



In the Public Eye

Snapshot of public attitudes
towards civil society

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The Law Family

**Commission
on Civil Society**

Introduction

To mark the launch of the Law Family Commission on Civil Society, we commissioned YouGov to provide a snapshot of public attitudes towards civil society in November 2020.

What do people think about the role of civil society and the voice it should have in national and local decision making? What are its strengths and where could it do better? How many people have supported or been helped by charities and community groups through the Covid crisis, and what role should those organisations play in the subsequent recovery?

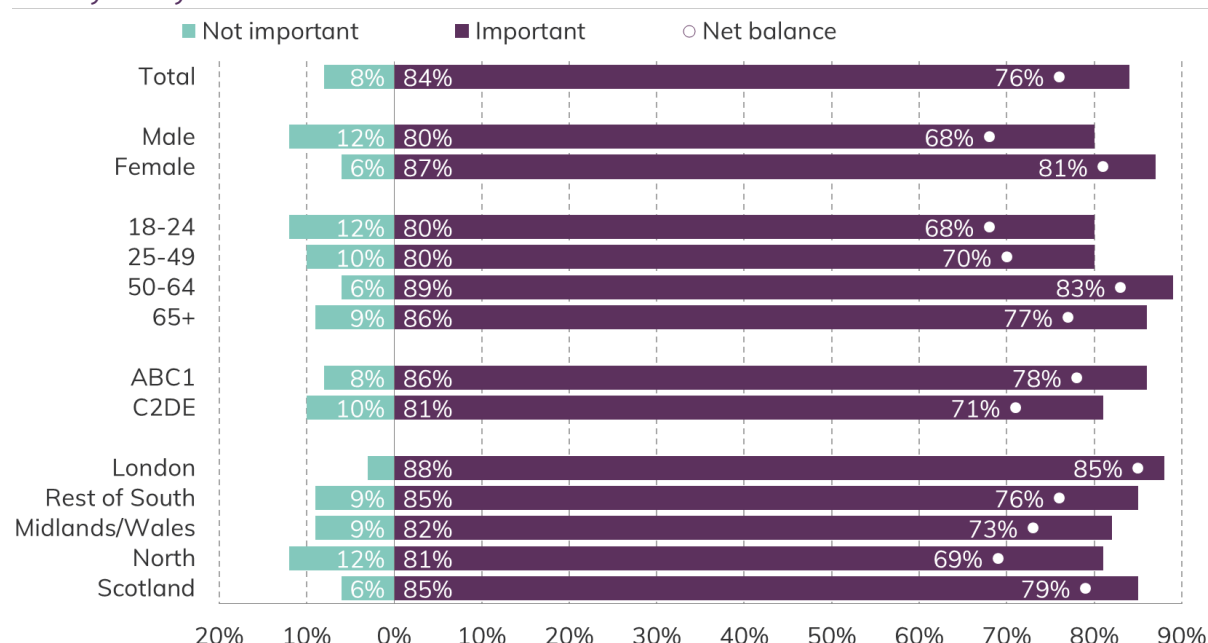
The results of this survey show how highly valued charities are and what a crucial role they play supporting those in need. 20 million people across Great Britain (40 per cent) volunteered their time to help others during the national lockdown in Spring. 8 in 10 people (82 per cent) described the role of charities and community groups in supporting the country through the crisis as important. 60 per cent think the sector will play a key role in the country's recovery. Charities and community groups are some of the most trusted organisations in the country and their role is clearly highly prized across society. But there is evidence that the public think there is room for improvement. Just under a third of adults (31 per cent) in Great Britain think that there are too many charities or community groups, and a similar proportion think the sector is "wasteful". The majority of the public consider charities to be understaffed, and only half would describe them as "efficient".

The British public places a high value on charities and community groups

Over 8 in 10 adults (84 per cent) in Great Britain think that charities and community groups play an important role in society (see Figure 1). Just 8 per cent said that they don't. This high estimation is shared across demographics but Londoners, women, and older people are especially likely to be positive about the role of these organisations. Men, young adults and those living in the North are relatively more sceptical, although the "net balance" (the proportion in favour minus the proportion against) remains very high in all cases. These findings echo Charity Commission research on public perceptions of charities,¹ demonstrating consistency about the high value that the British public place on charities and community groups.

¹ Charity Commission & Populus (2020) [Regulating in the public interest: The relationship between Charity, charities and the general public](#)

Figure 1. More than four-fifths think charities play an important role in British society
 “Overall, how important a role do you think charities and community groups play in British society today?” Great Britain: Nov-20



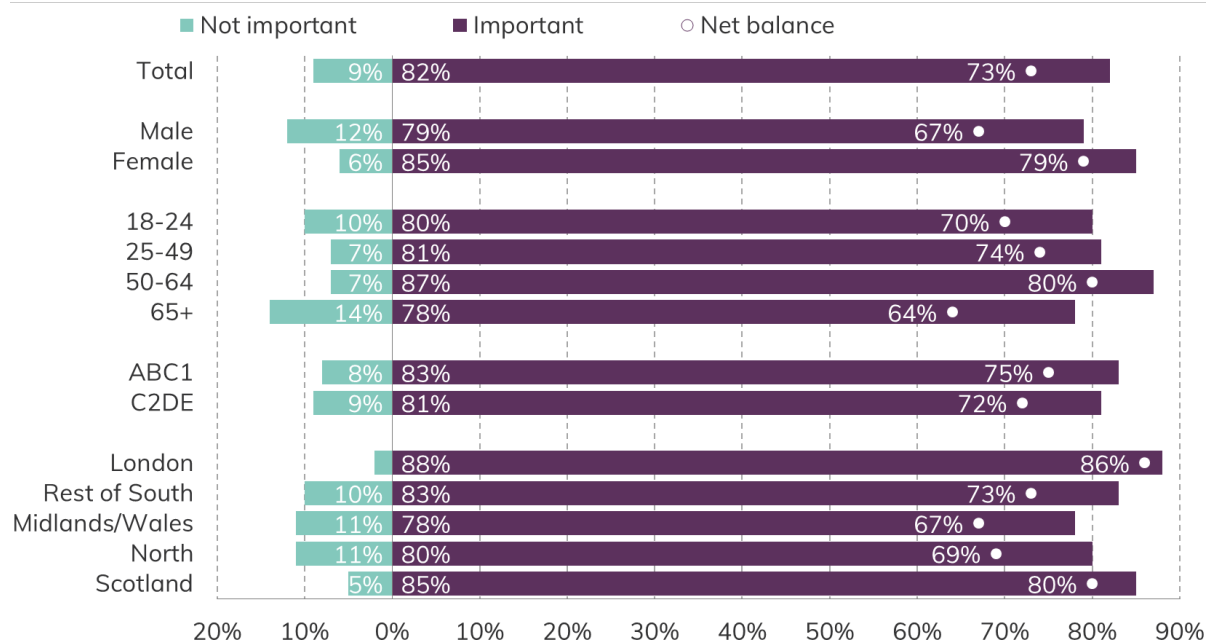
Note: Residual (not shown) covers "not sure".

Source: YouGov plc / Pro Bono Economics, online survey 18-19 November 2020. n = 1,696. Great Britain. Weighted and representative of all GB adults (18+).

