

The organisational needs of charities and social enterprises in the UK working on climate and sustainability

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pilotlight

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1. Executive Summary

To understand the activities of organisations working on climate and environmental sustainability and their support needs, Pilotlight has conducted survey research, with 298 charities and social enterprises taking part.

While there is no definitive data on this, Pilotlight's working estimate is that there may be as many as 16,000 environmental organisations in the UK.

The key findings from the research are that:

- Environmental charities are highly cause-led. They are strong on vision. However, when it comes to business and operational planning, they are less advanced than the wider charity sector.
- The skills gap is greatest for smaller environmental charities, where one in two have no business plan for the year and one in three have no way to measure their impact.
- One in ten environmental charities spend no money at all on training and development for staff.
- Environmental charities have a broad and active range of professional support needs, with fundraising and marketing (84%), evaluation (76%), diversity (69%) and strategy (67%) top of the list.
- Two out of three environmental charities are actively looking for professional support from skilled volunteers (63%).
- Only one in five environmental charities (20%) know of any options for capacity building support such as this. Most charities (80%) do not know where to turn to.
- Drawing on the support priorities of the participating charities, we estimate a need for an additional 100,000 skilled climate volunteers in the UK.

Recognising the need and opportunity for action, we conclude that action to fill the capacity-building gap on climate and sustainability in the UK is therefore urgent and compelling.

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2. About the survey

The survey was conducted inspired by insights from Garfield Weston Foundation that the part of the charity sector that focuses on topics of sustainability and environmentalism have a notably harder time accessing funding and support.¹ As a leading charity offering strategic support to the charity sector, Pilotlight set out to explore what the gaps in need and capacity are in this element of the sector.

Earlier scoping research conducted for Pilotlight, in 2020, by Cornish and Grey focused on the profile of the voluntary sector in relation to climate adaptation.² This survey was developed with early input from Cornish and Grey and benefited from generous collaboration by the Environmental Funders Network, in order to dovetail with its own research on environmental funding and was distributed across the UK civil society via charity infrastructure bodies on social media. A number of questions were drawn from wider voluntary sector research by Pro Bono Economics for the Law Family Commission, and we are grateful for the openness shown to us by colleagues there, as this in turn allowed for an element of benchmarking within the survey.

The survey launched on 24 April 2023 and was open until 4 June 2023 in its English format and in Welsh, launched 2 weeks later. In total Pilotlight received 298 responses to the survey, from across the UK. There were no Welsh language responses, but there were responses to the survey in its English format from across Wales, including from areas of strong Welsh language participation.

A Social Stories Hamper, with goodies to share from social enterprises in the UK, was offered as an incentive prize and the winner for this, selected at random, was the Scottish Seabird Centre.

As the survey was distributed via social media, the sample is not a conscious one but rather one of opportunity.

¹ <https://garfieldweston.org/about-us/news-insights/environment-report/>

² <https://www.pilotlight.org.uk/news/how-is-pilotlight-supporting-charities-fighting-the-climate-emergency>

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3. Key findings

This section on key findings covers:

- The profile of respondents, where information about individuals and their organisations who completed the survey can be found. This shows the cross-section of the sector who participated in the research.
- The basic strategic toolbox, an exploration of what common, essential strategic tools the charities have or are lacking.
- Organisational strengths and development needs, where information about the challenges the charities face and areas where they excel can be found.
- Connection to support looks at charities' experiences with and knowledge about pro bono support available to them and an estimate of the scale and relevance of support in terms of skilled volunteering.

Profile of respondents

75% respondents hold a paid, senior role in their organisation (CEO, Director, senior leader with or without line management responsibilities). A further 11% are board members of their organisation.

Using NCVO's membership breakdown of charity types, our survey showed that 77% respondents work for a charity, with 10% more for a social enterprise. Only five respondents indicated they work for a voluntary organisation type of organisation. For simplicity, we will refer in this report to charities as including social enterprises. As a social enterprise and a registered charity ourselves, we are aware of the sensitivities of these different identities, but felt we could save the reader some time, using a single term.

According to NCVO there were 6,204 voluntary organisations in the UK in 2022, a 2.5% increase over the past year.³ According to Social Enterprise UK, one in five social enterprises address climate change through their

³ <https://www.ncvo.org.uk/news-and-insights/news-index/uk-civil-society-almanac-2022/#/> Our calculations compared to NCVO Almanac data for 2021.

