Humber and North Yorkshire
Health and Care Partnership

Humber and North Yorkshire Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE)

Workforce Mapping Project 2025

Dr Elizabeth Cookingham Bailey
Dr Chunhua Chen
Professor Anne-marie Greene
School for Business and Society,
University of York

In Partnership with Humber and North Yorkshire Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) Collaborative within the Humber and North Yorkshire Health and Care Partnership (HNY)

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Executive Summary

A total of 335 organisations participated in the project, providing a wealth of information regarding their organisational status, financial and workforce assets, workforce management and challenges, and views about the future. Some results aligned with existing studies and expectations, while others provided surprises, either positively or negatively. Organisations studied have strived to be sustainable service providers and good employers while remaining true to their motivations as part of the VCSE sector, but have faced real difficulties in doing so. The highlighted challenges and expected changes related to job security, sustainable funding, communication between services, and training and peer learning between VCSE organisations.

Organisations

- The primary feature of the surveyed organisations in Humber and North Yorkshire is their composition: the majority of organisations are made up of registered charities, community- or locally-based, and micro/small organisations, both in terms of financial and service capacity, but also in terms of the number of employees.
- Service provision is diverse, with most organisations offering multiple services to different groups of people with in-house delivery as the main method.
- As expected, services focused on improving personal or community health and wellbeing by addressing specific needs, rather than tackling deep-rooted structural issues such as poverty and inequality.

People

- The people working or volunteering in the sector largely mirror the national scenario.[1] The sector is heavily volunteer driven and predominantly white, with an ageing population (mostly in volunteers). The difficulties of recruitment and retention of both paid staff and volunteers are fairly common across organisations. However, recruitment difficulties were generally not considered to be a significant problem.
- Support for those working or volunteering in the local sector is comparable to or even better than the national scenario and other industries in some aspects. This includes an underlying commitment to fostering a friendly working environment, as evidenced by various indicators (e.g. employment types, commitment to helping employees grow and develop, and flexible working).
- In general, organisations had an experienced (years of working), functional (match of purposes and services, skills acquisition), and relatively stable workforce (turnover rate), with an active volunteer base. However, a lack of attention to professional, technical and digital skills and relevant training is worth further consideration when it comes to preparing the workforce for the future.
- Financial pressures prevented organisations from giving more job security to their workforce, especially for micro/small organisations. Therefore, job insecurity and a lack of (long-term) funding were common core challenges to sustainability.

Heterogeneity

- Significant differences and even contradictory patterns were found in organisation purpose, service provision, and financial assets (especially sources of funding). There are also key differences in skills development and acquisition, workforce management measures and key influencing factors (e.g. challenges and expected support). This is true across three defined organisation sizes and across paid workers and volunteers.

Challenging Preconceptions/ Misconceptions

- There is no one VCSE sector, but rather many different sub-sectors that all have different stories, strengths and challenges.
- The majority of the workforce is not precarious, with the majority of paid staff on permanent, if part time contracts. The 15% of fixed term contracts therefore take up a disproportionate amount of HR time and strategic planning energy.
- Skills shortages are not a significant problem for either paid staff or volunteers, but were a key consideration, particularly for specialist staff. However, continuity/ sustainability of the workforce is an issue due to the predominant model of short-term funding and the older age demographic of volunteers.

1 Unless stated otherwise, the national or regional averages or levels used for comparison refer to the average or level of the VCSE sector.

- The VCSE paid workforce is younger than expected. However, there are issues of an ageing volunteer base and little attention is paid to succession planning. This is particularly a challenge with recruiting trustees.
- There is a lot of partnership working within the sector however this is threatened by the nature of the predominant funding model which makes organisations compete against each other.
- Most paid staff made a deliberate choice to work in the VCSE sector driven by a desire to change lives, often starting as volunteers, after working in other sectors.
- The sector is highly qualified and reliant on a number of key professional skills, but the sector relies on all of the workforce having highly developed interpersonal skills.

Recommendations

Improving the Funding Process

- **One size does not meet all** – Significant differences exist depending on the purpose of the organisation, its mode of delivery and its size. Funding structures have to shift to accommodate the difference between sectors.
- **Sustainable funding** – Organisations need funding sources that are not just project based, but rather that cover their core business. Organisations are having to invent new projects just to ensure funding is available to deliver core services. Introducing longer term contracts as short term contracts are problematic for many organisations.
- **Make work pay** – Contracts should reflect the value of the work done and the resourcing required to do it.

Recognising the value of the Sector

- Organisations want to be part of meaningful dialogue with the statutory sector that leads to tangible results. This would ideally lead to designing services that build on the strengths of the sector.

Collaboration not Competition

- **Sustainable workforce development** – Personal, local and professional networks are essential sources for recruiting volunteers, and often paid staff, but this often relies on one individual. Consideration is needed of how to build more sustainable networks.
- **Building a learning community –** Given the wide variety of organisations and sub-sectors that make up the VCSE sector, organisations want systems to share learning between those areas, particularly to support the smallest organisations.

Project Introduction and Methods Overview

The survey was created in collaboration with the funder and partners at the Humber and North Yorkshire Integrated Care Board (HNY ICB). The survey was disseminated through multiple channels. First, all charities with registered offices in postcodes within Humber and North Yorkshire were contacted using emails from the Charity Register. Second, social enterprises were contacted via email through existing databases and networks within the University. Third, members of the HNY ICB VCSE Collaborative, primarily local infrastructure organisations covering different areas within the region, disseminated the survey to their members through newsletters, live forums and social media. Finally, additional infrastructure organisations across the VCSE sector and local authorities were approached to disseminate to their networks.

Between August and September 2024, a comprehensive search was conducted across three databases – the Charity Commission, Companies House and Mutual – to map the VCSE sector in the region and to obtain organisational information for the subsequent online survey. A total of 17,930 organisations were identified and the following filters were to determine how many of those were relevant to parameters of the study: charity objects and activities, registration address and postcode, SIC code, company category and number. The overall picture of the sector, in terms of the types of organisation in each database, is presented below. The estimated total relevant organisations for the survey is 11,792.

335 respondents fully completed the survey with a further 428 who began but did not complete the survey (incomplete responses were not used in the analysis). As this was an exploratory study, the survey findings cannot be taken as representative of the entire population of UK VCSEs. A chi-square goodness-of-fit test was conducted

Charity company	CIO	Trust	Other	Previously excepted	5,190
700	920	433	3,039	98	

Benevolent Society	Community Benefit Society	Co-operative Society	Registered Society	Credit Union	Friendly Society	Specially Authorised Society	Working Men's Club	948
1	106	86	535	23	12	1	184	

Community Interest Company	Limited Partnership	Limited Liability Partnership	PRI/LTD BY GUAR/NSC	PRI/LBG/NSC	11,792
2,465	360	3,236	3,824	1,907	

to determine whether the organisation size distribution in a sample of 335 organisations differed from the known population proportions of 48.92% micro, 30.95% small, 15.69% medium, and 4.44% large (NCVO, 2024). The proportions of organisations across four sizes in the sample differ significantly from the hypothesised population distribution ($\chi^2(3, N = 335) = 88.307, p < .001$). Therefore, the sample's distribution of organisations cannot be considered representative of the population.

As part of the survey, respondents were asked if they would like to participate further. This included interviews, focus groups or both. They were also asked if they could recommend others to participate. The organisations were a relatively even split between large, medium and small sized organisations, based on income. A total of 22 organisations were invited to interview with 16 participating and 1 taking part in a focus group only. Additionally, a consultant who works in the sector was also interviewed to get a wider perspective on the local sector.[2] Organisations covered all six designated regions with the NY and Humber: North Yorkshire, York, East Riding, Hull, North Lincolnshire and North East Lincolnshire. A range of different organisation activities were also sought including a focus on mental health, support for diverse ethnic communities, social care and home care support, food related organisations, older and young people focuses. All organisations had some broad focus on health and wellbeing. Interviews were conducted in-person in situ as much as possible, but 5 requested online interviews.

The final wave of data collection included four focus groups structured to cover at least two of the six geographic regions and which will make up combined commissioning entities in the future. Hull/East Riding, North/North East Lincolnshire and York/North Yorkshire. Owing to the scale of North Yorkshire two focus groups were conducted one in York and one in Harrogate. All interested organisations (as noted on the survey) were invited to participate and where recruitment was low, additional invitations were offered through the local infrastructure organisations. 22 organisations were able to attend.[3]

Survey results were analysed primarily using descriptive statistics but a few basic regressions were also included to compare some of the populations and variables. These are highlighted throughout the text and were completed using SPSS. The interview and focus group results were analysed using reflective thematic analysis using NVivo software. Additionally, the results of both were shaped by a wider scoping review of the literature to determine existing definitions and understandings of both the sector and workforce (see appendix 1). It is crucial to accurately position the challenges as internal or external using the socio-ecological framework, thereby identifying potential actions that can be taken by multiple stakeholders at the individual and organisational level or sectoral, regional, national, or even international level.

2 Throughout this text we refer to quotations form interview organisations by their size by income (e.g. small, medium and large) such as Small Org 1.

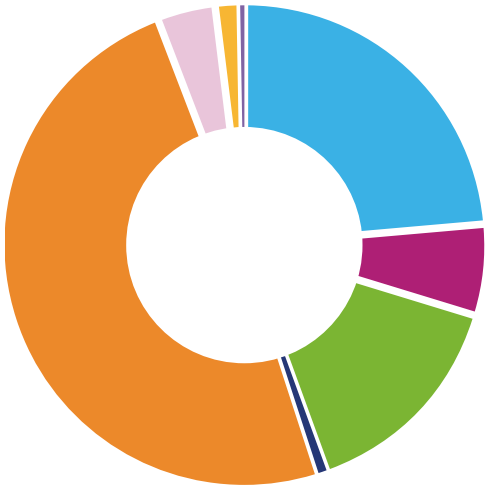
3 We will refer to quotations from focus groups as FG1 RE5 to indicate a respondent who was in focus group 1 which corresponds to one of the geographic areas

Scale and Scope of the Sector

This section looks at the results of the survey and what they say about the scale and the scope of the sector. As noted in the methodology section, the survey is not a representative sample so we can not say the degree to which these trends reflect all of the HNY VCSE sector.

Registration Status

Organisations: Registration Status



KEY

- Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) **28%**
- Community Interest Company (CIC) **7%**
- Company limited by Guarantee (CLG) **17%**
- A Mutual **1%**
- Registered Charity **58%**
- Group or unincorporated association **4%**
- Other **2%**
- Don't know **<1%**

According to the survey responses, charities make up the largest proportion of registered organisations (57.8%), followed by Community Incorporated Organisations (CIOs) (27.8%) and Companies Limited by Guarantee (CLGs) (17.4%). Despite their dominance, the proportion of charities has decreased by 10% since 2021, whereas the number of CIOs has increased significantly by over 18% (Chapman, 2022a, p. 18).

The majority of organisations are single registered. Over 82% of organisations are registered with a single category, with just over 17% registered with two categories. Of those with a single registration category, over 50% are registered charities (with one being small charity status) and 30% are CIOs and 8% are CICs. Organisations registered as CLGs, mutuals, groups and others account for 5% or less. Of those with two registration categories, the most common combination is 'Registration Charity + CLG/CIO', followed by 'CIC + CIO', 'CIO + CLG' and 'Groups + Other'.

Organisational Purpose

Most organisations identified their purpose as improving health and wellbeing. Almost 65% of organisations selected improving personal and/or community health and wellbeing as their purpose, followed by over 38% aiming for 'community cohesion and development'. Organisations with the purpose of 'tackling poverty and inequality' and 'advocacy and empowerment' make up between 20 and 29% each. Over 30% of organisations selected the 'Other' option and provided additional information that could not be categorised under the existing options. This included promoting arts, music, religion, peace and equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI); preventing food waste; conserving, protecting and preserving the environment, history and heritage; managing property; saving lives; supporting the criminal justice system; and nature or science-related activities.

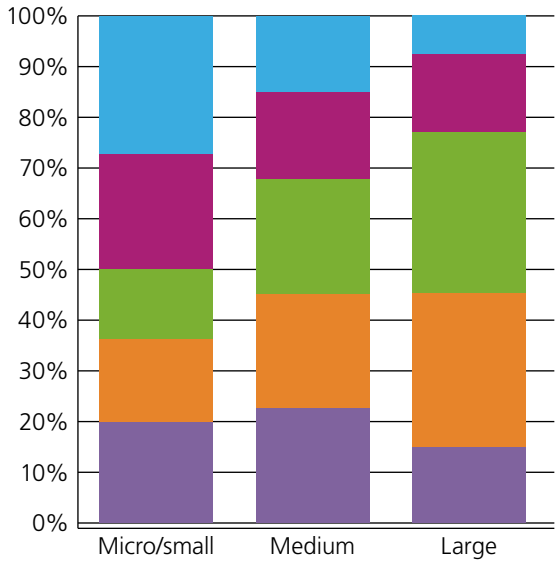
Organisations: Purpose

KEY

- Health and Wellbeing **65%**
- Tackling Poverty **28%**
- Empowerment **20%**
- Community Development **32%**
- Other **32%**

**Please note organisations have selected multiple purposes as many VCSE serve mulitiple functions"*

Purposes of Organisations of Different Sizes



KEY

- Improving health and well-being (personal/community)
- Tackling poverty and inequality
- Advocacy and empowerment
- Community cohesion and development
- Other

Furthermore, larger organisations (in terms of annual income) tend to address poverty and inequality and advocate for and empower people, whereas smaller organisations focus more on improving health and wellbeing and community development (see Appendix 2).

Organisational Remit and Area of Delivery

The majority of organisations are community-based and local, as was also found by Chapman (2022a). Nearly 70% of organisations were identified as community- or neighbourhood-based, or operating within a single local authority or district, with 'the entire HNY' as the least chosen remit. Unsurprisingly, fewer than 8.5% of organisations operated at a national or international level.

Most organisations operate in a single area of HNY. Nearly three-quarters of organisations deliver services in one area of HNY, with just about 16% offering services in two areas and less than 10% operating in more than two. Of the six areas, the largest number of organisations operate in North Yorkshire (47.8%), followed by East Riding of Yorkshire (28.4%), York (24.5%) and Hull (19.7%). Significantly fewer organisations deliver services in North Lincolnshire and North East Lincolnshire, accounting for less than 15% each.

Organisations: Remit

KEY

- Community or neighbourhood **43%**
- A single LA or district **25%**
- Regional **24%**
- National or international **8%**

Organisations: Remit

KEY

- East Riding of Yorkshire **28.4%**
- Hull **19.7%**
- North Yorkshire **47.8%**
- North Lincolnshire **12.8%**
- North East Lincolnshire **12.2%**
- York **24.5%**

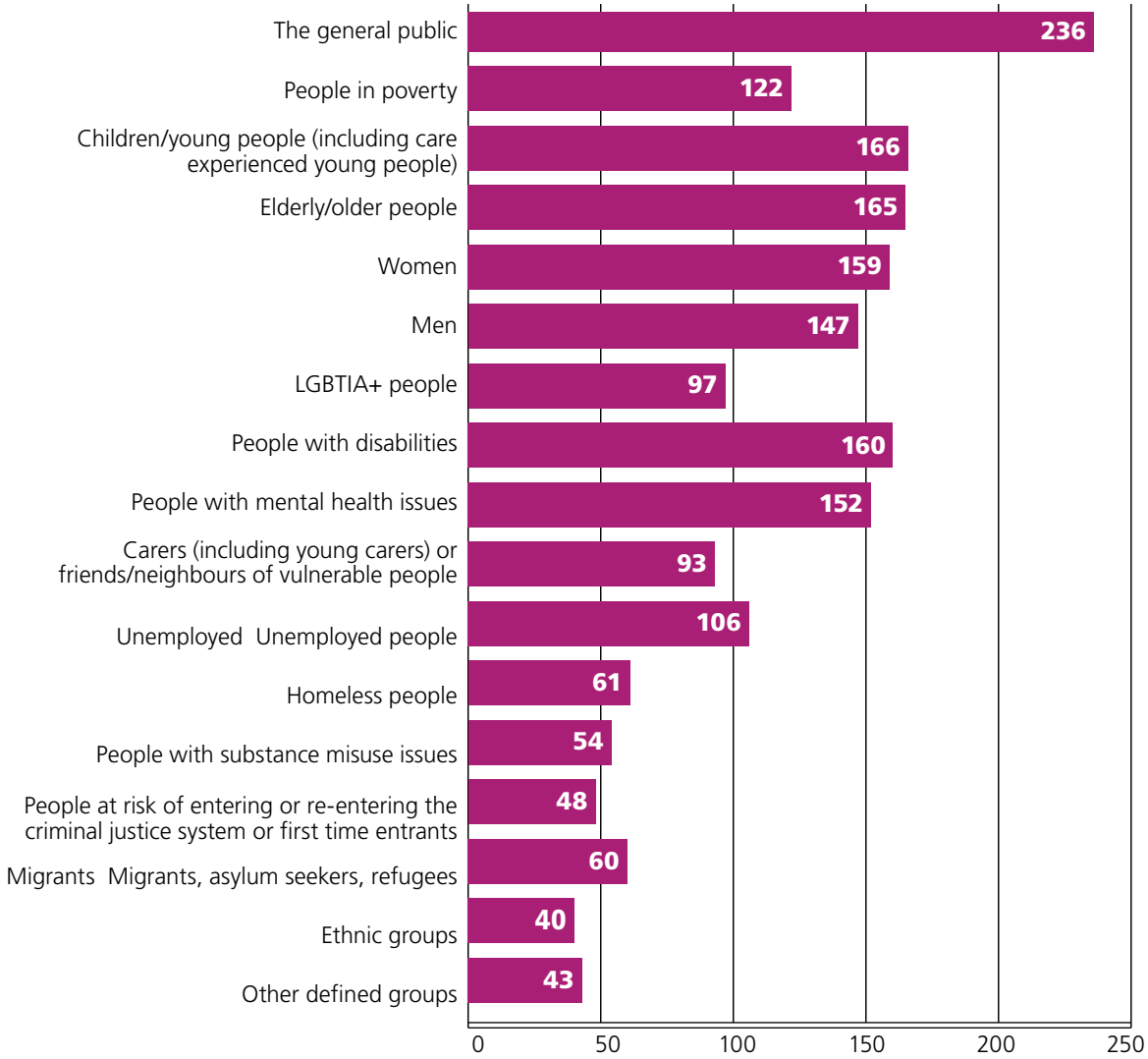
Groups Served

Most organisations serve multiple groups of people, and attention to specific groups varies significantly. 70% of organisations provide services for multiple groups of people, with 19% serving more than ten different populations.

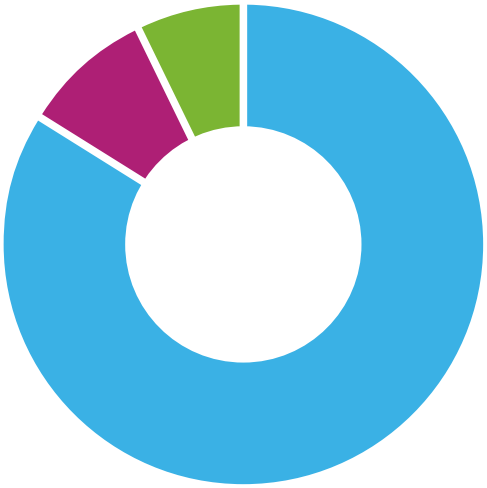
Most organisations tend to focus on 'the general public' and multiple groups of people, with three categories that demonstrate how they target specific populations. Over 40% of organisations target children/young people, older people, women and men, and people with disabilities or mental health issues, most of whom are usually considered vulnerable people. By contrast, fewer than 20% of organisations focus on individuals at risk of criminalisation, people with substance misuse issues, people experiencing homelessness, ethnic groups, and migrants (including asylum seekers or refugees). Groups targeted by 20–40% of organisations include people living in poverty, the unemployed, LGBTQIA+ people, and carers.

The vast majority of organisations are micro/small, with limited service capacity. Almost 85% of organisations were classified as micro/small, meaning they directly served fewer than 5,000 people per year. Organisations of medium and large size accounted for just above 9% and 6.5%, respectively, of the total. **This picture matches the composition of organisations that are primarily community-based and local**.

