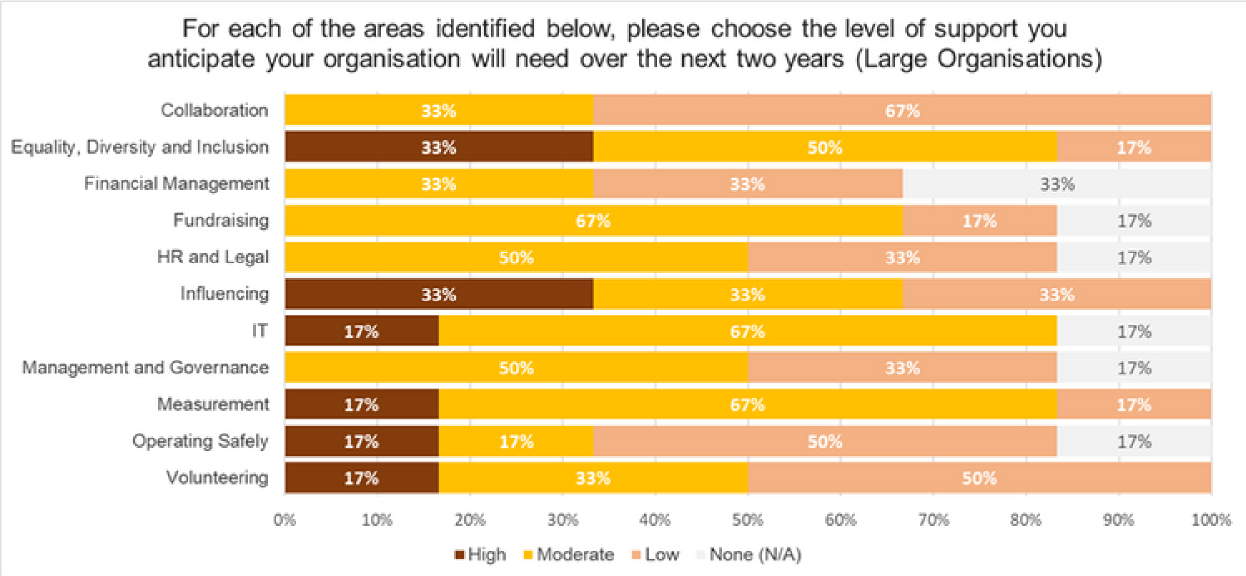


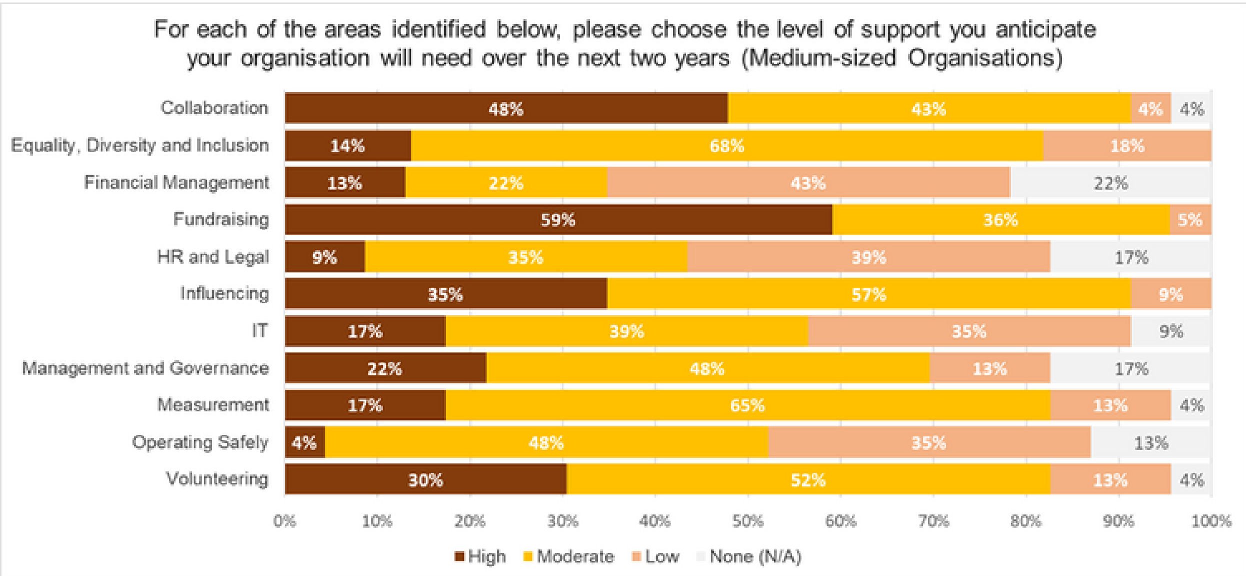
Breakdown of responses by size of organisation:

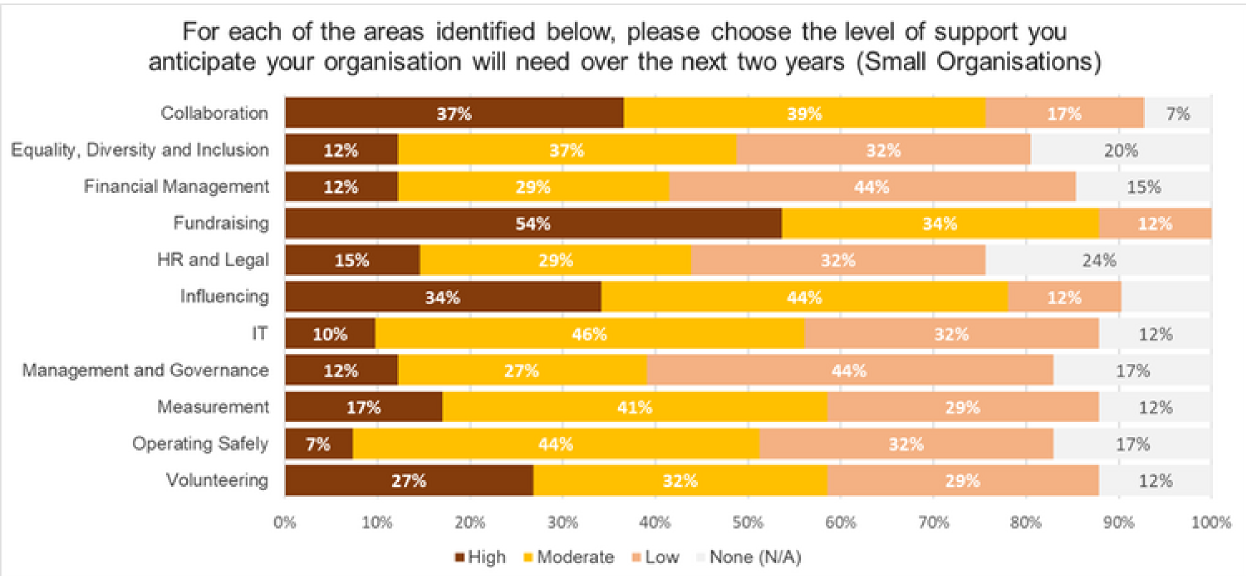
Anticipated support needs appear to be linked to the size of organisations, this has been broken down below, however of note:

- Large organisations typically anticipate lower overall support needs.
- For other organisations, ‘Collaboration’, ‘Fundraising’, ‘Influencing’ and ‘Volunteer Recruitment/Management’ are common areas with anticipated support needs.
- Small and medium-sized organisations typically anticipate a higher level of need for support over the next two years.

