

Searching for Life Rafts:

The Funding Experience
Survey 2026

May 2026



Authorship and acknowledgements

This report has been written by Rebecca Moran and Ben Cairns, based on survey research carried out by the authors with Gilly Green, Keeva Rooney and Katy Oglethorpe.

Thanks to everyone who took the time to complete the survey and share their experiences with us so openly and honestly. As the convenor of the Open and Trusting community, we are committed to ensuring that the feedback we have received through the Funding Experience Survey is heard and acted upon.

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Executive Summary

About the Funding Experience Survey 2026

This report documents the findings of the Funding Experience Survey, administered by IVAR (the Institute for Voluntary Action Research) between January and March 2026. As the Open and Trusting grant-making community continues to grow, the Funding Experience Survey was designed to:

- Explore the extent to which current funding practices align with what matters most to charities.
- Identify whether these practices continue to be the most important to charities.¹
- Understand what it currently feels like to apply for funding.
- Understand whether the experience of funding has improved since the 2022 Funding Experience Survey.

Open and Trusting grant-making

The 8 commitments

1

Don't waste time

2

Ask relevant questions

3

Accept risk

4

Act with urgency

5

Be open

6

Be flexible

7

Communicate with purpose

8

Be proportionate

'Open and Trusting' (O&T) is a grant-making movement launched in 2021. The movement calls for funders to adopt more Open and Trusting funding practices to make life easier for those they fund. At the heart of the movement is a set of eight commitments, to which over 190 funders have currently signed up.

¹ NB. The aim of the survey was not to test the difference that the O&T movement has made to funding practices. In fact, only 22% of respondents were aware of the O&T movement prior to the survey.

Overview: Survey Findings

The 2026 Funding Experience Survey tells two stories.

The first is one of progress. For 51% of charities, grant-making has improved over the last three years. A number of funders are making their processes clearer, asking better questions, and are more willing to engage with charities before they apply. These changes – which align directly with the commitments of the O&T grant-making movement – are being noticed and appreciated.

The second story is bleaker. For 28% of charities, their funding experiences have got worse over the last three years, with the practices they value the most – unrestricted funding, multi-year grants, and meaningful feedback – remaining the rarest. The words charities reach for when describing their funding experiences – challenging, frustrating, exhausting, soul-destroying – are a reminder that grant-making practices are not abstract. They affect – and can damage and diminish – people’s working lives.

This is playing out against a backdrop of compounding pressures: increased competition for funding, rising costs, growing demand for services, and an operating environment that is pushing some of our best organisations to breaking point.

What charities need has remained remarkably constant from when we started Open and Trusting in 2021. The top priorities identified in our 2022 survey remain the most pressing today: flexible funding that treats organisations as trusted partners capable of making their own decisions; funders who act in ways that respect people’s time, manage people’s expectations and are mindful of the operating context in which people are working.

We remain as committed as ever to strengthening the O&T movement to ensure that Open and Trusting practices become the norm rather than the exception. The thoughts, hopes and frustrations shared in this survey will serve as a road map for us going forward – and a reminder, for all of us, of how much still needs to change.



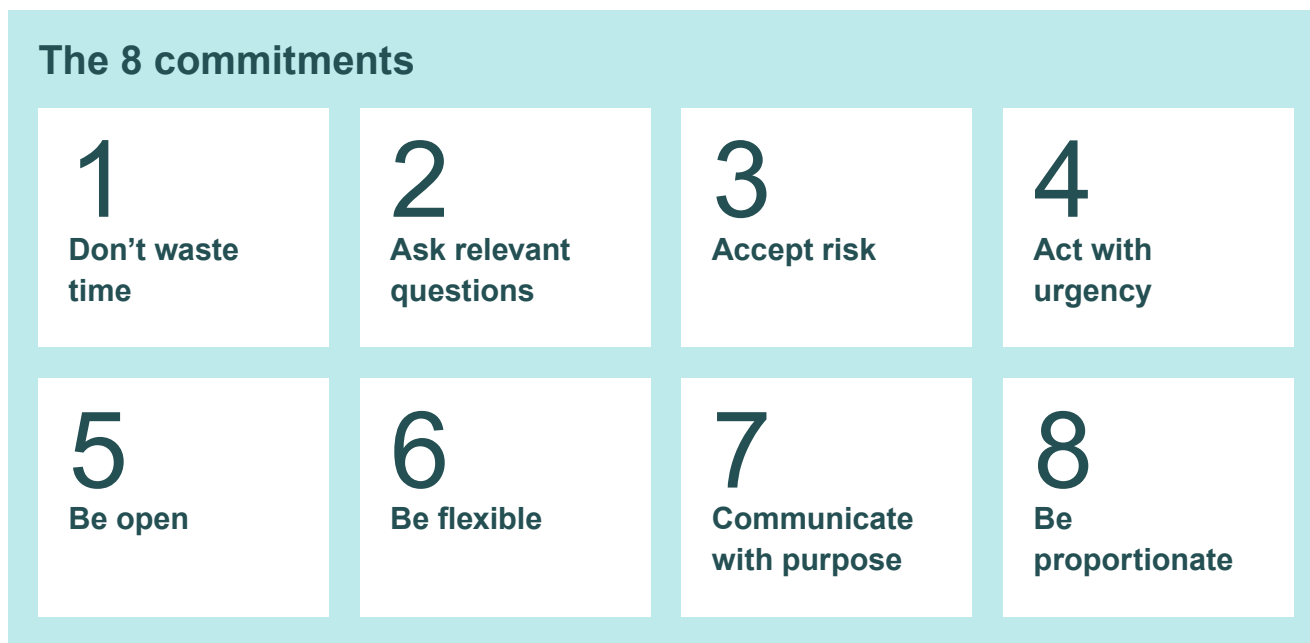
Ben Cairns
Director, IVAR

Part one: Introduction

This report documents the findings of the 2026 Funding Experience Survey. The survey was distributed by the Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR) to inform its work around Open and Trusting grant-making.



Open and Trusting grant-making



'Open and Trusting' (O&T) is a grant-making movement launched in 2021. The movement calls for funders to adopt more Open and Trusting practices to make life easier for those they fund. At the heart of the movement is a set of eight commitments, to which over 190 funders have currently signed up. To ensure that the movement remains rooted in charities' voices, IVAR introduced the Funding Experience Survey in 2022, leading to the publication of ['Getting the basics right'](#) which identified the grant-making practices that matter most to charities.

As the O&T movement continues to grow, the 2026 Funding Experience Survey was designed to:

1. Explore the extent to which current funding practices align with what matters most to charities (as outlined in ['Getting the basics right'](#), 2022).
2. Identify whether these practices continue to be the most important to charities
3. Understand what it currently feels like to apply for funding.
4. Understand whether the experience of funding has improved since the 2022 Funding Experience Survey.