Organisations: Target Population



Organisations: Number of People Served Per Year



KEY
- Micro/small (<5,000) **84%**
- Medium (<10,000) **9%**
- Large (≥10,000) **7%**

Service Provision and Method of Delivery

In terms of the five broad categories, the services most frequently provided are those improving health, empowering people and furthering community wellbeing, while the least frequently provided are those related to care and support. Over 20% of organisations provide one or two types of service to targeted population(s), with 77% offering multiple types of service. **The composition of the services provided by the sector is consistent with its stated purposes, mainly improving personal and community health and wellbeing. However, the small percentage of care and support provision may reflect the sector or be explained by sample bias; that is, fewer organisations providing such services participated in the survey. Given the demographic shift in HNY, which has a proportionally higher population of older people (19%), and a growing reliance on the sector to address unmet social care and welfare needs (Crowley et al., 2025), it is worth considering whether this limited service capacity is compatible with future demand.**

Furthermore, micro/small organisations focus on community development related services, whereas larger organisations focus more on professional services, such as healthcare, training and education, and providing information and advice (see Appendix 2). This reflects the varying capacities of organisations in terms of expertise and available resources.

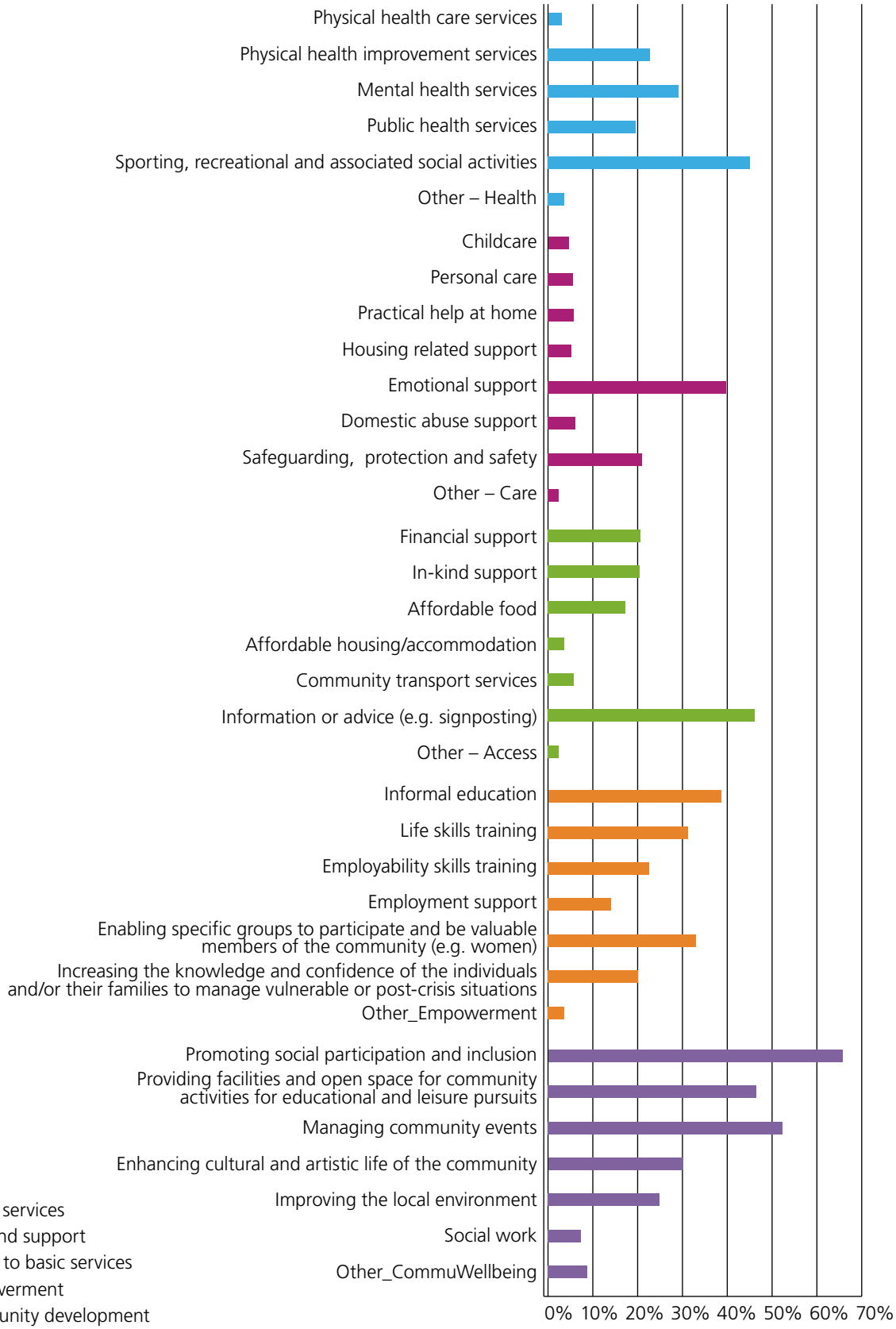
The majority of organisations depend on one approach to providing services, and in-house is the dominant method of service delivery in all six areas and for all sizes of organisations, but partnerships also play an important role. Almost 60% of organisations adopted a single service delivery model, followed by 30% that adopted two models. Fewer than 9% of organisations use all three methods to deliver services. Among those relying on one method, nearly 85% of them used the in-house service delivery method. Of those relying on two methods, 87% opted for the in-house and partnership combination. Either independently or jointly, over 60% of organisations used the in-house method, while around 30% used partnerships with other organisations to deliver services. Outsourcing was the least popular method of service delivery, with only about 10% of organisations opting for this approach.

Services: Delivery Methods

KEY
- In-house **60%**
- Outsource **10%**
- Partnership(s) **30%**

This suggests that although most VCSEs still prefer to deliver services in-house, a decent number are seeking to build partnerships with different types of organisations. However, the fact that a significant gap exists when it comes to developing partnerships between organisations of different sizes (at least 20%) raises the question of what support or resources smaller organisations may require in order to establish further partnerships.

Services Provided by the Sector: Five Broad Categories



Understanding the Workforce

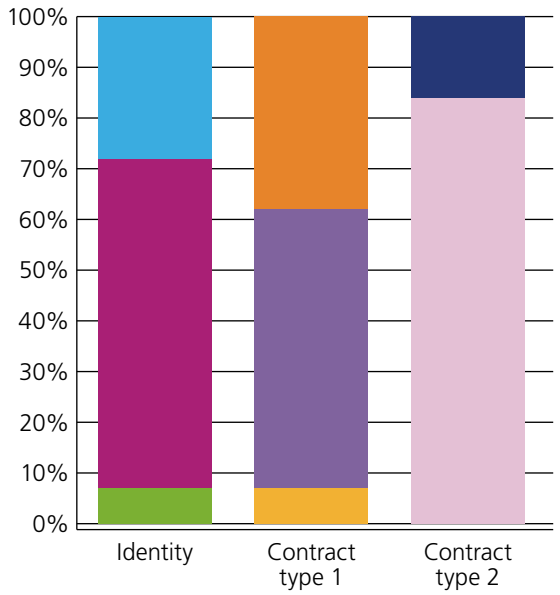
While the size of the workforce varies significantly between organisations, the survey results again demonstrate that the majority were micro/small organisations. The total workforce reported by the surveyed organisations amounts to 12,780 people, comprising 3,521 staff, 8,339 [4] regular volunteers, and 920 individuals categorised as 'other', including trustees, directors, board members, committee members, casual volunteers and contractors. The average number of staff and regular volunteers per organisation is less than 11 and 25 respectively, and around 55% of staff worked for organisations with 1 to 49 employees. This figure is 5% higher than the national average and significantly higher than in the public and private sectors (NCVO, 2024). Additionally, with over 60% of organisations being employers (20% higher than in England and Wales, according to Chapman, 2022b, p. 5), staff account for nearly 30% of the workforce, which is more than 10% higher than the national and regional levels (Chapman, 2022b, p. 5; NCVO, 2024).

The sector exhibits a combination of job precariousness[5] (as indicated by the high proportion of part-time and zero-hours workers), and job security (as reflected by the prevalence of permanent contracts). The majority of staff are on part-time contracts at over 55%, followed by full-time contracts at just over 38%, with 7% of staff on zero-hours contracts. Meanwhile, nearly 85% of staff hold permanent contracts, leaving 15% on fixed contracts. This is similar to the situation in Scotland, where 73% of the VCSE workforce is employed on an open-ended contract (GCVS, 2023), and it's better than that in adult social care in England, with 25% of the workforce on a zero-hours contract (The Health Foundation, 2019).

The sector is dominated by female, White ethnic groups (Irish, Gypsy or Irish Traveller, Roma, or Other White), and British workers (76%, 96% and 97% respectively). This aligns with the national scenario but is more prominent in all indicators, with differences of between 8-10% (NCVO, 2024). Notably, ethnic diversity in the workforce differs significantly from regional representation, with ethnic minorities making up nearly 15% of the population in HNY (Census 2021). In addition, the workforce is older than the UK average, suggesting a challenge of replacing ageing workers over the next five to ten years. Over 40% of staff are aged 50 or over, a proportion similar to that of the adult social care workforce (Skills for Care, 2024), but around 10% higher than that of the wider UK workforce (Gray, 2024; 33%).

The volunteer base comprises 13,132 people, including 8,339 regular volunteers and 5,869 casual volunteers. These volunteers are active in over 90% of organisations.

Workforce: Identity and Contract Type



KEY

- Paid staff **28%**
- Regular volunteers **65%**
- Other **7%**

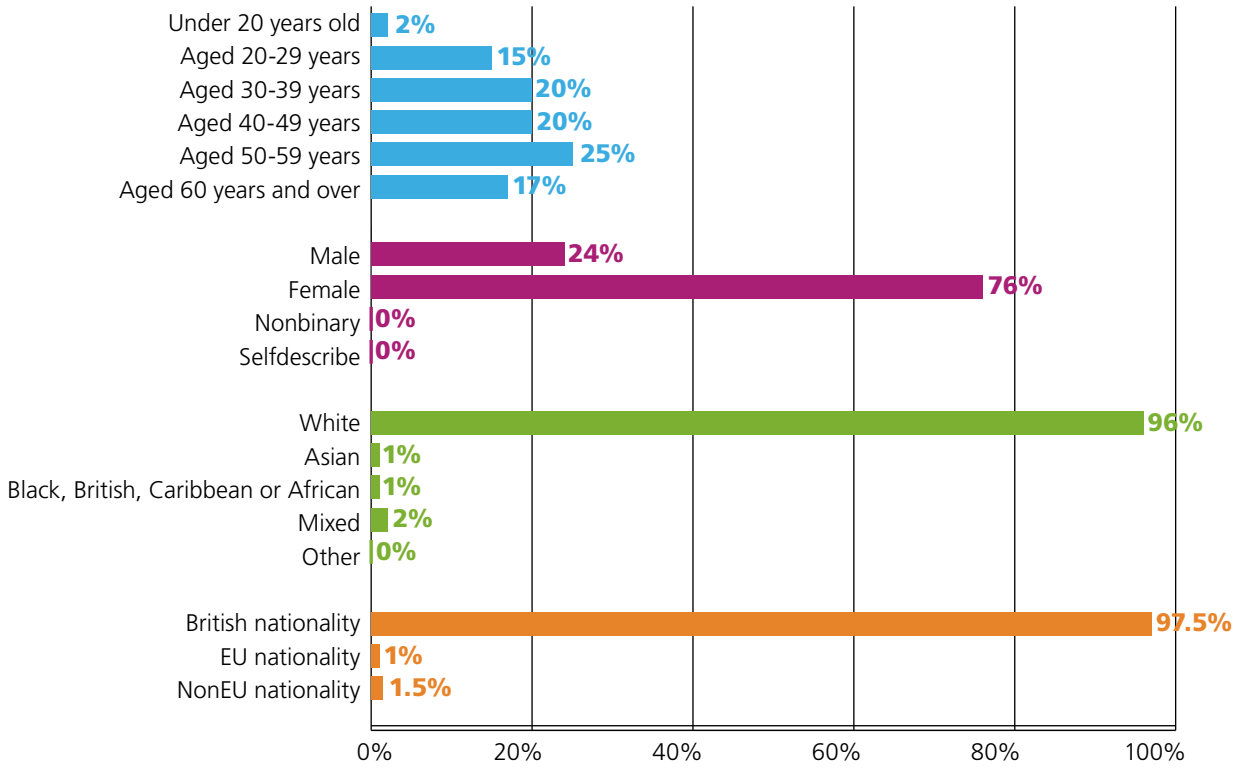
- Full-time contract **38%**
- Part-time contract **55%**
- Zero-hours contract **7%**

- Fixed-term contract **16%**
- Permanent contract **84%**

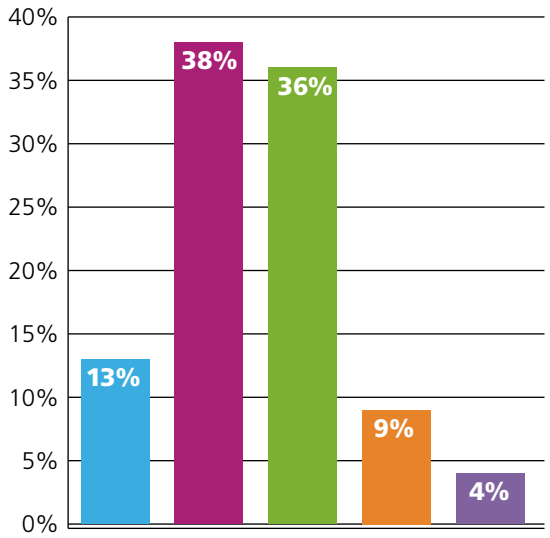
4 Data inconsistency: The total number of staff and regular volunteers is not consistent, depending on the responses to various questions.

5 It is recognised that there is no consensus definition of what precarious work actually is and whether or not a job is precarious depends on a number of factors, including the point of view of the individual worker. Forms of non-standard work, such as short-term or casual employment, part-time or on-call work, and self-employment, are commonly linked to increased job and income insecurity. However, these arrangements can also offer flexibility and positive outcomes for workers seeking adaptable work schedules.

Workforce: Demographics



Workforce: Volunteers



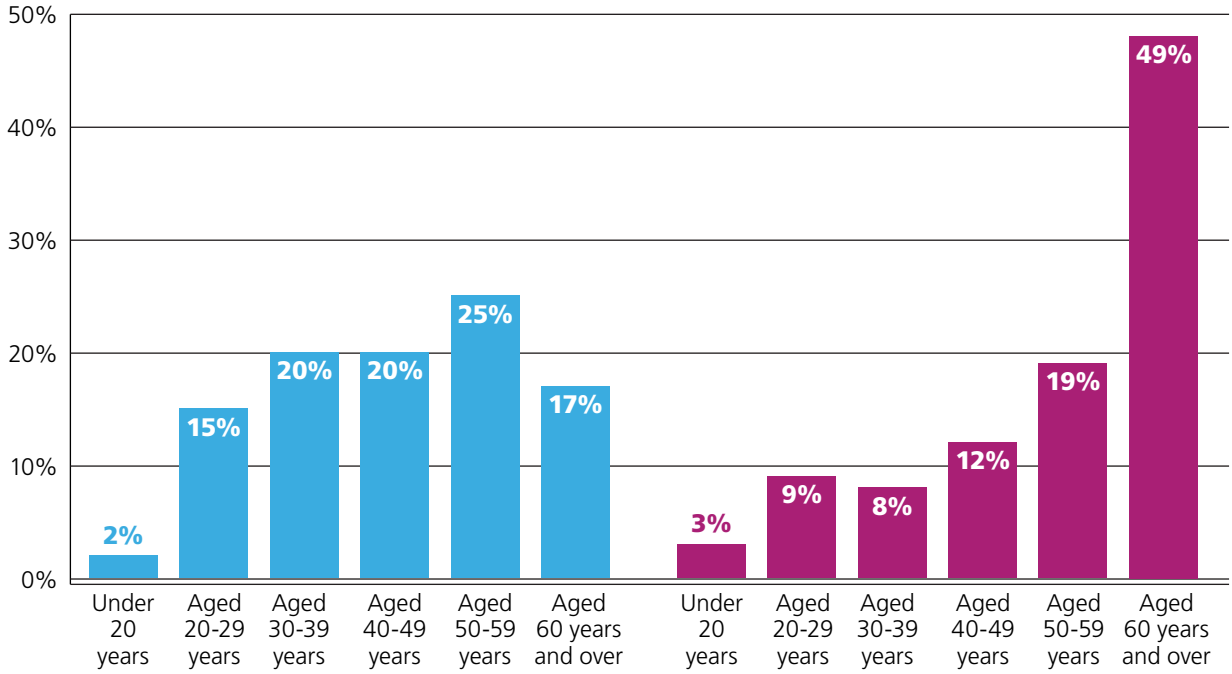
KEY

- 0 **13%**
- 1 to 10 **38%**
- 11 to 50 **36%**
- 51 to 100 **9%**
- 100+ **4%**

As with paid staff, the number of volunteers varies significantly between organisations. **They both indicate the enormous heterogeneity of the sector.** About 40% of organisations have between one and ten regular volunteers, while around 45% have between ten and 100. Only 4% have over 100.

The volunteer base is even older than the paid workforce. More than 65% of volunteers were aged over 50 — over 25% higher than the proportion of paid staff in this age group. Notably, over-60s make up nearly half of the volunteer base, 30% higher than the percentage of paid staff in this age group. Consequently, only 20% of regular volunteers were aged 30–49, while fewer than 15% were under 30. **This demographic situation therefore suggests challenges in replacing the majority of the workforce in the near future.**

Workforce Age: Staff Versus Regular Volunteer



Job Roles

According to the survey, the majority of job roles within organisations focus on programme and service delivery (58%), followed by management and leadership roles (18%) and administrative support roles (13%), while less than 10% focus on community engagement and development. This composition reflects the two main responsibilities of the workforce: direct service provision and organisational management.

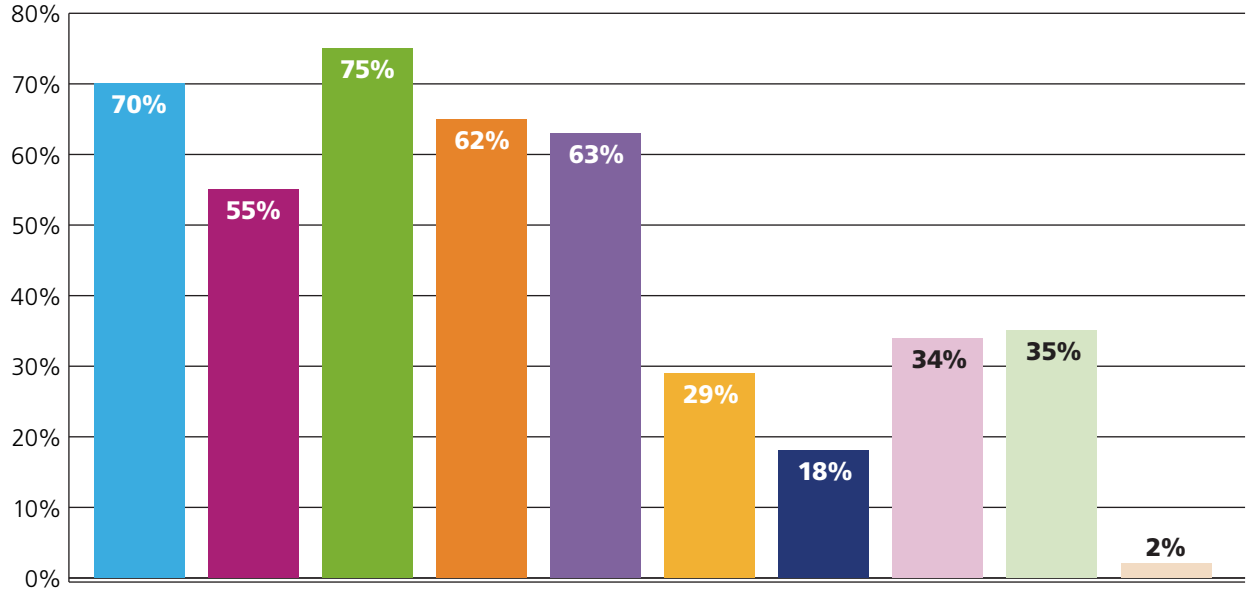
The same pattern was observed with regard to volunteers. Most organisations offer volunteers roles related to governance and management, operation and service delivery. These include running events (75%), core services (70%), raising money (63%), providing administrative, professional or logistic support (62%), and governance (55%). A significantly smaller proportion of organisations offer the remaining four types of roles, each of which accounts for less than 35%: community outreach, companionship or befriending, advice provision and transport services. **The convergence of paid staff and volunteer roles indicates that these roles and skills are in high demand and that volunteers are heavily relied on by organisations to achieve their goals.**

Workforce: Staff Roles

KEY

- Management and leadership **18%**
- Administrative support **13%**
- Programme and service delivery **58%**
- Community engagement and development **8%**
- Other **3%**

Workforce: Volunteer Roles



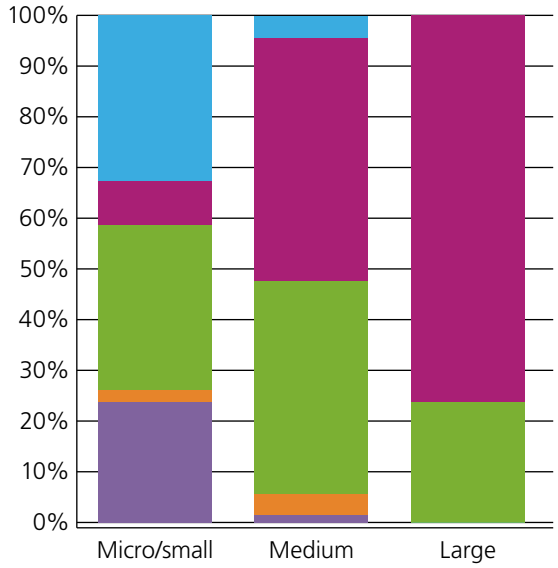
KEY

- Organisation's core services
- Organisation governance
- Running events
- Administration/HR/Finance/Legal support + Logistic support + Any other support for core services
- Raising money
- Giving advice or counselling to others, mentoring
- Providing transport
- Befriending, companionship, emotional support
- Community outreach (e.g. community ambassadors)
- Other

Pay

Approximately 60% of organisations did not respond to the question regarding senior management pay, either leaving it blank or answering 'N/A' or 'Don't know', which suggests a low willingness to answer such questions. Among 136 valid responses, most organisations (75%) spent less than half of their total compensation budget on their senior management. As expected, the proportion of pay allocated to senior management decreased as organisations grew in size. In micro/small organisations, the proportion of pay allocated to senior management was concentrated in either 0 (33% of organisations), 100% (24%), or 21–50% (33%). In larger organisations, however, it focused on the 1–20% and 21–50% ranges, especially, with the majority of large organisations (over 75%) allocating less than 20% of total payments to this group.

