

Call for climate volunteers

Why climate action needs a practical new pro bono volunteering programme



Photo: The Conservation Collective
Pilotlight Partner Charity, 2021

Together for climate action

There are around 16,000 charities and social enterprises in the UK working for a sustainable future. They are catalysts for action and are full of innovations for turning climate ambitions into reality but as our research shows they lack the capacity, skills and resources, to do so.

We have found that there is a clear appetite for and a clear call for skilled climate volunteers.

This is not about employees getting together to plant trees. Companies worldwide have made commitments to plant seven billion trees, but unless this is done with care, experts suggest the practice can be as harmful as it is helpful.

Businesses do have professional and occupational expertise that values-based charities are looking for.

With the Climate Change Committee saying the UK is falling well short of its net zero targets, is it possible that the social and commercial sectors could collaborate better?



If so, now is the time to explore how we can learn from each other. We know the climate crisis is more urgent than ever before and – as an African proverb goes – *“if you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together”*.

Ed Mayo, CEO

Executive summary

What charities need

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

To understand their work and their support needs, Pilotlight has conducted survey research, with 298 charities and social enterprises taking part. We refer to these in this report as charities, for simplicity.

To step up environmental action, the findings stress that there is an urgent and compelling need for support, including professional support from skilled volunteers.

63% of environmental charities are actively looking for professional support from skilled volunteers.

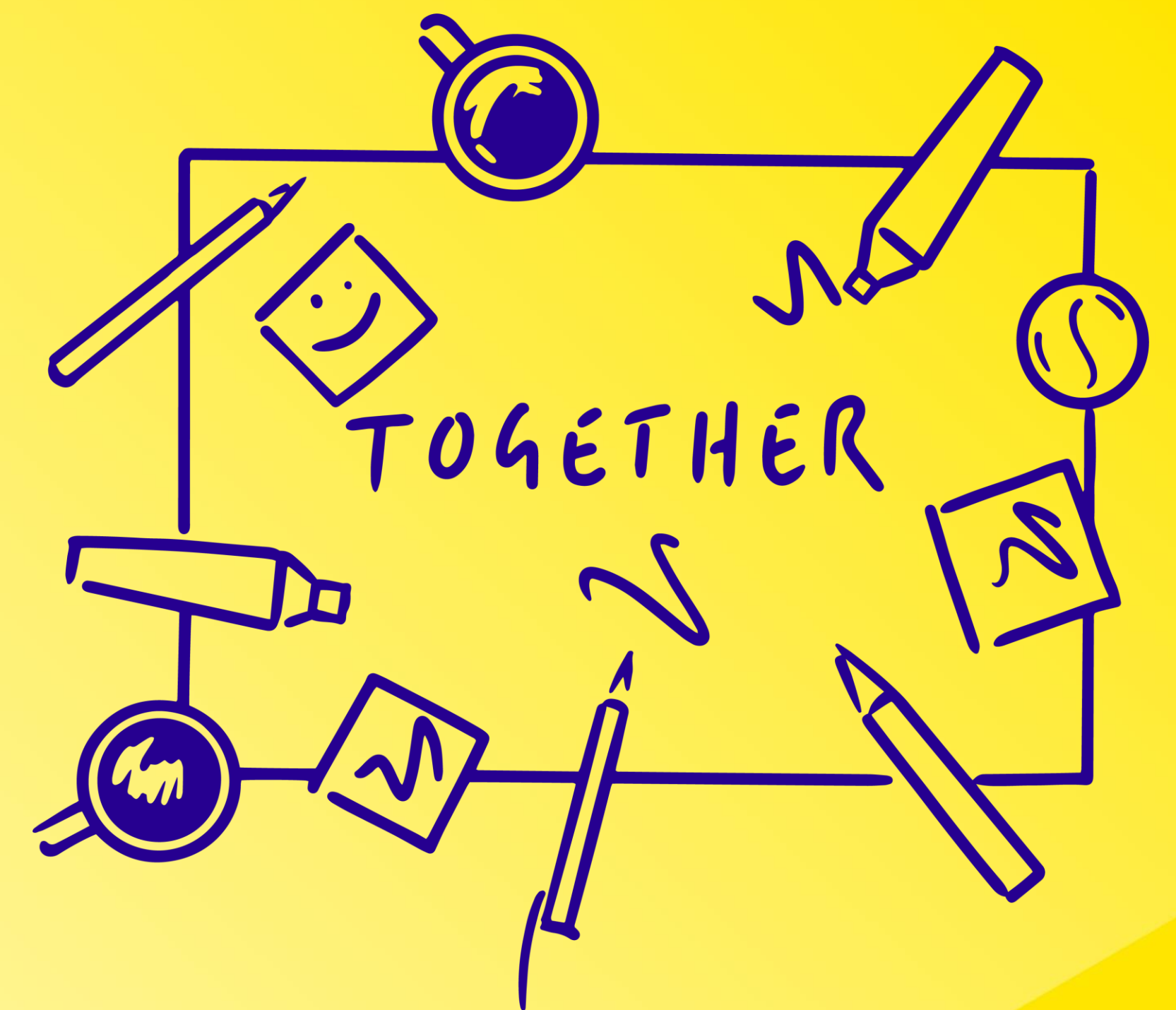
The skills gap is greatest for smaller charities, where 1 in 2 have no business plan for the year and 1 in 3 no way to measure their impact.