The overall aim of the survey was to collect data that would enable us to reflect on the future of the O&T grant-making movement; specifically, ensuring that it remains relevant and strongly aligned with the needs of applicants and funded organisations.

About the Funding Experience Survey 2026

The Funding Experience Survey 2026 was circulated between 4 February and 10 March 2026 via IVAR’s newsletter, as well as O&T funders’ own networks, to ensure feedback was sought from the widest range of organisations from across the UK. The survey collected a mix of quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data was analysed in Excel² and the qualitative data was analysed with the support of Notebook LM (a closed-resource intelligence engine). Illustrative quotes from the survey are included throughout.

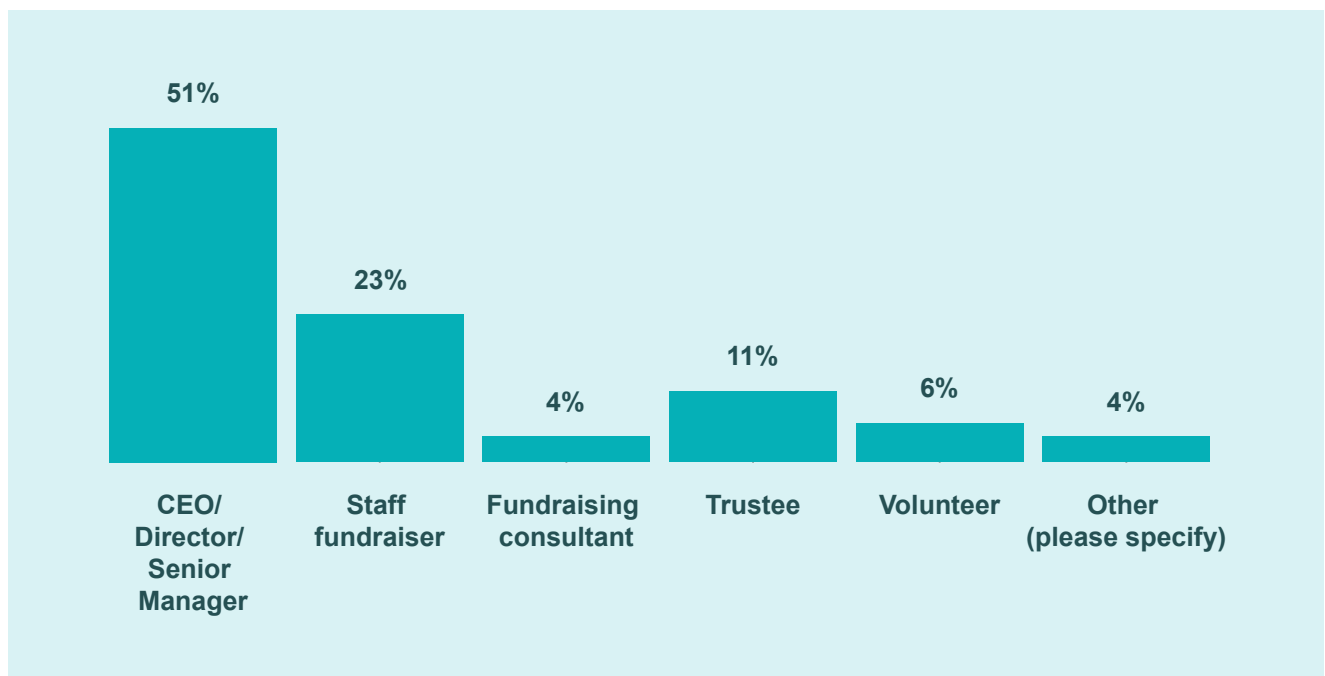
About the survey respondents

In total, 1,385 people responded to the survey, although 178 only completed the first four questions. As such, the findings below are based on responses from 1,207 participants. Of these, 1,053 (87%) provided a qualitative comment at some point during the survey.

Survey respondents

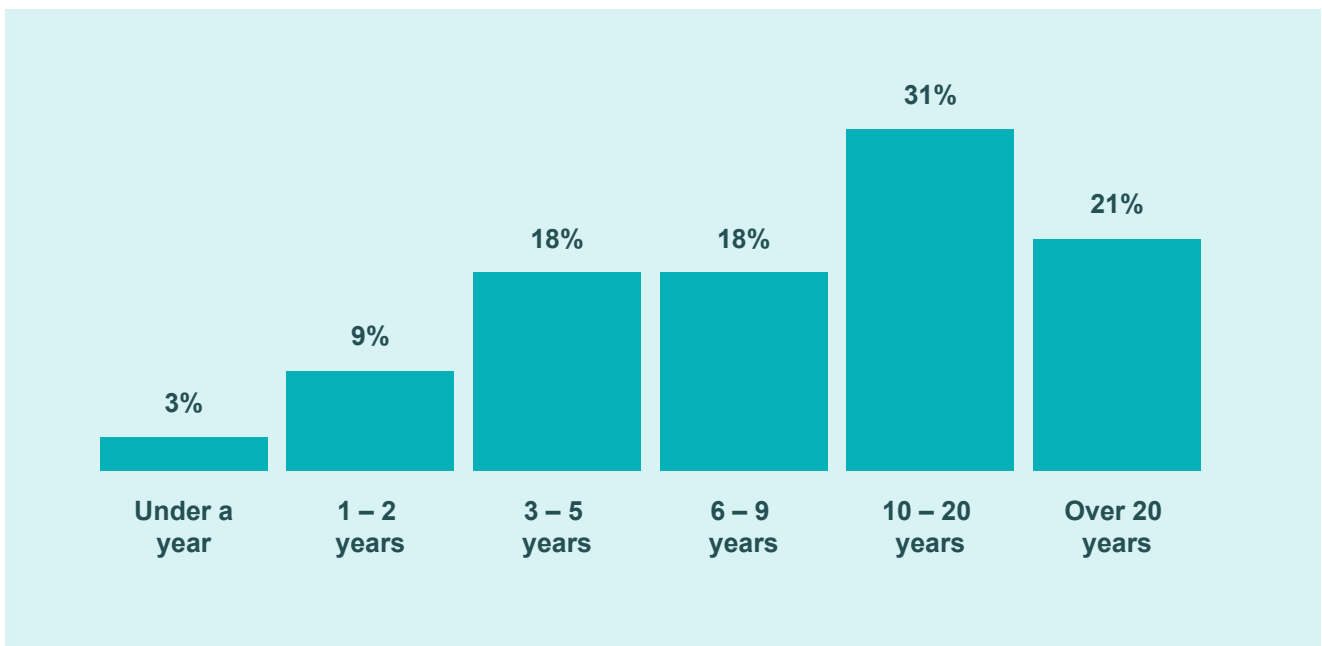
The majority (75%) of participants responded from the vantage point of a CEO/director/ senior manager or staff fundraiser (see Figure 1). Just over half of all participants have had over 10 years of experience in fundraising (see Figure 2 below).