Pay for Management as a Percentage of Total Compensation in Organisations of Different Sizes



KEY

- 0
- 1 to 20%
- 21 to 50%
- 51 to 99%
- 100%

Pay for Staff: Employment Types

KEY

- NLW employer **32%**
- NMW employer **14%**
- Both **16%**
- All volunteers **38%**

Regarding pay for staff, the vast majority of organisations (62%) pay their workforce in line with the National Living Wage (NLW) and/or the National Minimum Wage (NWM), with the remainder being entirely voluntary.

Recruitment to the Sector

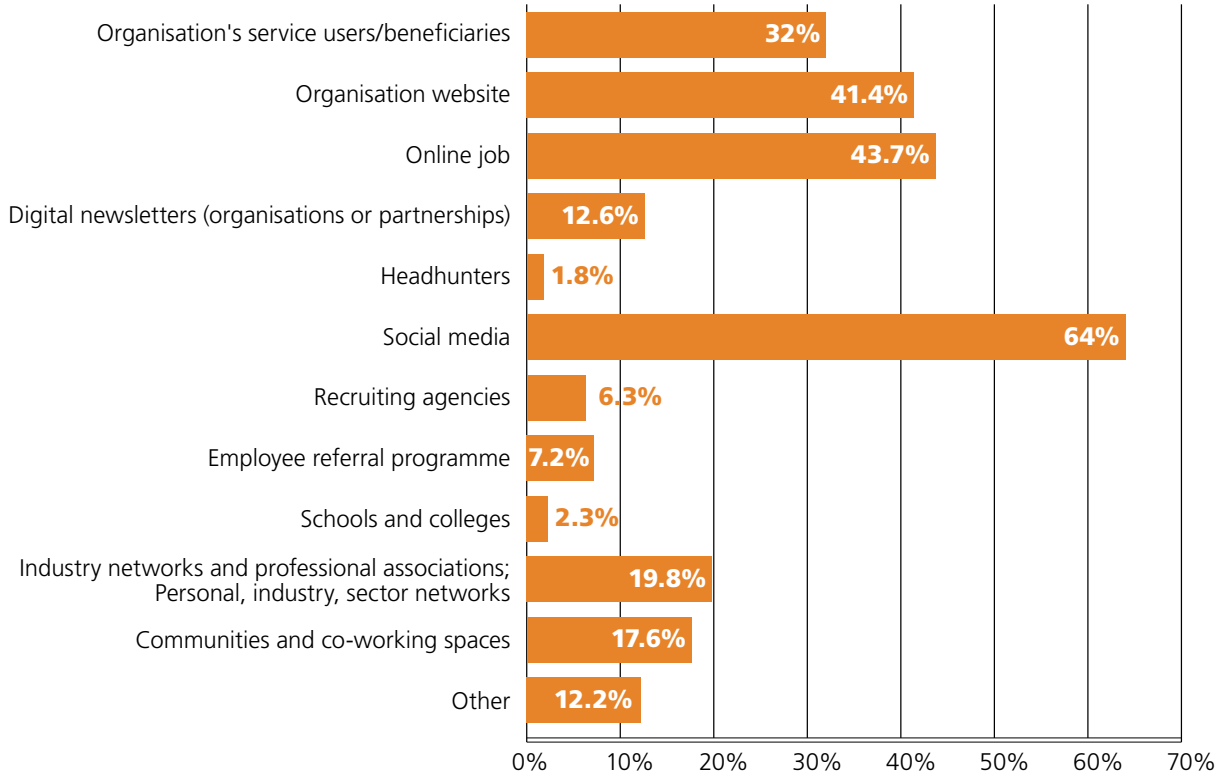
While there was a lot of variety in how people came to be working in the sector, in nearly all cases it was a deliberate choice. Nearly two thirds of interview respondents stated that they had worked previously in the private or public sector before choosing to join the voluntary sector, leaving only a third who had worked in no other sector. Half of the respondents, including all of those who worked in smaller organisations, had gotten their start in the voluntary sector through volunteering before deciding to formalise their engagement with the sector.

Recruitment Tools Used

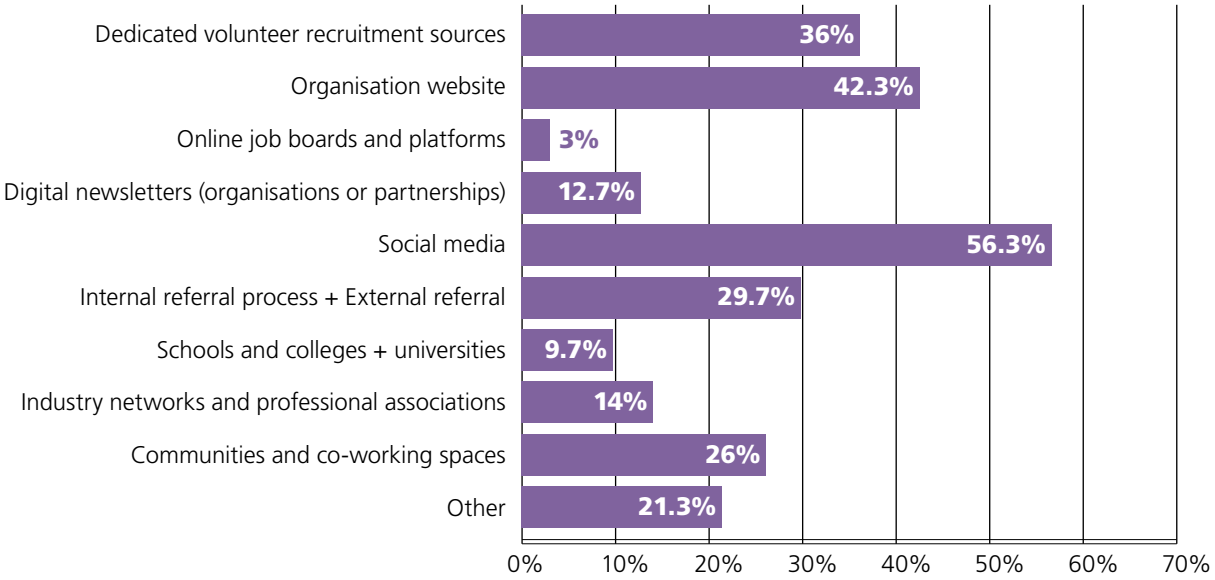
The tools used for recruitment varied between those looking for paid staff and those looking for volunteers. The former placed greater reliance on formal resources, while the latter also relied on networks and local resources; however, in both cases, social media was the most common. The survey results indicated that the most commonly used tools for paid staff recruitment were various online sources, including social media (used by almost 65% of organisations), online job boards (over 40%), and organisation websites (over 30%). Similar to paid staff recruitment, according to the survey, online sources were a key tool to recruit volunteers, with over 55% of organisations using it, followed by their own website (over 40%). As expected, volunteer recruitment also relies heavily on dedicated volunteering sources, with over 35% of organisations using them. Like the survey, interview and focus group respondents also frequently mentioned social media as a common tool for recruitment.

Unlike paid staff recruitment, various local and professional networks are important sources of volunteers, including internal and external referrals (28%), communities (24%), and local residents, premises, and activities (Other: 20%), while education institutions and online job boards are much less frequently used. According to all the focus groups, existing partnerships (this being particularly important for recruiting paid staff for more clinical positions), word of mouth and personal connections were much more heavily utilised by smaller organisations moving away from formal recruiters, similar to the survey results. The largest organisations were even able to

Workforce Management: Staff Recruitment Tools (Percentages)



Workforce Management: Volunteer Recruitment Tools (Percentages)



set up their own recruitment agency, but this was rare amongst respondents. One of the focus group attendees particularly emphasised using resources that were free, whilst others mentioned the importance of utilising a wide range of tools as essential ways of recruiting volunteers:

> *Getting notices out to all of those [sources], you're communicating to an incredibly wide range of people, but you … have to know your community."* **(FG1 RES6)**

Relying on personal connections for volunteers also brought particular challenges for organisations in terms of sustainability. In both interviews and focus groups, some respondents noted that there was a specific person who ended up being the connection point which brought in questions about the sustainability of that recruitment pathway.

> *Everyone knows each other.…Especially the elderly … a lot of them went to school together. They know each other. We don't recruit many strangers…up to now it's not a problem but as a generation dies out, the next generation..Recruiting among is becoming more difficult but it's not 100% difficult…but the lady that does co-ordinating, does the recruiting, she's running out of friends. Her friends used to work with her to do this charity, she knew a lot of them from her past. But she's running out of those types of friends so she's having to look at people who she doesn't know. So becoming more difficult for her to recruit … She found it safer to employ people she knows, then she knows their family histories."* **(SMALL ORG 4)**

> *We probably need to think of other routes to recruitment, because, at the moment, it's [the chair], and one or two other people who are doing the same thing.. but it's a little bit hit and miss, because there's so much competition."* **(FG3 RES4)**

According to the survey, 22% of organisations also recruit paid staff from people who use their services. Interview and focus group respondents expanded on this arguing that for paid staff and volunteers, drawing on service users in recruitment was a way of building trust and lived experience within the service. This was particularly true for the small organisations that worked with specialised groups of service users. In some cases this was also about having "local knowledge" of the communities they served (Small Org 1).

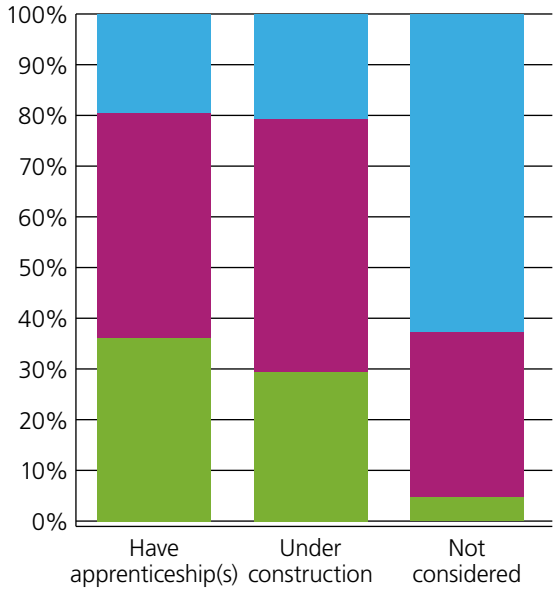
> *Working in the charity sector, you have to have empathy and sympathy. And you can only do that if you have some form of lived experience. You can only do that if you can align, or you can visualise what a person is talking about because you've seen it before. You've gone through it."* **(SMALL ORG 3)**

> *The people who I have as my volunteers are the extension of the directors, and they're open-minded people. So one's got lived experience of the criminal justice system. One has experienced poverty and various issues and really serious mental health difficulties. One's a survivor of domestic abuse. Some are unpaid carers"* **(SMALL ORG 5)**

Workforce Management: Apprenticeships

KEY
- Have apprenticeship(s) **14%**
- Under consideration **13%**
- Not considered **73%**

Workforce Management: Apprenticeship in Organisations of Different Sizes



KEY
- Micro/small
- Medium
- Large

Though only a small percentage of survey respondents utilised educational institutions, respondents in all focus groups used apprenticeship schemes or student placements as a means of meeting staffing needs as well as volunteers. According to the survey, apprenticeship usage was variable and the awareness or acceptance of apprenticeship training is low mainly due to relevance, capacity, and suitability. The majority of organisations have no intention of using apprenticeships to recruit new staff. Over 85% of organisations do not have an apprenticeship scheme, although around 14% are considering implementing one. Of the remaining 14%, the total number of available apprenticeships reported is 64, with one organisation offering 8.

Furthermore, the majority of organisations offering or considering apprenticeships are medium-sized. This finding is in line with the previous finding that these organisations concentrated on the provision of professional services, which are better suited to apprenticeships (see Appendix 2). In the context of transforming apprenticeships to help young people (Get Britain Working, 2024), there are opportunities for the VCSE sector, particularly organisations providing professional services, to offer more apprenticeships and contribute to this mission.

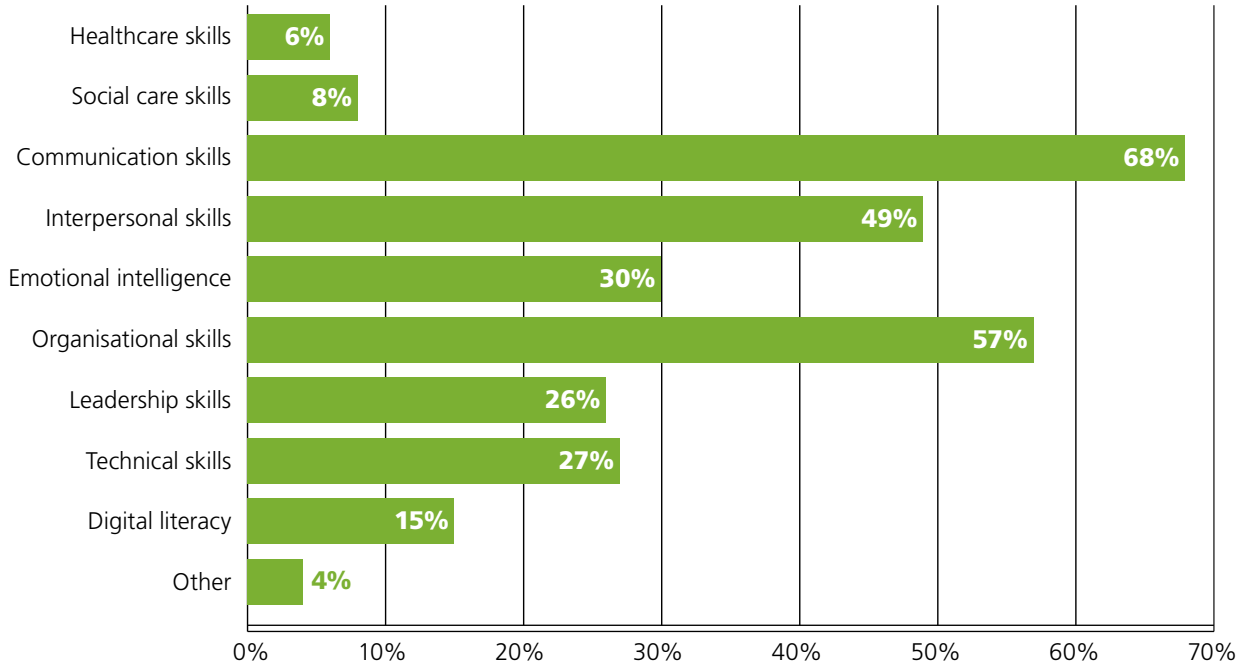
Recruitment Criteria

In terms of what core skills organisations are looking for in recruitment, according to survey responses, a far higher percentage of organisations consider communication, interpersonal and organisational skills (49% and over) to be core skills rather than professional, technical, digital and leadership skills (under 30%). When it comes to communication skills specifically, this figure rises to almost 70%. In contrast, only a small proportion of organisations (6-15%) identified digital literacy and health and social care as the core skills. Leadership skills, emotional intelligence, and technical skills fall somewhere in the middle with slight differences (26-30%). This paints a different picture to that in the for-profit sector, where an increase in demand for emotional and social skills is anticipated as part of a significant skills upgrade (Raconteur and Guidant Global, 2025).

This pattern is worthy of consideration. It may be explained by the fact that a larger proportion of the sample consists of VCSEs that provide community development and empowerment services than of those that provide health, social care and access services. This may also be explained by the shift in focus towards soft skills. While more than 55% of organisations see their primary purpose as improving health and well-being, emphasising the above three core skills rather than professional or specialist ones suggests a shift towards relationship-building over service delivery as a distinct technical process. This is indicative of the evolution of concepts pertaining to care, societal advancement and sustainability.

In line with the focus of service provision, micro/small organisations required a wide range of skills, while

Workforce Management: Core Skills (Percentages)



medium-sized organisations had a significantly higher demand for professional health and social care skills. Interestingly, micro/small organisations also demonstrate a greater demand for technical and digital skills than larger organisations (see Appendix 2).

In the survey, respondents were also asked if they were getting the right kind of skills from volunteers. Aside from the 13% of organisations that did not respond to the question, a slight difference in perceptions of volunteer skills acquisition was found. As shown in the figure, 47% of organisations believed that volunteers obtained the required core skills, whereas 38% did not agree with this. **The presence of these two equally strong but opposing responses (or such a large proportion of negative and missing responses) indicates that many organisations may not be getting the skills they need from volunteers. This was explored further in focus groups in particular.**

Workforce Management: Volunteer Skills Acquisition

KEY

- Not agree **38%**
- Agree **47%**
- Missing values **15%**

Across interviews and focus groups, key aspects of recruitment discussed involved having relational skills, such as "empathy and sympathy" (Small Org 3). A fourth of interview respondents mentioned that they *"recruit for potential and for skills rather than qualifications"* (Large Org 1) or that they *"hire for attitude, train for aptitude"* (Large Org 3). One noted that where they could not hire for the skills they needed, instead they hired on *"right personality and capacity to learn"* (Large Org 4). Within focus group discussion, a few organisations noted that requirement for specialWist skills meant there was a more limited pool of applicants that could be drawn from, e.g. psychologists, therapists, etc. Focus group 3 and 4 also focused on the challenge of finding more general professional skills amongst volunteers:

> *"If you want to add value to the VCSE sector, as a professional, offer your professional services for free to the VCSE sector. We can always find somebody who is going to paint a room or plant a tree or do things like that. But finding somebody who is a trained accountant or a trained solicitor to actually give that time."* **(FG3 RES2)**

The key was not just having a lot of volunteers, but having the right volunteers with the right skills who would commit to the organisation:

> *"You need people who are doers"* **(FG4 RES3).**

Recruitment Process

There was some discussion of recruitment and interview processes for both paid staff and volunteers in interviews and focus groups. One interviewee mentioned the importance of having "a transparent recruitment process" (Large Org 2) as important particularly because of redundancy processes. Across all the focus groups, respondents emphasised the importance of clarity in posts both to hire for bespoke roles with technical skills and to ensure volunteers were recruited for specific roles. This was linked to the difficulty of getting the right kind of volunteers, often getting retirees or those looking for experience, which sometimes brings a wider range of issues.

> *"With the volunteers, and like with employees, we have to have an extremely clear recruitment pack, expectations, objects, absolutely everything so people know from day one what's expected and that they're clear."* **(FG1 RES3)**

Clear induction and onboarding processes were also discussed in focus groups as being particularly essential for ensuring that people fit with the organisation and had clear roles, both as paid staff and volunteers. This was viewed as a key time to determine the capacity of those individuals to engage in the more relational aspects of work

> *"Onboarding and induction, that's key, whether it's a volunteer or a full-time paid employee. Our onboarding process is extensive, because A, we need to make sure that the fit is correct … B, people who come to our organisation need to feel that arms are around them, that they've got all the tools to go and do the do"* **(FG2 RES4)**

> *"At that interview point, actually, if you've done the relational work as part of the onboarding process, the ones that aren't actually a good fit aren't going to fill the application format"* **(FG3 RES5)**

> *"There's something in your induction … about testing people's resilience"* **(FG2 RES3)**

Overall, there were some differences between the way recruitment works generally, e.g. the skills that are needed for voluntary sector work, and the recruitment of specialist skills for service delivery or wider strategic operations. Both are challenging to recruit, on the one hand because soft skills are hard to judge in the recruitment process and on the other hand because professional skills face recruitment competition from other sectors. Ensuring clear recruitment criteria as well as having structured onboarding and induction schemes were important particularly for judging those soft skills and ensuring that those recruited fit with the culture and aims of the organisation.