The importance of civil society has been even more pronounced than usual during the pandemic, with charities, community groups and mutual aid groups taking a key role in delivering support to those in need. Figure 2 shows that people are similarly positive about the role of charities and community groups during the pandemic as they are about their role more generally.

Figure 2. Over four-fifths also think that charities and community groups played an important role in supporting society during the pandemic

“Overall, how important a role do you think charities and community groups played in supporting society during the pandemic?” Great Britain: Nov-20

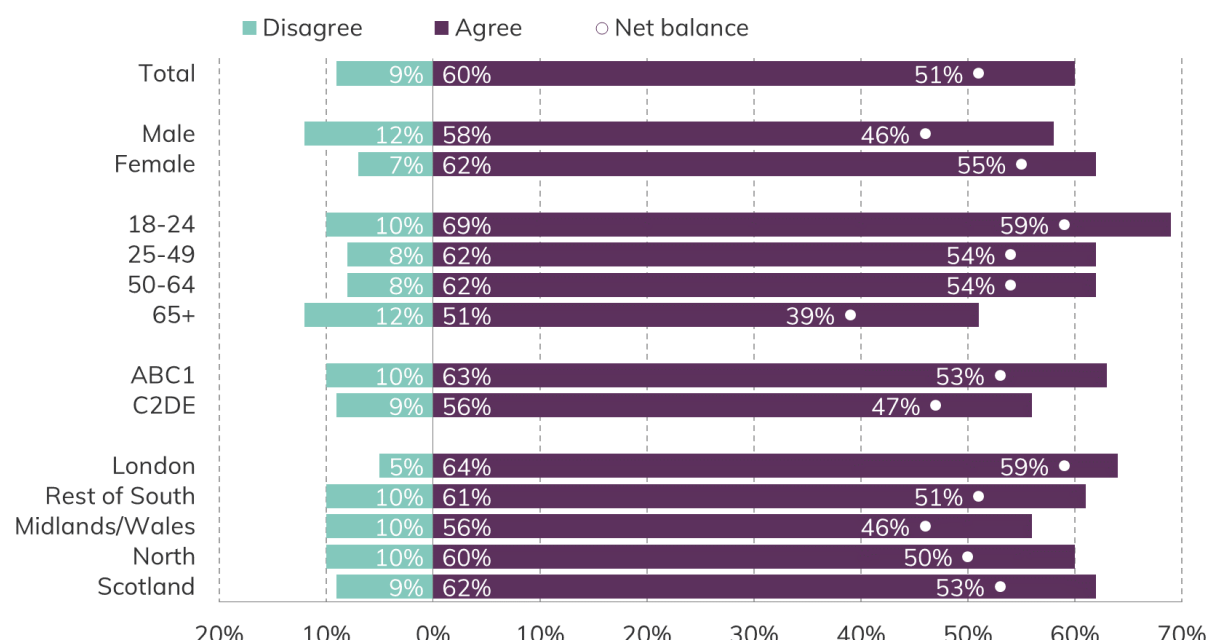


Note: Residual (not shown) covers "not sure".

Source: YouGov plc / Pro Bono Economics, online survey 18-19 November 2020. n = 1,696. Great Britain. Weighted and representative of all GB adults (18+).

Looking forward, 60 per cent of respondents said that they thought charities and community groups would play an important role in the country's recovery from Covid-19, while just 9 per cent said that they would not (see Figure 3). Despite being less positive than average about the role that civil society plays currently, those aged 18-24 were more positive than older age groups about the role that civil society would play during the recovery.

Figure 3. A majority of people agree that charities and community groups will play an important role in the country's recovery from Covid-19
 "Charities and community groups will play an important role in the country's recovery from COVID-19" Great Britain: Nov-20



Notes: Residual (not shown) covers "neither agree nor disagree" and "don't know".

Source: YouGov plc / Pro Bono Economics, online survey 18-19 November 2020. n = 1,696. Great Britain.

Weighted and representative of all GB adults (18+).

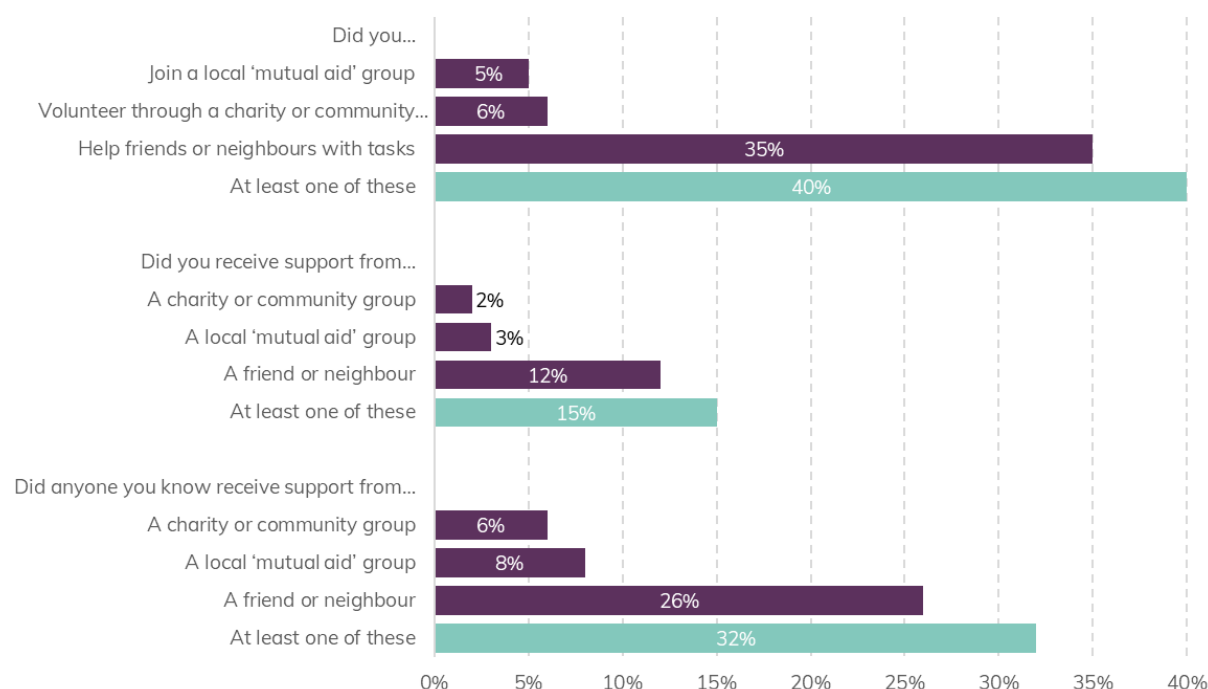
Overall, figures 1-3 show that the British public overwhelmingly think that charities and community groups have played an important role in society, and that most also expect charities to continue to do so as part of the recovery from Covid-19. This is broadly consistent across demographic groups, but the fact that younger people are especially positive about the role civil society will play in the recovery suggests that the current crisis could present an opportunity for charities to demonstrate their value to younger generations, to secure their support for the future.

A huge number of people volunteered to help others during the lockdowns

Our polling suggests 20 million adults (40 per cent) in Great Britain offered their help to others in some way during the first lockdown in Spring 2020. 35 per cent of adults (18 million people) helped friends or neighbours with tasks, 6 per cent volunteered through a charity or community group, and 5 per cent joined a local 'mutual aid' group.

