

charitytimes

Small charities

As demand grows, are smaller organisations being left behind?

Non-disclosure agreements

What do NDAs mean for charities, and are they fit for purpose?

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An overview of the key highlights from this year's leadership event

Summer 2026

What keeps charity leaders up at night?



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Editor's comment



There is something about the middle of the night that makes every problem feel bigger than it really is.

At 3am, I have found myself worrying about where my birth certificate is (I still don't know), or, on one memorable occasion, waking in a panic convinced I hadn't submitted my university dissertation 15 years ago (despite having successfully graduated).

Sometimes, during busy periods, the worries are more persistent and I have found myself searching online for 'how to fall asleep fast'. Those issues are often still there the next day, but they usually become more manageable once broken down into a practical

to-do list.

It seems charity leaders are having similar sleepless nights. This issue's special report (p.32) explores the challenges keeping charity leaders awake at night, and the findings offer a revealing snapshot of the pressures facing the sector. Income remains the dominant concern, cited by 80% of leaders, followed by staffing (45%), costs (28%), demand (15%), politics (14%) and board issues (12%).

None of these challenges exist in isolation. Financial pressures can affect recruitment and retention, while increasing demand often arrives alongside rising operating costs. Add political uncertainty and an unpredictable economic environment, and it is easy to understand why many leaders are struggling to switch off.

One finding that particularly stood out was that 69% of leaders said they were 'moderately or very concerned' about staff burnout and wellbeing. Yet there is an irony: many leaders are themselves exhausted. When those at the top are carrying significant stress, the impact can ripple throughout an organisation, influencing culture,

morale and decision-making.

There are no easy solutions to the challenges facing the sector. But perhaps there is something to be learned from those restless nights. Problems rarely look their best in the dark. While the concerns identified in our report are significant, they are not insurmountable. Progress doesn't come from solving everything at once, but from identifying priorities, focusing on what can be controlled, and taking the next practical step forward. The sector's challenges won't disappear overnight, but they will always look different in the morning.

Editor

Lauren Weymouth



Problems rarely look their best in the dark. While the concerns in our report are significant, they are not insurmountable.

The team

Editor

Lauren Weymouth

lauren.weymouth@charitytimes.com

Deputy Editor

Melissa Moody

melissa.moody@charitytimes.com

Commercial Manager

Camilla Capece

020 7562 2438

camilla.capece@charitytimes.com

Charity Times Leadership Network Membership Manager

Shannon Woods

020 7562 4385

shannon.woods@charitytimes.com

Design & Production

Jessica Harrington

jessica.harrington@perspectivepublishing.com

Managing Director

John Woods

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10



22



19



42



32

26



70



38



Summer 2026

REGULARS

06 NEWS

13 LEGAL LOWDOWN

Practical steps for charities encouraging legacy giving in wills

14 APPOINTMENTS

18 SOAPBOX

Melissa Moody discusses why charity PR needs a higher bar

38 CEO DIARY

Stephanie Slater MBE, CEO of School Food Matters shares her week

71 SARASIN COLUMN

Financial bubbles: What can history teach us?

73 ARC COLUMN

"Know what you own, and why you own it."

76 DIRECTORY

IN-DEPTH

19 PROFILE

Mat Cottle-Shaw on how he's driving change at Rotherham Hospice

22 SMALL CHARITIES

As demand grows, are small charities being left behind?

28 NON-DISCLOSURE AGREEMENTS

What do NDAs mean for charities, and are they fit for purpose?

31 REPORT

What keeps charity leaders up at night?

41 ON ALERT

With rising hostilities and increasing risk, charities are adapting in new ways

52 CHARITY BOARDS

Are trustee boards holding their charities back?

55 BETTER SOCIETY AWARDS

All the winners from the 2026 Better Society Awards

INDUSTRY VOICES

16 SRABANI SEN

Celebrating diversity: is it all it's cracked up to be?

17 CLARE MILLS

How can we fit ethical contemplation into existing processes and systems?

26 SUPPORTING SMALL

Building a support system that works for small charities

30 NATASHA FRIEND

AI vs young Londoners: Who funds better?