Figure 1: Respondents’ role



² Where relevant, notable differences in respondents’ answers were explored, based on a range of variables.

Figure 2: Respondents' time in fundraising



Participants represented organisations of varying sizes. 76% were small-to-medium sized organisations (see Figure 3). The majority had a varied funding portfolio (see Figure 4), and they represented organisations from across the UK (see Figure 5), with an increased response rate from organisations in Wales compared to the 2022 Funding Experience Survey.

Figure 3: Annual income (£) of organisations that responded

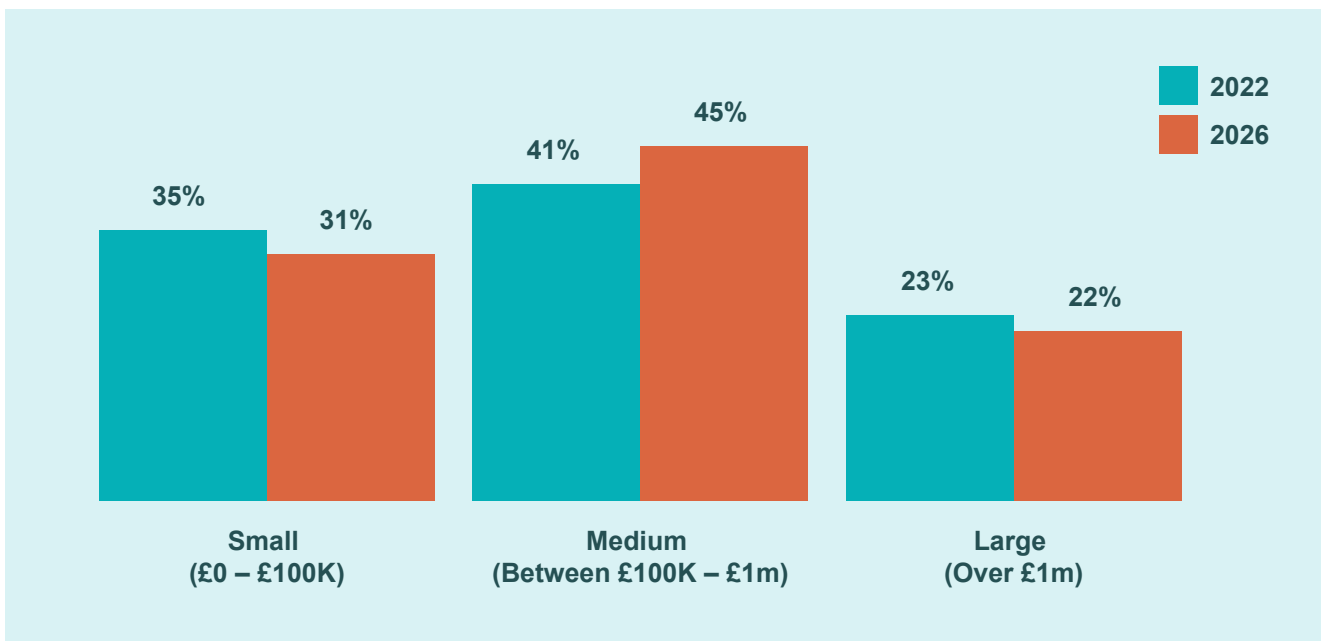


Figure 4: Annual income (%) from trusts of organisations that responded