15 per cent of adults said they received support themselves from one of the above sources, and 32 per cent said that they knew someone who did.

Figure 4. Receiving and volunteering for help during the March-June lockdown
 “Did you do/receive support from/did anyone else you know receive support from any of the following during the first lockdown (from March-June 2020)?” Great Britain: Nov-2020



Source: YouGov plc / Pro Bono Economics, online survey 18-19 November 2020. n = 1,696. Great Britain. Weighted and representative of all GB adults (18+)

For respondents from England, we repeated our question about volunteering during the Spring lockdown (March-June) and the Autumn lockdown (October-November).² Figure 5 shows a very clear decline across the three types of volunteering; whereas 40 per cent (or 17.7 million people in England) offered their support the first time, just 26 per cent (11.5 million) did so the second time.

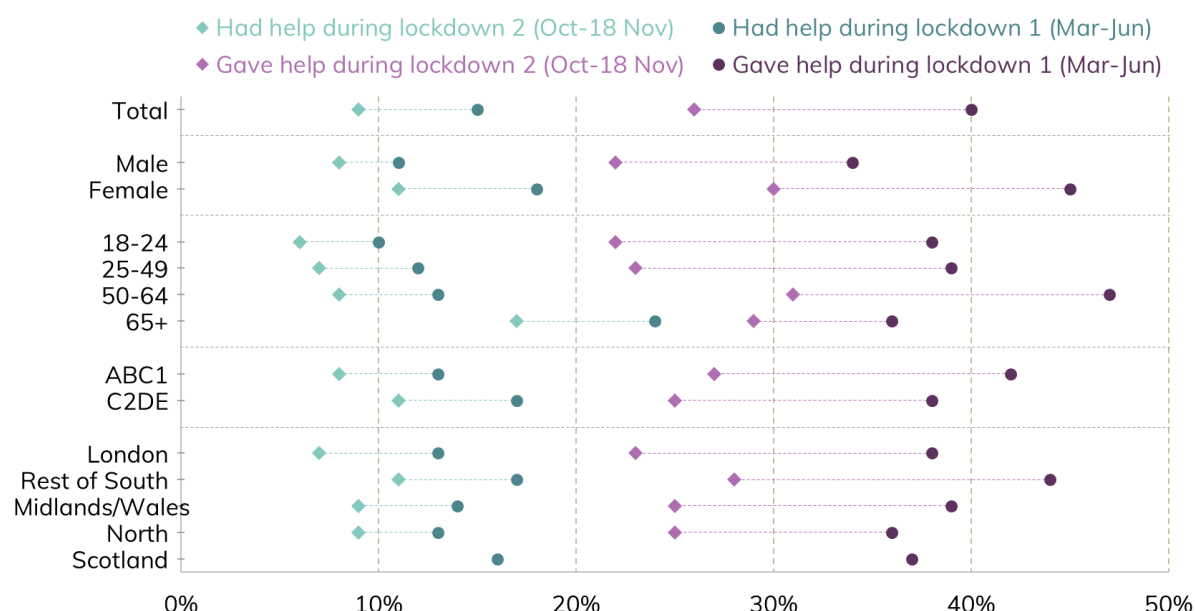
This may be a positive suggestion that less help was needed the second time round – perhaps because government gave more warning as well as a clearer indication of when the lockdown would end, or that people were better equipped to manage lockdown. It should also be noted that the questions related to different time periods – the first lockdown spanned several months, whereas at the time of our survey, the second lockdown had been in place for a much shorter period. The fact that the help provided between the two periods fell further among adults under retirement age may suggest that the availability of time might be a factor, as fewer working age adults were furloughed during the second period.

While it's not possible to fully explain the change based on the data in this survey, it's important to better understand the reasons behind this if we want to build on the momentum provided by the pandemic to ensure that the voluntary sector can make a strong contribution to the country's post-pandemic recovery.

² Other devolved nations were excluded from this comparison due to sample size issues and the timing of our survey (18th-19th November), which was live while only England was in a national lockdown.

Figure 5. Change in receiving and volunteering for help between the March-June [all GB] and October-November [England only] lockdowns

“Did you do/receive support from/did anyone else you know receive support from any of the following during the first lockdown (from March June 2020)/since the start of the current lockdown (since October 2020)?” Great Britain/England: Nov-2020



Notes: Question refers to either receiving help from, or volunteering to help: a friend or neighbour (with tasks such as shopping or dog walking), a charity or community group, or a local ‘mutual aid’ group.

Source: YouGov plc / Pro Bono Economics, online survey 18-19 November 2020. March-June figures are n = 1,696, Great Britain, weighted and representative of all GB adults (18+) and October-18 November figures are n = 1,455, England only, weighted and representative of all England adults (18+).

Despite positive sentiments about the role of charities and community groups in society overall, public perceptions about how efficiently these groups function is far more mixed

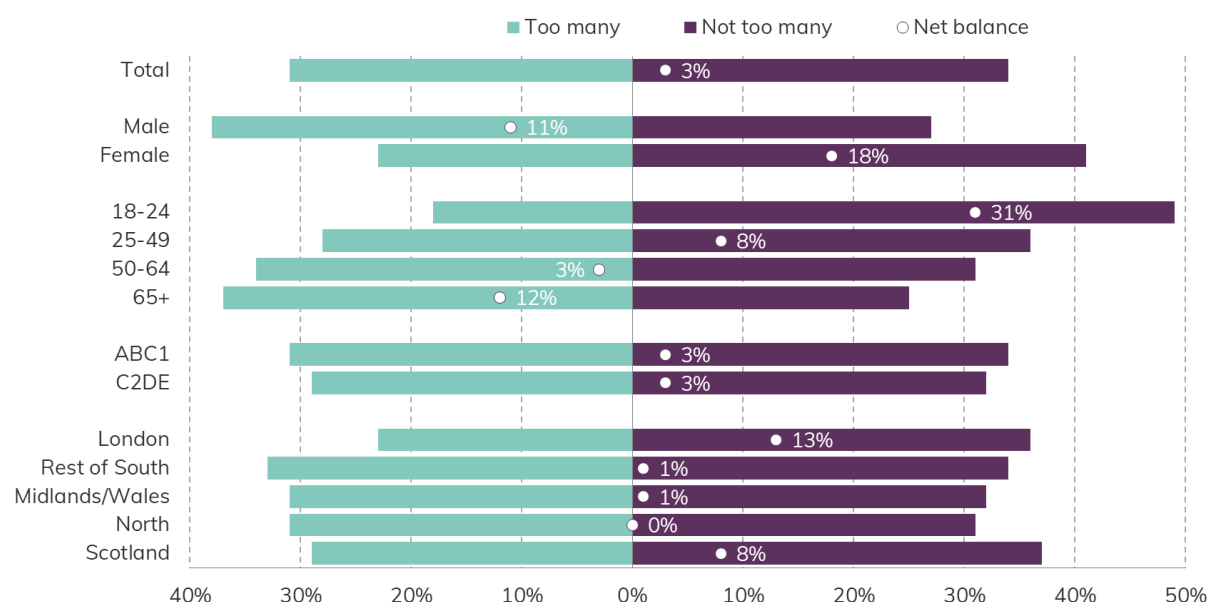
We have seen that people think charities and community groups are important and that lots of people have engaged with civil society during the pandemic. But perception is more divided on the performance of the sector. While plenty of people are positive about how many charities and community groups exist, the priorities they focus on, and how efficiently they use their resources, plenty feel the opposite. This could be borne of differing experiences of or familiarity with the sector, or it could be problem of perception. But whatever the cause, this is a division which has important implications for a sector reliant on public support.