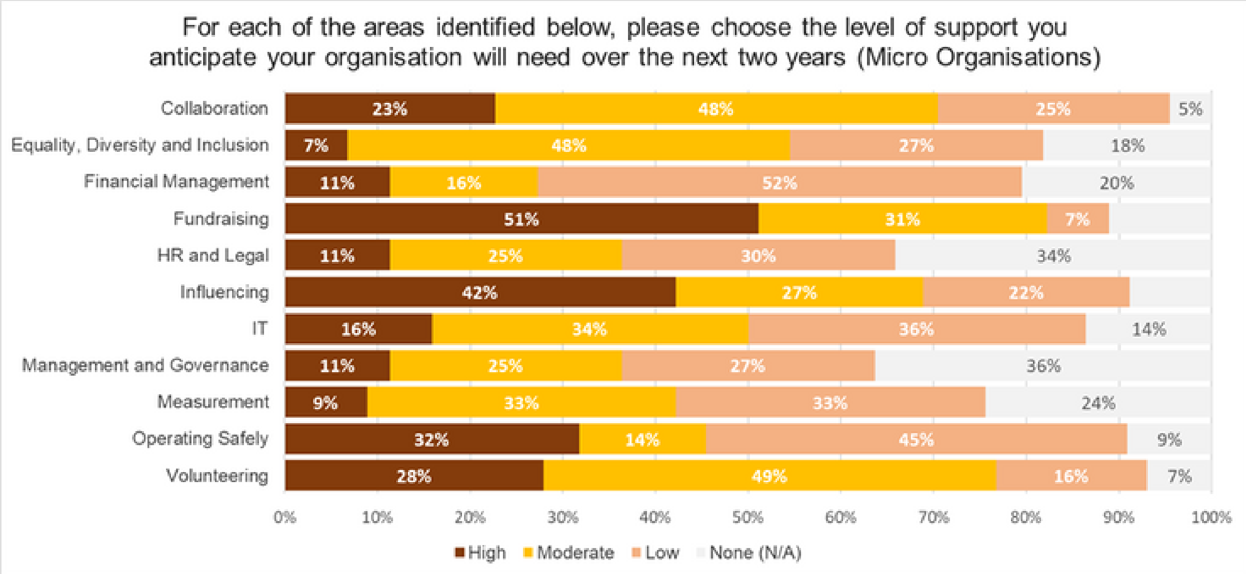
Challenges and Support Needs







Challenges and Support Needs



Finances

We wanted to understand the current financial position of organisations. We asked what their current biggest financial pressures were:

26% **Increased demand for services**

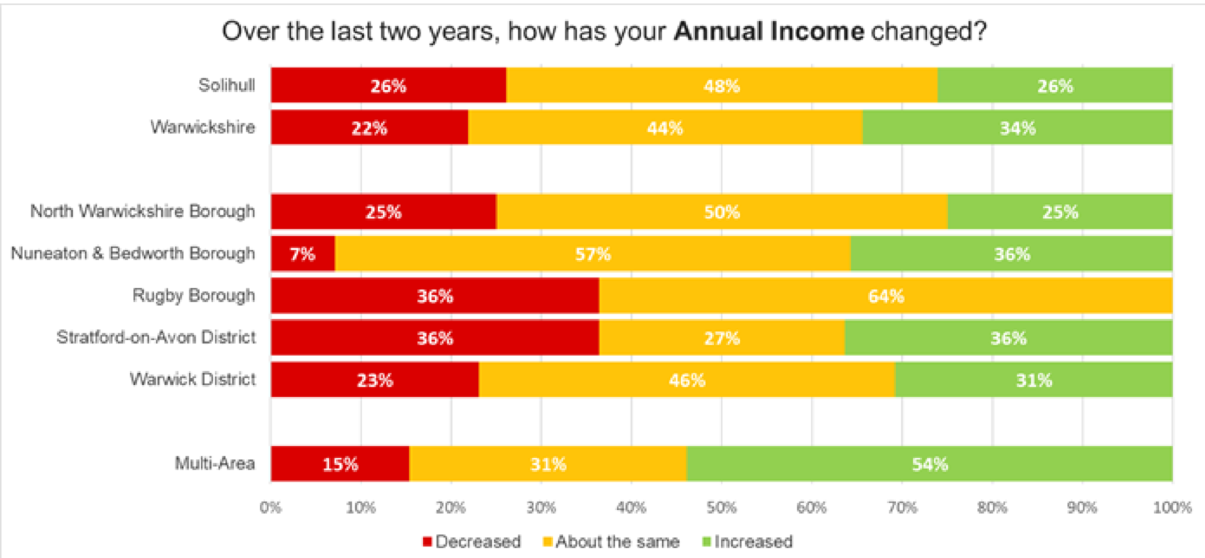
16% **Increased overhead costs**

16% **Increased utility costs**

Income

We asked how finances have changed over the last 2 years:

- 35% - Increased
- 43% - About the Same
- 22% - Decreased



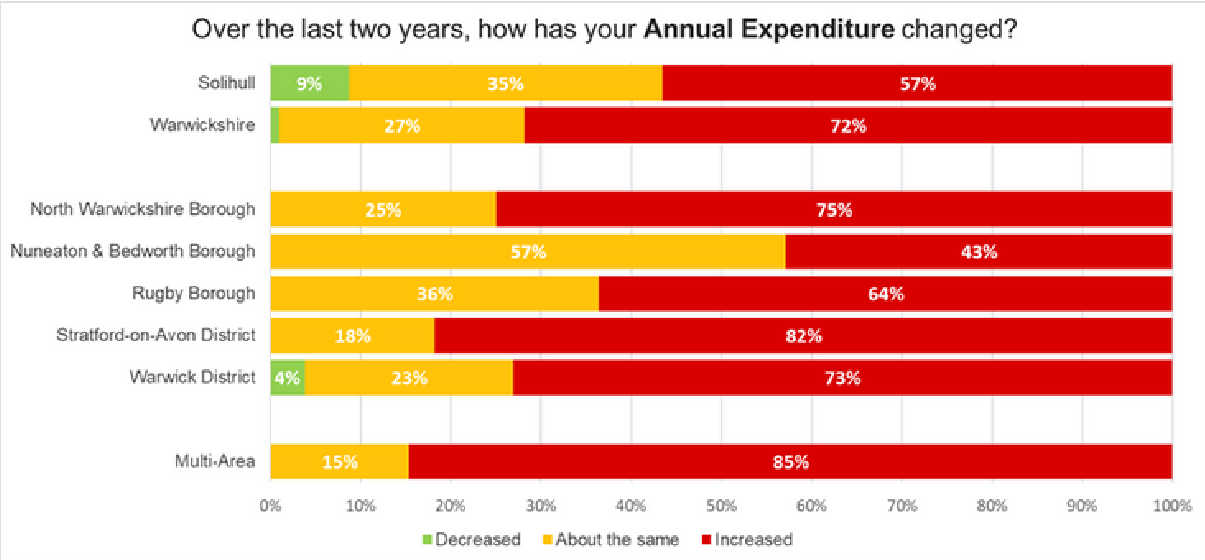
It is worth noting that larger, multi-area organisations are more likely to have seen income increased than smaller organisations.