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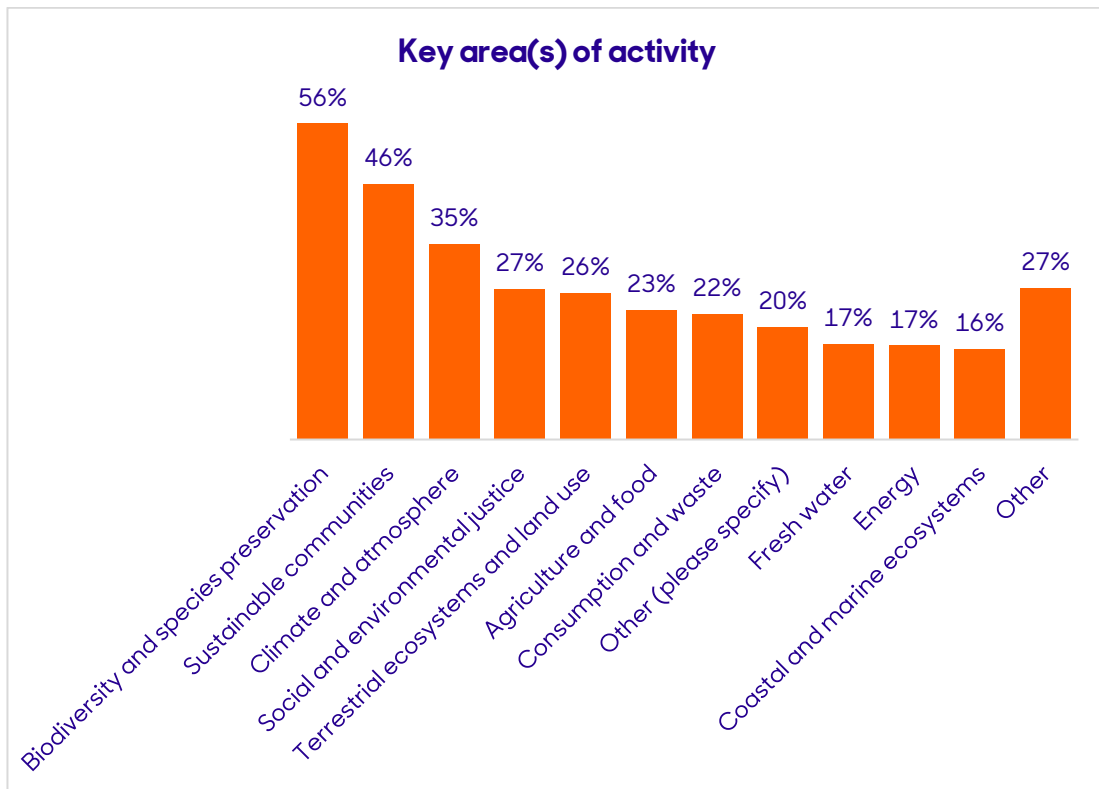
core mission.⁴ Social Enterprise UK also estimate that the number of social enterprises in the UK is 100,000. Taking these two estimates together, recognising the scope for overlap and duplication plus applying a significant degree of discounting for the more open definition used for social enterprises, we have decided to work to a provisional estimate of around 16,000 environmental organisations in the UK.

If so, then the sample size for our survey is 1.9% of the full sector of environmental organisations. This is given simply as a working estimate – as Professor Herman Daly used to say of efforts to green economic statistics “*it is better to be imprecisely right, than precisely wrong*” by offering no estimate at all. We would welcome research to get closer to the truth, as well, in particular, as mapping that can help to build a practical segmentation of environmental organisations for research and support in future. We have applied the classifications developed by the Environmental Funders Network, which is the best we know of for now.

Using this, we asked respondents to choose all key areas of activity from a list that their organisation is involved in. 56% of respondents’ organisations, the highest proportion, work toward, at least in part, biodiversity and species preservation. Sustainable communities (46%) and climate and atmosphere (35%) are also common areas of activity. 27% of organisations also engage in social and environmental justice work.

⁴ <https://www.socialenterprise.org.uk/app/uploads/2022/05/State-of-Social-Enterprise-Survey-2021-compressed.pdf>

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Most respondents' organisations focus on only a few key areas of activity, with 63% focusing on 1 to 3 areas and 30% on only one.

Number of areas of activity	Count of responses	Percentage of responses
1	89	30%
2	51	17%
3	47	16%
4	29	10%
5	26	9%
6	25	8%
7	12	4%
8	7	2%
9	7	2%
11	1	0.3%
12	2	0.7%
13	2	0.7%
Total	298	

We explored the age, income, and size of organisations to better understand their profile.

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Using NCVO's established charity income brackets, the respondents' income was explored. 28% of respondents' organisations are categorised as 'medium' sized charities. Comparing sustainability-focused charities who completed the survey to the UK charity sector at large (see table below) reveals that our respondent organisations are considerably larger than the overall average – including 7% classed as major or super-major.

Income band	Category (NCVO, Civil Society Almanac)	% of responses	% of UK charities ⁵
Less than £10,000	Micro	7%	45%
£10,000 to £100,000	Small	17%	35%
£100,000 to £1m	Medium	41%	16%
£1m to £10m	Large	26%	4%
£10m+	Major and super-major	7%	0.54%

This is especially pertinent in the context of the Environmental Funders Network's Research, *What the Green Groups Said, 2021*.⁶ Based on their insight, 'smaller CSOs [Civil Society Organisations] tend to be more reliant on foundation funding, although over 60% of the total value of foundation funding recorded in [*What the Green Groups Said, 2021*] was received by the largest 25 organisations.'⁷ Their research found that nearly 80% of their respondent charities (with income under £5 million) made up just 15% of the combined income reported by respondents, while just six organisations with incomes over £50 million received 51% of the combined income.⁸

⁵ NCVO, UK Civil Society Almanac 2022 (<https://www.ncvo.org.uk/news-and-insights/news-index/uk-civil-society-almanac-2022/executive-summary>)

⁶ https://www.greenfunders.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/What-the-Green-Groups-Said-2021_online.pdf

⁷ Page 4, https://www.greenfunders.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/What-the-Green-Groups-Said-2021_online.pdf

⁸ Page 7, https://www.greenfunders.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/What-the-Green-Groups-Said-2021_online.pdf

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This highlights the contrast evident among environmental charities' financial sustainability, with the 65% of micro, small, and medium respondent charities (income under £1 million) facing significant financial constraints.

The average (mean) age of organisations in our research is 28 years old, with a median age of 20. Just six respondents are less than two years old (3%), while charities that have been operating for 20 years or less comprise 28% of the respondents. Most respondent charities were established 21 to 50 years ago (37%). The average age is skewed by a few highly established entities that report having been established a century or more ago (5%), the oldest one reporting to be 300 years old. The environment is not a new concern, even if the ways in which this concern is understood, and the responses are shaped and highly contemporary.