We asked the public whether there are too many charities and community groups. They were relatively split on the matter: 31 per cent said that there are, and 34 per cent said that they are not (the remainder neither agreeing nor disagreeing). There are, however, very substantial differences between demographics, with men and people aged over 65 much more likely to say there are too many. Younger adults are substantially less likely than other age groups to believe that there are too many charities, with almost half

saying there are not too many compared to under a fifth saying there are (a 31 percentage point difference).

Figure 6. The public have mixed views about whether there are too many charities and community groups

“To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements: There are too many charities and community groups” Great Britain: Nov-20



Notes: Residual (not shown) covers "neither agree nor disagree" and "don't know".

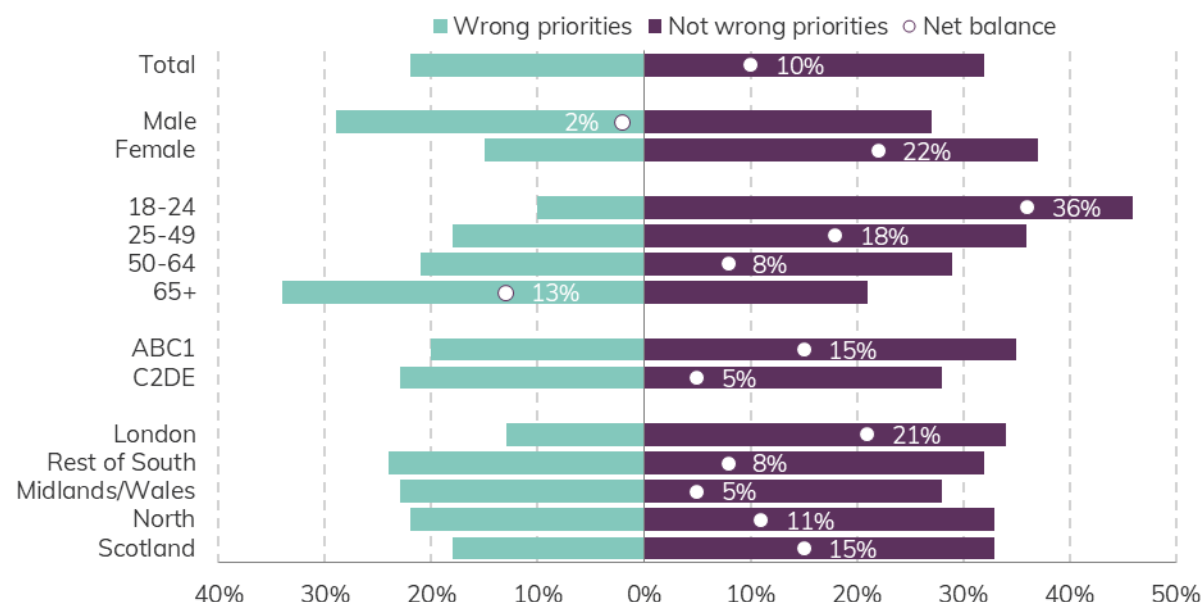
Source: YouGov plc/Pro Bono Economics, online survey 18-19 November 2020. n = 1,696. Great Britain.

Weighted and representative of all GB adults (18+).

We also asked the public about charities and community groups' priorities. Figure 7 shows that a net balance of people believe that charities focus on the right priorities, but a significant minority think they focus on the wrong ones, and opinions varied significantly across demographics. Overall, 22 per cent believe that charities and community groups “often focus on the wrong priorities”, while just under a third (32 per cent) disagreed with that statement. And many people either have mixed views about whether charities and community groups are focusing on the right issues, or simply don't know: fully a third neither agree nor disagree. Again, older people were far more likely to have concerns than other groups, while younger people tend to be much more positive.

Figure 7. Public opinion differs about whether charities and community groups focus on the right priorities

“To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements: Charities and community groups often focus on the wrong priorities” Great Britain: Nov-20



Notes: Residual (not shown) covers "neither agree nor disagree" and "don't know".

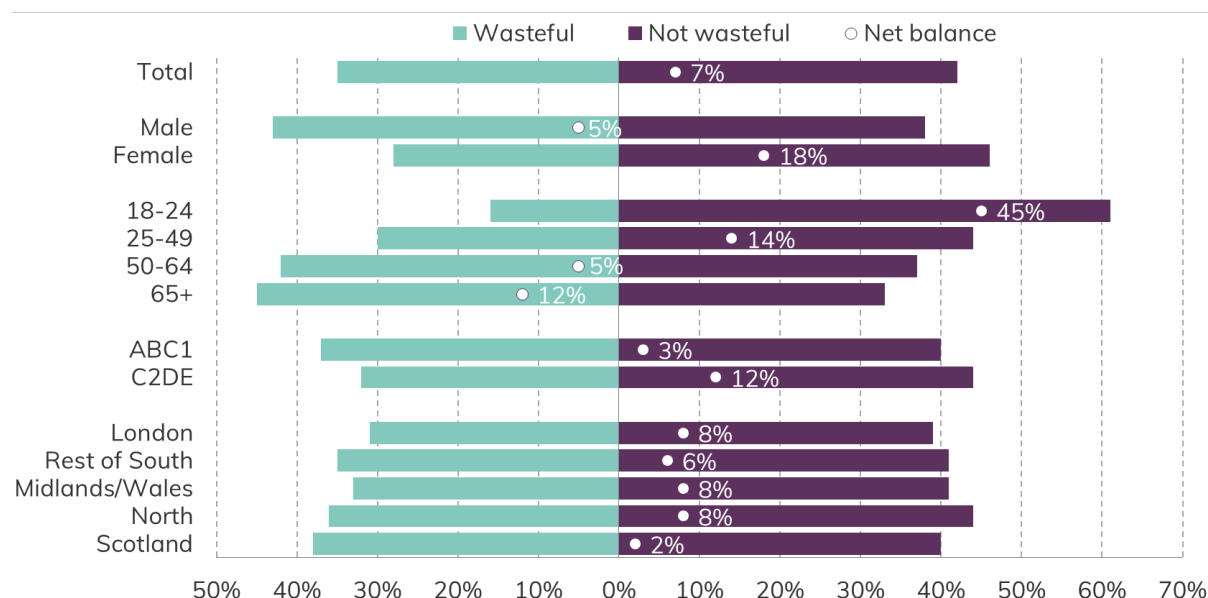
Source: YouGov plc/Pro Bono Economics, online survey 18-19 November 2020. n = 1,696. Great Britain.

Weighted and representative of all GB adults (18+).

Similar patterns are seen in terms of how wasteful the public thinks charities are. While a net balance of 7 per cent of people believe charities are not wasteful in general, there is a substantial proportion who think they are, particularly among older groups. Younger people are again the most positive, with the majority of those aged 18-24 believing charities are not wasteful.

Figure 8. The public are also mixed about whether charities and community groups are wasteful

“Thinking about most charities and community groups in general... How wasteful do you think they are?” Great Britain: Nov-20



Notes: Residual (not shown) covers don't know".