Finances

Expenditure

We asked how finances have changed over the last 2 years:

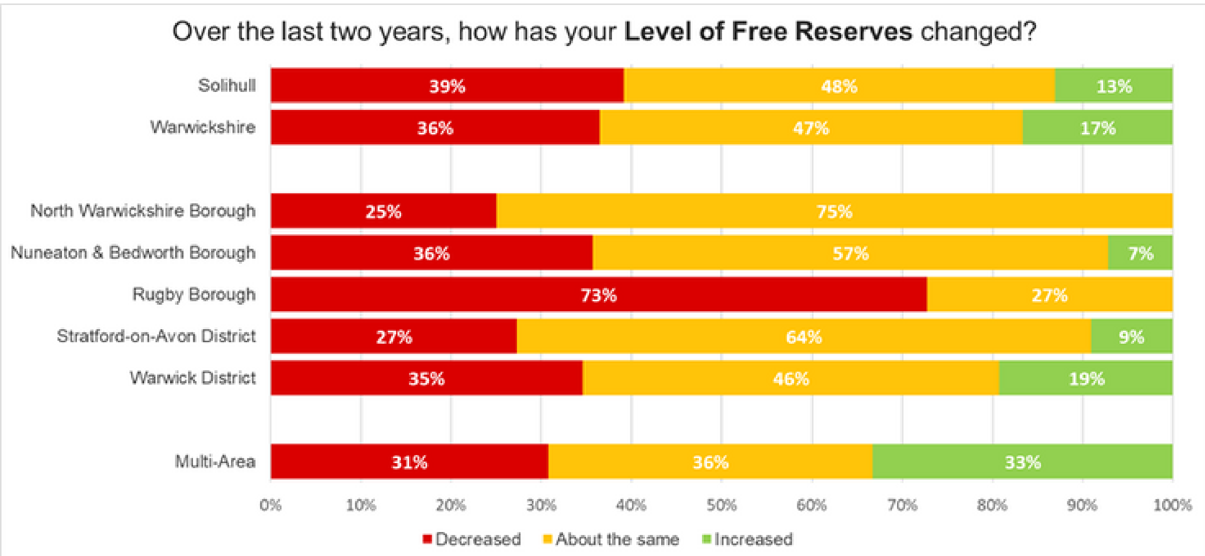
- 70% - Increased
- 27% - Stayed the same
- 2% - Decreased



Free Reserves

We asked how finances have changed over the last 2 years:

- 18% - Increased
- 45% - Stayed the same
- 37% - Decreased

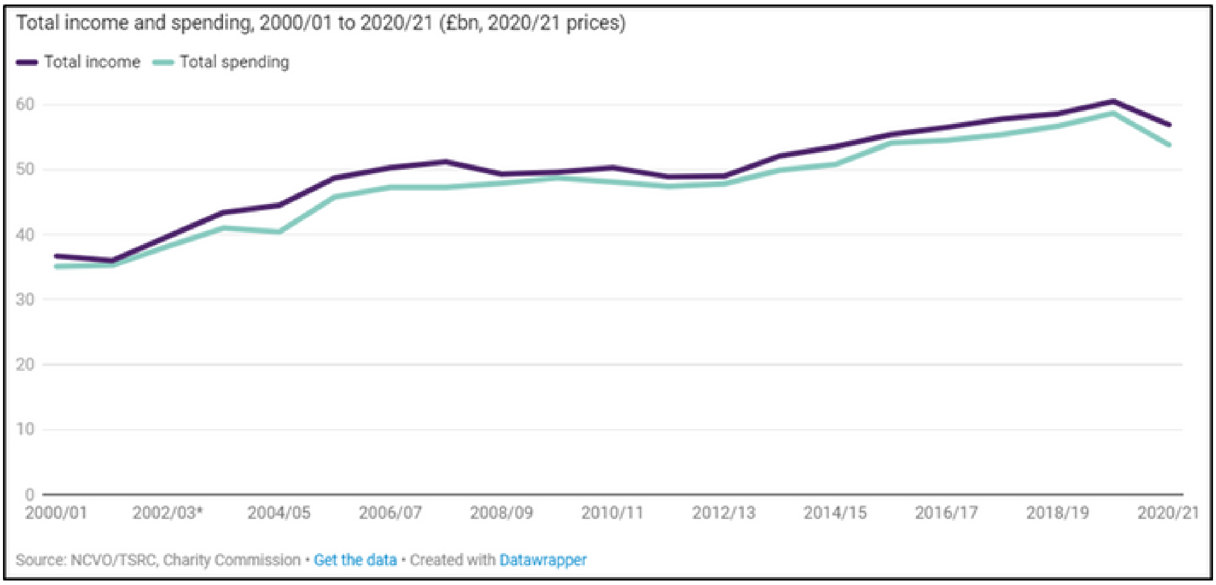


Finances

Although the majority of organisations have maintained or increased levels of free reserves, just over a third (37%) have seen free reserves decrease over the last two years. This indicates that expenditure has increased at a faster rate than income.

Larger multi-area organisations are more likely to have increased their free reserves than smaller local organisations, reflecting the pattern of income increases.

As a point of interest, the Almanac states* that nationally, income has grown across charities compared to March 2021 by £7bn, with an increased amount of donations and legacies, as well as an increase in charitable activities; expenditure has however increased at a similar level, with the costs of charitable activities increasing by £6bn. Also, the majority of registered charities (34.65%) have an annual income of under £5k pa. Their income is only 0.07% of the total gross income of all charities in England and Wales. Charities with an annual income of over £10m account for 63.5% of all income.



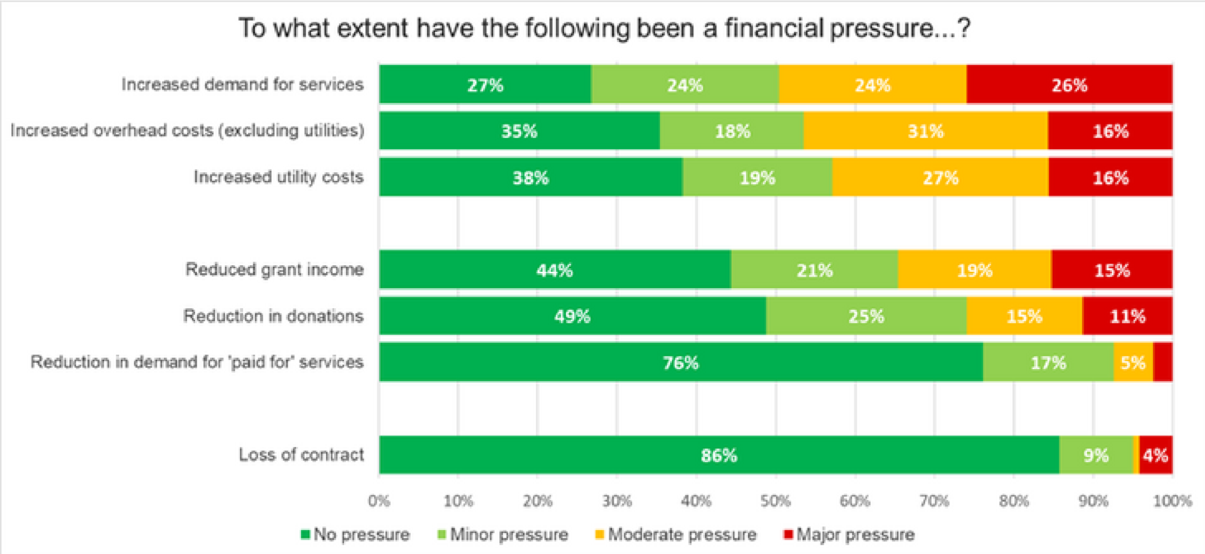
*Source: https://www.ncvo.org.uk/news-and-insights/news-index/uk-civil-society-almanac-2023/financials/

Our research shows broadly similar results compared to national data and trends.