Retention Within the Sector

In the survey, the scale of retention within organisations was highlighted based on years of experience staff had with the organisation. Over 80% of staff have at least one year of experience and, in particular, more than 50% have been in their roles for over three years. Organisations often found it difficult to compete with other sectors for specialist skills through the use of salary as a means of recruiting and retaining paid staff. This meant many organisations relied on non-financial tools.

Regarding the measures they had used or would like to use, most respondents tended not to have used performance management, employee engagement, career development mechanisms, or succession planning to retain people. However, they were positive about trying new or innovative measures. **This contrast may suggest these conventional measures are not always accepted, given the nature of the sector and the composition of the sample, which is mainly made up of small organisations that may not use these formal measures.**

Specifically, of the 9 possible measures to retain employees, 'providing (regular) training' and 'changing workplace culture' were the most used, with 30% and 25% of organisations choosing them, respectively. These were followed by 'performance management' and 'changing employment status' (19% each); 'providing more benefits' and 'conducting exit interviews' and offering 'internal career development opportunities' (16-17% each); and then 'implementing engagement programmes' (13%). Unsurprisingly, the least popular option was using various 'bonuses', with only 5% of organisations opting for it. This preference aligns with the characteristics of the sector, namely that motivation and ethical achievement are prioritised over financial gains.

Similarly, organisations were asked whether they had set aside funding for volunteer management. More than a quarter of organisations did not respond to the question about allocating funding for volunteer management, and over 60% admitted that it is subject to funding availability, with less than 8% being positive about it. Unsurprisingly, fewer than 55% of organisations have measures in place to engage and retain volunteers. **This may imply that volunteer management is still largely unstructured, with volunteer retention being primarily driven by motivation as opposed to structured processes.**[6]

Motivations to Work in the Sector

Nearly all interview respondents mentioned that part of the reason they stayed working in the sector, and part of the reason they came to it in the first place, was some variation on making a difference or giving back. This consequently meant that, as one respondent said, employees continued to work in the sector for those same reasons: "*The charity sector is a sector, when you enter, it's difficult to go out*" (Small Org 3). At least half of the respondents also emphasised the importance of the freedom and autonomy that was available to them in how they did their work in the sector, or as one respondent said:

> *I left that public sector career path to move into the voluntary sector, accepting it was less money but actually, there was more room and more autonomy just to do some stuff that was really different"* **(LARGE ORG 1)**

A few respondents also noted the benefits of the lack of bureaucracy of the state sector which meant they could be more responsive to needs; this differed for organisations who were part of wider national networks where they also felt the pressures of bureaucracy.

> *That is the joy for me, that people's stories can be heard. The narrative can change by the supporting you do"* **(SMALL ORG 3)**

> *You've got to have something that that sort of is sitting at your core that makes you want to be part of that charity, because it's not the pay. That is not the thing that motivates people. That is not the thing that gets them into our office on a morning, because our pay is so much less than they might get doing a similar level job"* **(MEDIUM ORG 4)**

6 The likelihood is that investment is viewed as a low priority. In Chapman (2022), the fact that overall provision of support for staff and volunteers in the sector is limited will also logically extend to volunteer management. Only 45 per cent of organisations have a dedicated training budget and just 53 per cent make provision to support personal development.

Focus group discussions also explored the motivations of volunteers as well as how to retain them within the sector which showed a variety of views and strategies. Focus group 3 supported the idea of awards for volunteers whereas focus group 1 was against this idea. The majority of focus group participants agreed that showing volunteers the impact of their work and finding activities that had a clear value was the best way to retain them: "*I find that the real motivation is changing people's lives, people get terribly excited. Your volunteers must really appreciate the impact they have on someone's life*" (FG1 RES6). In focus groups 1 and 4, a couple participants emphasised clear communication of what to do was seen as a way of retaining volunteers. Whilst freedom and autonomy were emphasised as valuable to paid staff, clear roles and guidance were essential for volunteers.

Overall, job satisfaction was a core reason for people to decide both to work in and stay in the sector, as summed up by one interview respondent:

> *It's more than just a job"* **(SMALL ORG 1).**

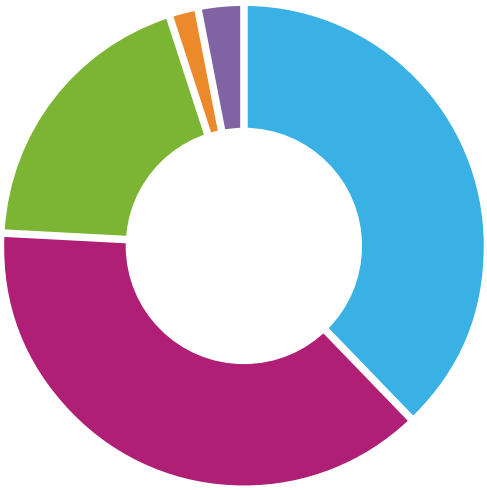
Participants in all focus groups talked about the importance of investing or buying into the work of the place:

> *I think most of the people that work with us, it's more of a vocation than it is a job"* **(F2 RES6).**

Whilst this drive to make things better is a key force in keeping people within organisations, it also meant that the work was never finished, which as one interview respondent indicated, could make it "*difficult to leave the job behind*" at the end of the day **(SMALL ORG 3)**.

Flexible Working

Workforce: Commute Distance

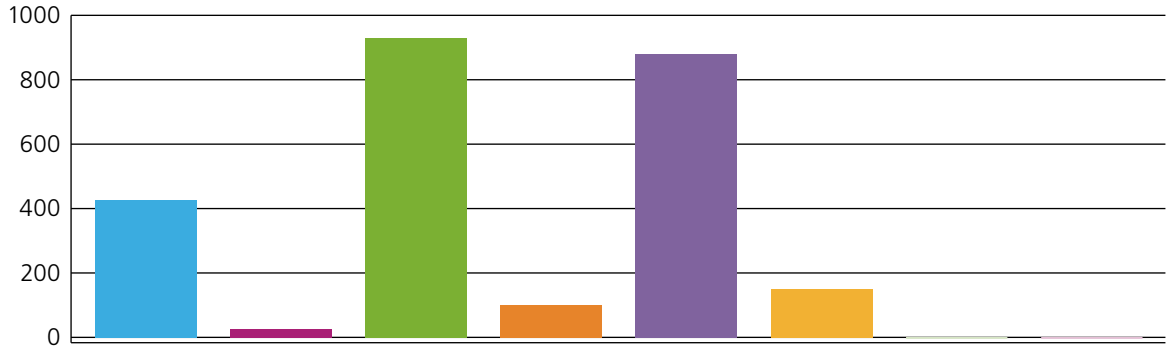


KEY

- Less than 3 miles **38%**
- Between 3 and 10 miles **38%**
- Between 10 and 30 miles **19%**
- Between 30 and 40 miles **2%**
- More than 40 miles **3%**

In the survey, organisations were asked to show the proximity of employees to the place they worked. Over 50% of the total number of employees both worked and lived in the same local council. In terms of commuting distances, approximately 45% of employees commute less than 30 miles . One interview respondent particularly noted the benefit of being able to "*work locally in your own area, with you know, people that you know, you know in a community that you know*" (Medium Org 1).

Workforce Management: Flexible Working



KEY

- Work remotely and from home **17%**
- Job sharing **1%**
- Hybrid working **37%**
- Compressed hours **4%**
- Flexibletime **35%**
- Annualised hours **6%**
- Staggered hours **0%**
- Phased retirement **0%**

Organisations were also asked to outline their flexible working arrangements. Nearly 55% of organisations offer at least one of the eight types of flexible working. While this figure is higher than the national average of 39% (NCVO, 2024), it is lower than the 80% recorded in Scotland (GCVS, 2023). The most popular options among employees are hybrid working (chosen by 37% of employees), flexible hours (35%), and working from home (17%).

In interviews, the majority of organisations with paid staff stated that offering hybrid or flexible working was an important motivator for staff choosing to work in the sector, with staff building their schedules around caring needs. This was seen as a way of retaining staff when financial incentives were not an option as mentioned by one organisation in interviews, and another couple respondents across two of the focus groups.

> *"Yeah, but that is the flexibility you will not get at the council, you don't get at the NHS. You know. Yeah, that is why some people- Everybody wants to have huge pay but they're taking care of their kids and it's becoming more apparent than just seeing the money. So they want to do something that is so flexible. There is the flexible aspect where they can come in early and finish early in the sense they have the school runs."* **(SMALL ORG 3)**

One of the focus group attendees did mention that flexible working arrangements must be balanced against service delivery needs and ensuring coverage for service users.

> *"If they're in a job which everyone knows isn't as well paid, it's the sort of equivalent in the private sector or the public sector, they've got to really be into it from the get-go. And then from that point on I try and be as flexible as I can be within reason, and you only expect them to be flexible for the organisation, can the organisation do it in return?"* **(FG1 RES2)**

Allowing flexibility for staff was generally seen as a benefit, but particularly with volunteer-run organisations, it was essential to balance this flexibility against ensuring there were enough staff to cover service needs. One solution, provided by respondents in focus group 4, was that remote working and digital tools also mean that volunteers and paid staff could be gathered from anywhere in the UK to support a programme.

Organisational Culture

In the survey, organisations were asked how they felt about the level of their paid staff engagement. The majority of organisations (57.8%) had a negative view of how well their staff engagement programmes had developed. This is consistent with the finding that less than 15% of organisations had implemented engagement programmes.

Nearly all interview respondents emphasised the importance of inclusive decision making as a means of ensuring a positive organisational culture. Many organisations had regular planning days that involved a good deal of co-productive decision making. Some of the medium sized organisations extended this out to wider community stakeholders whilst smaller organisations emphasised the importance of inclusion of volunteers as part of decision making as well. Some organisations also had committees made of staff members that helped with key decision making. However, as two respondents from large organisations noted, this could be a double edge sword as organisations grew. They noted that this meant it was not possible to consult staff on all decisions made by organisations which meant there had to be a degree of trust in leadership built into the organisational cultures. Trust in the decision making was often the case with respondents, but it is a point for those in leadership roles to reflect on as organisations expand.

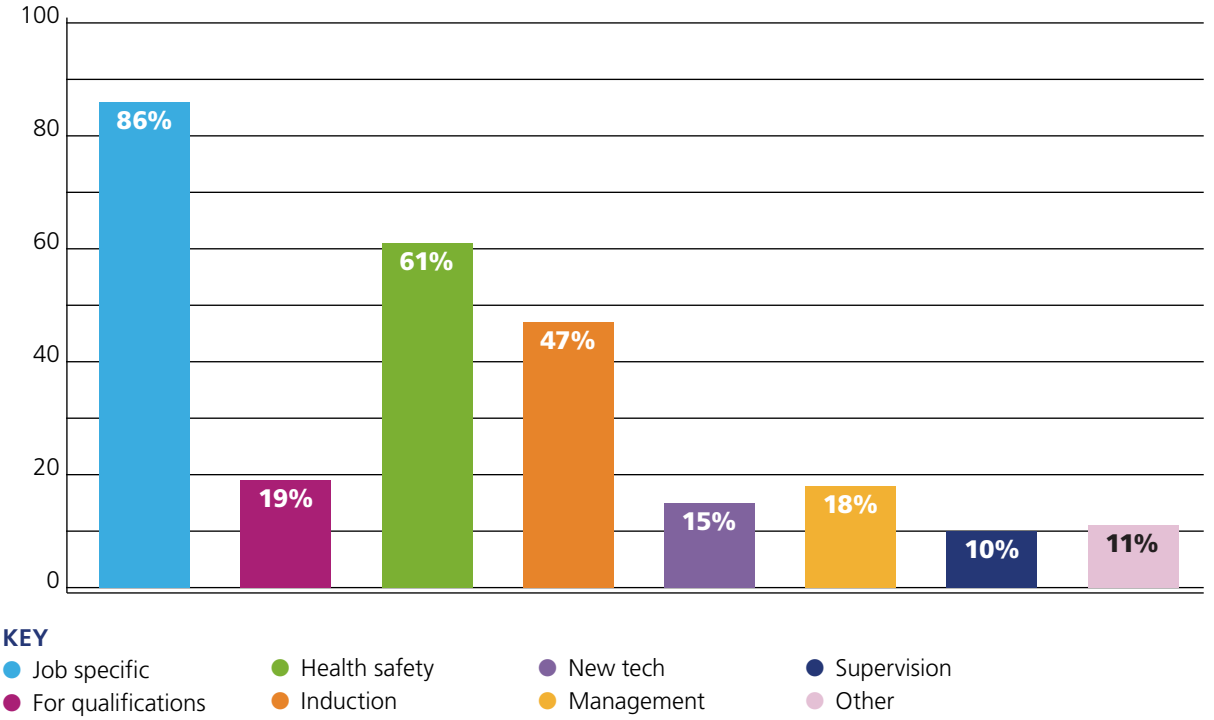
In the interviews, all the respondents from large organisations tried to offset this disconnect by having more informal social activities, such as group outings, wellbeing days or shared meals. There was also a discussion in focus group 2 about the usage of informal get togethers as a way of building recognition for staff. This was particularly important as during interviews a couple of the larger organisations shared stories of periods in the past where negative organisational cultures had dominated with limited transparency or diversity of views as well as leadership which was more 'toxic' than supportive. One interview respondent noted how these views of organisational culture had shaped not only retention but also recruitment.

Development and Training

Survey results show a contradictory picture of the VCSE sector commitment to skills development. Over 75% of organisations demonstrated a strong commitment to providing their employees with skills development opportunities. In contrast, fewer than 20% of organisations had a specific budget for this purpose, representing less than half of the figure for Yorkshire and Humber (Chapman and Wistow, 2023). Furthermore, over 30% of organisations did not respond to the question, which by default is taken to mean either they do not have a training budget or they do not have access to the data, as such results could not be interpreted.

Organisations show a clear preference for certain types of training, which may explain the contradictory picture mentioned above. Of the seven types of training, the most frequently mentioned categories are job-specific training (86% of organisations), health and safety/first aid training

Workforce Development: Staff Training



(61%), and inductions (47%). These three categories also represent the three priority training areas. Just 10–20% of organisations offered training in the remaining categories, with training in new technologies being the least prioritised (offered by around 16% of organisations). In England and Wales, however, nearly twice as many organisations provided digital technology training (Chapman, 2022b, p. 47). Like technical and digital skills, it is worth considering the role of new technologies in preparing the workforce for the future, given their rapid development and profound impact on society. For example, the NHS has specified its ambition to create the "most digitally accessible health system" (DHSC, 2025), which could impact on the VCSE sector.

All interviewees indicated that there were limited opportunities for promotion and vertical progression for paid staff owing to their size. This meant that organisations found alternative routes for development of staff. Nearly all organisations which had paid roles either were large enough to provide training or used large infrastructure organisations to cover statutory obligations (e.g. first aid, food hygiene). A couple of the larger organisations noted that previously they were able to provide staff with funding for more external development opportunities, including degrees, but the cost had become too high. Additionally, a few of the smallest primarily volunteer-run organisations noted that it was challenging to arrange training for volunteers where it was not a statutory requirement.

Beyond training, survey respondents were asked to reflect on the nature of the career development plans they had in place. As mentioned above, survey respondents tended to disagree or neither disagree or agree that they had used career development mechanisms to retain people. All the larger organisations interviewed in the study were able to provide various alternative opportunities for career development such as mentoring, coaching and close supervision. Only one organisation mentioned opportunities like secondments during interviews, but this was seen as another core development opportunity. A few of the medium and small organisations were also able to provide mentoring, but also in one case provided opportunities for paid staff to engage in role development. Focus Groups 1 and 3 discussed both the development of staff and volunteers particularly emphasising personal development approaches possible given the small size of the organisations.

Overall, it was quite a mixed picture from the organisations who were interviewed about their performance management practices. The larger organisations were more likely to have annual appraisals or PDRs, but some of these had only been brought in recently. A couple of the medium and small organisations worked to PDRs or KPIs but owing to the smaller number of paid staff there did not appear to be as many formal practices.

Turnover

Survey respondents were generally cautious about all forms of change to the workforce and expressed uncertainty about the future. A conservative approach to workforce change is being adopted, with a reluctance to reduce the workforce size. According to the survey, more than 55% intend to maintain current staffing levels, while only over 5% plan to reduce them. Despite this preference for stability, almost a quarter of organisations are planning to expand their workforce. In general, micro/small organisations are more likely to stay the same size, while medium-sized organisations are more likely to see their workforce reduced. Although not significantly, over 16% of organisations responded 'Don't know' about their workforce change.

Workforce: Estimated Change

KEY

- Increase by % **23%**
- Decrease by % **5%**
- Remain stable **56%**
- Don't know **16%**

A low response rate was observed for the questions about turnover, with 33-44% of organisations not answering. The data indicates a net increase of 368 in the workforce over the past 12 months, which corresponds to an average staff turnover rate (leavers/staff) of 18%. This figure is comparable to the average for the UK voluntary sector in 2022/23 (19%; Circle HR, 2024) and for the NHS in 2023/24 (16.5%; NHS, 2024, p. 84).[7]

Workforce Management: Staff Turnover Rate

KEY

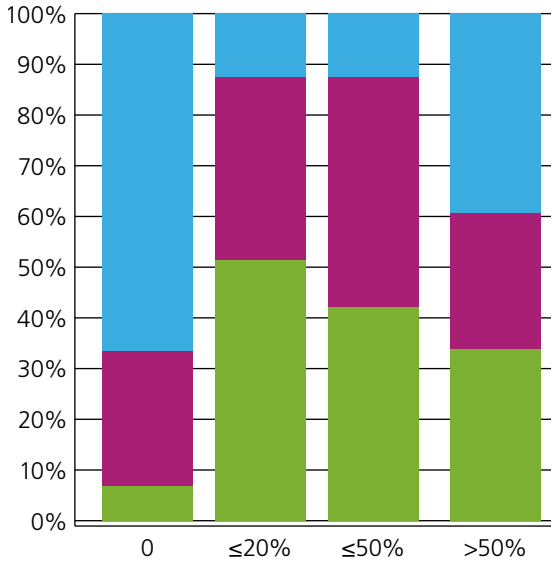
- 0% **35%**
- ≤10% **16%**
- ≤30% **35%**
- >30% **14%**

Over 85% of organisations have a turnover rate of under 30% which is well below the national average of 47%.

Notably, almost 65% of micro/small organisations reported a zero turnover rate, whereas turnover rates in most larger organisations (over 45%) were less than 20% (see Appendix 2). This may be explained by the fact that many micro/small organisations are entirely volunteer-run.

7 However, this figure is significantly higher than another from *NHS England » Staff leaving the NHS among lowest in over a decade*: 10.1% of hospital and community healthcare workers left the NHS in the 12 months up to September 2024.

Workforce Staff Turnover Rate of Organisations of Different Sizes



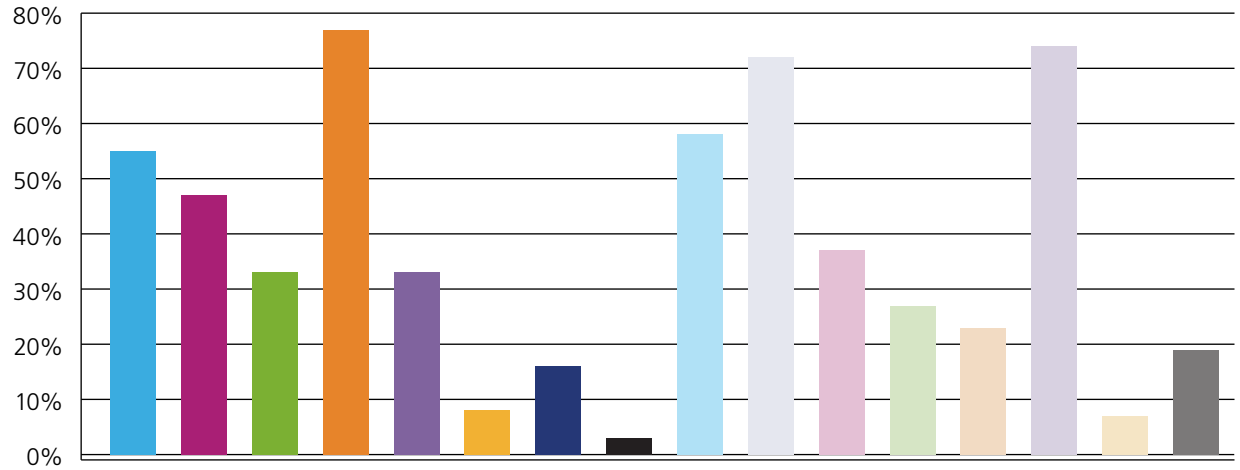
KEY
- Micro/small
- Medium
- Large

The most frequently mentioned factors that influence paid staff turnover were job insecurity arising from low pay, part-time, zero-hours, and fixed-term contracts, and a lack of long term funding, and career progression, with between 38-41% of organisations citing them. Besides institutional or contextual factors, personal circumstances such as age, retirement and sickness were also considered important, with responses ranging from 24% to 31%. Lastly, paid staff turnover was also caused by organisational management, with the resulting figures for this being between 12-20% for issues such as underperformance, redundancy and relocation.