Age (in years)	Count	% of responses
<2	6	3%
2-5	22	11%
6-10	28	14%
11-20	48	24%
21-50	72	37%
51-99	11	6%
100+	10	5%

The average (mean) number of paid staff at respondent organisations is 51, but as with age, this is skewed by a few outliers, with the median at just nine paid staff members. Just 18 charities (9%) report having over 100 paid staff. The largest proportion of respondent charities operate with 1 to 10 staff members (44%).

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Number of paid staff	Count	% of responses
0	22	11%
1-10	88	44%
11-25	32	16%
26-50	28	14%
51-100	13	6%
101-200	9	4%
201+	9	4%

On the other hand, environmental charities appear to be highly adept and established at using volunteers to achieve their goals. The average (mean) number of volunteers that support respondents' charities is 420, though again this is shown to include significant outliers, as the median is just 20. These outliers include 12 (6%) charities with over 1,000 volunteers. However, it should also be noted that 14% charities operate with no volunteer resource at all.

Number of volunteers	Count	% of responses
0	27	14%
1-10	47	24%
11-25	39	20%
26-50	18	9%
51-100	16	8%
101-200	21	11%
201-500	14	7%
501-1000	6	3%
1000+	12	6%

Respondent charities operate in a wide variety of geographical context. 33% of respondent charities operate across the UK, while 27% operate regionally (in one or more specific counties or countries), 25% across England, and 21% in their local authority area. 20% have an international remit.

Among the organisations with a single nation-wide remit, 47% focus on England, 23% on Scotland, 17% on Wales, and 13% on Northern Ireland.

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Our respondents' offices are based across the entirety of the UK. Perhaps unsurprisingly, 18% of organisations are based in London and 19% in the South West.

Where is your organisation based?	Count	% of responses
East of England	17	8%
East Midlands	9	4%
London	36	18%
North East	7	3%
North West	18	9%
South East	26	13%
South West	38	19%
West Midlands	19	9%
Yorkshire and the Humber	11	5%
Scotland	25	12%
Wales	13	6%
Northern Ireland	7	3%
We have no offices	14	7%
Other (please specify)	7	3%

The strategic toolbox

Using elements of a survey instrument developed by Pro Bono Economics (PBE) for a wider survey of the voluntary sector, allowing us provisionally – subject to appropriate qualifications around the different methods for sampling in each study – to benchmark the results, the survey explored a set of current strategic 'tools' respondent charities have.⁹

While 92% of respondents have an up-to-date statement of mission, vision, and values, just 34% have an up-to-date theory of change or logic model to describe how they work. Nearly 30% (29%) of organisations do not monitor any KPIs at all at this time and under half (44%) monitor more than three KPIs.

⁹ <https://www.probonoeconomics.com/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=b1d6a99e-c6b6-4623-9bc7-ea87b14c8e4b>

This is in line with PBE's research into the wider voluntary sector (see tables below), although PBE itself flags concern on these results: *'strategic and business planning, and the monitoring and management of organisational performance in the sector is also variable. For example, around half of smaller charities struggle to carve out the time and space to implement these fundamental practices.'*¹⁰

There are also two marked differences. Most environmental organisations (92%) have an up-to-date statement of mission, vision, and values, 9% more so than for voluntary organisations more widely. At the same time, among environmental organisations, 9% fewer have a business plan for the current year including measurable goals and objectives.

As one respondent commented plaintively *"we have no capacity to plan ahead as we are the ones delivering day to day."* Another reported that *"we are excellent at managing our day to day finances, but we need a more robust method of planning our long term strategic financial resources, developing long term, sustainable income streams and not relying on short term 'big' funds' that run out after 2/3/5 years."*

Environmental charities are cause-led. They are strong on vision. However, when it comes to some of the key management tools that are used for effective planning, benchmarked against the charity sector more widely, they are less advanced on practice. The clearest gap is in being 'data-driven', i.e., having a clear model to show how outcomes will be achieved and monitoring KPIs in service to this.