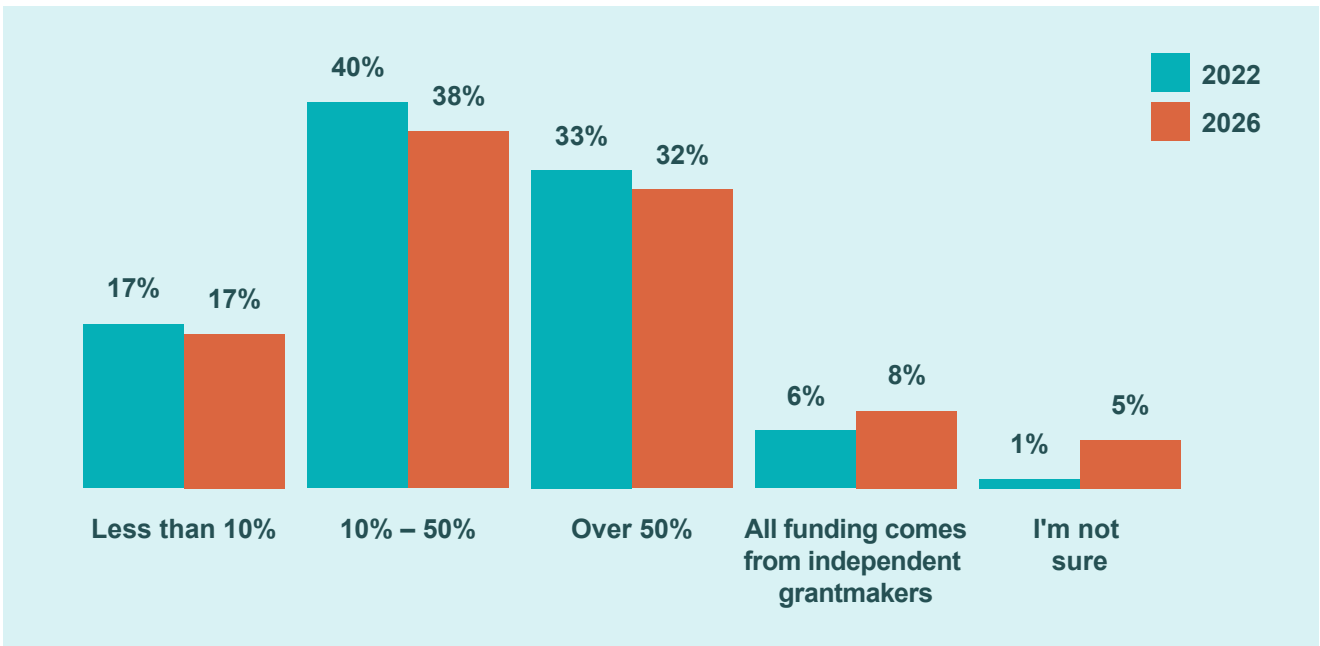
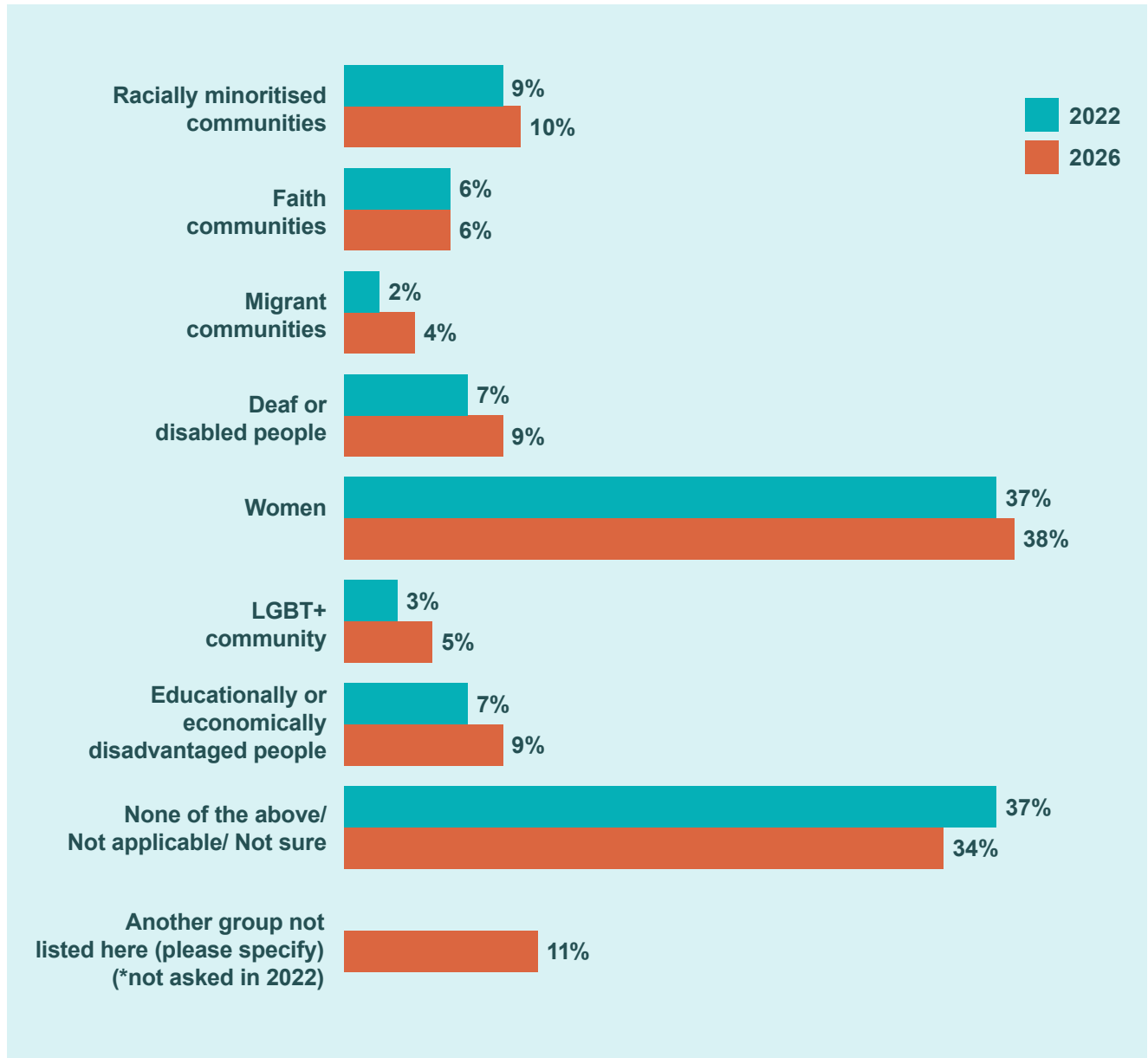


Figure 5: Location of responding organisations



When asked whether responding organisations were led by a particular group,³ 86% of respondents (1,037) fell into one or more of the categories listed in Figure 6.

Figure 6: Percentage of organisations led and managed by different communities⁴



When asked about their awareness of the eight O&T commitments, only 22% (266) said they had been aware of them prior to completing the survey.

³ Fifty per cent or more of leadership and trustees identify with their leadership group.

⁴ The figures add up to over 100% as respondents were able to select more than one option.