It should be noted that the most frequently cited factors identified are more relevant to medium and large organisations than to micro/small ones, which, on the other hand, are more closely linked to personal circumstances and experience (see Appendix 2).

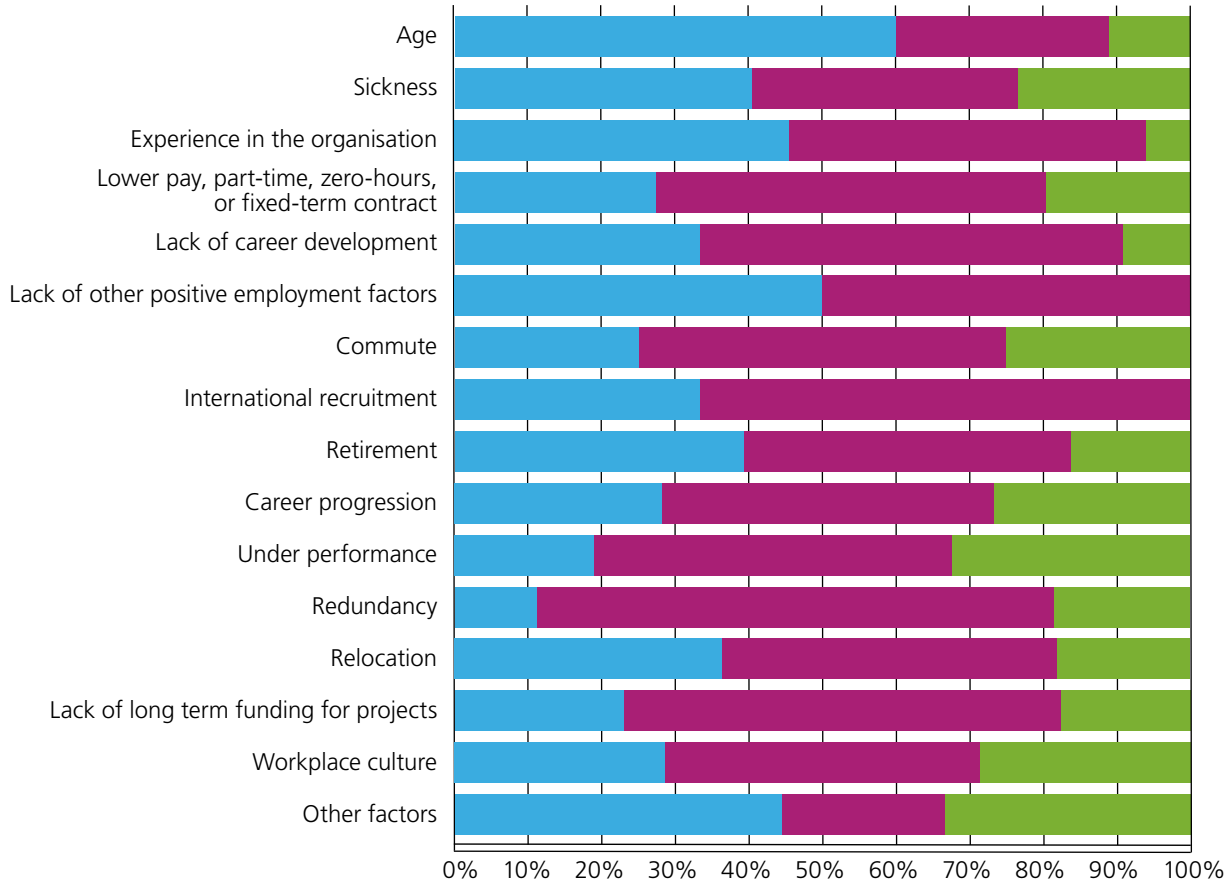
Like paid staff, the most frequently cited factors influencing volunteer turnover are old age (nearly 50% of organisations) and health conditions (over 50%). However, family or other commitments (over 55%), gaining paid employment (over 35%), and loss of motivation (over 22%) also significantly impact volunteer turnover, mirroring the nature of voluntary work. Additionally, full time education (over 10%) can also encourage volunteers to leave. It is worth noting that, although volunteers leaving due to 'full time education' or 'gaining paid employment' represents a

Workforce Management: Factors Influencing Staff Turnover



KEY
- Age **29.1%**
- Sickness **24.9%**
- Experience in the organisation **17.5%**
- Lower pay, part-time, zero-hours, or fixed-term contract **40.7%**
- Lack of career development (e.g. internal) **17.5%**
- Lack of other positive employment factors **4.2%**
- Commute **8.5%**
- International recruitment **1.6%**
- Retirement **30.7%**
- Career progression **38.1%**
- Under performance **19.6%**
- Redundancy **14.3%**
- Relocation **12.2%**
- Lack of long term funding for projects **39.2%**
- Workplace culture, historically high turnover **3.7%**
- Other factors **10.1%**

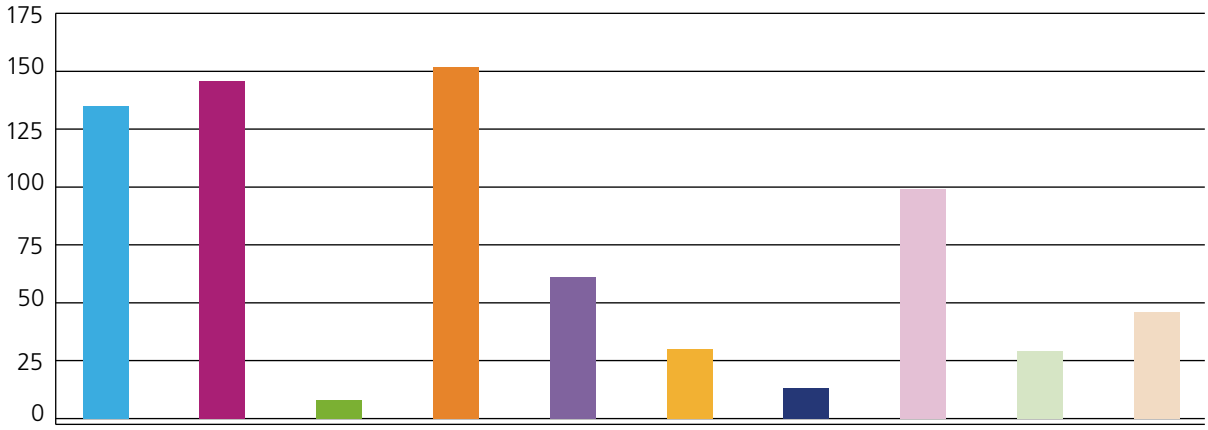
Workforce: Staff Turnover Factor in Organisations of Different Sizes



KEY

- Micro/small
- Medium
- Large

Workforce Management: Factors Influencing Volunteer Turnover



KEY

- Age **49.5%**
- Health conditions **53.5%**
- Commute **2.9%**
- Family or other commitments **55.7%**
- Loss of interest/motivation **22.3%**
- Moving to another organisation **11.0%**
- Value/behaviour not suitable **4.8%**
- Gained paid employment **36.3%**
- Entered full time education **10.6%**
- Other **16.8%**

loss to the sector, this demonstrates the sector's value to the wider workforce, as they offer employment and learning opportunities, especially for young people, which prepares them for entering the labour market. 'Other' factors include death, relocation, project closure, overburden, and being 'stolen away by the public sector'.

In addition, organisations were also asked to prioritise the influencing factors they had selected. As for paid staff turnover, the top 4 factors, beside 'other' factors, are a lack of long-term funding, age, workplace culture and low pay and job insecurity, while the top 3 factors influencing volunteer turnover are old age, gaining paid employment and health conditions.

Precarious Contracts

From the interviews, the issue was not high staff turnover per se, particularly voluntary turnover. The most significant reason for turnover of paid staff, mentioned by all but one of the interviewees and also the subject of in-depth discussion in two of the four focus groups, was the precarious and fixed term nature of employment due to short-term funding. This led to a lack of financial security for paid staff and a preference for work outside of the sector, especially in the NHS or local government. One interviewee (Large Org 5) indicated that currently, a third of paid staff were out of contract waiting for new contracts to be confirmed.

> *"The uncertainty of funding is really unhealthy in the sector…They'd quite like to know what they were doing more than a year in advance and to know their job is secure…There is no parity between us and the NHS or local government who have security."* **(LARGE ORG 3)**

> *"This is a kind of recurring theme in the voluntary sector isn't it, you find a job that you love and then the contract comes to an end."* **VCSE CONSULTANT**

> *"if there's something that looks much more secure that's probably in a more statutory or a more commercial or corporate organisation the temptation [is there], even if the passion's there, because you're always balancing that, love this job, love this sector, but am I going to be able to pay the mortgage, the car loan, all of those things that people have."* **(FG3 RES2)**

Burnout

Another significant concern mentioned by a third of interviewees and also discussed in the focus groups was staff burnout relating to the nature of work and expectations of hours of work in the sector. Here, one interviewee encapsulated this as: "*it sounds really naff to say a calling, doesn't it? But it's almost like my job is my life*" (Small Org 5). This attitude was shared by many, but there was recognition that this could lead to serious burnout and ill health amongst staff:

> *"…she… produced you know seven or eight sheets of A4 where she'd written every single thing that she had to do as the CEO every day and it was like that's not sustainable… I definitely reached complete burnout by the time I'd finished and was ready to go for sure it made me very sick." (VCSE Consultant)*

> *"I think you also have to recognise the burnout as well. I think employment is an area, if it's not- you know, if the staff aren't nurtured properly, burnout is a very prevalent."* **(FG2 RES5)**

Lack of Career Progression

Interviewees also spoke of how paid staff would compare their conditions of employment in the VCSE sector with those of the public (NHS and local government) and private and found their own situation wanting in terms of career progression, benefits and salaries. The lack of promotion opportunities and career progression were seen as significant factors:

> *"I've got people who want to succeed and to promote and… it's dead man's shoes."* **(LARGE ORG 3)**

> *"Career development is limited… we don't have lots of different levels. You know, we're quite flat. We've got senior management, a few managers and everybody else. So, there's not a lot of progression routes."* **(LARGE ORG 2)**

> *"If somebody leaves, because there's a better opportunity for them. We support that… because we know a lot of the jobs are probably not long term."* **(LARGE ORG 5)**

In comparison to employment in the public and private sector, there was also recognition that salaries were comparatively low in the VCSE sector, especially given the hours and expectations of work. While this was acknowledged as not necessarily being the prime reason for people to leave the sector, combined with lack of job security and lack of career progression, other opportunities outside of the VCSE sector were viewed as more attractive:

> *"We train people up, and then they move on, because they know that they can get the qualification, or they've got the skills and experience that they've gained, and other organisations recognise that they've worked for us, and therefore we're going to be good staff, because they know we have good staff, but … we can't offer them the same conditions that local authority or health gives them."* **(FG2 RES4)**

This was further confirmed by one interviewee who had conducted a staff exit survey:

> *"We've had a couple leave for career development who have gone to health. So, obviously more money, more career progression. One was able to access training so they could go back to nursing. So, you know, the package was much more enticing."* **(LARGE ORG 2)**

In the focus groups there was some discussion that turnover was an expected part of employment in the sector, and could be viewed as a positive, recognising the development opportunities that had been given to them:

> *"… if I can keep people for at least two years, I'll be happy because you also want people to move on themselves."* **(FG1 RES2)**.

Within the focus groups there was also some discussion of turnover of volunteers, however overall this was viewed as small and not a serious issue (compared to the difficulties in recruitment of volunteers). Where turnover occurred, this was largely due to the ageing nature of the volunteer population, and there were concerns raised about succession planning:

> *"Our age profile is kind of like 80s, 70s, you know. And that's the thing about it, are we making plans for bringing people through?"* **(FG2 RES5)**.

Overall, turnover of paid staff and volunteers is not viewed as a significant problem within the sector and a largely conservative approach to workforce change is being adopted, with a reluctance to reduce the workforce size. On the one hand, the predominant reliance on short term funding within the sector, leads to job precariousness, lower salaries and less career development, all of which are viewed as negative factors affecting retention and pushing people to leave the sector. On the other hand, turnover is also framed as positive – the sector does a lot to upskill people and create leaders of the future and whilst it means people leave, managed correctly it can be positive.

Partnerships and Funding

Partnerships

From the survey, more than 40% of organisations in the region engage in some form of partnership, which is significantly lower than Somerset's figure of almost 65% (Clay et al., 2024, p. 34). In terms of partner types, the partnerships they engage in within the sector far exceed those with the public and private sectors. Almost 50% of organisations reported partnerships with other VCSEs, followed by over 30% with public bodies. Additionally, over 5% of organisations established partnerships with private businesses. Most organisations have semi-formal and informal partnerships, which together make up over 80%. Consequently, formally constituted partnerships were the least reported, accounting for just over 20%. **This reflects the growing trend towards collaborative service delivery in the sector.**

Successful Partnerships

The majority of interviewees could think of examples of successful partnership working and this was also the subject of discussion within the focus groups. Some of these examples involved partnerships between different VCSE organisations, working together to share resources, information and policy documents and referring clients to other VCSE organisations. One example involved a hub of 11 voluntary sector organisations in one building, another involved a successful 'Friends Of' group, while interviewees also talked about different regional and national partnerships and alliances.

> *"The charity sector is really good at coming together. They're really good at doing things like action learning sets. They're really good at sharing problems and sharing solutions. "They're really good at sharing policies… We're very generous in our leadership. We're very generous in what we will do…We've tried to see if one of us has experienced something before, see what we can learn, we're very good at that… we've got to focus as a sector. We've got to focus on the things we agree on."* **(MEDIUM ORG 4)**

> *"when we set up [an] Alliance… part of the understanding to join that group was that… every application that we put together… in the three years that that alliance ran, everybody in the room had an opportunity to say, "I'd like to be part of that project." And if there were ten of us then it meant that we got less funding and there were four of us, we might have got slightly more. But at that point, nobody for three years put in an individual application… sadly the Alliance itself was a funded project so no longer exists any more… [but] there were 65 members of that alliance… at its highest point."* **(FG3 RES2)**

Some of these examples involved partnership working between VCSE organisations and external organisations, including local authorities, the NHS, a partnership with a university and a commercial organisation. One interviewee mentioned the model of partnership working introduced by the Labour Government called 'The Compact'.[8]

Trust, good communication and lack of competition between the partners were seen as key to making these partnerships work:

> *"Now, when we did this project with the NHS money that filtered down… Some really good partnerships have come out of that. Why? Because we're not competing for money. We've all applied for the money, but once we'd got the money we all sat in a room… Traded stories…We all worked collaboratively."* **(MEDIUM ORG 4)**

> *"I can have the most amazing partnership like I work with [Partner] absolutely outstanding, no hidden agenda. There's a whole load out there who go in… just trying to bring small organisations down, or just so much jealousy between them."* **(SMALL ORG 5)**

8 See Bailey and Terry (2025: 3): "The 1990s also brought renewed partnership with the voluntary sector in service delivery, shifting funding from grants to contracting out statutory services to private and voluntary sector providers (Buckingham, 2009; Wilding, 2010). The greater coordination of services between the public and 'third' sector was reinforced with the introduction of 'compacts' in each UK nation (Kendall, 2000; Lewis, 2005). While this led to initiatives to build capacity within the sector, this also meant an attempt to create homogeneity and consistency across VSOs (Carmel and Harlock, 2008)."

Covid also had a positive effect on partnership working generally, both within and external to the VCSE sector, some of which had a lasting legacy:

> *I mean the council was pretty much ignoring the CVS sector until Covid. Then because the council couldn't cope with Covid, the CVS sector actually stepped in and did a lot of the work. I think as a result that forum has been working quite a lot with the council to at least let them acknowledge that we are here and helping people you know."* **(FG4 RES6)**

> *previously I think it was a bit of every man for himself approach… during the Covid experience we had to think more, more globally about our area. We knew we were all in a position that if we work together we could make an impact we could make a difference because we're all trying to do the same sorts of things… it got us talking … about our commitment you know to the populace of the area what we can do to help how we can support each other to keep going. What resources we can share, we clubbed together as a sector, we regularly got together and it nurtured relationships and allowed us the sector to see itself as a bigger piece of kind of social support… and that journey continues."* **(MEDIUM ORG 1)**

Obstacles to Partnership

Within both interviews and focus groups there was some variability in how different organisations viewed their statutory partners, which was heavily based on specific geographies. Some statutory bodies were perceived as highly supportive and inclusive of the wider sector whereas others were criticised for what appeared to respondents to be the selection of the same organisations every time that contracting opportunities came up. It should be noted that these are just respondents' opinions and we do not have information about the procurement processes that have been involved here.

Overall, funding constraints had strained these relationships and there was also frustration voiced in the focus groups about how VCSE organisations felt that they had to constantly justify themselves to councils:

> *[the] local authority thinking that they can do the job better than you and duplicating your service and then realising that they can't do the job better than you."* **(FG2 RES6)**

> *we're constantly having to re-justify ourselves all over again. I said something to the councillor the other day, 'We've been doing this since July 2005 and we're still here in May 2025 and we've delivered God knows how many projects for you, you might have trusted us by now. Why do you need to still see this document that document and that document?'"* **(FG3 RES2)**

There was also frustration that VCSE organisations would be frequently asked for their input and views, but that this was seen as largely tokenistic and therefore a waste of their time:

> *We get asked to come together a lot for meetings… 'we need to have a VCSE voice at the table, or, you know, children's services are going through massive changes and we've got 25 former employees going to the meeting and can you represent the whole of the VCSE sector in that meeting?'. How often do you… come to the table to 'actually, I'd like to understand how you work better.'"* **(FG3 RES3)**

> *Oh yes, well we've asked the VCSE voice… there's been a consultation and one lived experience voice was part of it but actually we've done absolutely [nothing] all about it afterwards."* **(FG3 RES5)**

Competition in the sector for funding was viewed as major barrier to partnership working between organisations for more than half of the interviewees as well as a major point of discussion in one focus group:

> *It shouldn't be so competitive… At the end of the day, we all want the same things… we need to find a way to achieve it in a more constructive manner than we have at the moment."* **(LARGE ORG 3)**

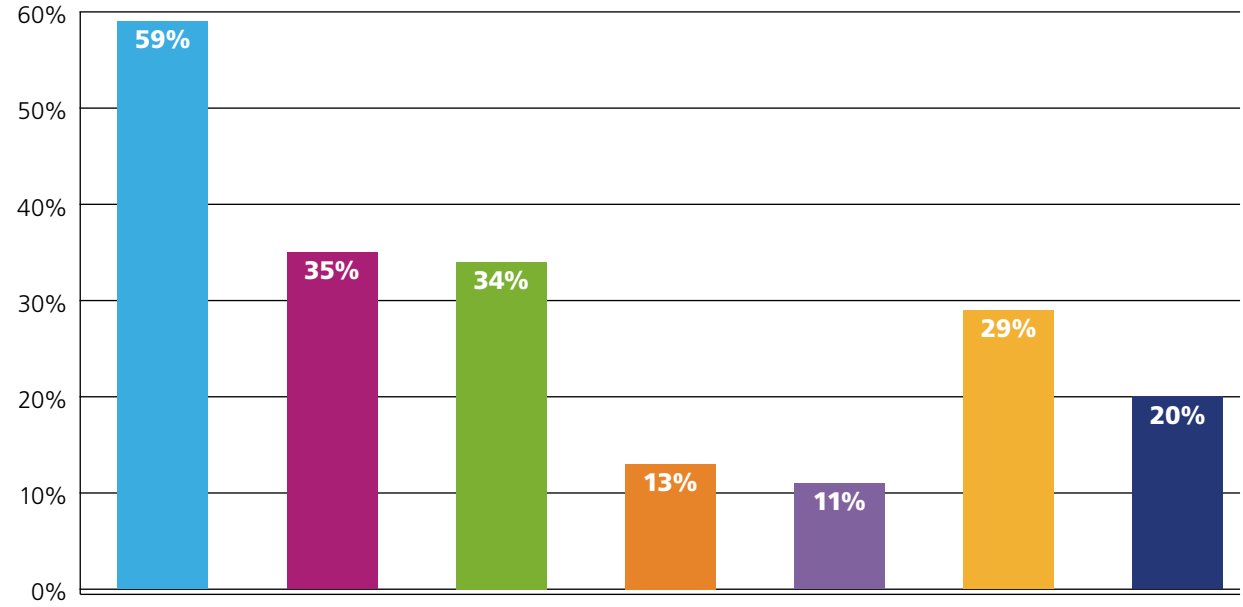
> *when you're working against charities that are much bigger, which are much more established… although they might be on the same funding cycles…they've probably got a better bet at getting it."* **(FG3 RES5)**

Funding

Aside from self-earning activities (selected by nearly 60% of organisations), the main funders or commissioners were charitable foundations and local authorities, with both accounting for around 35% of responses, followed by individual donors (nearly 30%). By contrast, fewer than 15% of organisations relied on the NHS or other government agencies.