44 EMMA BRACEGIRDLE

The sector that stands to win or lose on AI imagery

45 CHARITY TIMES CONFERENCE

Resilience, reinvention and the realities of a changing sector

54 MARY JANE ROBERTS

Why charity leaders must wake up to the attention war

News in brief



The British Heart Foundation is looking to close 90 stores by the end of March 2027, with the rest by March the following year

STAFF AT RISK AS RSPB TO CUT COSTS BY 7%

The RSPB is consulting with staff as it considers job cuts as part of plans to reduce its operating costs by 7%. The cuts are being looked at as it faces "ongoing external pressures" including inflation, a National Living Wage rise, and the hike in NI employer contributions, which have added £2m to its wage bill. The consultation is due to end on 15 July.

BHF TO CLOSE NEARLY 1 IN 4 CHARITY SHOPS

The British Heart Foundation has announced plans to close 150 of its 640

charity shops. It will close 90 stores by the end of March 2027, with the rest to shut their doors for good by March 2028.

'LACK OF BUY IN' FROM LEADERS HINDERING PHILANTHROPY

Fundraisers are warning they are not being backed by their boards and senior leaders to target high net worth donors, according to research by CloF. Its research also warns that efforts to attract philanthropic giving are being hindered by a lack of skills in using technology. The findings have emerged in the second part of the fundraising body's Philanthropy 2035 research project.

SMALL CHARITIES ABSENT FROM PUBLIC CONTRACTING

Research has found that charities with incomes between £1m and £100m account for nearly two thirds of contracts "and an even larger share of funding". This is a pattern that is replicated for contracting involving CICs. DCMS's report *Mapping and Understanding the UK Civil Society*

Sector has found that "micro and small organisations of all types are almost entirely absent from procurement markets.

CANCER CHARITIES ANNOUNCE MERGER

A cancer support charity set up in memory of former England cricket captain Andrew Strauss's wife is to merge with Maggie's, which runs 27 cancer support centres across the UK. The foundation focuses on supporting families where a parent is living with an incurable cancer. The Foundation's staff will begin moving over to Maggie's from next month in a move that follows the two charities already working closely in partnership.

MAN CHARGED FOLLOWING CHARITY FOUNDER'S DEATH

Thames Valley Police have charged a man in connection with a fatal road traffic incident involving an arts charity founder. Tim Joss, who founded and was chief executive of Aesop Arts & Society,

died two years ago at the scene of the incident in Oxfordshire. The 68-year-old charity leader from Brize Norton had been riding his bike when he collided with a car. Police have confirmed that "Kieren Kilminster, aged 22, of Wavell Way, Winchester, has been charged by postal requisition with causing death by careless or inconsiderate driving following" the incident.

DEMENTIA CHARITY CLOSES AFTER SPENDING OUTSTRIPS INCOME

A support charity that has been helping people for more than four decades has closed. Dementia Concern, based in Ealing, London shut down at the end of last week. It said that 'discussions are ongoing' with other organisations to see if they can take on aspects of its work. The organisation's last financial records submitted to the Charity Commission show that it spent £121m in the financial year ending March 2025, however its income that year was £1.03m. This is the second year in a row its spending has outstripped its income. The charity's chair Peter Ryan said: "Like many other charities, our financial position has become unsustainable".

ONE IN THREE CHARITY COMMUNICATORS FEEL BURNED OUT

A survey by CharityComms found that one in three communications professionals felt burned out at work during 2025, up from one in four when the organisation carried out its survey the previous year. It also found that one in seven said they are often looking for resources to prevent burnout, up from fewer than one according to its *Salary and Organisational Culture Survey Report 2025*.



CIOF TO REPLACE ANNUAL CONVENTION WITH 'AFFORDABLE' EVENT PROGRAMME

The Chartered Institute of Fundraising (CIOF) has staged its last ever annual fundraising convention. From next year the event is to be replaced with two new one-day events. This includes a fundraising summit focused on leadership and the future of the profession, and another called Fundraising in Action, which is aimed at designing, building and enhancing fundraiser's skills. It says the new events will "sit alongside a year-round programme of activity delivered by our groups across the UK". It will include webinars and networking events.