Part two: Survey findings

Current funding practices

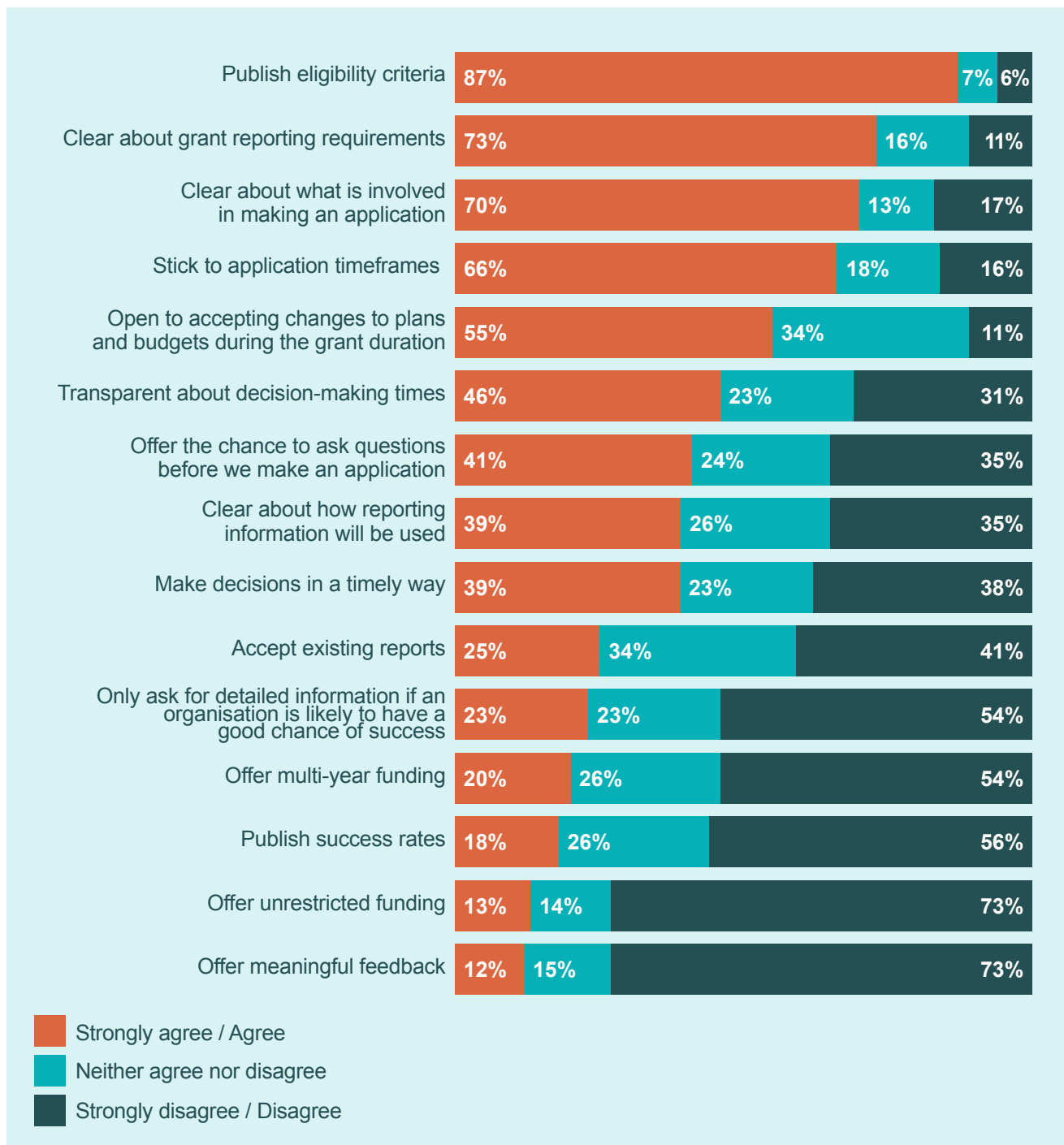
Key Findings

- **There is a mixed picture** regarding whether or not respondents are experiencing Open and Trusting funding practices.
- **Unrestricted and multi-year funding are among the rarest practices.** While a high percentage of respondents agree that funders publish eligibility criteria and are clear about reporting requirements, there is very low agreement that funders offer unrestricted funding (13%) or multi-year funding (20%).
- **The sector is divided on whether funding practices are improving.** Just over half (51%) feel practices have got better over the last three years. However, only 9% feel they have improved 'a lot'. Over a quarter (28%) feel that funding practices have got worse.
- **Applying for funding is taking an emotional toll:** Respondents' funding experiences over the past year have been emotionally taxing for many. The six most frequent words used to describe the process are overwhelmingly negative: *challenging, difficult, frustrating, exhausting, time-consuming, and stressful.*
- **The more Open and Trusting practices people experience, the more positive the funding environment feels.** Among respondents who felt funding practices have improved a lot, 41% had experienced 11 or more of the Open and Trusting practices compared to just 5% for those who felt practices have got worse.

Current funding practices

Survey respondents were asked to what extent they agreed that most funders' practices currently align with our earlier research on what matters most to charities.⁵ Figure 7 below shows a very mixed picture.

Figure 7: Extent to which respondents agreed that funders' practice matches what matters most to charities

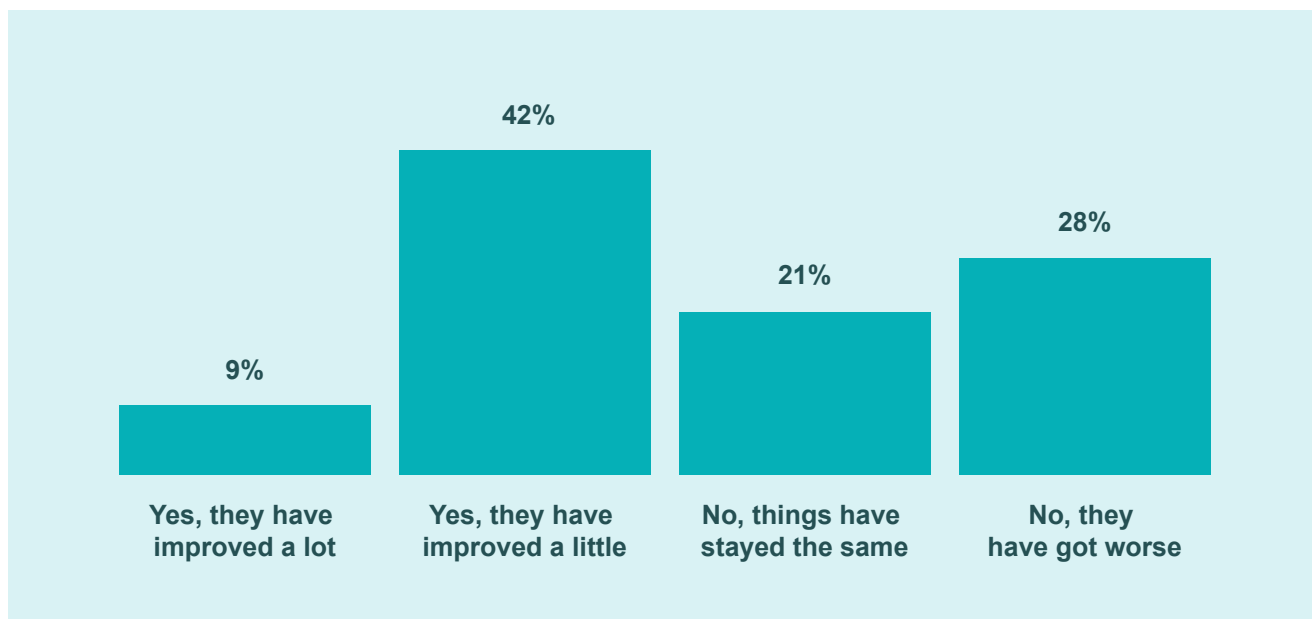


⁵ For the purpose of the survey, the grant-making practices that matter most to charities were split into 15 statements. This ensured that each statement was only testing one aspect of funder practice at a time.

Improvements in funding practices

Respondents were asked to reflect on whether they felt funding practices had, overall, 'improved', 'stayed the same' or 'got worse' over the last three years.⁶ **Just over half (51%) of respondents felt that funding practices have improved**, albeit only 9% felt they have improved a lot (see Figure 8).

Figure 8: Degree to which respondents feel that funding practices have improved, stayed the same or got worse over the last three years



Within the qualitative data, respondents gave a number of reasons for this improvement, all of which align with the O&T commitments. For example:

- Streamlined application processes (e.g. staged application processes).
- Greater availability of multi-year, unrestricted funding.
- Increasing levels of transparency (e.g. clear criteria and eligibility checkers).
- Improved digital systems and portals.
- A willingness to answer questions pre-application.
- More proportionate, efficient reporting processes (e.g. funders accepting annual accounts and a narrative update).
- A willingness to be more responsive towards individual organisations' needs.

'Some funders do have a two-stage process which helps in terms of staff capacity.'

'I have noticed some funders are now clearer about criteria and have eligibility checkers on their websites.'

⁶ It has been just over three years since the findings of the first Funding Experience Survey were released in September 2022.

‘Some grant portals are now retaining your basic information.’

‘It feels that more funders are willing to have discussions beforehand to discuss the viability of applications.’

‘I am finding that more funders are making interim and final reporting easier and quicker by accepting existing reports.’