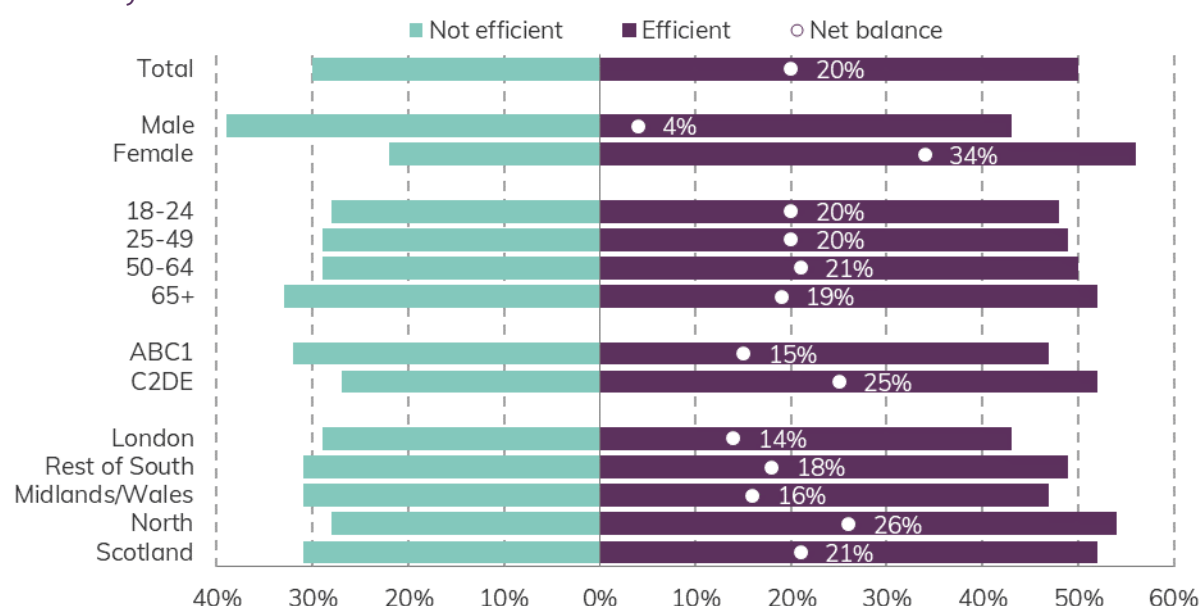
Source: YouGov plc/Pro Bono Economics, online survey 18-19 November 2020. n = 1,696. Great Britain.

Weighted and representative of all GB adults (18+).

In terms of efficiency, the public are broadly positive. 50 per cent said that charities and community groups are efficient, compared to 30 per cent who said otherwise. This varies substantially by gender, and somewhat by social grade and region, but very little by age (see Figure 9). This is quite unusual compared to other responses, which varied more significantly by age categories. The gender differential is particularly large – it is unclear why this is the case, but it could imply differing levels of knowledge and experience of charities and community groups, different interpretations of what counts as ‘efficiency’, or it could be serving partially as a proxy for favourability (women tending to be more favourable towards civil society organisations, across the questions asked).

Figure 9. People tend to think of charities and community groups as efficient, but a substantial minority disagree

“Thinking about most charities and community groups in general... How efficient do you think they are?” Great Britain: Nov-20



Notes: Residual (not shown) covers don't know".

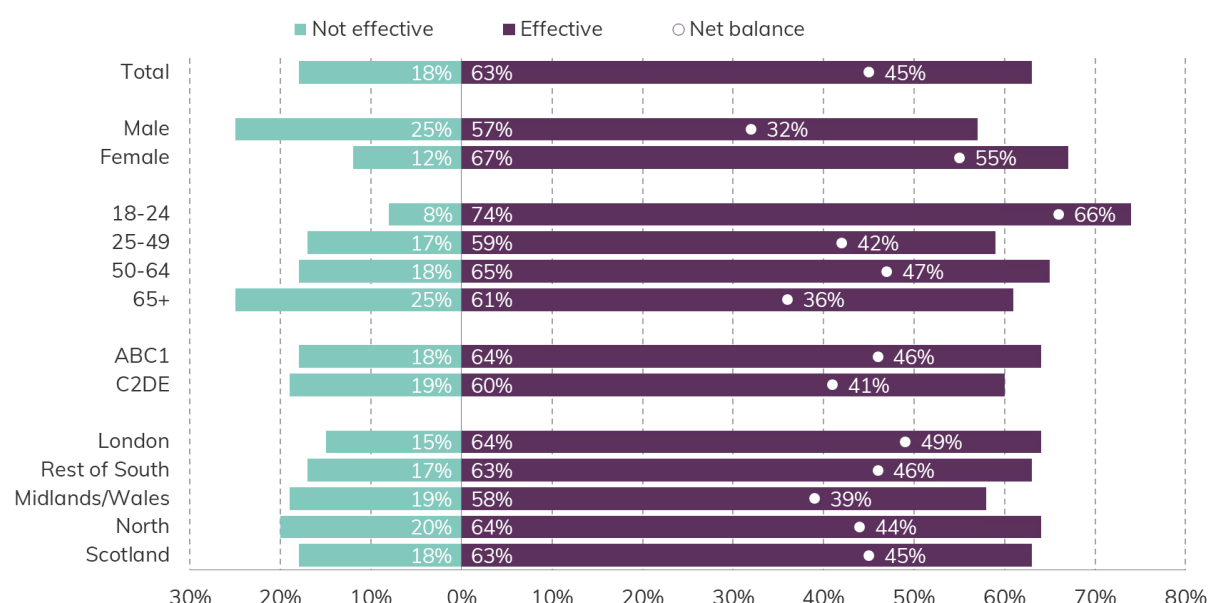
Source: YouGov plc/Pro Bono Economics, online survey 18-19 November 2020. n = 1,696. Great Britain.

Weighted and representative of all GB adults (18+).

But despite mixed views about the priorities and functioning of civil society groups, a clear majority think that they are effective and trustworthy

There is a strong sense across all demographic groups that charities tend to be effective. As figure 10 shows, 63 per cent describe charities and community groups as effective, compared to 18 per cent describing them as not effective.

Figure 10. People have positive views on charity and community group effectiveness
 “Thinking about most charities and community groups in general... How effective do you think they are?” Great Britain: Nov-20