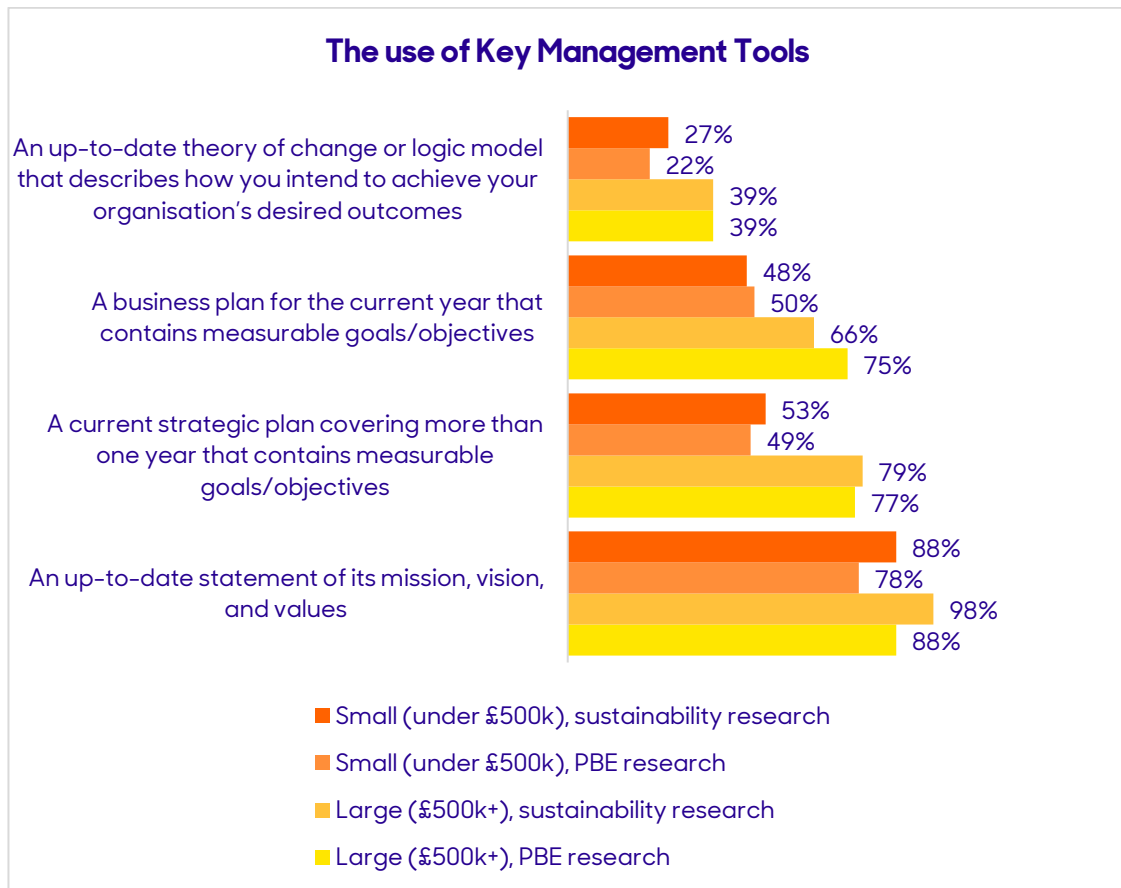
¹⁰ <https://www.probonoeconomics.com/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=b1d6a99e-c6b6-4623-9bc7-ea87b14c8e4b>

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Which, if any, of the following does your organisation currently have?	% of responses	Voluntary sector as a whole
An up-to-date statement of its mission, vision, and values	92%	83%
A current strategic plan covering more than one year that contains measurable goals/objectives	65%	65%
A business plan for the current year that contains measurable goals/objectives	56%	65%
An up-to-date theory of change or logic model that describes how you intend to achieve your organisation's desired outcomes	34%	33%

In this sense, as with other charities, environmental organisations are in need of development support to round out their strategic toolbox. These findings also seem to hold across different sizes of organisation. Comparing organisations above and below £500,000 income repeats this finding that, regardless of their size, environmental organisations are more likely to have a clear mission, vision, and values statement.

While upskilling staff would be an effective way to build the strategic toolbox, environmental organisations are also financially limited in their investment in learning and development. While the total percentage of income is small, 27% respondents report spending 0.1% to 1% of last year's expenditure on training. A further 20% spent 1.1% to 2%. However, alarmingly 10% did not spend any money on development of their staff at all.



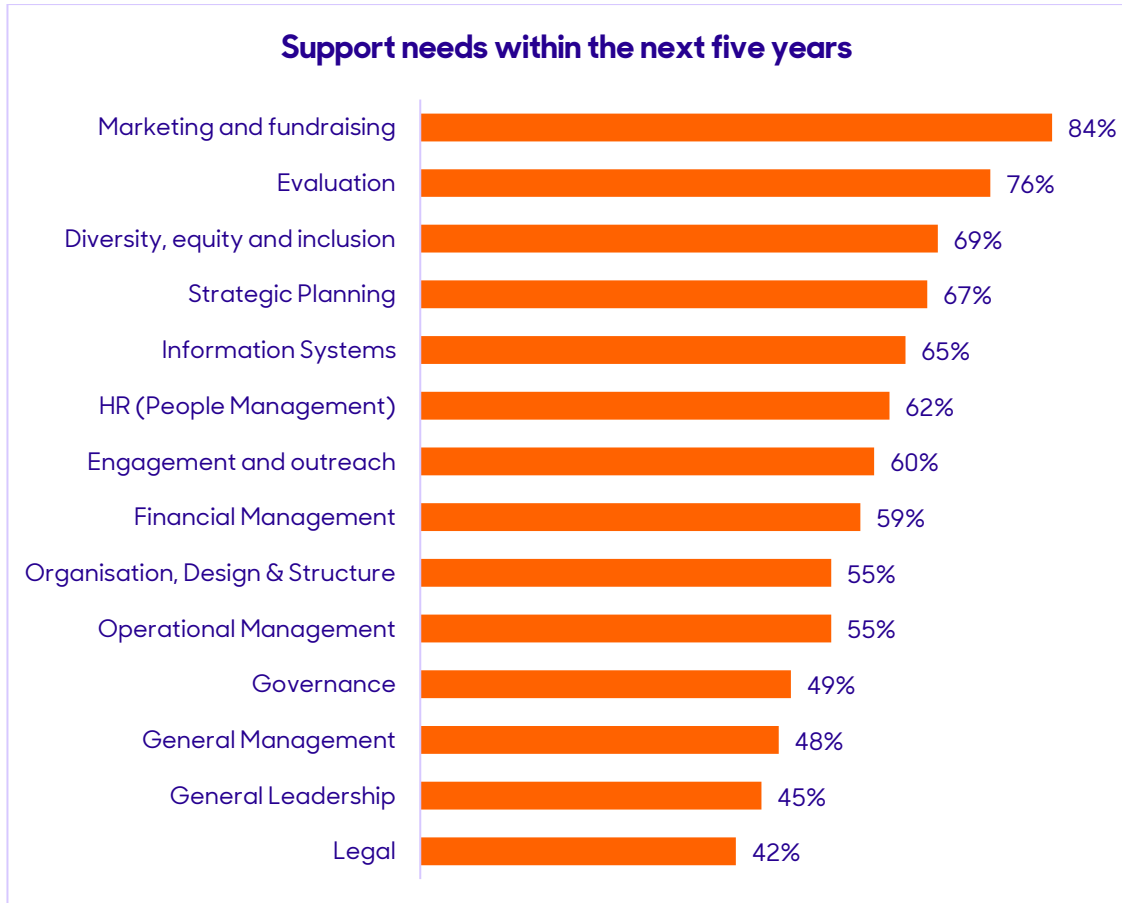
Again, on this, the sustainability sector mirrored the voluntary sector more widely, with the same concerns expressed by PBE that *'there are issues with how the sector is able to utilise and invest in its workforce... Low pay and challenging working conditions are taking their toll on staff and are likely to be acting as a drag on the sector's productivity, while a failure to address a lack of racial and socio-economic diversity within the sector adds further weight to these issues.'*¹¹