FELIX RELAUNCHES FOLLOWING MERGER

Felix has formally re-launched following the merger of Fareshare and the Felix Project. The new name and re-launch will enable the two organisations to "rescue and redistribute more food and invest it in communities". Under the new name, the charity has seven depots in London, Liverpool, Ipswich and Southampton and works with 16 independent network partners who manage a further 28 depots across the UK.

Regulator news

■ Commission probes management of Christian school

The Charity Commission will assess the financial management and governance of St Lawrence College in Kent after it was placed into administration.

The school has been run by charity The Corporation of St Lawrence College, which has submitted a serious incident report to the Commission relating to its finances.

■ Regulator warns charities using 'soft opt in' marketing

The Fundraising Regulator has warned charities to ensure they avoid harming public trust when they use a new 'soft opt in' provision that allows them to contact supporters without prior consent.

It has issued the warning as it launches an update to guidance on data privacy and announces plans to develop separate guidance on the new provision.

■ Julia Unwin uses speech to criticise board recruitment

New chair of the Charity Commission, Julia Unwin, has used her inaugural speech to criticise the focus of charity boards using their personal contacts to recruit trustees. She said in the speech that she is "saddened but not surprised" that just 6% of trustees who took part in a survey by the Commission last year, were appointed following an open recruitment process by responding to a job advert.

World's wealthiest continue to be less generous than those in lower income countries

People in the UK are becoming less generous in terms of the proportion of income given to good causes, the research has also found

Written by **JOE LEPPER**

People in wealthy countries continue to give less of their earnings to good causes than those in lower income regions, research has found.

The Charities Aid Foundation's (CAF) latest World Giving Report is based on surveys of more than 60,000 people across 105 countries. This found that globally people donated on average 1% of their income.

But the proportion is much higher across African nations, where 1.6% is given, and far lower in Europe, where the figure is just 0.6%.

This disparity in giving between richer and poorer regions was also prevalent in last year's global giving report from CAF.

The UK is among the poorest

performers in terms of percentage of earnings given to good causes, despite being the 25th richest nation in the world, according to latest International Monetary Fund (IMF) figures.

In the UK people donated 0.7% of their income, down on last year's figure of 0.75%. This has seen the UK slump from the 64th most generous in terms of percentage of income given to 75th.

Previous research by CAF released earlier this year into local giving by Brits to charity also recorded a fall in the proportion of earnings donated in the UK. This found that among the least generous areas were affluent Kensington & Bayswater, while the most generous was Sheffield Hallam.

Global fall in giving

The research also found a global slump in the proportion of people giving to good causes, from 64% in 2024 to 61% in 2025. Using this metric the UK is ranked 5th in the world, at 62%.

In the UK less than one in five donations in the UK goes to global charities, while just under one in four is made to local charities and just under three in five are made to national charities.

Most generous country revealed

The most generous country in the world is Nigeria, where people give an average of 2.8% of their income to good causes. Ghana is the second most generous, with a figure of 2.4%. Both are ranked outside the top 160 richest

In the UK people donated 0.7% of their income, down on last year's figure of 0.75%

countries in the world, according to the IMF.

Overall, the ten most generous countries are in Africa and Asia. Among the least generous is Portugal, which is ranked 100 out of 105 countries with people giving away on average 0.4% of their income.

Meanwhile, Germany is ranked 98th out of 105 countries looked at, with people similarly donating 0.4% of their income on average. In 104th ranked Latvia people give away 0.3% of their earnings on average.

Globally the most generous age group are those aged 25 to 44. They donate twice as much of their income compared to the over 55s (1.2% v 0.6%).

Most popular causes

Religious groups are the most popular cause to donate to globally, supported by just over three in 10 people, followed by children and young people and poverty relief, which are supported by just under three in 10.

Despite Europe lagging behind Africa in terms of giving overall, donors in higher income countries including those in Europe give a higher share of their earnings to charities working globally, compared to those in lower income countries.



Community spirit

A strong sense of community spirit is key to giving, CAF's report found. In countries where more than four in five people feel a strong sense of belonging to their local community, giving is more than three times higher than where community spirit is low.