Finances

Finance trends

We asked to what extent issues or events have been a financial pressure for organisations:



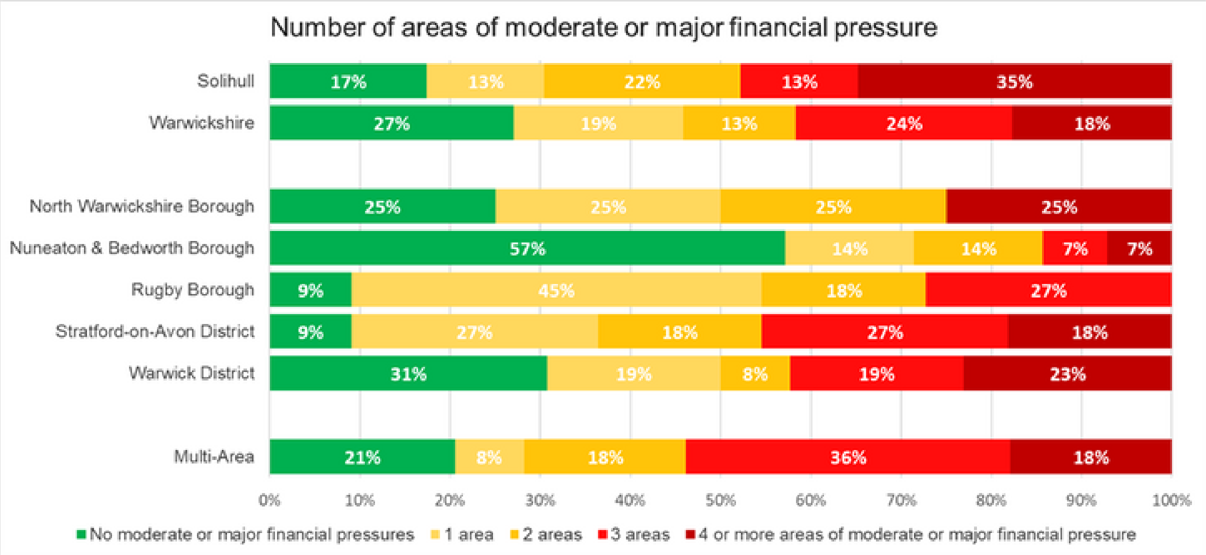
There is an overall pattern of increased demand for services, and increased overhead costs. Just under half of organisations identified a 'moderate' or 'major' pressure from increased utility costs (43%). It is worth noting that several organisations noted that they are currently protected from utility cost increases due to a fixed-term supply contract, but are anticipating steep utility cost rises when these contracts come to an end.

Around a third of organisations have experienced moderate or major pressures due to reductions in grant and/or donation income.

Almost half of organisations (47%) have experienced moderate or major pressures related to increasing overheads, typically staffing costs. Others have noted they anticipate such challenges in the near future.

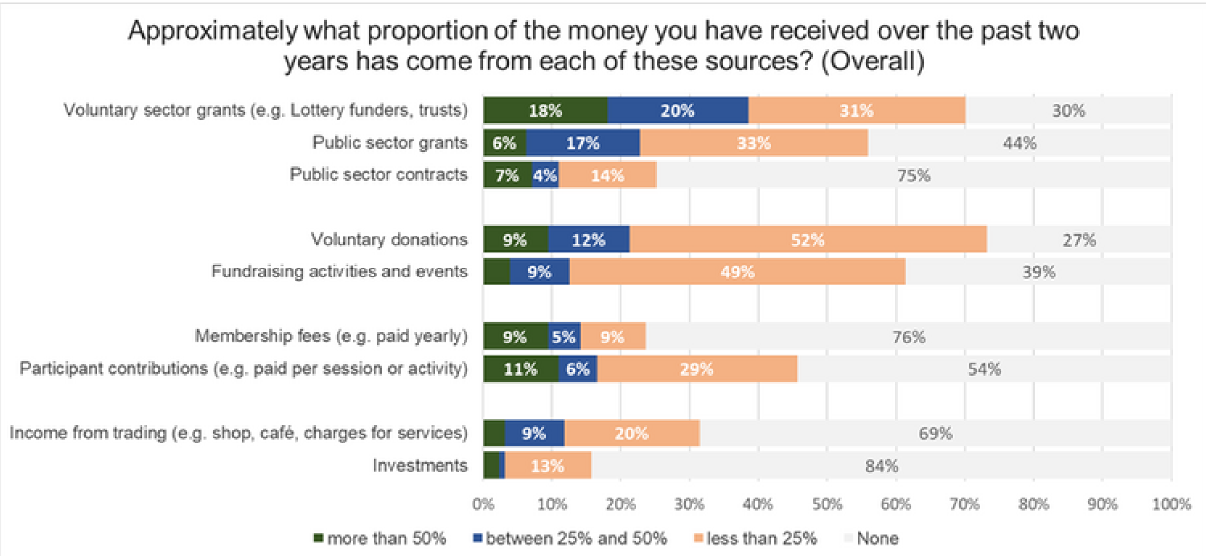
Overall, 76% of organisations have experienced at least one area of moderate or major financial pressure, with 42% experiencing moderate or major pressure in three or more of the areas asked about.