Organisational development needs

Clearly, the strategic toolbox discussed above is just a starting point. Organisations' strategies, leadership, and operations are far more complex than the above minimum tools are able to support. We asked charities to tell us what, amongst a range of topics, they excel at, what they expect to be challenged by within the next five years, and what their

¹¹ <https://www.probonoeconomics.com/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=b1d6a99e-c6b6-4623-9bc7-ea87b14c8e4b>

most urgent organisational need is. Additionally, we explored what in their view are the most pressing challenges facing environmental and sustainability charities as a whole over the next five years.



Understandably, marketing and fundraising are viewed as the biggest challenge facing organisations within the next five years, reflecting the ongoing challenge of funding structures. We return to this below. As also alluded to in the previous section, becoming data-driven is also a considerable challenge, with evaluation (and, separately, information systems) being the second biggest challenge.

Diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) is recognised as a third challenge, reflecting a growing body of research and debate around the white, eurocentric nature of the sustainability field. As one respondent said, *"the environmental sector is still one of the least diverse sectors in the UK."* Across the voluntary sector, there has in recent years been a recognition

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of the need for systemic action to dismantle racism.¹² In the environmental sector, despite the key role played over so many years by people from the global majority, this has been a particular challenge.

In 2021, research by Full Colour for Wildlife and Countryside Link found that 84% of those surveyed in the environmental sector had considered issues of DEI or had taken some action but did not have a specific action plan.¹³ Ellie Ward of Link comments that *"just 4.8% of environmental professionals identify as Black, Asian or from other minority ethnic group compared to 12.6% across all UK professions. Research shows that people of colour face significant barriers to joining environmental organisations in the first place, and then once in the sector experience both overt and covert racism."*¹⁴

Next up, the fourth most cited organisational challenge over time is strategic planning. Additional organisational development needs are then HR (People Management), engagement and outreach, financial management and organisational design.

As one respondent put it: *"all the above are challenges, but we meet them as best we can. some are easier to meet and others are harder. Biggest one is getting in enough funds to keep going - whether from grants or self-generated income."*

In comments, recruitment of staff and suitable trustees is a specific concern noted by several charities, especially ones based in more rural

¹² See for example <https://www.acevo.org.uk/reports/home-truths/> and <https://www.acevo.org.uk/home-truths-2/>

¹³

https://www.wcl.org.uk/assets/uploads/img/files/Changing_the_world_from_within_Sept_2021.pdf This finding helped to inform the publication by the Link of 'A Route Map to Greater Ethnic Diversity': https://www.wcl.org.uk/docs/WCL_Route_map_towards_greater_ethnic_diversity_October_2022.pdf

See also <https://www.sos-uk.org/research/racial-diversity-in-environment-professions> <https://www.race-report.uk/> and work supported by funders such as Esmee Fairbairn Foundation <https://esmeefairbairn.org.uk/latest-news/addressing-lack-diversity-environment-sector/> - and, for a more radical take on power, imagination and control, *Hospicing Modernity*, Vanessa Machado de Oliveira, North Atlantic Books, 2021.

¹⁴ <https://www.countryside-jobs.com/article/2023-01-04-towards-greater-ethnic-diversity-in-the-environment-sector>

areas. One respondent noted that "significant difficulties recruiting key posts into the [organisation] restricts [their] capacity to grow learning, bring in new skills and expertise and new perspectives - lack of applicants and suitable candidates. This is having an impact on staff well-being as staff are stretched beyond their current roles longer than is usual when vacancies remain unfilled."



Other concerns cited included challenges around efforts to maintain capacity and workload, succession planning, and volunteer recruitment. For one respondent, "volunteers have always been a good way to get things done. However, we do not want to exploit anyone - particularly recent graduates. We have tried to establish roles which are mutually

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beneficial to the volunteer and us, but this impacts on our ability to be inclusive."

For charities with incomes under £500,000, the top three challenges are marketing and fundraising, evaluation, and strategic planning. For charities with incomes over £500,000, marketing and fundraising also appeared in their top concerns, but their third challenge is in diversity, equity, and inclusion.

We asked what the most urgent support needs were. The results echo the needs over five years, but some organisational development needs escalate, such as strategy, while others, such as evaluation, are downplayed.