‘I think funders are being a bit more respectful to individual charities’ requirements.’

For 28% of respondents, funding practices have got worse, while 21% feel they have remained the same. For those who feel funding practices have got worse, some of the main reasons given for this included:

- Unpredictable and erratic funder behaviour (e.g. pausing or closing funding programmes).
- Increasing numbers of funders moving to ‘invitation-only’ applications, leading to inequalities within the sector and leaving little room for supporting newer, less experienced organisations.
- Burdensome administrative demands upon application when success rates are reducing.
- Restrictive or unrealistic funding priorities (e.g. prioritising innovation rather than funding evidence-based interventions and expecting small/medium charities to shift to doing systems change work).
- Narrowing and restrictive eligibility criteria (e.g. income caps) and grant sizes not keeping pace with sector-wide changes (i.e. rising organisational costs).

‘The amount of chopping and changing, strategic reviews, pauses, early closing is making a stressful situation even worse.’

‘Unless you already move in certain circles, you don’t have a chance.’

‘The irony is stark: as your chances of success decrease, the amount of work required to apply has gone up.’

‘I get “radio silence” from the majority of funders that we apply to.’

‘There has been such a massive move away from funding direct service delivery to it being about innovation. That means key organisations and services (e.g. advice centres, youth provision, employment support) have been stripped of funding.’

‘One thing that’s very challenging is funders narrowing eligibility criteria. It’s made the environment tougher for those charities who are supporting multiple marginalised or disadvantaged groups.’

Where funders are putting O&T principles into practice, charities are noticing.

The reasons for respondents feeling that funding practices have improved – or not – align closely with them noticing improvements in relation to the eight Open and Trusting commitments (e.g. not wasting time, being open and transparent, and proportionality).

‘It’s promising to see more funders adapt their practice.’

‘There are a few funders who are really fantastic. They set such a good example for other funders.’

Analysis shows that the more Open and Trusting practices a respondent had experienced, the more likely they were to feel that the funding environment – as a whole – is improving (see Figure 9 below). For example, among respondents who felt that funding practices have improved a lot, 41% had experienced 11 or more of the Open and Trusting practices compared to just 5% among those who felt practices have got worse.

Figure 9: Percentage of respondents who feel that funder practice is improving, by how many funder practices they agree that they have experienced

Number of O&T practices respondents are experiencing	All respondents	No, they have got worse	Yes, they have improved a little	Yes, they have improved a lot
0 to 5	44%	66%	37%	12%
6 to 10	43%	30%	51%	47%
11 to 15	12%	5%	12%	41%

How it feels to apply for, and manage, grants

Respondents were invited to comment on the extent to which their experience of applying for, and managing, grants feels ‘straightforward’, ‘trusting’ and ‘respectful’. Based on the qualitative feedback, it is clear that:

Funding experiences feel straightforward when:

- Clear guidance is provided.
- Standardised questions and processes are used across different funders.
- Application processes are technically user-friendly (e.g. offline viewing and auto-saving forms).
- The length of the application feels proportionate to the grant value being applied for.

‘Our experience of applying for grants is straightforward when funders provide clear guidance, structured application processes, and relevant support materials.’

Funding experiences feel trusting when:

- Core or unrestricted funding is offered.
- The knowledge and expertise held within different communities is trusted.
- Due diligence processes feel proportionate (rather than excessive).
- Funders avoid micromanagement (e.g. of budgets).

‘Unrestricted funding shows confidence in the charity, trusting the experts to deliver the best and most impactful outcomes using their (often very) limited resources in the most responsible way.’

Funding experiences feel respectful when:

- Funders acknowledge the human effort that goes into applying. For example, by:
 - Holding pre-application calls.
 - Developing proportionate and streamlined application processes.
 - Sticking to published time frames.
 - Providing honest, meaningful feedback.

‘Where funders communicate clearly, offer dialogue, and recognise organisational constraints, the experience feels more trusting and respectful.’

Words used to describe respondents’ funding experiences

Respondents were asked, ‘What one word or phrase would you use to describe your experience of applying for funds over the last year?’ This word cloud provides a visual representation of the most frequently used words and phrases.

The six highest frequency words used were:

- Challenging (used 124 times)
- Frustrating (used 79 times)
- Exhausting (used 65 times)
- Time-consuming (used 56 times)
- Difficult (used 54 times)
- Stressful (used 46 times)



Some of the words people chose to illustrate the emotional impact that funding processes are having on them were: ‘disheartening’, ‘demoralising’, ‘soul-destroying’ and ‘depressing’. Others describe a funding environment that feels ‘competitive’, ‘relentless’, and ‘unpredictable’. Throughout, respondents used some evocative metaphors to describe their experiences. Fundraising is:

‘The professional equivalent of banging your head against a brick wall for 8 hours a day.’

‘Like trying to run up a descending escalator.’

‘Like scanning an ocean for a single life raft – possible, but far from easy ...’

Although positive words appeared far less frequently, those that did appear offered insight into what people consider a ‘positive funding experience’, including:

- Smooth, efficient and seamless
- Supportive
- Worthwhile

Most important grant-making practices

Key Findings

- **Unrestricted and multi-year funding are what charities value most.** Of the 15 grant-making practices listed, unrestricted funding (59%) and multi-year funding (51%) were selected most frequently when respondents were asked to select the four practices most important to them – significantly ahead of many of the other practices.
- **These practices matter because they provide organisations with stability, which allows them to plan, focus on front-line delivery, and enhance their overall impact.**

During the survey, respondents were asked to pick up to four grant-making practices (of those listed) that were most important to them (see Figure 10 below).

Figure 10: Percentage of respondents who chose each of the grant-making practices that matter most to charities as being one of the four most important

Most important grant-making practices	Percentage (%) of respondents who selected this practice as one of the four most important
Offer unrestricted funding	59%
Offer multi-year funding	51%
Only ask for detailed information from applicants who are likely to have a good chance of success	48%
Give meaningful feedback	48%
Be clear about what is involved in making an application	38%
Publish eligibility criteria	33%
Give organisations the chance to ask questions before they make an application	32%
Make decisions in a timely way	21%
Publish success rates	14%
Accept changes to plans and budgets during the grant duration	13%
Be transparent about decision-making times across all stages of the application process	11%
Accept existing reports from grantees	8%
Be clear about grant reporting requirements	7%
Stick to application time frames	5%
Be clear about how reporting information will be used	1%

The four practices that matter most – unrestricted funding, multi-year funding, selective information-seeking, and meaningful feedback – are united by a common theme: they treat organisations with respect, as capable and trusted partners.

Why these grant-making practices matter the most to charities

They provide organisations with the stability they need to plan strategically and invest in people and resources:

‘Multi-year funding enables strategic planning and long-term impact, rather than reactive programming and perpetual fundraising.’