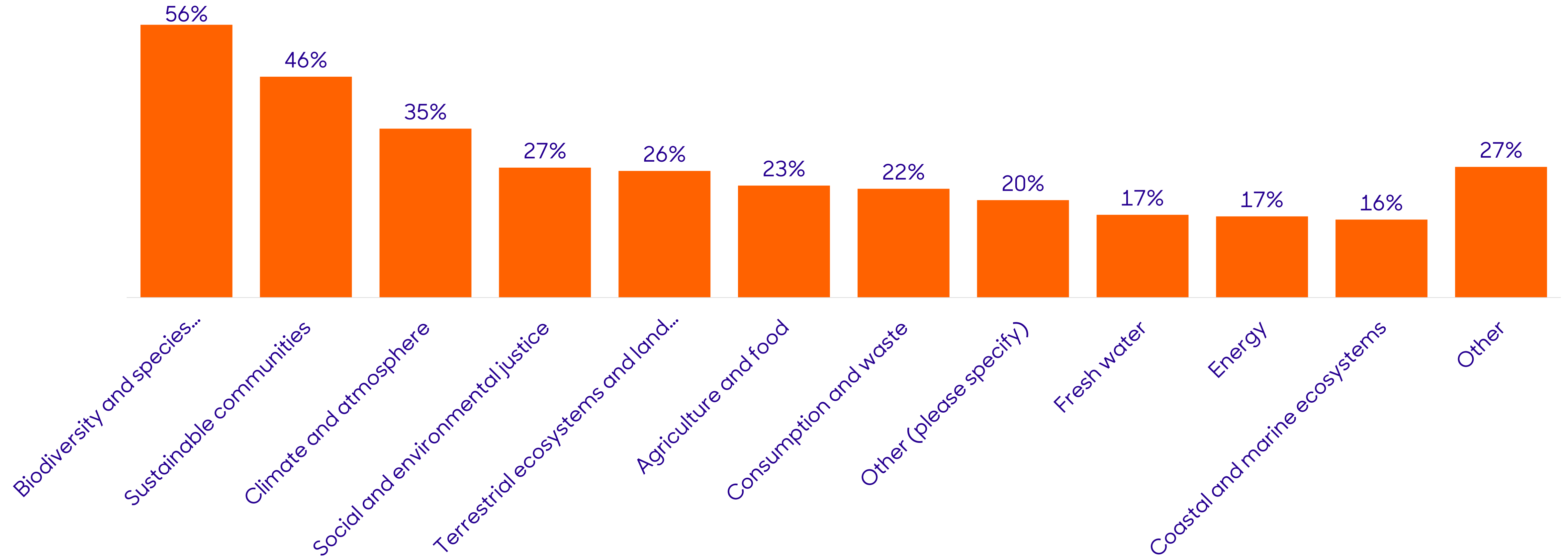
The professional support required is wide-ranging, with fundraising, evaluation, diversity and strategy top of the list.