Most urgent support needs



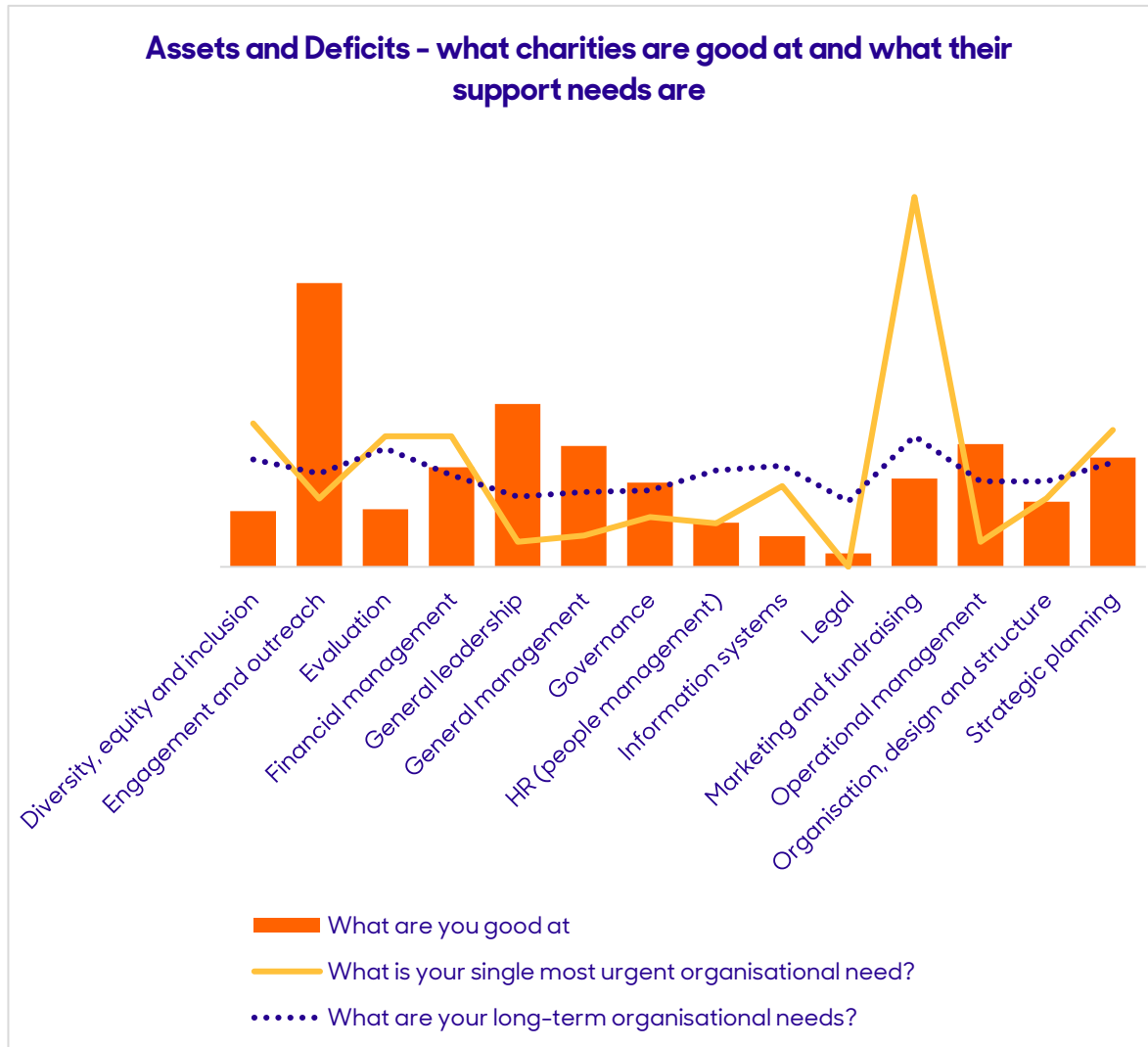
In terms of the most urgent needs, income generation (fundraising or new revenue stream exploration) is still the most sought-after skillset among those looking for pro bono support. The second highest number of respondents stated looking for support with strategy, then operational support (filling gaps such as financial management and HR), third came marketing and communications (including social media, marketing, and PR), and a significant number of respondents mentioned looking for support with technical skills (IT, CRM, data management, web design). For one charity, *"our challenge is managing growth - integrating new staff and maintaining our culture."*

Organisational strengths... and challenges

In terms of their own strengths, charities feel that they are best at engagement and outreach – by far! 70% of charities chose this option. 40% of charities saw their leadership as a strength. Charities on average specified three and a half strengths each, but other strengths were more evenly spread, and no other specific strength emerged as common to more than one in three of the respondents.

Generally, their strengths and challenges line up (for example charities report being quite good on operations management and it is seen as less likely to cause worries in the next 5 years). There are notable skills gaps in evaluation (as noted above), DEI, HR, and information systems, and there are fewer charities with notable self-reported legal skills (3%).

How does the self-reported strengths on outreach link to the perceived weaknesses on diversity and inclusion? One respondent points to an answer in their case, which is the fact that "our work focuses on underrepresented groups in the outdoors, but our staff and board do not reflect this diversity at all."



Unsurprisingly, areas of charity operations that the organisation has more knowledge and expertise of are seen as less likely to be urgent challenges, as the charity is buffered against such challenges.

Information systems is an area in which charities do not rate themselves as good at and they identify as a key focus for support. While there has been excellent work over time to build digital capability for charities, charted for example in the Charity Digital Skills report (48% of charities now have a strategic approach to digital), there is far more to do in terms of capacity

building... and of course, systems do not stand still.¹⁵ As one respondent commented *"technology changes quickly and to become a lean organisation we need to ensure technologies can integrate with each other and into our workstreams."* Another indicates that *"we need to go through a significant digital transformation over the next few years"*.

Clearly charities do have great assets in terms of strengths that are relevant to their support needs.