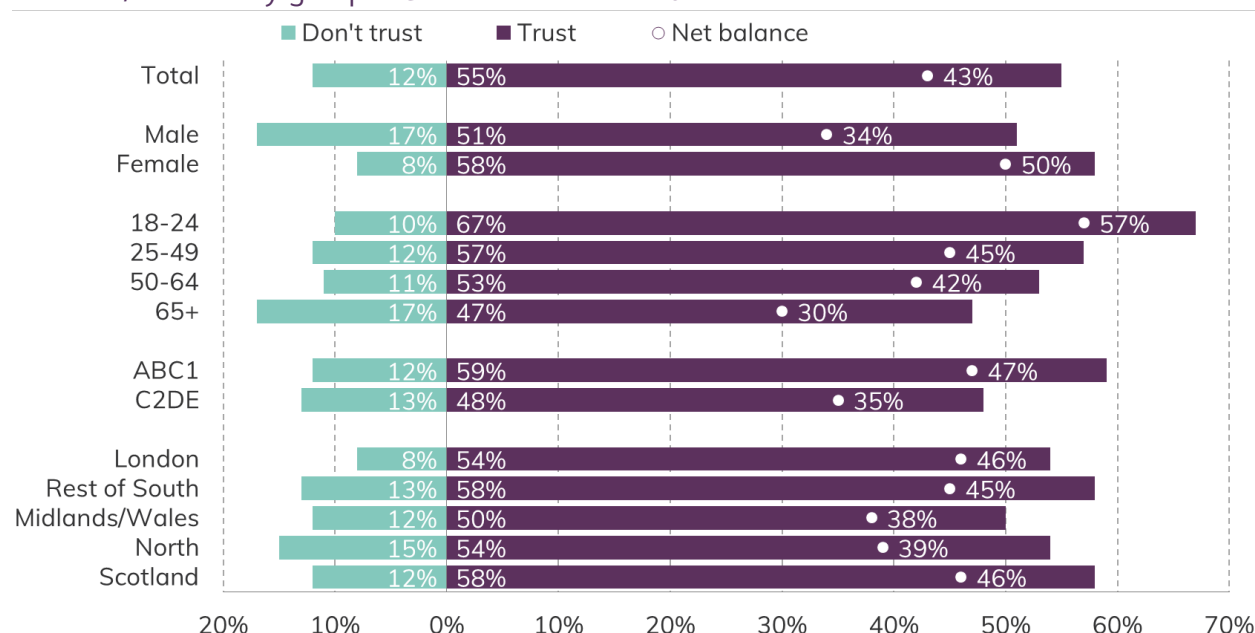


Notes: Residual (not shown) covers don't know".

Source: YouGov plc/Pro Bono Economics, online survey 18-19 November 2020. n = 1,696. Great Britain. Weighted and representative of all GB adults (18+).

In addition, people generally trust charities and community groups – in fact, they are some of the most trusted institutions in society. Overall, 12 per cent agreed with the statement “I don’t trust charities/community groups”, but 55 per cent disagreed. Men are substantially less likely to trust them than women are, as are those aged 65+ (see Figure 11).

Figure 11. The public generally trusts charities and community groups
 “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements: I don’t trust charities/community groups” Great Britain: Nov-20



Notes: Residual (not shown) covers "neither agree nor disagree" and "don't know".

Source: YouGov plc/Pro Bono Economics, online survey 18-19 November 2020. n = 1,696. Great Britain. Weighted and representative of all GB adults (18+).

Research from the Charity Commission also suggests people broadly trust charities, reporting the average overall trust and confidence in charities at 6.2, when asked to score them out of 10 – below where it was in 2014 (6.7), but improved on a low point in 2018 following several scandals. Only doctors (7.3) and police (6.5) had higher favourability scores than charities, and charities scored substantially above the “ordinary man/woman in street” (5.5), private companies (5.1), newspapers (4.0), and Ministers/MPs (3.8).³

The public broadly support the idea that the country would be a better place if charities and community groups had more influence

Campaigns like #NeverMoreNeeded have highlighted the essential roles that charities are playing during the pandemic: finding accommodation for rough sleepers and those escaping domestic abuse, supporting those with mental or physical health problems, distributing food, and fighting loneliness. We’ve seen that people value the charity sector and that, while opinions on the efficiency of charities might be mixed, they are considered on the whole to be effective and trustworthy. But what role does the public think charities should play in our lives?

When asked to identify the most important functions played by the charity sector (selecting up to four), the overwhelming majority – 73 per cent – selected “helping vulnerable people”. Half selected “delivering services not provided by [central or local] government”. Around a third selected “helping animals” and “protecting the natural

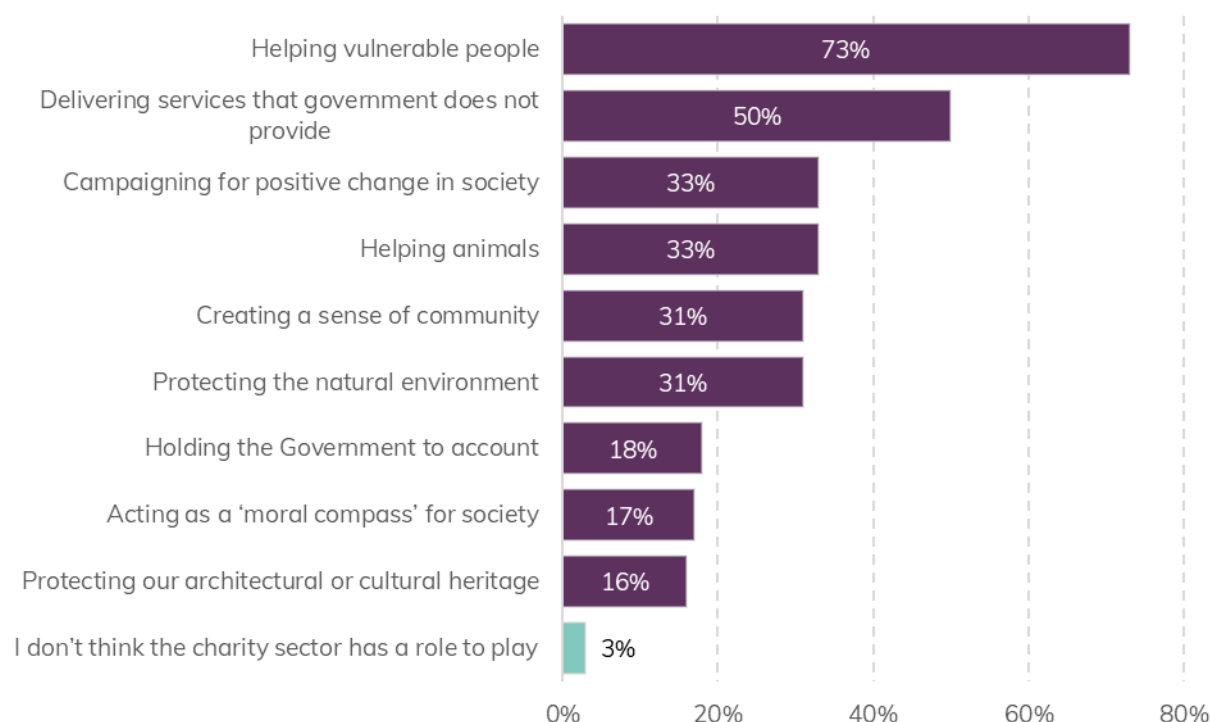
³ Charity Commission (2020) [Regulating in the public interest: The relationship between Charity, charities and the general public](#).

environment”. This suggests that people tend to think of service delivery as the primary function of charities and community groups.

It is notable however that large numbers of people also think charities should challenge authority and the status quo rather than simply providing services. A third of respondents also said that “campaigning for positive change in society” is one of the main functions of charities – and just under a fifth listed “holding the Government to account” and “acting as a ‘moral compass’ for society” (see Figure 12). This suggests that people recognise the wider roles that charities can play influencing and improving the world around them.

Just 3 per cent of people said that they did not think the charity sector had a role to play.

Figure 12. The public sees helping vulnerable people, and delivering services that the government does not provide, as the most important functions of the charity sector
"Which are the most important functions of the charity sector in Britain? (Up to four options permitted)" Great Britain: Nov-20



Source: YouGov plc / Pro Bono Economics, online survey 18-19 November 2020. n = 1,696. Great Britain.