Finances



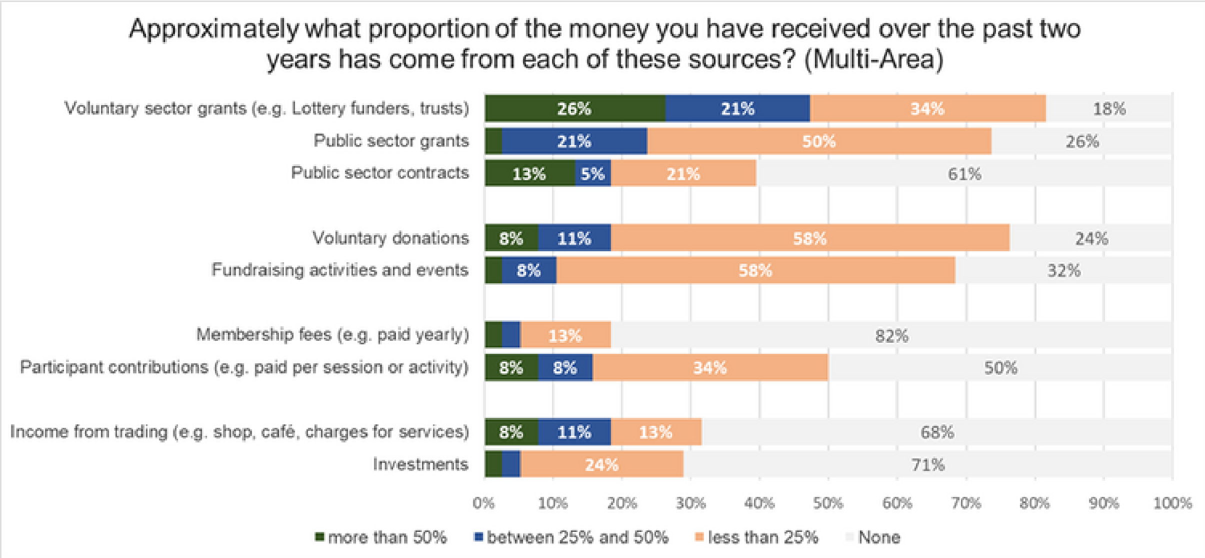
Sources of funding

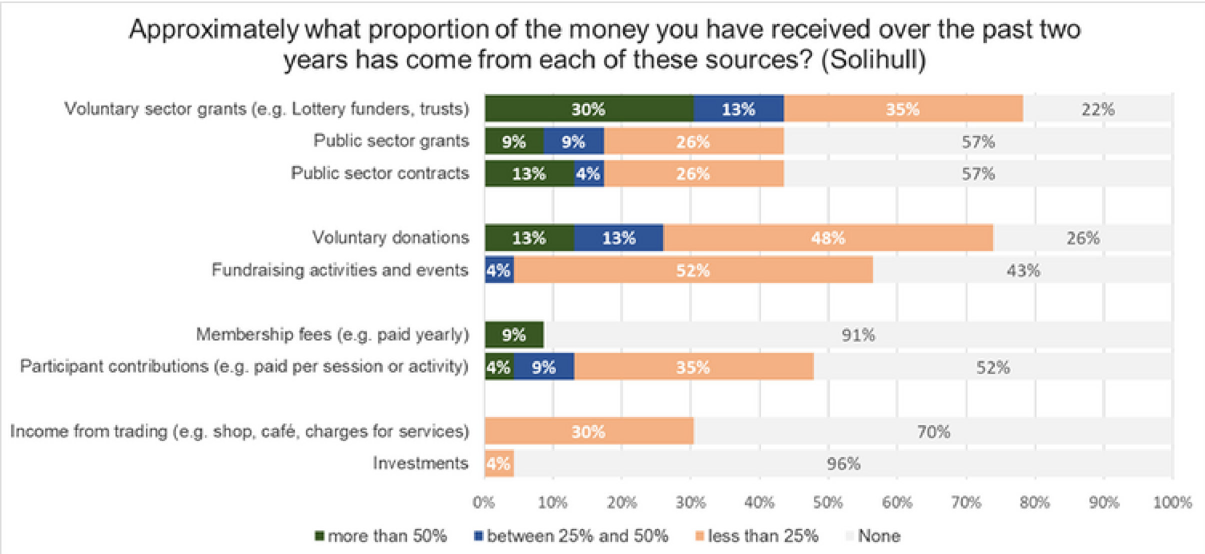
We asked approximately what proportion of the money organisations have received over the past two years has come from each of a range of sources:

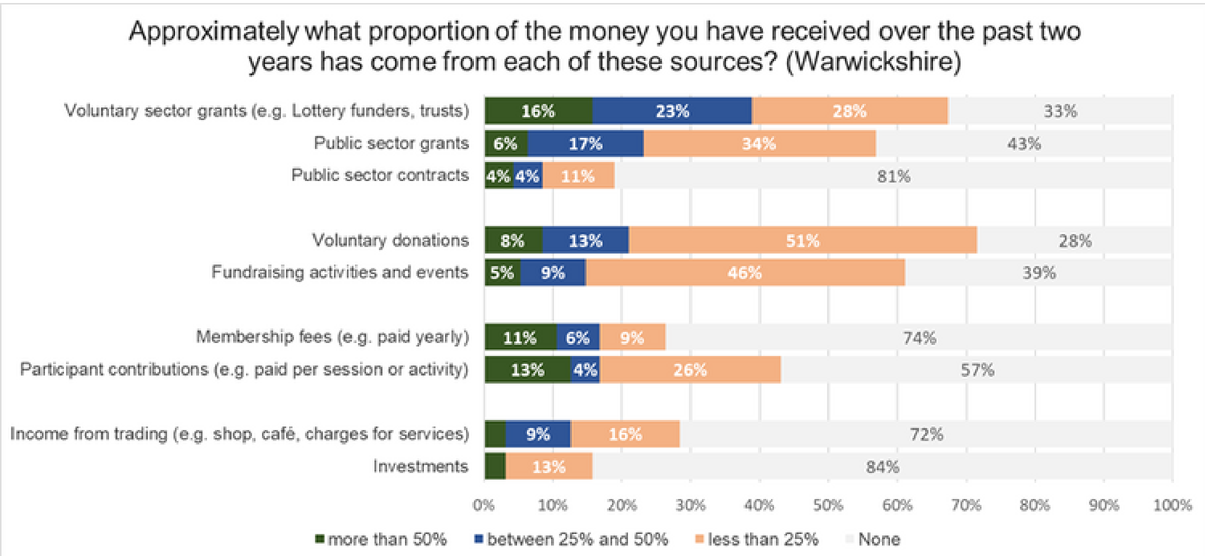


Finances

We broke this information down by area:

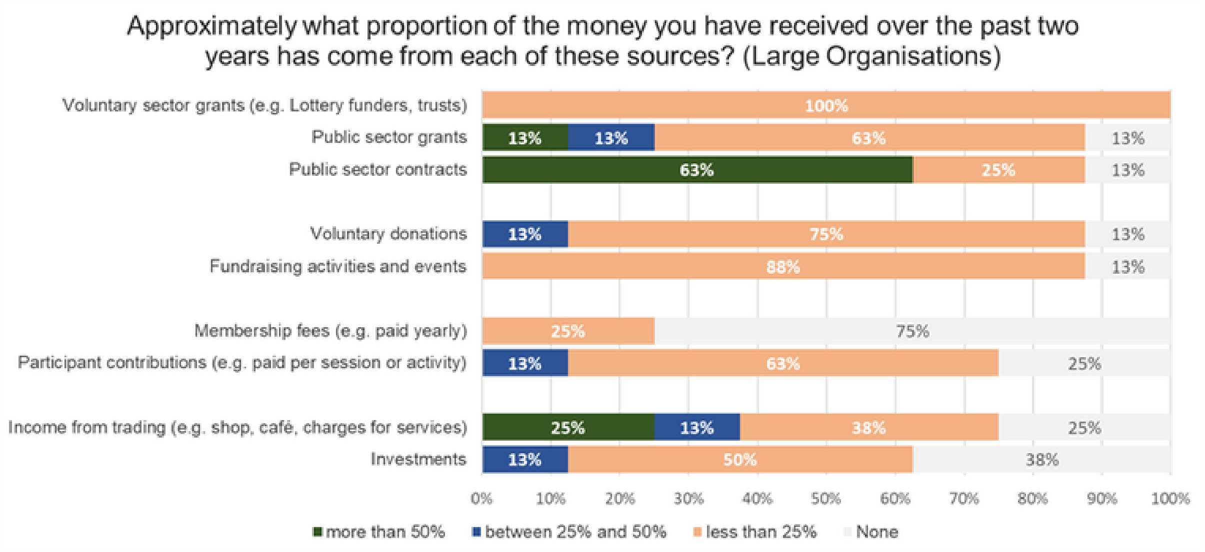


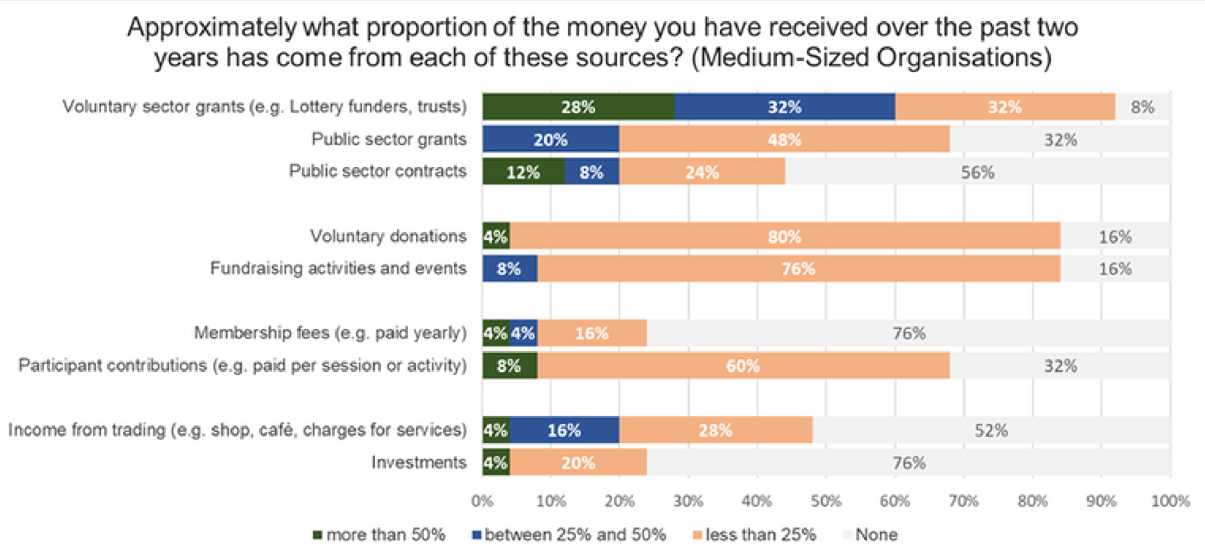


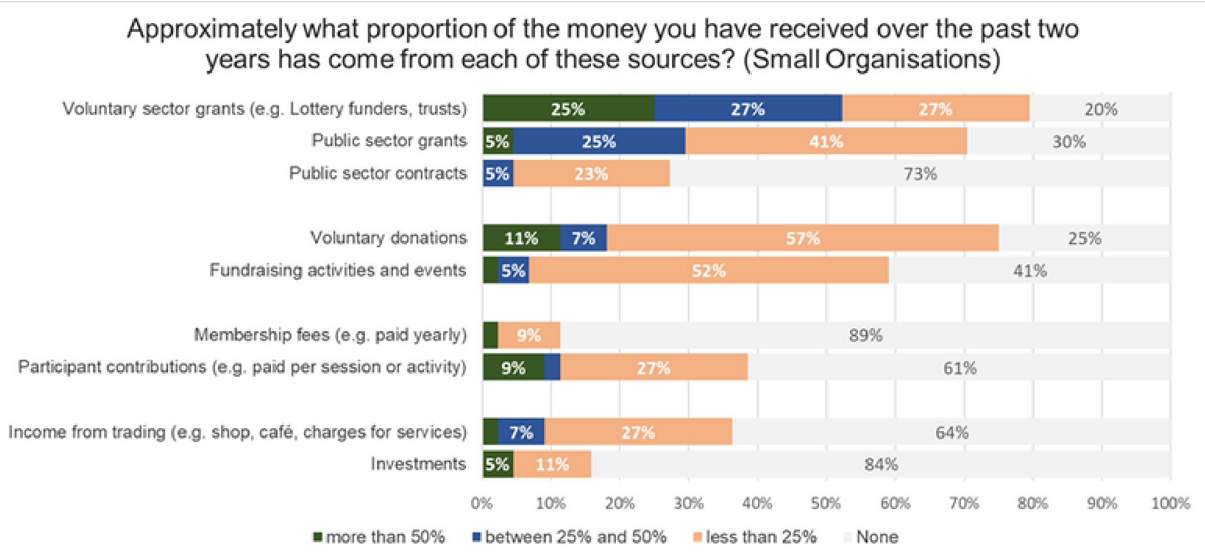


Finances

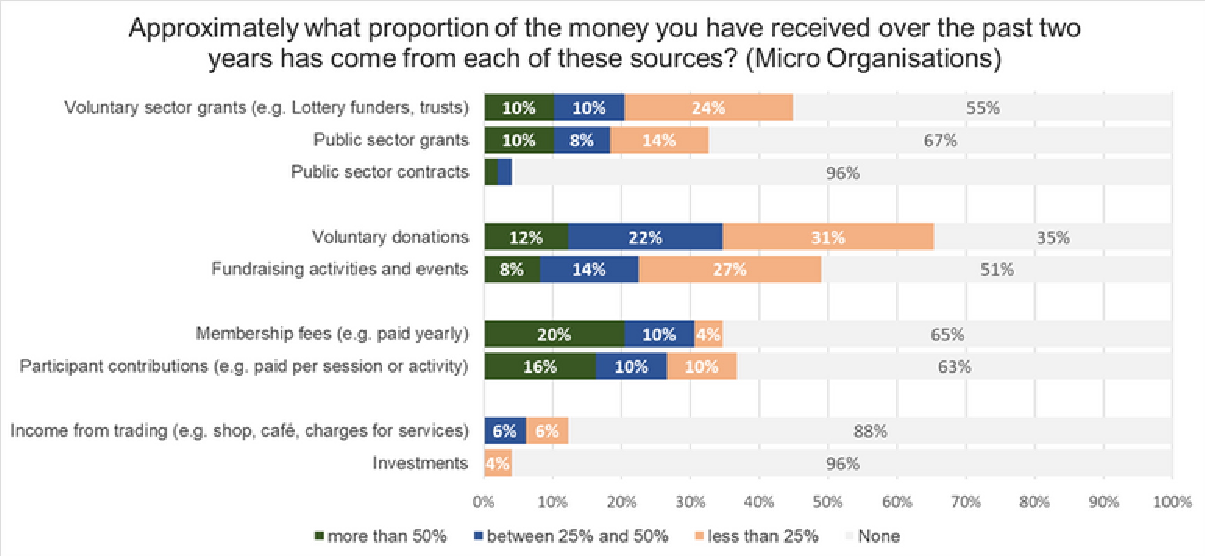
We broke this information down by size of organisation:







Finances



The majority of organisations reported that their sources of funding over the last two years have been broadly the same compared with previous years. A small proportion (5%) reported increasing difficulty with securing donations and/or grant income.

The charity 360Giving collects and publishes data to positively inform grant making. Their UK Grantmaking 2021-22 report* shows that total grantmaking to voluntary sector organisations from UK-based institutions is estimated at over £20bn, although not all of that will have been spent in the UK.The 'charitable grantmaker segments' contributed an estimated £7bn (35% of the total) compared to almost £6.4bn (32%) for Government segments.

The report also showed that the majority of charity recipients (74%) in the 360Giving data have a turnover of under £1million, and are more likely to be working with specific communities of interest or geography than general charities. The duration of grants was usually for 3 years or less; only 13% of grants made were for over 3 years. The majority of the grants were smaller, over half of grants made are for £10,000 or less, with only 1.4% of grants for over £1 million, and these grants were more likely to come from Government funding sources.

*Source: https://www.threesixtygiving.org/snapshot/

Equality, Diversity & Inclusion

For this report we wanted to understand more about the organisation's approaches to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) as we feel this has been under-reported in the past.

We asked respondents what progress organisations have made in relation to EDI over the last five years; we gave examples such as how organisations are run (e.g. governance, volunteers or paid staff), or it might relate to the design and delivery of organisation's services.