To be good at outreach and engagement, for example, is a helpful underpinning for being good at fundraising. The environmental movement has always been able to draw on a rich array of storytellers.¹⁶

One organisation which has a track record of support for storytelling and digital fundraising is Lightful. Vinay Nair, Co-Founder & CEO comments that *"we have been seeing a sharp increase in demand for digital tools and training we provide not only across the U.K. but also around the world. It is vital we help organisations build a solid digital strategy that forms the foundation for authentic storytelling, which leads to increased campaigning and fundraising results."*¹⁷

In line with this, one respondent explains that *"we are aiming to increase our impact tenfold to 2030 and marketing and fundraising will be crucial in getting there."* For others, funding is part of a wider story around the charity business model, including the need to diversify and build resources for the work ahead. The caution for many, though, is that this is a long way off. As one put it *"long term financial sustainability and security remains our key challenge."*

We know from our work to support charity leaders that running a cause-led organisation, buoyed up by hope and expectation but staring into the realities and risks of financial risk and dependencies can feel like walking a tightrope. As we have argued elsewhere, being a charity leader, seen by

¹⁵ <https://charitydigitalskills.co.uk/>

¹⁶ See for example comments by Andrew Simms: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/nov/01/fairy-stories-folk-tales-climate-change-refugees>

¹⁷ Personal correspondence, September 2023

some as lacking in professional skills, in fact ought to be recognised as one of the most demanding and talented leadership roles of all.¹⁸

Comments on funding do also show a nuanced view, with concerns expressed that increased fundraising can lead to further pressures, in terms of increased competition in the sector. As one charity puts it, *"our main challenge is that fundraising takes up most of the Senior Team's time and we are still being unsuccessful - usually due to an oversubscription for the limited funding pots for UK charities in this area unless you are a very large or established charity. This limits our impact as our time is pointed in the wrong direction."*

Reporting systems and grant paperwork too can be a challenge – *"we rely on grant funding, and we do get great results for a small climate change community charity - however the time wasted because we haven't got the correct information to hand or recorded when requested by current funders or future is very frustrating."* Even so, in line with the findings we cited earlier from the Garfield Weston Foundation, there is an evident need for increased access to funding. As one respondent commented *"currently philanthropic funding is not growing at the pace needed and many funders find it difficult to reach local NGOs."*

For many, the challenge of funding is compounded by an underlying sense of urgency caused by the speed of climate degradation and the scale of the climate emergency. As one respondent put it, *"the variety of ideas which need to be tested/rolled out locally and nationally at once, to drive change quickly enough, and are not being met by existing charities, mean there needs to be funding for innovation and pilots/seed funding which newer/small organisations can successfully apply to (without needing huge governance functions and years of experience). We cannot wait until charities naturally grow, we need to invest now in innovation and allow projects to learn/fail/succeed at speed."* Linked to this are comments on scaling that:

- *"there is so much good being done across the UK and so much useful activity being tested, but those doing it cannot capture/evidence appropriately nor grow quickly enough."*
- *"it feels as if the only solution to the scale of the challenges we face is for all sectors to converge around activities that deliver to*

¹⁸ <https://www.charitytimes.com/ct/blog-opinion-should-charities-be-professional.php>

multiple agendas: climate, biodiversity, access to nature, water quality/quantity, food production."

There are also concerns expressed around the feasibility of scaling impact, with concerns on the political landscape (with a perceived lack of support) and a fear of sustainability topics not staying 'top of mind' enough to maintain engagement from society, volunteers, and staff at the level that is required. The sustainability agenda is far wider than carbon alone; the efforts of many environmental charities and their intersection with social charities working with and giving voice to vulnerable groups for example is classed by some as working towards a 'just transition'.¹⁹

In all of this context, we are struck even more by the relatively low emphasis placed by environmental charities on governance. There are some comments such as "we need to transition our Board of Trustees from being active volunteers into strategic directors" and critical asides such as "we have a Board of Trustees who are out of touch and have no vision or strategic plan for the future" but many are silent on their governance.

Alongside leadership, with which it sits in synergy or in tension, we find that governance is the single most important variable in the life of organisations at times of uncertainty, risk and opportunity. As one respondent commented "with so much uncertainty we will need to be able to respond quickly to seize opportunities and limit challenges. This requires a significant shift in the way that we do things. Our culture, governance and digital capability may restrict this at present."

Another respondent suggests that "the external context is shifting so fast that strategic planning is needed to ensure opportunities are maximised, and [there is] clarity of purpose."

In our experience, having worked now to support over 1,000 charities, we tend to see that charities struggle to assess the quality of their governance – that trustees are supportive is commonplace, that they are able to challenge effectively is not. It is a critical factor though, as where charities see there are needs, there can be an underlying thread of governance, in terms of the capable and informed direction of resources, strategy and culture against the mission of the charity. Governance sits behind many or

¹⁹ See for example <https://www.lse.ac.uk/granthaminstitute/publication/just-transition-finance-tool-for-banking-and-investing-activities/>

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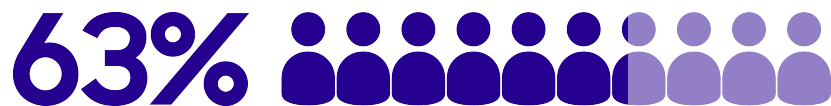
all of the capabilities that environmental organisations are looking to address, from digital skills on the Board and its ability to champion diversity through to its capabilities to support and enable effective operational leadership and organisational performance.

The capacity building challenge, from this perspective, is not a simple one of growing capability from where it is now, but rather one of growing capability to where it needs to be. This gives an urgency to the challenge of institutional development in the sector.

Scale of support required – and the scope for pro bono volunteering

Around two thirds of respondents (63%) were actively looking for added professional support at the time of the survey completion. The overwhelming preference for this support was for skilled volunteering. A minority of respondents recognised that they had the capacity to pay for support in some cases, such as around fundraising. Of those charities who are looking for support, half (49%) have benefited from free professional support from skilled volunteers within the last two years.