Weighted and representative of all GB adults (18+).

Notes: Excludes “something else (3 per cent) and “don't know” (10 per cent).

Charities often maintain close relationships with the communities they operate in and have substantial expertise from their frontline work supporting people. This means that charities and community groups can be valuable in helping decision-makers develop, implement, and understand the impact of policy. To some degree, this happens already. For example, charities provide input to government through publications, advisory panels and consultations. They lobby for change to support the people who rely on them, such

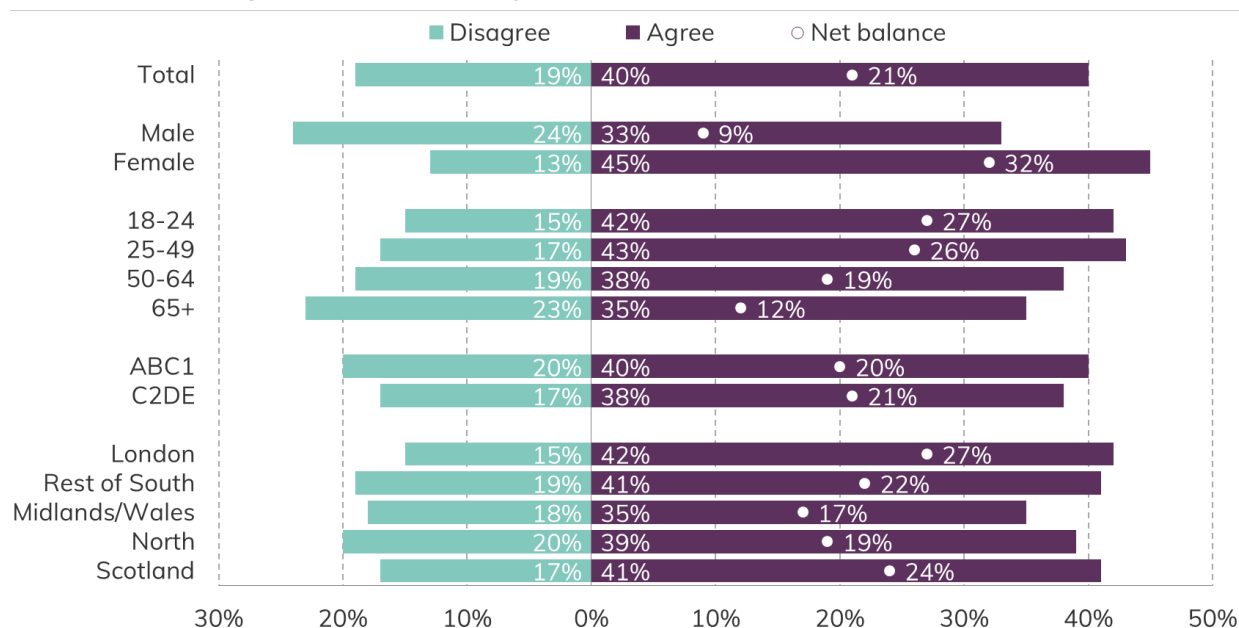
as the “Five Weeks Too Long” campaign which gathered charities delivering frontline welfare support to protest the five-week waiting period for new welfare claims.

However, this relationship is not always without challenges and charities often advocate for a stronger role in the decision-making process. A notable example of this in recent years has been the growth of community-led climate emergency movements which have had a substantial impact on public awareness and government action at a local and national level.

We asked the public whether they felt charities and community groups having more involvement in decision making would lead Britain to being a better place at the national or local level (Figures 13 and 14). Overall, twice as many people think the country would be a better place if charities had more influence than think the opposite.

Figure 13. Britons generally favour the idea that charities and community groups should have more involvement in national decision making

“To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements: Britain would be a better place if charities and community groups had more involvement in decision making at national level” Great Britain: Nov-20

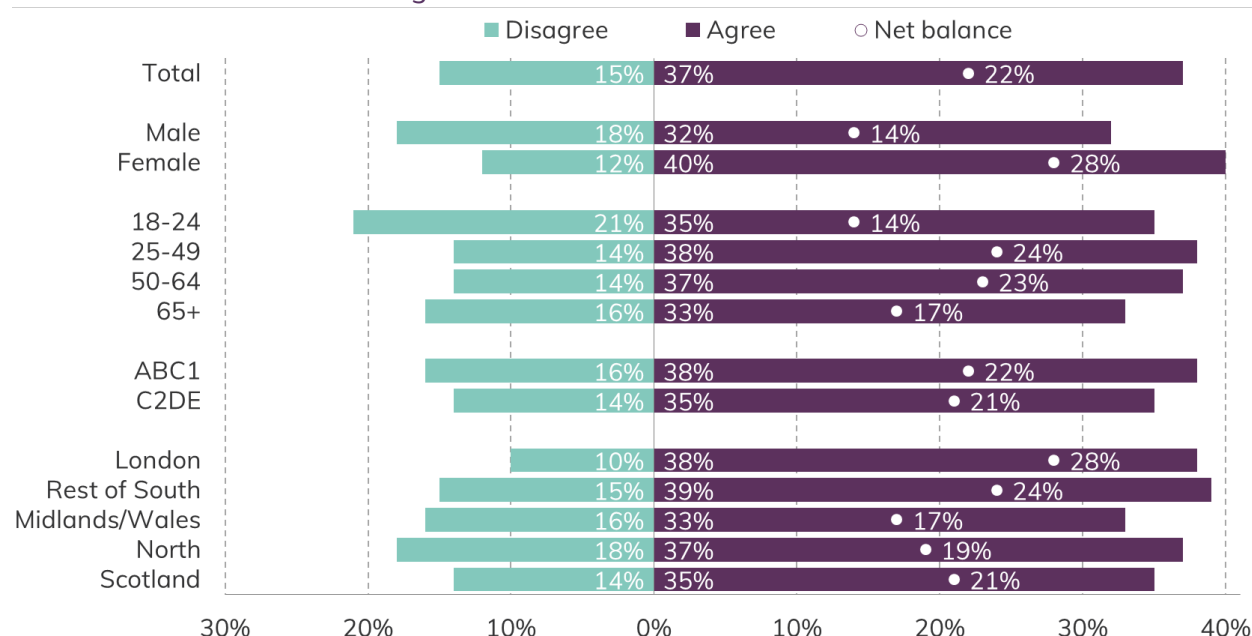


Notes: Residual (not shown) covers "neither agree nor disagree" and "don't know".

Source: YouGov plc/Pro Bono Economics, online survey 18-19 November 2020. n = 1,696. Great Britain. Weighted and representative of all GB adults (18+).

Figure 14. The public are generally supportive of charities and community groups having a greater influence over decisions in their local area

“To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements: My neighbourhood would be a better place if charities and community groups had more involvement in decision making at local level” Great Britain: Nov-20



Notes: Residual (not shown) covers "neither agree nor disagree" and "don't know".