- 45% of survey respondents noted work undertaken to develop organisational culture in relation to EDI. This included reviewing the content and accessibility of policy and practice (17%), undertaking work to identify and address gaps in representation and/or access (11%), training and awareness raising for staff and/or volunteers (8%), and collating monitoring data including protected characteristics (3%). In many cases, this work has focussed on one or more specific protected characteristics, e.g. age, disability, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation, following identification of a specific need for organisational development.
- 31% reported tangible changes made to practice or resources in order to address barriers to inclusion, including engaging with people with lived experience as staff, volunteers or advisors (23%), creating staff capacity to oversee EDI developments (5%), and making specific adjustments, such as to the format of information about the organisation or contact methods.
- 32% reported no change in relation to EDI. This included organisations who reported that they had always worked to high standards in this area (24%) and some, mostly small community-based organisations, who reported that this was not an issue for their circumstances.

Equality, Diversity & Inclusion

We further asked what support would enable organisations to further progress in relation to EDI:

- 39% of survey respondents said they did not require support to enable further progress in relation to EDI or were not sure what support would be helpful. Some organisations who were confident with their EDI policies and practice offered to support any initiatives that may be undertaken to share best practice in this area.
- 20% identified a need for training for staff and/or volunteers.
- 16% highlighted a need to review service and policy design, with a request for support and best practice guidance to create effective processes, and guidance on data collection and analysis.
- 15% noted the value of partnerships and collaboration, with suggestions made to enhance collaboration with other organisations to advance diversity and inclusion, and to create ways of promoting and sharing best practice.
- 12% identified a need for resources to provide capacity to support EDI developments and/or undertake desired changes, with funding to enhance staff capacity and physical resources to enhance accessibility mentioned.
- 8% identified a need for support to recruit a more diverse group of trustees, and/or develop effective ways to recruit a more diverse and inclusive team of volunteers.

Partnerships

To help us to better understand cross-sector relationships, we asked a number of questions about how organisations work with others, from the public and private sector partners, as well as other voluntary sector partners.

Public Sector

We asked respondents to describe their relationship(s) with public sector organisations, what, if anything, has changed in the last two years, and what could improve these relationships in the future:

- 31% of survey respondents reported close working relationships with public sector organisations. The majority of reported relationships were with local councils across all tiers of local government. In addition, close working relationships were reported with health services, in particular in relation to mental health support, with other work-area specific relationships also noted.
- In contrast, 20% reported limited or reduced working relationships with public sector organisations, with 12% noting some frustration at the lack of progress made with building relationships on apparent shared priorities.
- 15% identified practical working relationships, such as co-working on delivery of specific projects, or development support received from public sector organisations. Others noted strategic support where priorities aligned (4%), funding (2%) and receipt of referrals (2%).

Partnerships

- 16% identified barriers to engagement with public sector organisations. Many of these related to difficulties in making contact with an appropriate person within an organisation (11%), often as a result of perceived instability within those organisations leading to a high turnover of staff.
- Others noted a lack of capacity within both VCSE and public sector organisations to build and sustain productive relationships, issues related to public sector organisations making inappropriate referrals or placing inappropriate expectations on VCSE organisations, and concerns that some public sector procurement practices did not take proper account of the added value offered by established local organisations when considering sustained holistic impact rather than short-term output monitoring.

Private Sector

We also asked respondents to describe their relationship(s) with private sector organisations, what, if anything, has changed in the last two years, and what could improve these relationships in the future:

- 38% of survey respondents reported little or no relationships with private sector organisations.
- 14% reported receipt of funding from private sector organisations typically through fundraising support, with other examples including income generated through hire of facilities.
- 12% identified delivery support from private sector organisations, such as pro-bono or reduced cost of premises to run activities or professional support such as legal advice, or gifting of surplus goods, in particular food.
- 5% reported volunteers recruited from private sector organisations, typically teams undertaking a specific time-limited task as part of a Corporate Social Responsibility programme.

Enablers for positive relationships with private sector organisations included: utilisation of personal contacts (5%); and alignment with an organisation’s goals relating to social or environmental impact (3%)

Partnerships

Others in the VCSE Sector

We also asked respondents to describe their practical working relationship(s) with other VCSE organisations, what, if anything, has changed in the last two years, and what could improve these relationships in the future:

- 45% of survey respondents reported positive practical working relationships with other VCSE organisations, including partnerships to deliver specific projects or activities (22%), cross-referral or signposting to enable holistic support of beneficiaries (12%), and best practice sharing to support specific developments (4%). Some noted that these were often short-term relationships based on current funding, expressing a desire for more sustained values-based partnerships.
- 19% highlighted the benefits of networking, sharing information and best practice either directly or through sector forums.
- 4% suggested there was a need to increase networking opportunities, in particular face-to-face opportunities that allow informal contacts to be made outside of a core agenda.

Partnerships

What makes partnership working successful?

Interviewees identified several enablers of effective partnership working, which they viewed were strengths of their organisation and the VCSE sector overall:

Specialist skills
Many VCSE organisations have specialist skills and knowledge to contribute to partnerships and enhance overall impact:

> “They recognise our skills and aptitude in terms of... the ability to enter into communities in ways that they just cannot do... We recognise that they have particular expertise and funding for large scale impact, so we work well together in that space.”

Respect and mutual learning
A positive reputation with stakeholders and communities, combined with mutual respect, provides the foundation for a positive partnership based on shared learning, development and impact:

> “I think our reputation... is pretty good and the reason for that is because... everybody knows what our approach is and we react very quickly.”

> “You need to build up those connections, you need to be authentic yourself but you need to understand who the other partner is, about them and it’s about learning from each other and being respectful and if you’re going to work in partnership, be very clear who’s doing what action.”

Partnerships

Individual relationships

Although partnerships are ostensibly built at an organisational level based on an alignment of strategic objectives or contractual agreements, successful partnership working is often dependent on the informal connections between individuals, respect and shared values:

> “I think people that interact with us, once we get an opportunity to talk to people, understand what we’re doing”

> “The one thing that makes [partnerships] work better is the individual you are dealing with. It would be nice to have a standard way of things being done but when people leave, the new person picks it up but it never really seems to happen that way.”

Most interviewees noted a desire to build more effective partnerships with public sector organisations, in particular local councils and health services. There was widespread recognition that public sector organisations currently faced significant resource challenges, but also frustration at what was often felt to be missed opportunities, where VCSE organisations have the potential to efficiently and effectively deliver sustained positive outcomes, but are not given the security of long-term funding. In some cases, it was noted that public sector organisations are increasingly relying on VCSE organisations through formal and informal referrals, but without providing funding. Although relationships with individual officers were generally positive, several interviewees felt that there are pockets of disrespectful attitudes towards the sector. This, some felt, is combined with a general lack of meaningful strategic engagement with, or recognition of, the actual or potential contribution of the VCSE sector to the communities of Warwickshire and Solihull:

Partnerships

"They see us as the icing on the cake, when in actual fact we've become the cake."

"I would love to think that they read the reports, they looked at the robustness of them and though actually, this is quite significant, but I am not entirely convinced that they do."

"There is a denial that the voluntary sector are picking up so much work and so many gaps in the county... So now they've convinced themselves that they've been able to do that superbly and they've been able to adapt the services to the new kind of financial resource that they've got available and still deliver incredible services. That isn't the case at all and I think it would be good for them to truly understand and recognise what we do in order for us to then be able to work together properly, to meet the needs of the beneficiaries that we work with..."

CAVA Support

Overwhelmingly respondents expressed their appreciation for the support CAVA already provides, and members were keen to see this continue.