"Giving is deeply personal based on different factors including values, circumstances and experiences," said CAF managing director Mark Greer.

"By understanding these influences and how they appear around the world, we can learn what drives vibrant cultures of giving to support the resilience of civil society.

"We all have a role to play in growing giving. Encouraging conversations, and more importantly, action by individuals, charities, businesses, and governments can help build stronger and more thriving civil societies."

The world's wealthiest

The findings of CAF's survey follow the publication of the Sunday Times Giving List, which revealed the most philanthropic individuals from the Sunday Times Rich List.

The list shows collectively, the most generous philanthropists gave £4.9 billion to charity, either personally or through charitable foundations or businesses.

This is up by £1.25 billion on last year's figures.

Hedge fund manager Chris Hohn has become the first British philanthropist to donate more than £1bn to charitable causes.

Based on figures for 2024, TCI Fund Management and the Children's Investment Fund Foundation founder Hohn donated £1.4bn, which is just under 17% of his total wealth of £8.5bn. Children's health and climate change were among the main causes Hohn donated to.

The Giving List tracks the philanthropic activity of the 100 individuals on the Sunday Times Rich List and the 40 Richest Under 40 in association with the Charities Aid Foundation (CAF).

Researchers found that ten of the top 100 richest individuals listed gave more than £100m but a total of 63 gave less than 1% of their wealth.

"Our research shows that high net worth donors can be inspired by someone else's story," said CAF managing director Mark Greer.

"However, we don't tend to talk

about charitable giving in the UK, even amongst the ultra-wealthy. We hope Sir Chris Hohn's generosity and openness inspires others to give and helps create a wider culture of giving to support hardworking charities that are crucial to UK society."

Also featured on the Giving List is Sir Elton John, who donated almost 8% of his £480m wealth to HIV/Aids, medical and humanitarian charities.

Harry Potter author JK Rowling also features, after giving away just under 2% of her £975m fortune to causes supporting disadvantaged women and children.



Survey finds ways most new donors are recruited

Seven in 10 of new donors are recruited through face-to-face fundraising, while half of new one-off donors are acquired through digital channels, research shows

Written by [Joe Lepper](#)

A survey of more than 100 charities has found that seven in ten new regular givers are recruited through face-to-face fundraising.

The survey has been published by the Chartered Institute of Fundraising (CioF), in partnership with consultancy AAW, and involved 104 charities representing £2.2bn in voluntary sector income.

In contrast half of new one-off donors are acquired through digital channels, the survey found.

"The data shows how donor recruitment channels are shifting, with digital and face-to-face playing distinct and vital roles," said CioF executive director of membership and operations Rob Cope.

"We regularly hear from our members that face-to-face is one of the most valuable and consistent methods of fundraising for them and this data backs that up."

The survey also found that legacies remain the single largest source of voluntary sector income, generating 37% of all earnings among charities.

However, the survey also found that just 15% of fundraising expenditure is directed towards this source of income. A far greater proportion of large charities' income comes from legacies than among their smaller counterparts, the survey found.

"It's clear that legacies continue to be a powerhouse of voluntary income. vet.

interestingly, the investment levels don't reflect their long-term potential," added Cope.

Other findings from the CioF's 2026 Fundraising Benchmarking Survey are that there are six full time equivalent staff members on the median average fundraising team, with an income under £10m. The average among charities with an income above £100m a year is 73.

Surveys launch 'to shape future of fundraising'

Meanwhile the CioF has launched two UK wide surveys that aim "at building the clearest picture yet of the fundraising profession". These are aimed at individual fundraisers and fundraising leaders.

These aim to find out more about "who fundraisers are, how they experience the profession, and what supports or limits progression and opportunity".

The findings will inform the organisation's future policy, standards, guidance and advocacy.

"If fundraising is to thrive as a profession, we need a much clearer understanding of the people who make it happen and the systems that shape their careers," said CioF executive director of engagement Ceri Edwards.

"We hear important stories every day about barriers to progression, pressures on wellbeing, access to opportunity, and how fundraising is valued inside organisations, but we need stronger evidence to turn those experiences into meaningful change."