Furthermore, smaller organisations depend much more on trading activities, individual donors, and other voluntary sector sources than on the public sector, while larger organisations appear to demonstrate the reverse.

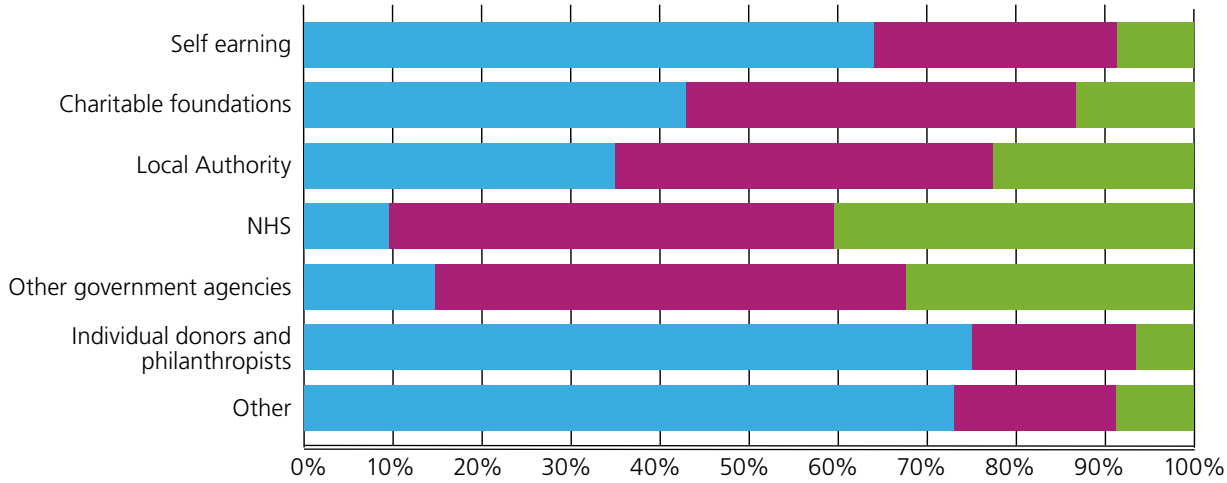
Funders and Commissioners



KEY

- Self-earning
- Charatible trusts and foundations
- Local Authority
- NHS
- Other government agencies
- Individual donors and philanthropists
- Other

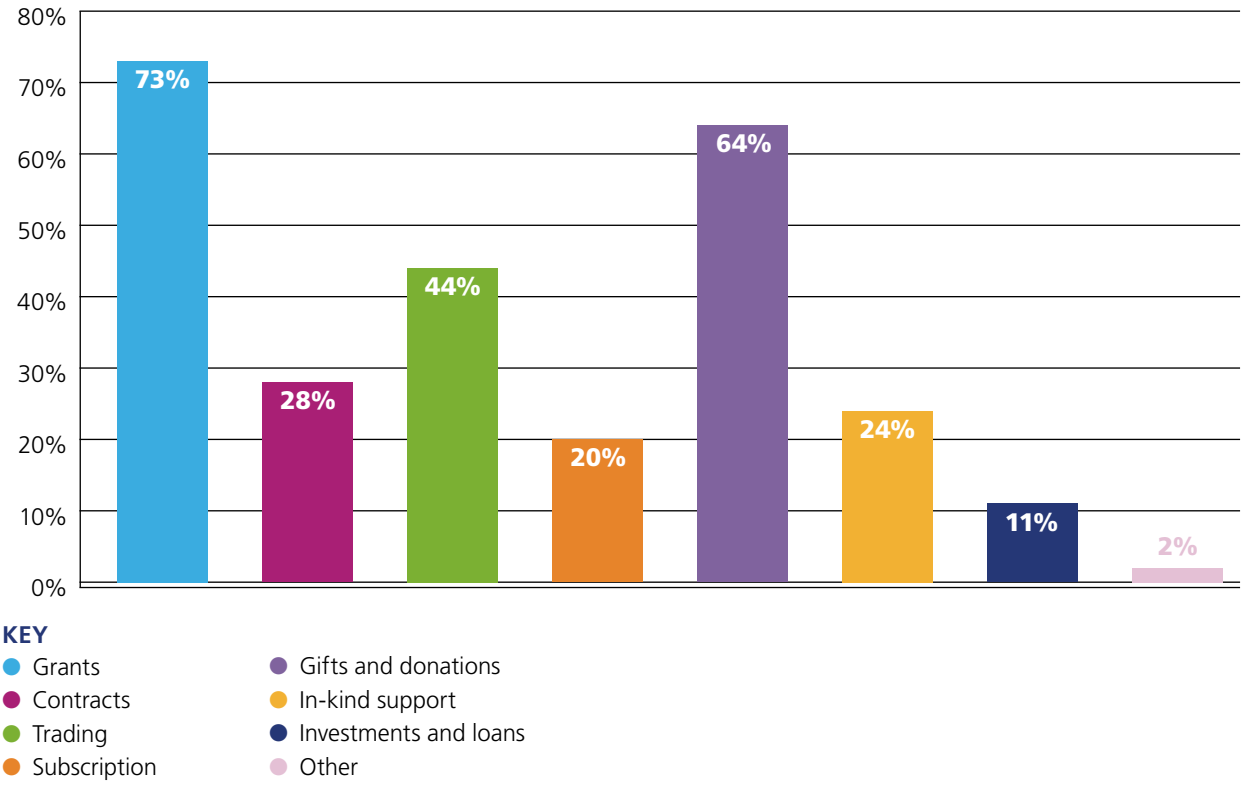
Organisations: Funders and Commissioners of Organisations of Different Sizes



KEY

- Micro/small
- Medium
- Large

Organisations: Source of Income

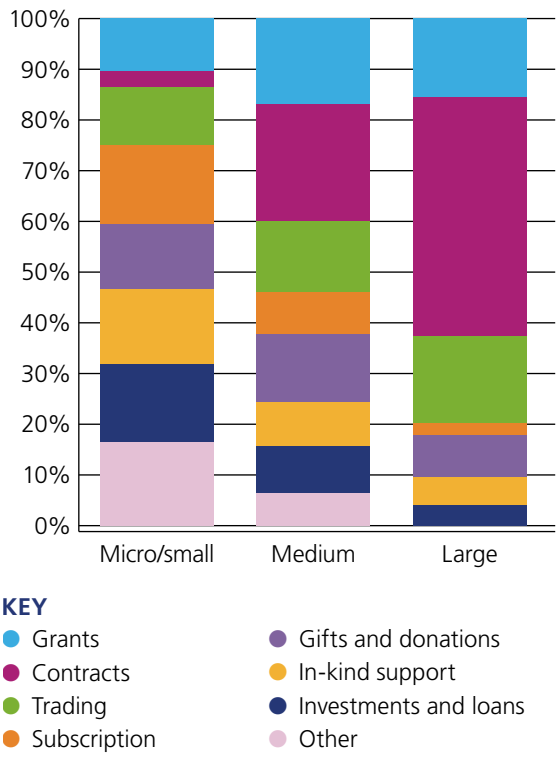


Notably, medium-sized organisations obtain funding from charities and public funders in a relatively even way (see Appendix 2).

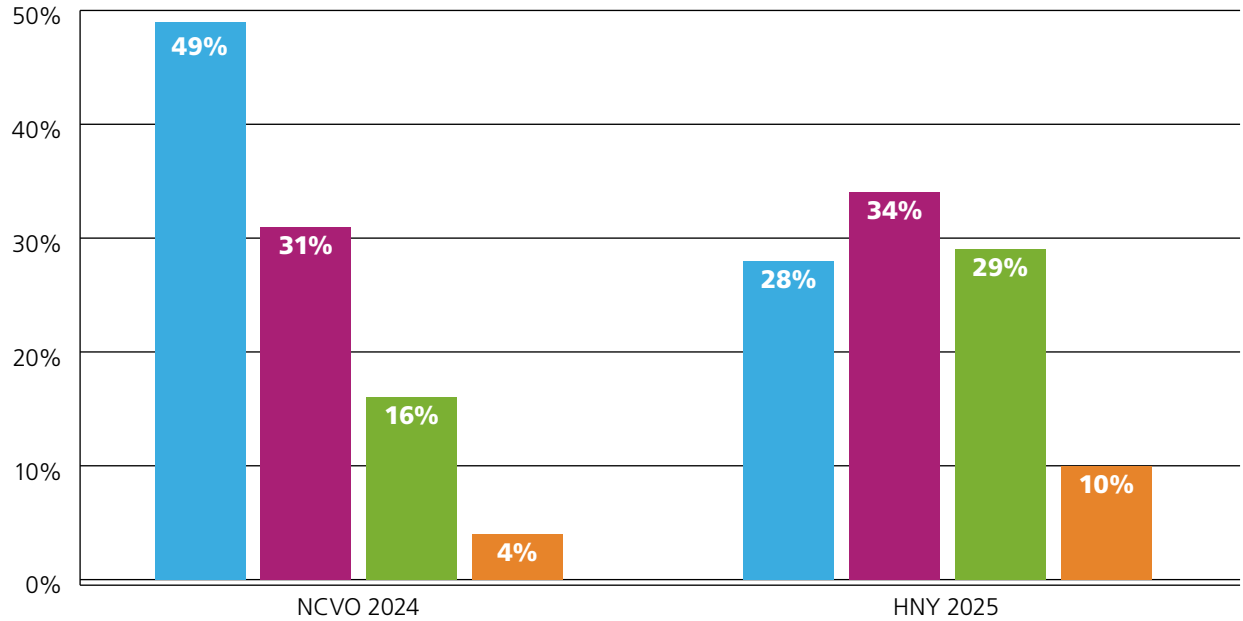
Almost 90% of organisations rely on multiple sources of funding, with over 70% reporting three or more different sources. Only a small proportion of organisations have one source of funding (just under 8%), while a smaller proportion still have four sources (less than 1%). Specifically, of the seven possible sources of funding, those related to service provision and donations are generally seen as important sources of income for organisations. The top four sources are 'grants' (over 70%), 'gifts and donations' (64%), 'trading' (44%), and 'contracts' (28%), followed by 'in-kind support' at 24%. 'Subscription' and 'investments and loans' are the least popular funding sources, accounting for 10-20% of the total. The general trends in the main sources of income outlined above align with those set out by the NCVO (2024) and Chapman and Wistow (2023). However, given the decline in donor numbers in the UK (CAF, 2025), the high degree of reliance on gifts and donations among the surveyed organisations – even 10% higher than that reported by Chapman and Wistow (2023) – could pose a challenge if this trend continues, particularly for micro/small organisations, which rely on these sources of income to a significantly greater extent (nearly 65%).

As organisations grow in size (measured by annual income), funding sources tend to become more

Organisations: Sources of Income Organisations of Different Sizes



Organisations: Size Measured by Income



KEY
- Micro
- Small
- Medium
- Large

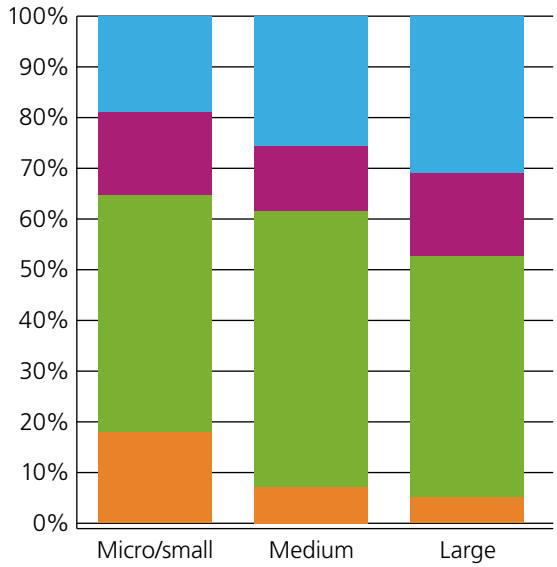
concentrated, with larger organisations relying more on 'grants', 'contracts' and 'trading'. This suggests that micro/small organisations have a more diverse funding strategy as compared to larger organisations who have a stronger capacity to generate income (see Appendix 2).

In line with the nationwide scenario, micro/small organisations dominate among those surveyed, accounting for over 60%, while nearly 30% are medium-sized and 10% are large. However, the proportion of micro organisations is over 20% lower than the national figure. In contrast, the proportions of other sizes are higher, in particular, medium-sized organisations account for 13% more (NCVO, 2024).

With the exception of 13% of organisations having no assets or reserves of any kind, nearly 50% held cash-in-hand reserves, while a significantly smaller proportion of organisations held property and long-term investments: 23% and 16%, respectively.

Furthermore, as the organisation grows in size, the proportion of organisations with property and reserves apparently increases from over 25% to nearly 60% and from over 60% to nearly 90%, respectively. However, this pattern does not apply to investments (see Appendix 2). **This is indicative of greater resilience to risk in larger organisations.**

Organisations: Financial Assets of Organisations of Different Sizes



KEY
- Property
- Longer-term investments
- Reserves
- N/A

Funding Difficulties

Within the interviews, constantly changing funding priorities and funder preference for new projects rather than continuation of services were seen as significant obstacles to being successful in funding applications and ultimately a threat to service provision:

> *Our funding strategy has to change on a year by year basis, and the difficulty is that grant funding is coming harder and harder to get. A lot of funders don't want to fund continuation. They like to fund new and shiny, and that obviously leads to problems as well, because those services that are currently there are services that are needed and they develop in line with need."* **(LARGE ORG 5)**

Focus group participants in particular noted how certain issues would be prioritised (green/environmental issues and services to areas of deprivation were specifically mentioned), which meant that it was very difficult to get funding for core business. This was felt to come from a lack of understanding by funders of what organisations in the VCSE sector did. This meant that organisations were either excluded, or had to rebadge their work as something other than it was:

> *... sometimes they don't understand what we do so I am more, you know, [higher] probability to be successful if I do 'a singing with dementia family' which is not what we do because we are music therapists. But if I said that I want to establish a hub for elderly to manage neuropsychiatric symptoms, the feedback is 'we don't really understand what you do'. And [laughs] okay, let's do a singing group"* **(FG1 RES5)**

> *we've just been turned down for an expression of interest and I could kick myself because I should have put more in about the garden and not the people"* **(FG2 RES6)**

> *It's a bit of a farce at times... applying for funding for effectively the same project but changing the name every year just so a funder can be like 'ah, it's a new project'"* **(FG1 RES2)**

Three interviewees plus three focus groups discussed the ways in which there was an assumption that the VCSE sector was 'free' and a lack of acknowledgement that VCSE organisations face the same costs as other organisations. This meant that there was a tendency to view the VCSE sector as cheaper and therefore worthy of less funding compared to the for-profit sector:

> *the conceptual point of the voluntary sector... you're the ones that you can do it for free. And it's like, 'No, we have to find the money just like everybody else'... But you're not commissioning us at a cheap price, and that's what they tend to do. Whereas... engineering walks in, and it's like, Oh, bloody hell! That's a bit more than I thought I was going to have to pay [but] that's what you have to pay isn't it, because it's so."* **(MEDIUM ORG 2)**

> *their lack of understanding of all costs because obviously their building's free and they don't pay for their electricity... they just don't realise that they've got a HR department they have to finance, so when you talk to them about the organisational costs and full cost recovery, they don't get it."* **(FG2 RES3)**

> *I spent my entire time in this sector saying VCSE doesn't mean free, volunteering doesn't mean free either because if you are paying a volunteer coordinator, you are training volunteers, you are DBSing volunteers. All of these things come with a cost and whilst I absolutely welcome the ethos that if we are going to sort our health in this country we actually all have to be in it together and it can't be statutory over here and volunteering community over there."* **(FG3 RES2)**

Therefore, respondents felt that there were a lot of hidden costs to funding bids that VCSE organisations just had to cover, such as increases to national insurance, inflation rises and redundancy payments. The lack of funding for core costs was a particular bone of contention and was felt to signal a lack of recognition and understanding of the finances of VCSE organisations. Confirming views expressed about burnout within discussions about turnover and retention, one hidden cost mentioned specifically by four interviewees and three focus groups was the time resources needed to apply for funding. This contributed to staff burnout, especially in the case of most small organisations which would not have a dedicated fundraising/grant application officer:

> *"I'm up till midnight searching and applying for grants, absolutely burnt out. I've got another 2 directors, but… they're not grant writers."* **(SMALL ORG 5)**

> *"It's a lot of time that is taken up with no guarantee and the expectation from a commissioning perspective… we have to apply for more grants that takes time. You can't afford to. We don't have the spare money to be able to pay for somebody to then do that, and so it falls on potentially senior managers who work that … The difficulty is, if you're spending an hour outside of doing that network, that's an hour where we're not doing XY, and Z, or it means that that work piles up. So it's a real, difficult thing to work in."* **(LARGE ORG 5)**

Suggested improvements included streamlining application processes and having longer term grants so reducing the number of times organisations needed to apply, reducing the burden of reporting and evaluation of grants.

Overall, there was a significant amount of partnership working in the sector and such partnerships were viewed as crucial to dealing with future challenges of the sector. There are many examples of good partnership working with associated benefits for funding distribution, service delivery, and staff and volunteer recruitment. VCSE organisations are keen to be part of active and meaningful dialogue and collaboration and this could be built on in the future. However, a key barrier to partnership working was the competitive nature of funding. Most organisations in the sector are reliant on short-term funding and this is seen as a key barrier to the sustainability of the sector. The project-related nature of funding and frequently changing priorities of funders were seen as a significant problem and a threat to the sustainability of core service provision. In addition, funding application processes were criticised for their administration and time-resource burden leading to burnout and wasted workforce resources. Thinking about ways that funding commissioning could be improved to move away from projects to core services and streamlining application processes would be welcomed.

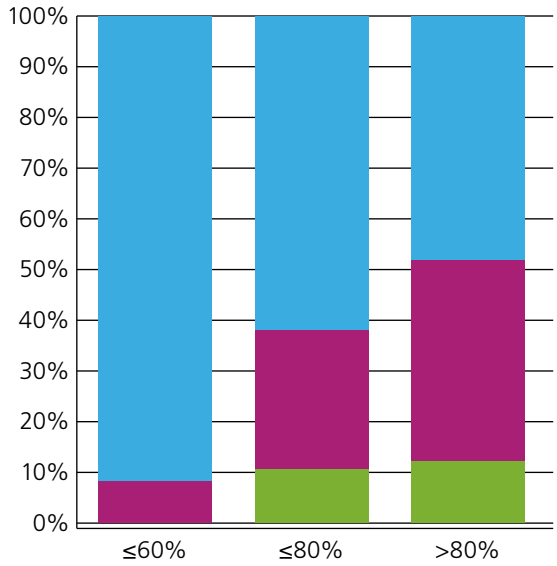
Workforce Readiness

Regarding succession planning, the survey response rate was under 70%. Less than 45% of organisations agreed that they had such a process in place, while over 55% disagreed or neither agreed nor disagreed. Almost 70% of organisations either carry out workforce planning occasionally or not at all – more than twice the number that do so on a regular basis. **Overall, preparing the workforce for the future has not received enough attention. This may be explained by the fact that micro/small organisations make up the majority of the sector.**

Recruitment Challenges

In the survey, respondents were asked to what extent they have the skills they need in their organisation, although 18% did not answer the question. Organisations generally expressed optimism about having core skills, with almost 60% believing that they had obtained more than 80% of the required skills. Unsurprisingly, only 6% of organisations rated this figure as under 60%.