Drawing on the support priorities of the participating charities, we estimate an immediate need for an additional 100,000 skilled climate volunteers in the UK.

Research findings



298 charities participated - from across a wide variety of action



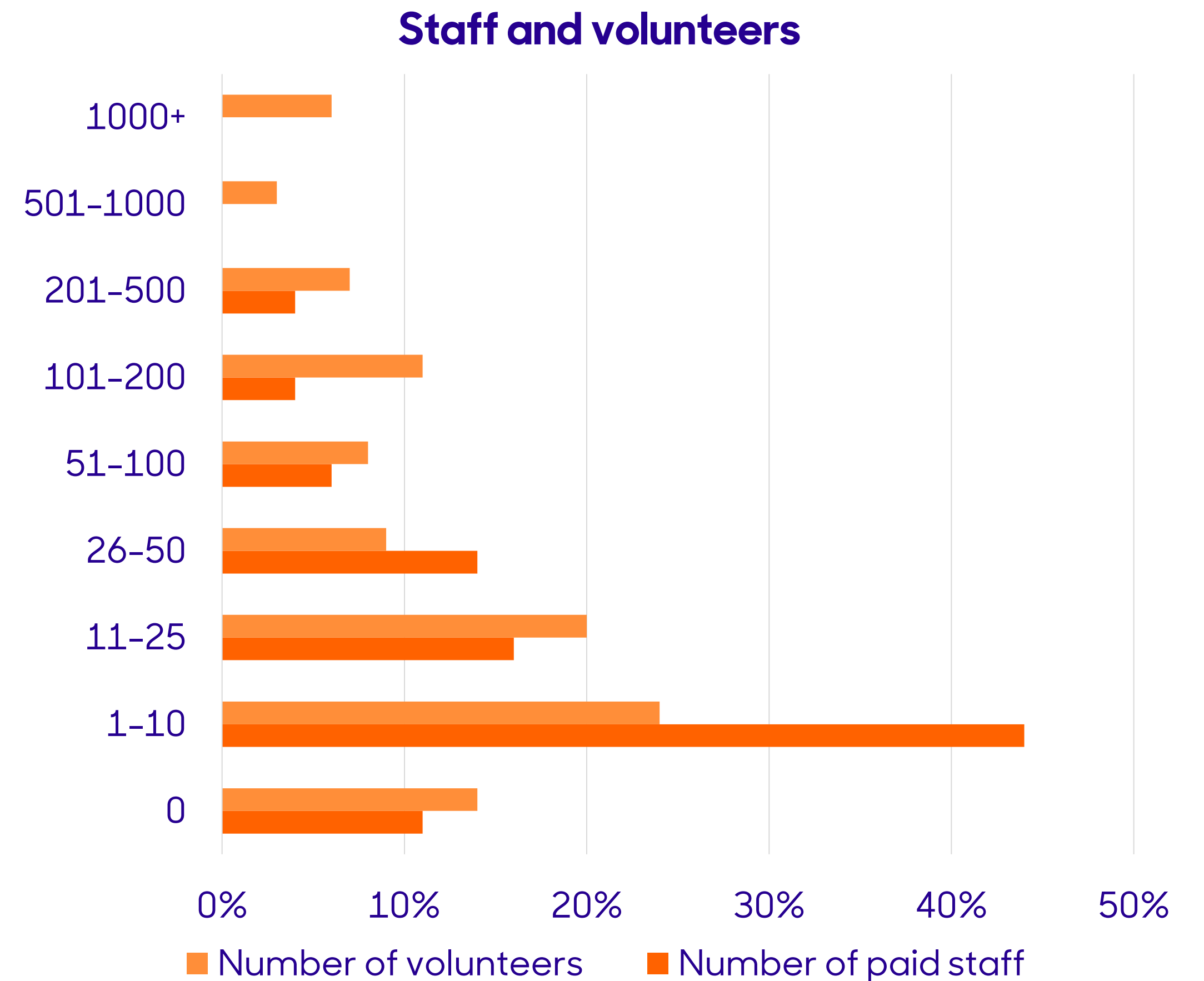
The make-up of the charities

The charities who responded operate in a wide variety of geographical contexts:

- 33% across the UK
- 27% regionally
- 21% in their local authority area, and
- 20% have an international remit.