‘Multi-year funding provides financial stability that allows you to hire staff on proper contracts.’

They enable organisations to direct their time and resources to front-line delivery:

‘More proportionate application processes and timely decision-making would significantly reduce wasted capacity, freeing senior leaders and frontline teams to spend more time on delivery, partnership-building, and learning.’

‘Open and trusting practices allow staff and volunteers to focus on frontline community work rather than constant fundraising.’

They enable organisations to meet the needs of their beneficiaries as they see fit:

‘Unrestricted funding is gold dust as it allows us to get on with the work and adapt as we need to according to need.’

‘Unrestricted funding lets us adapt quickly.’

They enhance organisations’ longer-term impact:

‘Unrestricted funding sustains organisations. And sustainable organisations create lasting impact.’

‘Multi-year and unrestricted funding provide stability and flexibility, allowing us to focus on long-term impact.’

They respect organisations’ expertise, time and capacity:

‘Unrestricted funding shows confidence from the funders in the charity. Trusting the experts to deliver the best and most impactful outcomes.’

‘Time-intensive and administratively demanding application processes can divert valuable staff time away from frontline service delivery.’

When asked whether there were any practices missing from the above list, additional suggestions included:

- Ensure digital platforms are accessible and easy to use.
- Ensure eligibility criteria reflect the reality of organisations' operating context (e.g. increased National Insurance and inflation rates) and do not punish charities for holding reserves or managing their finances responsibly.
- Further improve transparency and communication (e.g. publish reporting formats, application scoring criteria and past grantees).
- Invest time in building up a relationship with organisations (e.g. through site visits and pre-application conversations).
- Provide 'funder plus' support.
- Identify opportunities for funders to collaborate and pool funding and reporting requirements.

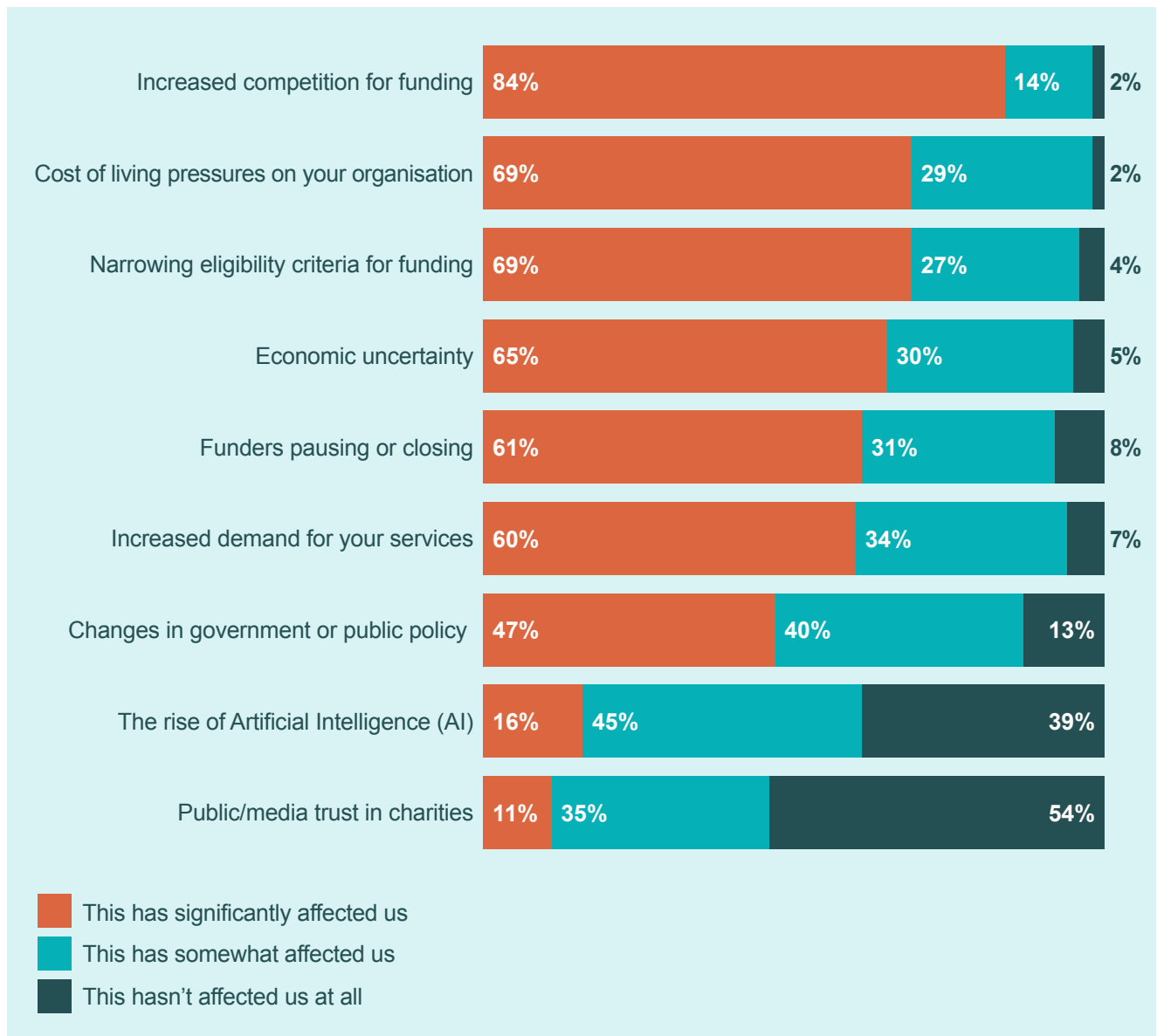
The current operating context

Key Findings

- **Charities today are operating under intense and compounding pressure.** 89% of respondents have been significantly affected by at least one of six major contextual factors – and half have been significantly affected by five or more simultaneously.
- **Increased competition for funding is the pressure affecting charities most significantly.**
- **The pressures are converging in ways that feel overwhelming or even unsurvivable.** Funders' practices – e.g. narrowing eligibility criteria, pausing or closing funding programmes – are adding to the challenges of rising costs, economic uncertainty, and growing demand for services, leaving charities uncertain about their future.
- **The human impact is significant.** Those working in the sector describe themselves as burnt-out and in survival mode – a reminder that funding practices do not exist in isolation from the people delivering them.

The final section of the survey sought feedback about the world in which charities are working today. Specifically, respondents were asked to what extent a range of factors had affected their organisations in the past 12 months (see Figure 11).