Workforce: Possession of Core Skills of Organisations of Different Sizes



KEY
- Micro/small
- Medium
- Large

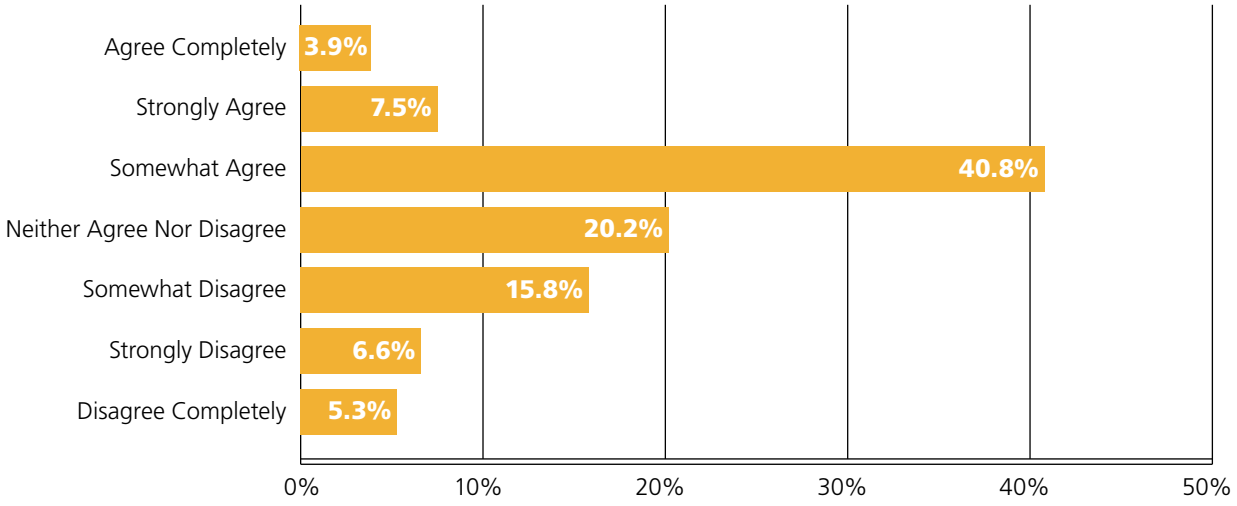
Workforce Management: Staff Skills Acquisition

KEY
- <60% **6%**
- <80% **19%**
- 80%+ **57%**
- No response **18%**

Workforce Management: Timely Recruitment

KEY
- Not agree **33%**
- Agree **35%**
- No response **32%**

Workforce Management: Recruit on Schedule (228)



Despite the overall optimism about having core skills, micro/small organisations are more likely to report skills shortages (see Appendix 2).

More than half of the organisations were optimistic about their ability to recruit on schedule, while less than a third expressed pessimism.

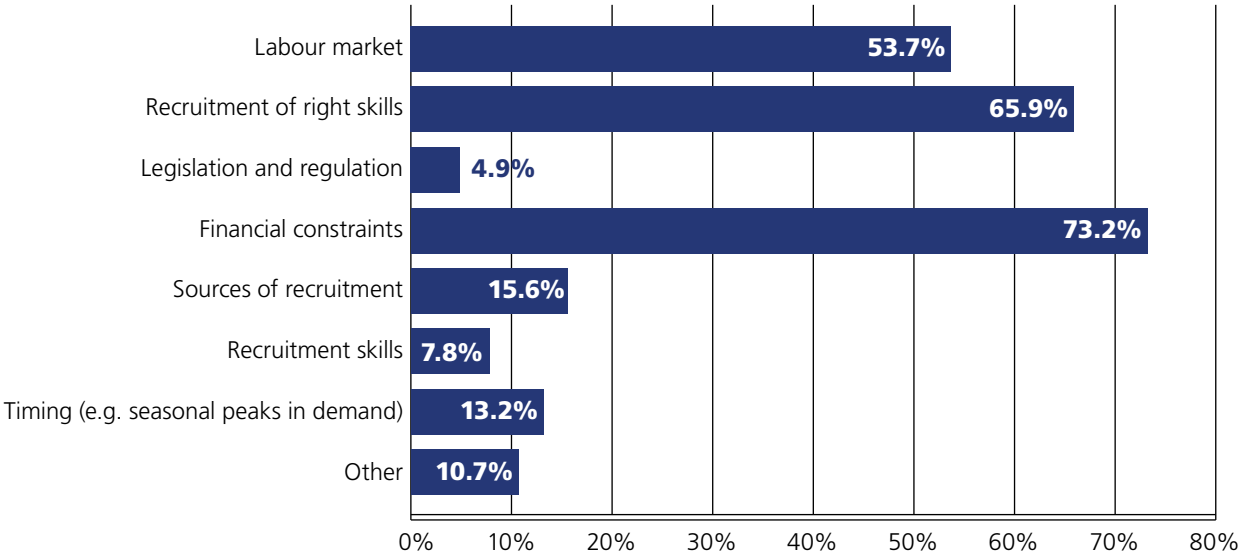
However, when looking at all 335 organisations, those associated with missing values, not agreeing or agreeing, were similar, at 32-35%. **Such different results suggest that caution should be exercised when interpreting recruitment data with a large number of missing values.**

With respect to recruitment challenges, financial constraints and workforce shortages (in terms of quantity and skills) are the most frequently mentioned by over 50% of organisations, compared to other challenges mentioned by less than 16%. In particular, financial difficulties and skills deficits are not only pervasive and acute, impacting nearly 65% of organisations, and are seen as the foremost two issues. **This suggests that the main challenges for recruitment are largely external, meaning they are beyond the organisations' control.**

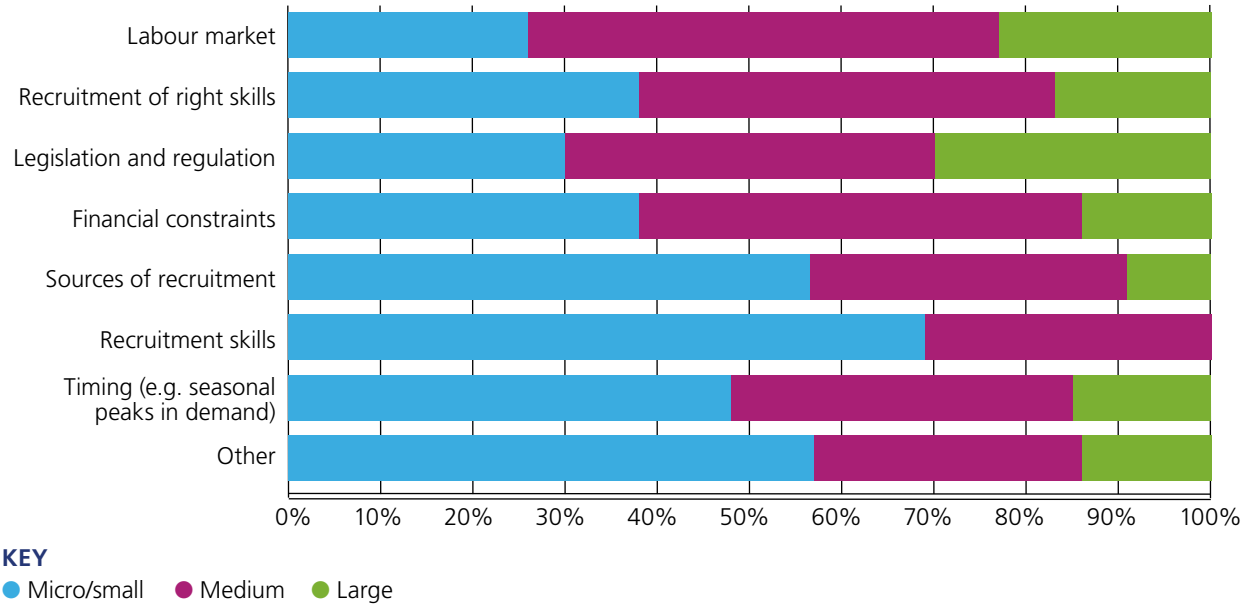
All organisations face challenges relating to skills shortages and financial constraints. However, micro/small organisations are more concerned about technical recruitment issues relating to sources and skills, while larger ones are more concerned about the labour market and legislation (see Appendix 2).

Interviewees did not see paid staff or volunteer recruitment as a problem per se, indeed one

Workforce Management: Recruitment Challenges (Percentage)



Workforce Management: Recruitment Challenges of Organisations of Different Sizes



interviewee commented that they had no trouble recruiting for the roles they advertised for. However, most interviewees could identify particular staff capacity gaps that they had. Specific roles mentioned were specialist skills such as trained advisors, cooks, finance officers and fundraising officers/grantwriters. Interviewees talked of strategies to deal with these gaps including replacing a volunteer role with a paid role through funding , deliberately recruiting a deputy to CEO role, while two interviewees detailed the clear succession plans developed in their organisations. Interviewees felt that most organisations had enough volunteers, however there was concern about the type- there were worries about succession and continuity of service given the older average age of most volunteers. In addition, respondents talked about how Covid and changing lifestyles and priorities had led to more discerning volunteers, less prepared to do the full range of tasks needed, and with less availability of time, which could lead to operational difficulties.

Within focus groups, there was a lot of variability depending on the type of role which organisations could recruit which tied into the skills needed. Matching pay in the public sector was one key issue that organisations faced, particularly for more clinically- oriented roles. Organisations noted one of the recruitment challenges was not just around pay, but also the extent to which they could offer other benefits like sickness pay or annual leave. Another key challenge was around the stability of contracts which were often fixed term as opposed to the statutory sector. Therefore, a core challenge around paid staff recruitment for the sector was around funding. Respondents mentioned that one of the key aspects was that you need money to recruit paid staff. Roles are often created owing to demands for services. Respondents noted that this caused further issues because of the increased emphasis on employee rights linked to regulations around redundancy pay and national insurance.

> *"Probably not a surprise to anybody, but pay isn't great in the sector. I mean we have been able to keep up with above and in line inflation pay increases for the last five or six years, but I imagine the charity started from a lower base because the offer still isn't great. I always feel like whenever we go out to recruit, we are almost hoping to get a bit lucky with finding someone who's in the right life circumstance. So, you know, they might be winding down from a more intense role and they still want to do something, or maybe their partner who brings in a more solid income so they just want to supplement. Or it could be someone who probably would fit my situation when I applied for my job, which is ready for a step up but sort of needs to prove themselves at that level as well."* **(FG1 RES2)**

In terms of volunteers, survey respondents were asked to compare the number of volunteer hours they needed against the number they were getting. The sector has an active volunteer base, as the number of hours volunteered roughly corresponds to the need for volunteering. While there is a wide variation in the difference between organisations, the overall gap between the number of hours needed and available

per week is 1,464 hours, with an average difference of less than seven hours. Within focus groups, recruitment challenges of volunteers were extremely varied. In focus groups 1 and 4, recruitment of trustees was a core issue. Many focus group attendees noted that it is the type of organisation or role that attracts the volunteers and in some cases this also meant there was a time poverty issue with those more inclined to volunteer of working age were likely to be volunteering already which limited their capacity in any given role. The core challenge was then often the aging of retiree volunteers or the loss of those in education upon graduation. The key gap is around middle age groups.

Overall, most organisations did not engage in strategic workforce planning. While there were some difficulties in recruiting some specialist skills for both paid staff and volunteers, this was not viewed as a significant problem generally. However, the short term and project related nature of funding in the sector was viewed as a significant recruitment challenge. There were concerns for succession planning within the ageing volunteer base and recognition that volunteers were less flexible and reliable in the post-Covid era. These concerns would seem to suggest that giving more time to workforce and volunteer planning would be useful to address future challenges and that ideally this would involve collaboration between VCSE organisations and with statutory partners.

Future Recommendations

In the survey, organisations were asked what they felt were the three most important external sources of support or policy changes that they expected in the next 5 years. With a response rate of just over 70% for the question, the results show that the sector is more concerned about funding mechanisms, opportunities and culture than specific support. Nearly 80% of organisations highlighted 'more financial support', either from the sector itself, local authorities or other entities, as the change they expected to see in the near future. This was followed by more peer learning opportunities and better communication with other services, with over 40% selecting these options. A moderate proportion of organisations – between 20% and 27% – expected specific support relating to recruitment, training, and changes in legislation.

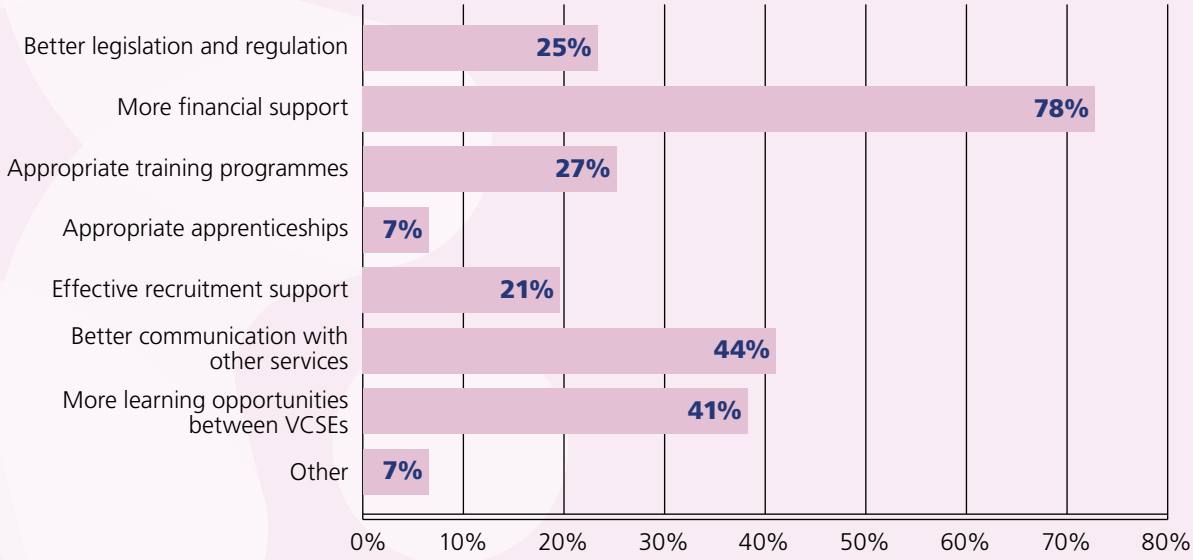
While more financial resources and improved communication and cooperation between services and organisations are not purely workforce issues, they are critical in addressing challenges. These themes also came out strongly in the interviews and focus groups.

Improving the Funding Process

Through interviews and focus groups, funding was a core concern. Whilst the organisations understood there was a finite amount of money, their particular recommendations were tied into bigger points about recognising the value of the sector and thinking about how to make processes less detrimental to smaller providers. Organisations had a range of suggestions:

- **To keep the applications simple with realistic deadlines that did not fall around holidays or have such short notice periods that they would perpetuate the cycle of overwork and burnout.**
- **The strengths of the sector rather than having them reshape their provision to meet funding availability. Organisations called for funding of their core business rather than just being single project based as well as to provide longer term contracts that would reduce cycles of temporary posts.**
- **More notice of the fact they had to follow statutory rules: ensuring reasonable time for hiring for new programmes, providing development opportunities, covering national insurance increases and ensuring there was redundancy income built into the process.**

Workforce Development: Expectations of External Support and Change



- **There is also pressure from funders to appear sustainable in terms of income after grants (e.g. showing diverse funding sources), but owing to their non-profit nature this is often not possible for many medium and large organisations.**
- **Fundamentally, going back to the point about value, organisations wanted to remind funders to compensate for the worth of their expertise.**

Recognising the Value of the Sector

The biggest issue across interviews and focus groups was about recognition of the sector's value. A core theme that did not come through in the survey alone, but could be clearly tied into a desire for better communication and potentially more effective policy and regulation. Organisations of all sizes talked about the key social impact they have but often that it went unrecognised. Additionally, organisations discussed how economic gains from work in the sector were often undervalued and sometimes were barriers to understanding their social value.

> ***"If you're in a line of work where you basically stop something from happening or stop something from getting worse, it's really hard to show the value of that…because a lot of the things, you can't put monetary value on it. You can't prove it, you can't say well, this happened or this didn't happen."*** **(FG1 RES2)**

> ***"The voluntary sector does everything. It's the glue. It's the stuff that we all rely on. We just don't see it and actually, if we maximise the asset of the community we would probably save huge amounts of money."*** **(LARGE ORG 1)**

> ***"I think some of that conflict that is happening has come from that disconnect, you know, where other organisations think they're better than the 3rd sector. They never think the 3rd sector is better than them. And there are things that I know the NHS can do better than us. Of course there are, but there are things that we can do better than the NHS. Otherwise they won't be referring everyone to us…So there is that respect for each other's expertise doesn't seem to be there."*** **(MEDIUM ORG 4)**

> ***"I will just hope over a long period of time, people who have never had interaction with people who work in the voluntary sector, to know that they have equal qualifications that they have because there's a perception out there of people who work in the voluntary sector. I meet lawyers, doctors, who gave up those professions in their prime to work in the voluntary sector because people quantify returns in terms of money."*** **(SMALL ORG 3)**

Overall, a core recommendation from respondents was to have more active dialogue with stakeholders outside the VCSE sector:

- **This means funders and statutory partners listening to what the sector could offer and the value they bring through actively going to the sector and sitting at the table with the organisations. Communication must go both ways.**
- **This also means recognising the way that value is measured in the sector and not using financial or quantitative measures.**
- **This would mean designing provision that used the strengths of the sector rather than instrumentalising the sector to deliver services more cheaply.**
- **Fundamentally, organisations wanted to be heard and wanted to see what was being done about it. They wanted tangible actions resulting from this dialogue.**

Collaboration Not Competition

During interviews and focus groups, organisations highlighted the importance of how the sector thinks about collaboration, this included small, medium and large sized organisations. This ties into potential reforms to funding, communication and regulation as well as to the idea of sharing learning across the VCSE sector. Part of this required work from commissioning bodies to rethink competitive tendering processes with increased transparency and clear governance rules. This also might mean providing schemes to develop the capacity of smaller organisations. In this vein, a medium and a large organisation said that they felt the sector was becoming more collaborative as a result of the covid-19 pandemic.

The question is how to bring small and big organisations together effectively.

- **One suggestion was the usage of buddy or mentoring schemes which would allow smaller organisations to work more closely, maybe even forming consortiums.**
- **Facilitating learning across different sections of the VCSE sector. For example, what are sports organisations doing well and what are community organisations doing well.**
- **This means thinking about how we could learn from different sub-sectors, but also potentially how we could share resources across those sub-sectors.**

Recruitment Support

Primarily the issue of recruitment support were raised by organisations that were struggling with volunteers. In focus groups this was discussed more in depth with respondents in focus group 4 suggesting a policy change was needed to get more employers to allow time during the work week for volunteering opportunities. This would also get around some of the recruitment gaps with working age populations.

> ***"People in their 30s and 40s, and I get that. Busy, you work full time with children, lots and lots of things going on. But if my employer were to say, "We can release you for four hours once a quarter to go to that meeting and then we can be a trustee." That would free up a whole wealth of people. Because I think even just for our organisation, when you talk about admin skills, I have a whole payroll team who are absolutely cracking at admin. They'd be amazing."***
> **(FG RES6)**

Appropriate Training

Finally, a few respondents in interviews and focus groups talked about the value of getting the VCSE sector to further embrace technology. However, many said there were limits to this mostly owing to culture, capacity and knowledge. There seemed to be some interest in training opportunities that would provide support particularly around generative AI.

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Appendix 1: Theoretical Framing

Appendix 1 consists of two literature reviews that provide a theoretical basis for the project. The first, was an initial review of the literature on the sector and services conducted at the start of the project, with the aim of clarifying the scope of the survey. The second, was a scoping review of the studies on the VCSE workforce used to develop a framework for understanding the challenges facing the VCSE sector workforce in HNY.

Sector and Services

The VCSE sector is a heavily service-oriented sector, encompassing a diverse range of organisations that provide a wide variety of services to the community, guided by the principles of voluntarism. With the objective of enhancing health and wellbeing through the integration of health services and others, the project's initial focus was on examining organisations that offer such services in close association with the NHS, such as social care. However, the meaning of the term 'social care' is evolving, and its usage varies. For example, the literature review outlines at least three main approaches to understanding social care.

- Social care is a key component of the welfare state (Daly and Lewis, 2000), referring to services or support for people experiencing vulnerability and disadvantages.
- According to the social determinants of health theory (WHO, 2010; Morse et al., 2022), social care includes services addressing health-related social risk factors and social needs, or health-critical social care services (Rosenbaum et al., 2023).

Figure 1 Four broad categories of services

- With the trend of integrating health and social care, a systematic review identifies four types of integrated social care (Uribe et al., 2023).