For those with a single nationwide remit, 47% focus on England, 23% on Scotland, 17% on Wales, and 13% on Northern Ireland. While offices are based across the UK, London (18%) and the South West (19%) are prominent.

A small number are large charities (9%) with over 100 paid staff. The median is just 9 paid staff members. Smaller charities openly report challenges around lack of diversity.



Environmental charities are adept at working with volunteers to achieve their goals. The median number of volunteers is 20, with a small number (6%) engaging over 1,000 volunteers.

Charities are stronger on vision But weaker on practice...

Environmental charities are cause-led and most (92%) have an up-to-date statement of mission, vision, and values. 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 weaker on practice:

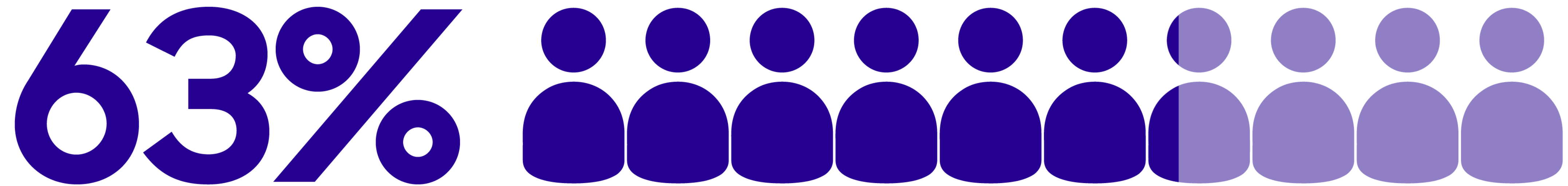
- Around a third of charities (30%) have no Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that they monitor
- Only one in two (56%) have an agreed business plan with goals for the year
- Only one in three (34%) have a theory of change to translate their vision into the work they do
- Over a third (37%) spend 1% or less on training and development. One in ten charities spend no money at all.



Charities are typically characterised by having a complex purpose. **The organisational challenge of finding the best possible way to turn purpose into practice is therefore a common one and key to the effectiveness of different charities.**

Done well, this can prompt a special form of purpose-led entrepreneurship – one that businesses can learn from too.

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



...but only one in five (20%) know where to find it.

What challenges do environmental charities face?

Overall, there is a wide range of professional skills that environmental charities are looking for in terms of support over the medium term.

Fundraising and marketing (84%), evaluation (76%), diversity (69%) and strategy (67%) top of the list.

"We are aiming to increase our impact tenfold to 2030 and marketing and fundraising will be crucial in getting there."

"We need to go through a significant digital transformation over the next few years."

We estimate an immediate need for an additional 100,000 skilled climate volunteers in the UK.

Support needs within the next five years



The immediate need for skilled climate volunteers in the UK



Method: Pilotlight estimate, using a statistical model in which each support need can be met by one skilled volunteer.
Note: this is in addition to current levels of skilled volunteering in the sector.

What they see

In the words of charities

- “The biggest challenge is getting enough funding to keep going.”
- “We cannot wait until charities naturally grow, we need to invest now in innovation and allow projects to learn/fail/succeed at speed.”
- “We need to transition our Board of Trustees from being active volunteers into strategic directors.”
- “Our challenge is managing growth – integrating new staff and maintaining our culture.”
- “How do we measure and communicate our impact?”
- **“Long term financial sustainability is one of our biggest current challenges.”**



Charities also have strengths and experience that business can learn from



So, it is not just charity...

The pro bono business case

We know from our work with charities that businesses can benefit from pro bono volunteering. We want to test the case that 'climate volunteering' can lead to a range of persuasive business benefits, including:

- Contributions to authentic net zero action and a just transition
- Lower risk forms of corporate engagement with charities that focus on organisation support rather than attempts to gain green credentials by association
- Employee engagement and wellbeing
- Learning and development, including around soft skills and climate risk.