Figure 11: Extent to which respondents said that a range of factors are affecting their organisation in the past 12 months

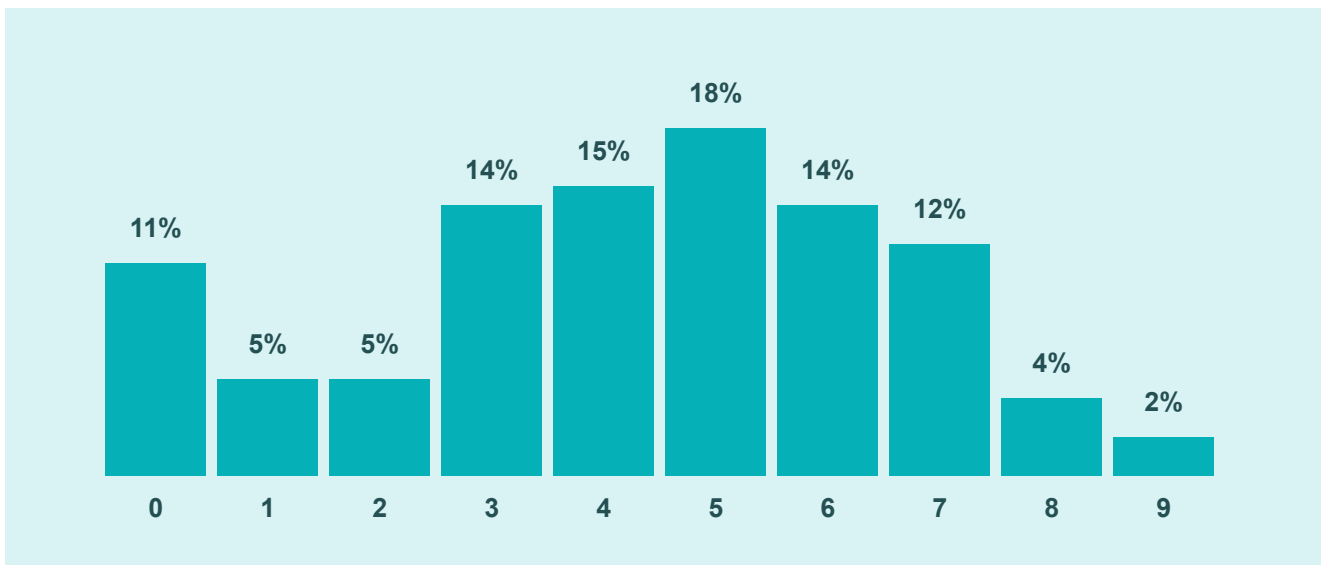


The findings show that the following six factors are ‘significantly’ affecting at least 60% of respondents:

- Increased competition for funding (84%)
- Cost of living pressures on organisations (69%)
- Narrowing eligibility criteria (69%)
- Economic uncertainty (65%)
- Funders pausing or closing (61%)
- Increased demand for services (60%)

Eighty-nine per cent of respondents said they have been ‘significantly’ affected by at least one of these factors (see Figure 12).

Figure 12: The number of factors organisations have been significantly affected by



Half of all respondents (50%) have been ‘significantly’ affected by at least ‘five pressures’, with many of the factors being described as *‘intrinsically linked’*. This combination of factors is having a significant impact on those working in the sector, with respondents describing themselves as *‘burnt-out’* and *‘in survival mode’*: **The message is that organisations are under significant pressure from a range of contextual factors:**

‘It’s the triple squeeze – high demand, high costs and funding difficulties.’

‘Our reality is that we have been doing much more for much less. We are now at breaking point.’

‘It’s like an ever-depleting battery – a vicious downward spiral of increasing effort required for less and less return.’

When asked what other factors are affecting organisations, respondents mentioned:

- Funders not accounting for full cost recovery in line with rising organisational costs.
- Funders being less willing to support organisations that are seen to be ‘too political’:

‘As people from and working in the migration sector, I feel there is a fear of association with funding us from quite a few funders now.’

Part three: Discussion

Key messages

Over 1,200 people working across the voluntary sector took the time to share their experiences with us. Their responses demand reflection and change. Below are some of the key implications and takeaways that we will encourage the O&T community to reflect on.

- 1. The O&T movement remains as relevant today as it did when it was launched.** There is nothing in the survey findings that tells us our job is done or that we should sit back and stop working hard to improve the funding landscape. In fact, everything points to the opposite. Given the significant emotional and practical impact that closed, inflexible funding practices can have, we must keep working to ensure that O&T grant-making becomes embedded across the funding landscape.
- 2. Flexible funding – unrestricted, multi-year – remains the biggest unmet need.** The offer of long-term, flexible grants is what charities say they most need to deliver consistent, responsive and effective services. But it remains an uncommon practice – ‘gold dust’ in the words of one respondent – requiring close continued attention, advocacy and support to be adopted by more funders.
- 3. Funders can’t control every aspect of charities’ experience – but they can influence how it feels.** Many of the pressures charities face – increased competition, rising costs, growing demand – are beyond any individual funder’s control. But ‘challenging’, ‘exhausting’ and ‘soul-destroying’ (see word cloud on [page 18](#)) are words about process, not outcomes. A charity turned down for funding will feel disappointed – but there is no reason why applying should also leave them feeling demoralised or burnt out. That is within funders’ power to change.
- 4. The shift that matters most is cultural.** What holds funders back from meaningfully changing their practice is rarely lack of awareness. It is more often a set of assumptions around risk, control, and what good impact looks like. Funders hold significant power in their relationships with charities, and how they manage that power – whether they see their role as scrutinising or enabling, controlling or trusting – shapes everything. The O&T commitments are not just a checklist of practices. They are an invitation to examine those assumptions.
- 5. We will need to work together if we want to achieve more.** The survey reminds us that funding practices continue to be highly variable. As such, while we can each make individual, incremental progress, organisations are not going to reap all the benefits if poor practice continues to exist elsewhere. The more funders that operate in this way, the greater that difference becomes. In the face of huge contextual challenges, growing the movement and building shared momentum isn’t just desirable – it’s the most powerful thing we can do for the sector.

Conclusion

‘What difference would an O&T approach make to our organisation? It would mean a stronger, more resilient charity; staff who can focus on support rather than survival; services that are consistent, reliable, and high-quality; the ability to innovate instead of firefight.’

This quote captures what Open and Trusting grant-making makes possible. Processes that feel smooth and worthwhile rather than ‘exhausting’ or ‘frustrating’. Relationships that feel supportive and trusting rather than ‘difficult’ or ‘unpredictable’.

It is not a radical ask – it is a practical one: to be straightforward, trusting and respectful. Funders and charities exist in service of the same thing: communities, people, and the work that makes a difference to their lives. At a time when that work is under threat from so many forces, we’re calling on grant-makers to ask themselves one question: what could we do better?

The results of this survey are both a challenge and an invitation. A challenge to keep asking what more can be done – and an invitation to do it together. With a growing community of committed funders, we believe that an Open and Trusting funding landscape is within reach.