Following the discussion across the project team, however, it was concluded that none of these approaches accurately reflected the landscape of the VCSE sector and the services it provides. The VCSE sector comprises organisations that address inequalities and issues not met by mainstream services; VCSE services inherently address social needs (Chapman and Wistow, 2023). There are four broad categories of services that improve personal and community health and wellbeing (see Figure 1).

The Workforce

One of the key objectives of the project is to seek recommendations to address the workforce challenges facing the VCSE sector in Humber and North Yorkshire; however, the overall picture of addressing workforce challenges globally and in the UK is not promising. The workforce has been a focal point of policy, practice and research. At a national level, the UK has identified the issue as a crisis (DWP, 2024; Bailey, 2025), particularly within the NHS and social care. As the main provider of health and care services, a better understanding of workforce development and the challenges facing the VCSE sector is urgently needed. Unlike other sectors, the VCSE workforce comprises two categories: paid workers and (regular) volunteers, given that the delivery of voluntary services largely relies on volunteers — the 'unpaid workforce' (Cemalcilar, 2009). Through a scoping review, this project develops a socio-ecological framework to understand workforce challenges in the region, leading to the identification of recommendations for viable solutions and/or coping strategies. There are three key findings from the scoping review that are worth of attention:

- Few studies pay attention to the challenges faced by the VCSE workforce. In contrast, a substantial body of literature exists on the challenges confronting the health and social care workforce, as well as on enhancing workforce management in other industries through the utilisation of AI-, data- and digitisation-driven modelling tools. This suggests that either workforce issues are not considered a priority in the VCSE sector, or that the sector itself is not perceived as an entity.

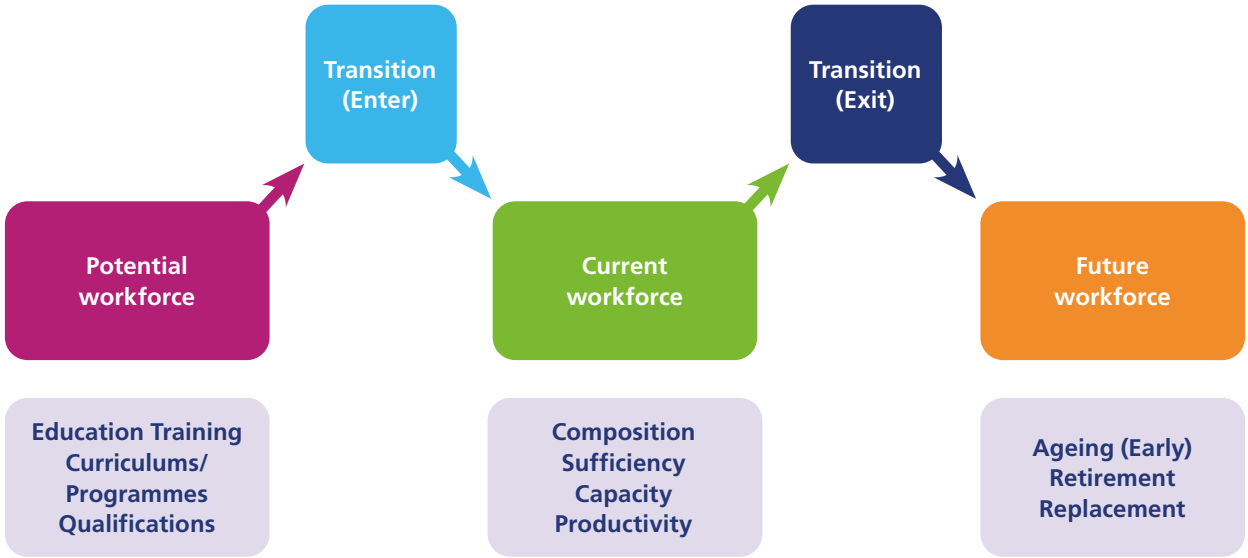

Figure 2 Workforce challenges in the process of evolution

- The challenges facing the VCSE workforce exist at every stage of the labour market process:from potential workforce, transition (enter), current workforce, transition (exit), to future workforce (see Figure 2).

Workforce challenges exist in six dimensions – quantity, quality, management, health and wellbeing, ethnicity, and identity (see Figure 3). Workforce shortages and associated recruitment and retention challenges are commonly experienced by most labour market sectors; however, the focus varies. For example, health and care workforce challenges are often associated with wellbeing, ethnic/race inequalities, and skill shortages. Government departments focus on diversity. The infrastructure or construction industry highlights safety. Other industries emphasise skills shortages, staffing and productivity. A particular challenge facing the VCSE sector relates to workers' sense of identity, which is shaped by their feeling of belonging to a value-based organisation but challenged by a changing context, such as neoliberalism (Mainard-Sardon, 2021).

Apart from the commonly cited factors above, current

Figure 3 Six dimensions of workforce challenges

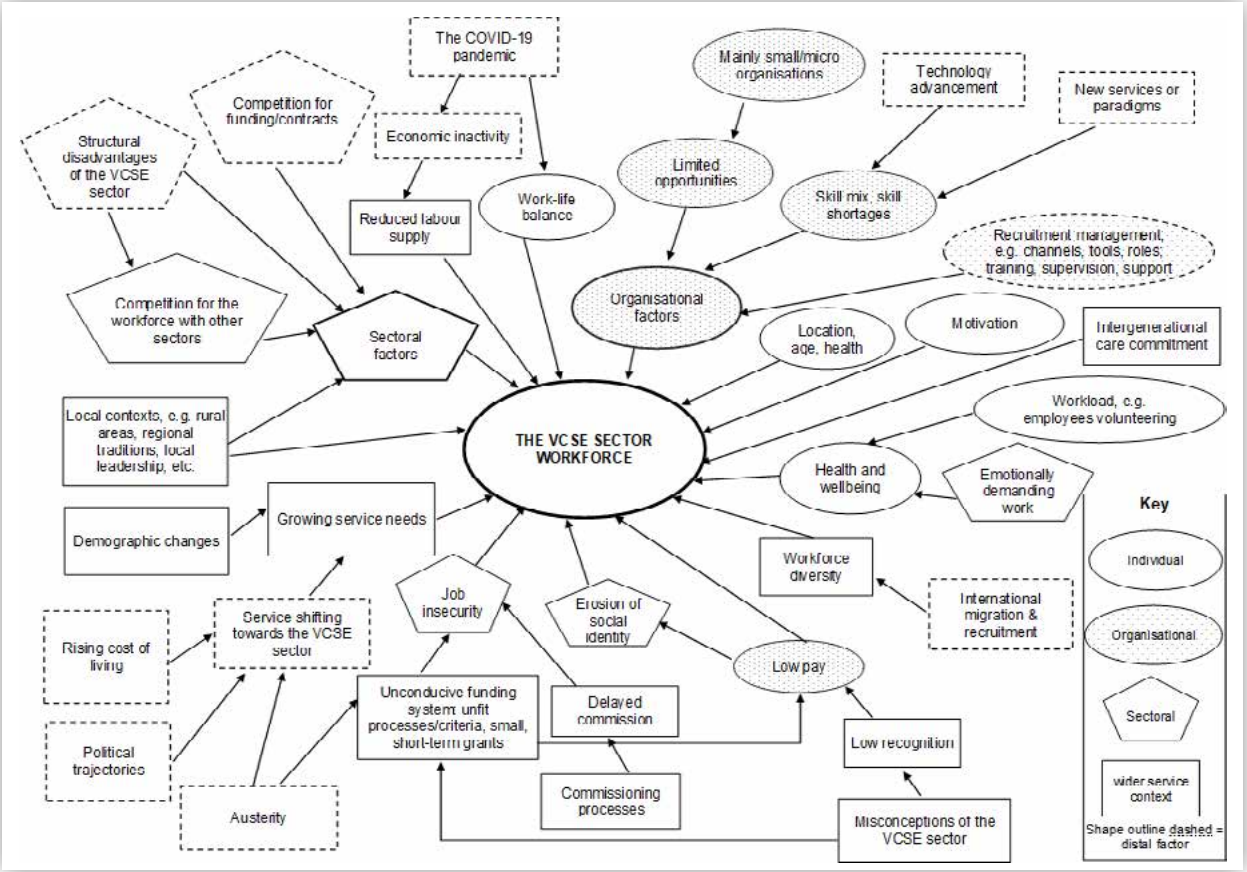

Figure 4 Mapping the framework

VCSE workforce challenges arise from: growing service needs resulting from the shift of services away from the public sector (Crowley et al., 2025); the funding system; misconceptions about the VCSE sector itself; and competition for staff from the public sector. Two key mechanisms explain how funding affects the VCSE workforce and how the volunteer base is affected (see Figure 4).

Our socio-ecological framework (see Figure 5) incorporates factors at individual, organisational, sectoral, regional, national and international levels that contribute to the challenges faced by the VCSE workforce.

This framework is used:

- To encourage a shift in mindset, moving towards viewing the VCSE workforce within its broader context, with the goal of initiating precise action within and beyond the sector.
- To help organisations and the VCSE sector in a region identify recommendations to address challenges for different stakeholders.

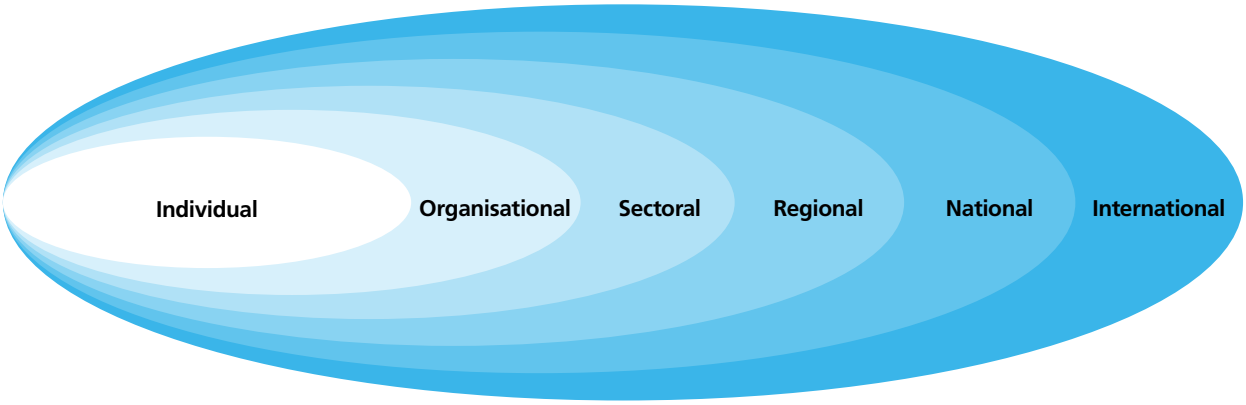

Figure 5 Six-level framework to understand workforce challenges

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Appendix 2: Survey Data

* Percentages and totals are based on respondents

* The 'Total (count)' field shows the number of valid responses for the question

Purposes of Organisations of Different Sizes

PURPOSE	MICRO/ SMALL	MEDIUM	LARGE	TOTAL
Improving health and well-being (personal/community)	57.90%	77.90%	71.90%	207.70%
Tackling poverty and inequality	21.80%	34.70%	53.10%	109.60%
Advocacy and empowerment	12.90%	24.20%	56.30%	93.40%
Community cohesion and development	38.10%	35.80%	43.80%	117.70%
Other	38.10%	23.20%	15.60%	76.90%
Total (count)	**202**	**95**	**32**	**329**

Services Provided by Organisations of Different Sizes

CATEGORY	SERVICE	MICRO / SMALL	MEDIUM	LARGE	TOTAL
Health and wellbeing services	Physical health care services	2.0%	3.2%	10.0%	15.2%
	Physical health improvement services	18.5%	34.0%	16.7%	69.2%
	Mental health services	19.0%	44.7%	53.3%	117.0%
	Public health services	12.5%	26.6%	46.7%	85.8%
	Sporting, recreational and associated social activities	42.5%	53.2%	33.3%	129.0%
	Other_Health	3.0%	2.1%	10.0%	15.1%
Social care and support	Childcare	3.0%	5.3%	10.0%	18.3%
	Personal care	4.0%	5.3%	16.7%	26.0%
	Practical help at home	4.0%	8.5%	10.0%	22.5%
	Housing related support	2.0%	10.6%	10.0%	22.6%
	Emotional support	33.5%	45.7%	60.0%	139.2%
	Domestic abuse support	3.0%	12.8%	6.7%	22.4%
	Safeguarding, protection and safety	12.0%	27.7%	60.0%	99.7%
	Other_Care	3.0%	1.1%	3.3%	7.4%

CATEGORY	SERVICE	MICRO / SMALL	MEDIUM	LARGE	TOTAL
Access to basic services and benefits	Financial support	15.5%	24.5%	46.7%	86.6%
	In-kind support	12.5%	34.0%	33.3%	79.9%
	Affordable food	12.5%	27.7%	20.0%	60.2%
	Affordable housing/ accommodation	2.0%	4.3%	13.3%	19.6%
	Community transport services	3.5%	9.6%	10.0%	23.1%
	Information or advice (e.g. signposting)	33.5%	62.8%	86.7%	182.9%
	Other_Access	3.5%	1.1%	0.0%	4.6%
Empowerment of people and families	Informal education	34.5%	46.8%	46.7%	128.0%
	Life skills training	20.0%	48.9%	56.7%	125.6%
	Employability skills training	11.0%	37.2%	53.3%	101.6%
	Employment support	6.0%	26.6%	30.0%	62.6%
	Enabling specific groups to participate and be valuable members of the community (e.g. women)	26.0%	44.7%	43.3%	114.0%
	Increasing the knowledge and confidence of the individuals and/or their families to manage vulnerable or post-crisis situations	12.0%	30.9%	43.3%	86.2%
	Other_Empowerment	4.5%	2.1%	3.3%	10.0%
Community engagement, outreach and development	Promoting social participation and inclusion	59.0%	76.6%	80.0%	215.6%
	Providing facilities and open space for community activities for educational and leisure pursuits	46.5%	42.6%	50.0%	139.1%
	Managing community events	52.5%	51.1%	53.3%	156.9%
	Enhancing cultural and artistic life of the community	32.0%	25.5%	30.0%	87.5%
	Improving the local environment	26.0%	21.3%	30.0%	77.3%
	Social work	2.5%	14.9%	16.7%	34.1%
	Other_CommuWellbeing	6.5%	10.6%	20.0%	37.1%
Total (count)		**200**	**94**	**30**	**324**

Apprenticeship(s) Offered by Organisations of Different Sizes

APPRENTICESHIP(S)	MICRO/ SMALL	MEDIUM	LARGE	TOTAL
Have apprenticeship(s)	19.4%	44.4%	36.1%	100.0%
Under consideration	20.6%	50.0%	29.4%	100.0%
Not considered	62.6%	32.6%	4.8%	100.0%
Total (count)	**131**	**94**	**32**	**257**

Core Skills Required by Organisations of Different Sizes

CORE SKILLS	MICRO/ SMALL	MEDIUM	LARGE	TOTAL
Healthcare skills	13.3%	73.3%	13.3%	100.0%
Social care skills	19.0%	57.1%	23.8%	100.0%
Communication skills	56.6%	32.4%	11.0%	100.0%
Interpersonal skills	46.6%	40.5%	13.0%	100.0%
Emotional intelligence	43.0%	40.5%	16.5%	100.0%
Organisational skills	62.9%	30.5%	6.6%	100.0%
Leadership skills	45.7%	35.7%	18.6%	100.0%
Technical skills	61.6%	31.5%	6.8%	100.0%
Digital literacy	75.0%	17.5%	7.5%	100.0%
Other	63.6%	18.2%	18.2%	100.0%
Total (count)	**146**	**92**	**30**	**268**

Staff Turnover Rates in Organisations of Different Sizes

STAFF TURNOVER RATE	MICRO/ SMALL	MEDIUM	LARGE	TOTAL
Turnover rate = 0	63.8%	25.0%	6.9%	34.9%
Turnover rate ≤ 20%	13.8%	45.5%	58.6%	37.7%
21% < Turnover rate ≤ 50%	13.8%	23.9%	27.6%	21.1%
Turnover rate > 50%	8.6%	5.7%	6.9%	6.3%
Total (count)	**58**	**88**	**29**	**175**

Factors Influencing Staff Turnover in Organisations of Different Sizes

FACTORS	MICRO/ SMALL	MEDIUM	LARGE	TOTAL
Age	60.0%	29.1%	10.9%	100.0%
Sickness	40.4%	36.2%	23.4%	100.0%
Experience in the organisation	45.5%	48.5%	6.1%	100.0%
Lower pay, part-time, zero-hours, or fixed-term contract	27.3%	53.2%	19.5%	100.0%
Lack of career development	33.3%	57.6%	9.1%	100.0%
Lack of other positive employment factors	50.0%	50.0%	0.0%	100.0%
Commute	25.0%	50.0%	25.0%	100.0%
International recruitment	33.3%	66.7%	0.0%	100.0%
Retirement	39.3%	44.6%	16.1%	100.0%
Career progression	28.2%	45.1%	26.8%	100.0%
Under performance	18.9%	48.6%	32.4%	100.0%
Redundancy	11.1%	70.4%	18.5%	100.0%
Relocation	36.4%	45.5%	18.2%	100.0%
Lack of long term funding for projects	23.0%	59.5%	17.6%	100.0%
Workplace culture	28.6%	42.9%	28.6%	100.0%
Other factors	44.4%	22.2%	33.3%	100.0%
Total (count)	**77**	**80**	**30**	**187**

Funders and Commissioners for Organisations of Different Sizes

FUNDERS AND COMMISSIONERS	MICRO/ SMALL	MEDIUM	LARGE	TOTAL
Self-earning	64.0%	27.4%	8.6%	100.0%
Charitable foundations	42.9%	43.8%	13.4%	100.0%
Local Authority	34.9%	42.5%	22.6%	100.0%
NHS	9.5%	50.0%	40.5%	100.0%
Other government agencies	14.7%	52.9%	32.4%	100.0%
Individual donors and philanthropists *	75.0%	18.5%	6.5%	100.0%
Other	72.7%	18.2%	9.1%	100.0%
Total (count)	**194**	**92**	**32**	**318**

*Many of the funders referred to in the text were coded as 'self-earning' or 'individual donors and philanthropists'.

Main Sources of Income for Organisations of Different Sizes

SOURCES OF INCOME	MICRO/ SMALL	MEDIUM	LARGE	TOTAL
Grants	52.8%	36.5%	10.7%	100.0%
Contracts	16.5%	50.5%	33.0%	100.0%
Trading	57.1%	30.7%	12.1%	100.0%
Subscription	80.6%	17.7%	1.6%	100.0%
Gifts and donations	64.9%	29.3%	5.9%	100.0%
In-kind support	76.6%	19.5%	3.9%	100.0%
Investments and loans	77.1%	20.0%	2.9%	100.0%
Other	85.7%	14.3%	0.0%	100.0%
Total (count)	**197**	**93**	**30**	**320**

Financial Assets Owned by Organisations of Different Sizes

FINANCIAL ASSETS	MICRO/ SMALL	MEDIUM	LARGE	TOTAL
Property	25.8%	36.9%	58.6%	121.3%
Longer-term investments	22.0%	19.0%	31.0%	72.1%
Cash-in-hand reserves	62.9%	78.6%	89.7%	193.5%
N/A	24.7%	10.7%	10.3%	45.8%
Total (count)	**186**	**84**	**29**	**299**

Self-rated Confidence in the Possession of the Required Core Skills Among Organisations of Different Sizes

SELF-RATED CONFIDENCE	MICRO/ SMALL	MEDIUM	LARGE	TOTAL
Possession of core skills ≤ 60%	91.7%	8.3%	0.0%	100.0%
Possession of core skills ≤ 80%	61.8%	27.6%	10.5%	100.0%
Possession of core skills > 80%	48.0%	39.8%	12.3%	100.0%
Total (count)	**151**	**91**	**29**	**271**

Recruitment Challenges Highlighted by Organisations of Different Sizes

RECRUITMENT CHALLENGES	MICRO/ SMALL	MEDIUM	LARGE	TOTAL
Labour market	26%	51%	23%	100%
Recruitment of right skills	38%	45%	17%	100%
Legislation and regulation	30%	40%	30%	100%
Financial constraints	38%	48%	14%	100%
Sources of recruitment	56%	34%	9%	100%
Recruitment skills	69%	31%	0	100%
Timing (e.g. seasonal peaks in demand)	48%	37%	15%	100%
Other	57%	29%	14%	100%
Total (count)	**85**	**89**	**29**	**203**

Humber and North Yorkshire
Health and Care Partnership

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For research queries please contact Dr Elizabeth Cookingham Bailey, University of York (*elizabeth.bailey@york.ac.uk*).

To find out more about the current work of the Voluntary Community and Social Enterprise Collaborative at the HNY ICB contact: *hnyicb.vcseteam@nhs.net*.

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