Around two out of three environmental charities are actively looking for professional support from skilled volunteers



However, only one in five environmental charities in our survey (20%) know of any options for skilled volunteering support. Most charities (80%) do not know where to turn to for skills-based support.

This is about the same level for both those currently looking for added professional support and not – which strongly hints at a barrier to entry to accessing free support. Furthermore, to access support then implies a need for the capacity to take on that support. As one respondent commented: *"the challenge is often having the staff capacity to support/ manage volunteers, and then implement their recommendations."*

Of course, if they can generate more income, then charities have more scope to pay for the support services that they require. Larger charities are better able to employ people with specialist skills, whereas it is an old adage that leaders of smaller charities have to be Jack or Jill 'of all trades', turning their attention to managing staff and volunteers, running operations, analysing data, building relationships and fundraising. The acute lack of training for leaders at the smaller end of the charity sector is therefore of particular concern, because it is extremely hard to be good at all these different tasks.

Even so, money only runs so far, and it is a strength of the charity model that volunteers can bring expertise that a charity may not be able to pay for. This is where skilled volunteering has a role to play – where people give their time and expertise to the public good rather than, or in addition to their money.

Trustees are one source of volunteer expertise. There has for example been a welcome push for trustees with digital skills, providing strategic support to charities over a period when salaries are so much higher in other sectors for skilled digital staff that market solutions, including employment, are unsustainable or unaffordable.

There are a number of national pro bono providers, including Pilotlight, and these have formed in recent years into a collaborative network, the UK Pro Bono Association, with the intention of improving access to support for charities. In the first research of the field, we estimate that annually at least 8,300 charities and social enterprises benefit from wider pro bono support.²⁰

Media Trust runs the Weston Communicating Climate programme aimed at strengthening the voice of environmental charities through communications training and by matching them with media industry volunteers. It has partnered for example with the agency MG OMD using volunteers helping charities to influence public debate and policy.²¹

Reach, an online platform for matching skilled volunteers, has seen an increase of 67% over the last four years in climate and environmental organisations recruiting volunteers and trustees (around 270 in the last year), including demand from small but impactful volunteer-led groups. The demand for skills is varied, including app developers, translators, developers and writers but, in with the survey results here, the most common requests are for fundraising and communications expertise.²²

However, while some have been able to emphasise support for environmental organisations, for others, environmental charities are not currently the focus or they are set aside in terms of eligibility for support. Of those respondents who have received pro bono skills based volunteering support, this has often been delivered by an independent supporter in the charity's network or local area.

²⁰ <https://www.pilotlight.org.uk/give-your-culture-workout#:~:text=A%20workout%20culture%20is%20one.to%20support%20charities%20and%20causes>

²¹ Personal correspondence, September 2023

²² Personal correspondence, September 2023

To assess the scale of support needed indicated by the respondents, we have developed a straightforward statistical model, in which each support need can be met by one skilled volunteer. On the basis of this, we estimate that there is a need right now for an additional 100,000 skilled climate volunteers in the UK.

This is a call to action.

This is not, it should be stressed, the business team-building days of the past of litter picking and painting community halls. That got people out of the office, but they had a poor reputation. The difference is that through pro bono volunteering, people are using their professional skills and helping charities access the specialist skills they need. After all, the professional support required, as we have indicated, is wide-ranging – generalist as well as specialist.

There is evidence that the conditions might be right for a programme of pro bono volunteering of this form to take off. Pilotlight's data suggests that:

- three quarters of employees (77%) believe that employers should be supportive of their staff taking time to volunteer
- 79% believe that businesses themselves benefit from employee volunteering
- 82% say volunteering develops their work skills and knowledge
- those who volunteer with the support of their employer are around twice as likely to be people of the global majority as the population at large (23% compared to 12%).²³

Skilled volunteering has risen by twenty per cent since the start of the pandemic, according to NCVO, even as overall volunteering numbers have faltered. One element of this is the rise of workplace and virtual volunteering.

²³ <https://www.pilotlight.org.uk/give-your-culture-workout>.

4. Conclusion – the case for capacity building

It is a privilege for us to have responses from so many environmental charities, sharing information on their aspirations, their strengths and their most pressing organisational challenges. We are grateful to all who have contributed to this common endeavour.

With the Climate Change Committee saying the UK government's current programmes will not deliver net zero, there is a need to look at whether other sectors, charities, social enterprises and indeed businesses could take more of the lead in delivering action.²⁴

The shift to a sustainable economy, if that is indeed possible, cannot be delivered by charities alone. But what charities can do is to run ahead of others and show the way, testing what is possible, building constituencies of support, promoting values, and challenging the powerful forces that keep us unsustainable.

The twin climate and biodiversity emergencies of our day can be seen, from a human perspective, as challenges of organisation. As Donella Meadows and partners warned thirty years ago in 'Beyond the Limits', looking at a range of resource models for the future, the world "*does not run out of land or food or resources or pollution absorption capability, it runs out of the ability to cope.*"²⁵

The capacity-building gap is therefore urgent and compelling.

Our current system of institutions has accelerated the damage. A new set of institutions has to chart the path towards a more sustainable future.

²⁴ <https://www.theccc.org.uk/2022/06/29/current-programmes-will-not-deliver-net-zero/>

²⁵ Meadows DH, Meadows D & Randers J, Beyond the Limits: global collapse or a sustainable future, Earthscan, 1992

**We bring together charities,
businesses and skilled
individuals. As a result, we
amplify the good work that's
done in the world.**

Mila Evanics, Head of Charities and Impact, Pilotlight

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