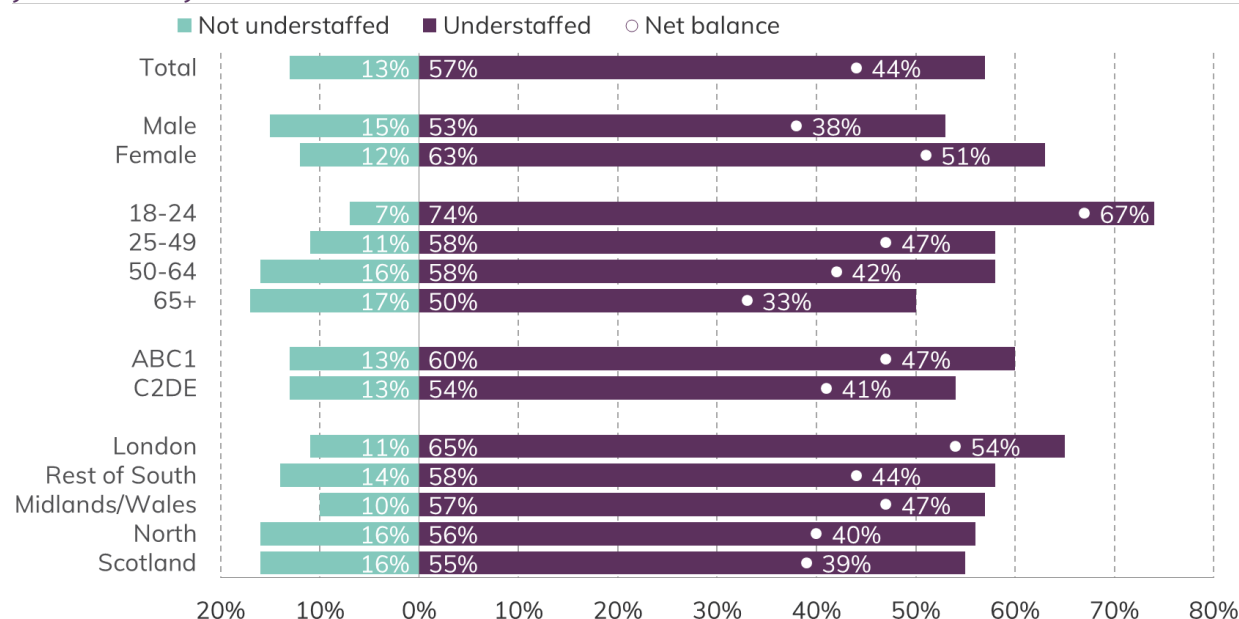
Source: YouGov plc/Pro Bono Economics, online survey 18-19 November 2020. n = 1,696. Great Britain.

Weighted and representative of all GB adults (18+).

More funding, more support from government, and more collaboration would all help charities and community groups achieve more

Despite the important role the public clearly sees charities and community groups playing - whether delivering vital services, or supporting better decision making – many people believe charities and community groups are currently understaffed. 57 per cent of respondents said that they believe charities and community groups were understaffed, compared to just 13 per cent who said otherwise. Women and younger adults were more likely to say they were understaffed.

Figure 15. People tend to think of charities and community groups as understaffed
 “Thinking about most charities and community groups in general... How understaffed do you think they are?” Great Britain: Nov-20



Notes: Residual (not shown) covers don't know".

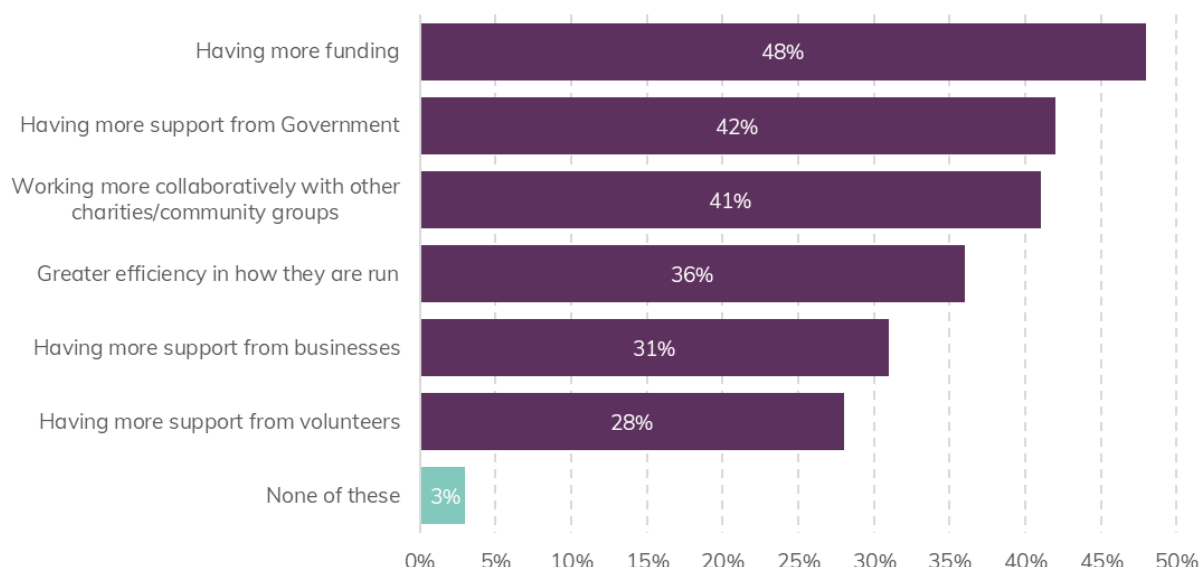
Source: YouGov plc/Pro Bono Economics, online survey 18-19 November 2020. n = 1,696. Great Britain.

Weighted and representative of all GB adults (18+).

Given the British public's support for charities and community groups and their potential for playing a greater role in our lives, what do people think the sector needs to deliver more? When asked what would be most helpful for charities and community groups in terms of meeting their objectives almost half said more funding. Just over 40 per cent also selected “more support from Government”. But there was also a strong sense that working more collaboratively with other organisations could help, as well as greater efficiency, suggesting the public believes there is more charities can do to help themselves as well.

Figure 16. The public sees increased funding, government support, and sector collaboration as the most important factors to help charities/community groups deliver on their objectives

“Which of the following would be most helpful to charities and community groups in working towards their objectives? (Select up to three)” Great Britain: Nov-20



Source: YouGov plc / Pro Bono Economics, online survey 18-19 November 2020. n = 1,696. Great Britain. Weighted and representative of all GB adults (18+).

Overall, the public hold charities and community groups in high regard, but many people believe they could achieve more. “How?” is a question the Law Family Commission on Civil Society will try to answer

This report has shown a clear sense of the value of civil society and the regard in which we hold it as a force for good during good times and bad, and that it can play a key role in making Britain a better place. But it is clear also that the public thinks it can achieve even more, particularly if given the right resources, powers and skills. Of course, public perception of charities is not necessarily the same as reality – but that distinction may not matter too much. Charities require public support, so it’s important both that they are effective, and are seen to be effective.

In this context, PBE begins its work on the [Law Family Commission on Civil Society](#), an ambitious two-year programme into how we can unleash the potential of civil society and harness the power and energy within our communities to improve wellbeing in the UK. Through the Commission, we will address structural questions about the effectiveness and efficiency of charities and community groups, while helping the public to observe that in action, and examine how high levels of public esteem can be translated into opportunities for civil society to make the country a better place. The public clearly sees the recovery as an opportunity for charities and community groups to help the country to level up. The Commission will work with the sector to ensure that the public are proved right.

Thank you to YouGov for their support with this research. Please [click here](#) to view the full results tables published by YouGov.



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