- Giving staff an opportunity to do something practical and positive through the firm on climate action.

On one count, 1 in 6 employees in the UK are suffering with eco-anxiety, rising to 33% among 18 to 34 year olds.

To be clear, this is a call for skilled volunteering

This is not the 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 specialist skills that they need.

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.

Pilotlight's data suggests that 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%).



And a side note

This is not about more tree planting

Perhaps the best-known form of typically unskilled environmental volunteering is companies asking staff to help plant trees.

According to the World Economic Forum, **companies have committed to planting over 7 billion trees by 2030**. These include some of the world's largest and most well-known brands.

This has ecological value. Trees play a key role in absorbing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. They also provide other important benefits, such as improving air quality and providing habitat for wildlife.

But there are downsides if not done with skill and expertise. Trees need to be planted in the right places; they need to be properly cared for. Otherwise, saplings may not survive.

Some critics argue that corporate tree planting can actually do more harm than good, if not done with care:

"Mass tree planting can have a number of negative impacts on the environment. It can lead to monoculture, which is the planting of a single species of tree in a large area. Monocultures can be harmful to the environment because they are more susceptible to pests and diseases. They can also disrupt the natural ecosystem, as they do not provide the same level of habitat for wildlife as a diverse forest."

- Dr David Macdonald, conservation biologist at the University of Oxford

In an age that is sceptical of greenwashing, it would be appropriate to measure success by the number of trees planted that are still thriving in five and ten years' time (and the species sustained by them).

Call to Action

A new pro bono programme...

The shift to a green economy can't 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. Our current system of institutions has accelerated the damage. A new set of institutions has to chart the path towards a more sustainable future.

The capacity-building gap is therefore urgent and compelling. **Sharing skills across sectors, learning together is a key way to spur and spread and scale positive action for sustainability.**



This is why we're creating a practical new pro bono programme, recruiting Partner Businesses for their employees to lend their time, expertise and passion to environmental charities, to turn their ambitions into action. Take a look at what you and your teams could achieve and gain through skilled volunteering.

A compelling idea

The case of Linklaters

"This is a simple and compelling idea, that businesses like ours who want to take action on climate change can enable staff to flex their workplace skills in order to help environmental charities and social enterprises.

We can all learn from and benefit from skilled volunteering of this kind."

Matt Sparkes, Sustainability Director, Linklaters LLP

Linklaters



Appendix 1

What is Pilotlight?



What is Pilotlight?

Our founding story

"I wanted to bring new people to the table"

is how Jane Tewson CBE, a celebrated social entrepreneur, describes her decision to set up Pilotlight in 1996. It was, in many ways, a similar spirit to her earlier achievement of co-founding Comic Relief from a refugee camp in Sudan in order to bring new money into the charity sector. And a decade later, she co-founded Pilotlight to bring new skills into the sector.

And the purpose of the charity was sealed in its name.

As Jane says, *"Pilotlight means igniting other flames; being a catalyst, bringing things together and letting them go. So, spreading new flames."* Nearly 30 years later we're still amplifying the impact that charities, businesses and individuals can bring to the world.



What is Pilotlight?

Helping businesses to do good

Key to our success and our ability to achieve our mission is our deep and long-lasting partnerships with charities and with business.

We do believe that with care, business can be a powerful force for good and we are proud of our partnerships some of the world's most inspiring employers.

Businesses like Morgan Stanley where we partner with Learning & Development and Corporate Social Responsibility teams to co-create opportunities for employees at all career levels to develop themselves and give back to society.

Over the last four years we have developed partnerships with socially responsible business across the UK, all of whom want to make a difference to their world.

Morgan Stanley



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

If you are a business wanting to explore skilled volunteering or a charity looking for support, [please contact us](#).

Report published October 2023.

A full technical report on the survey findings can be found on the [Pilotlight website](#).

Our thanks to all the charities and social enterprises who contributed to this research, as well as to the Environmental Funders Network, Garfield Weston Foundation and National Lottery Community Fund for their support in spreading the word on the survey itself.

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