No one person or organisation is responsible for the success of the VCSE sector, it's a collective effort, but as a learning organisation we took the opportunity to ask some more detailed questions about the services CAVA provides:

What do you think CAVA does well?

- 67% of survey respondents identified sharing of information and providing a trusted source of knowledge and support as the primary contribution CAVA makes to the sector. This included specific praise for the CAVA newsletter as a source of information and facilitator of communication across the sector (26%), and recognition of a range of high quality advice, information and signposting.
- 36% identified specific support received from CAVA that had been valued, with mention of funding advice (17%), volunteer recruitment (7%), advice on governance and processes (6%) and training (5%).
- 14% highlighted the value of CAVA's role in facilitating networking within the sector and ensuring the representation of the sector in multi-agency partnerships.
- 7% identified CAVA's strategic role as an advocate for the VCSE sector, in particular supporting relationships between the VCSE and public sectors.
- 7% of survey respondents were of the opinion that they could not identify anything that CAVA does well. In most cases this was due to having little contact with or knowledge of CAVA, but did include a small number of respondents who had felt let down when seeking support, particularly with regard to recruiting volunteers or seeking funding. Two respondents felt that CAVA's strengths are in supporting new or stable organisations looking to grow, but that they are not equipped to effectively support organisations in difficulty.

CAVA Support

How do you think CAVA could be more effective at strengthening the voice of the VCSE Sector?

- 22% of survey respondents requested 'more of the same', suggesting CAVA should focus on consolidating and extending its current activities, with a focus on dissemination of information (10%), and facilitating networking and forums (9%).
- 15% suggested that CAVA could improve its visibility within the sector, with clearer and more proactive promotion of the support it can provide. There were also several requests, mostly from smaller organisations with very small staff teams, for CAVA to visit them to get a better understanding of the work they do and their opportunities and challenges.
- 11% requested a greater emphasis on advocating for the VCSE sector, in particular with relationships with local councils and health services. Several respondents identified significant potential for the practice of local public sector organisations to better meet their stated objectives than was currently experienced, with resulting benefits for both public and VCSE organisations, and the communities which they both serve. CAVA was viewed as well placed to facilitate these improvements.
- 10% suggested a need to raise awareness of the sector among the general public, to both increase the visibility and recognition of the impact of the sector and encourage more people to volunteer.
- 8% identified a need for a greater level of practical support. This was mostly requests from smaller organisations that lacked capacity or skills for writing funding bids or addressing organisational management situations.
- 3% suggested that CAVA should facilitate coordinated representation of the sector. This was a stronger and more specific version of the networking and advocacy roles reported above, focussed on creating a cohesive shared vision for the sector in order to enhance strategic recognition of the sector, development of multi-agency partnerships and funding partnerships.

CAVA Support

Interviewees elaborated on the perceived strengths of CAVA and opportunities for development. To some extent, these views were linked to the size of their organisation. Although there was a range of individual circumstances and views, a general overall pattern emerged:

- For very small/ micro volunteer-led organisations, there was a focus on basic information and communications, e.g. via the newsletter, and support with recruiting volunteers, providing specific advice on practical issues, and sharing best practice.
- For larger organisations, CAVA's role was seen to be predominantly about facilitating networking and raising the profile of the sector.
- Smaller organisations with a single employee or small staff team were typically more likely to have identified specific requests of CAVA in the past, and would be likely to request these in the future also. The most common of these were:
    - Proactive relationship building, by visiting organisations to get a more detailed understanding of their work, opportunities and support needs.
    - Practical support to address specific governance, process or organisational development issues, adding short-term capacity to enable successful completion of specific tasks.
    - Facilitating networking and sharing of best practice on specific topic areas, perhaps including a proactive matching of organisations to undertake peer support.
    - Advocacy of the VCSE sector to public sector organisations to ensure recognition of the strengths and potential contribution that local VCSE organisations can make to stated public sector objectives. It was suggested that this could include identification of barriers to the full engagement of VCSE organisations, and an agreed strategic approach to tackling those barriers.

Recommendations

Where do we go from here? The State of the Sector reports are not just about looking back, but also looking forward.

01

Size matters

The survey results and a general theme from the interviews show that small to medium sized organisations are facing the biggest challenges currently, with large and micro organisations not so much. This may be due to the fact that larger organisations have greater capacity to reallocate to acute challenges, whereas micro organisations typically have quite low resource demands, e.g. no/few paid staff, no/smaller venues or assets to manage. The small and medium sized organisations are the ones most affected by the twin pressures of reducing grant/donation income and increased demand.

Increased priority should be placed on work that benefits small and medium organisations where pressures are felt most acutely.

02

Relationships matter

The research, from the data and more detailed interviews, reflects a gap between the rhetoric and practice of the public sector working with the VCSE. Feedback often showed the frustration at the lack of progress made with building relationships on apparent shared priorities.

Partnership and network building is the most significant opportunity for organisations over the next 2 years; increased support should be available around collaboration (32% identified this) and influencing (37% identified this).

Recommendations

03

People matter

Challenges recruiting both staff and volunteers were noted throughout this report, with respondents citing the risk this poses for the quality and sustainability of service delivery. Recruiting volunteers is an issue which was cited by many interview and survey respondents. Key factors included a reported drop in the number of and reduced flexibility of potential volunteers. Limited finances was reported by respondents to be a risk factor to affect staff numbers and the consequential negative impacts on the support and welfare of both staff and volunteers. Considering the high proportion of volunteers to paid staff in many VCSE organisations this is, and will, have a significant impact upon organisation's delivery approaches.

All partners need to increase promotion of the value of volunteering and also the VCSE Sector as an employer of choice. Organisations need to continuously consider their recruitment techniques, flexible arrangements and alternatives that makes a career in the VCSE as appealing as other sectors.

04

Resources matter

55% of respondents anticipated that funding pressures would be their biggest challenge in the next 2 years. Managing the increasing demand, and meeting essential expenditure in the context of levels of expenditure outstripping levels of income available, whilst also building organisational resilience feels like an almost insurmountable challenge.

Funding is often aimed at addressing key issues, like Covid recovery or the cost of living crisis, however funding often has not incorporated cost of living increases on organisations themselves. Funders need to continue to listen to the challenges around core income, longer term funding and the value of supporting existing programmes that work and create real impact for residents.

Recommendations

05

Next steps

As with all previous State of the Sector reports, this reports demonstrates the need and value of the VCSE Sector to address, prevent and improve outcomes for our diverse communities across Warwickshire and Solihull.

Underpinning all of this report is the need to continue and increase how all partners work together more effectively. CAVA has created its own strategic plan, and will build on this with an action plan that aims to address, monitor and evaluate progress on some of the key highlights and issues raised in this report. We will also work with VCSE and public sector colleagues to support them to implement the recommendations to build a more equal, resilient and responsive VCSE Sector.

We thank you for your continued support in our collective efforts to strengthen the VCSE in Warwickshire and Solihull.

We would like to thank everyone involved in contributing to this report:

- All voluntary, community and social enterprise sector organisations who took the time to complete the survey and took part in the interviews
- Tiller Research, without whose expertise in designing, hosting and analysing the survey results and interviews, this report would not have been possible
- To the the CAVA team, who shared and promoted the survey, who authored and designed the report

Congratulations to the six organisations who won a voucher for their organisations as part of the prize draw!

For more information about NCVO's Civil Society Almanac, and the full 2023 report visit: https://www.ncvo.org.uk/news-and-insights/news-index/uk-civil-society-almanac-2023/

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