Charity Commission 'does not appear at all fit for purpose', MPs to warn PM

Investigations found 'several failings' around decision making at the regulator and its communication with complainants

Written by [Joe Lepper](#)

Members of the House of Commons Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee are to write to Number 10 amid concerns over the Charity Commission's actions during a spat with the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman (PHSO).

At a hearing this week its chair Simon Hoare MP said that on assessing evidence around the disagreement, the regulator "does not, on the face of what we have heard, appear at all fit for purpose".

The Committee has also accused the regulator of "blundering" into the row with the PHSO.

Hoare added that from "colleagues across the House" he has spoken to, the Commission "is in the junk bond basket reputationally and organisationally".

In addition to the Prime Minister's Office, the Committee will also be writing to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport as the regulator's sponsoring department, and the Cabinet Office, around their concerns.

The row centres on concerns raised by the PHSO that the Charity Commission failed to implement its recommendations to improve following its probe into the regulator's handling of two sexual abuse cases at charities.

The ombudsman's investigations found "several failings" around decision making at the Commission and its communication with complainants.



The reports were the subject of a failed attempt by the Commission in the High Court to bring a judicial review over its concerns over the ombudsman's statutory remit.

This legal action had risked delaying the laying of the reports before parliament, but these were published last year after MPs intervened.

Commission's attitude 'belligerent', claims MP

Committee member Simon Carling MP described the Commission's attitude to the PHSO's decisions as "belligerent".

Meanwhile, Hoare questioned the quality of legal advice the Commission received and the decision making of its board members.

He told Charity Commission chief executive David Holdsworth at the hearing "you have kept the receipt, I hope" for the legal advice.

Holdsworth revealed that "from end to end on both the cases" the Commission has spent £70,000.

Hoare said that the Commission's decision making over seeking a judicial

review could only be justified "if you are a new organisation of three men and a dog in a back bedroom" rather than a "well-established, well-resourced entity".

"Yet you, as the commission, blunder into this, causing considerable upset to two complaints and a massive amount of additional and unnecessary work to the PHSO, troubling the courts and seeking to undermine parliamentary privilege by forming a legal block between information to be received by Parliament," he told Holdsworth, as well as Commission chair Julia Unwin, at the hearing.

Unwin said that she challenged the word "blunder" to describe its actions around the row with the PHSO, and that "misunderstanding" would be more appropriate, adding that the Commission "is not proud of how we conducted ourselves on these cases".

She added that the Commission is looking to boost staff numbers and carry out a "serious organisational review" when asked by MPs for details around plans around improvement.

Far-right threat having negative impact on most charities, research suggests

But researchers warn that ‘cultures of timidity and reticence’ are holding back charities from countering the rising threat of far-right views in the UK

Written by [Joe Lepper](#)

Researchers say that ‘cultures of timidity and reticence’ are holding back charities from countering the rising threat of far-right views in the UK.

This is despite most of the 55 NGOs with incomes above £100,000 who were surveyed by researchers warning that such threats have negatively impacted their organisation.

Three quarters of respondents reported “very significant negative effects” or “some serious negative effects” to both their mission and the communities they work with.

“We are facing a clear threat, and yet there is a tendency towards timidity in response,” said researchers.

One respondent said: “Some in our trans network are saying they cannot currently do the media work we support them to do.”

Another said: “The far-right are polarising people against progressive solution.”

Meanwhile, another highlighted the impact of far right propaganda on those it works with.

“Some in the communities we work in are being radicalised and believe migrants/small boats/refugees are to blame for society’s ills,” they said.

Researchers add: “The fact that the challenge is multifaceted and the effects are differential is complicating the response, making it hard to mobilise around simple responses.

“However, there are things that can help different NGOs at different stages

on the journey towards meaningful action.”

The research Towards Meaningful Action is a follow up to previous research called Meeting the Moment which also looked at the impact on social change organisations of the far right.

Countering far-right threats

Report co-author Jim Coe has also published a document aimed at helping charities’ strategic discussions around the threat of the far right and potential scenarios they could face.

This invites charities to consider how marginalised communities are being impacted and whether fair debate is being hindered.

Questions charities should be asking themselves include “do you need to

be doing more to help ensure that the communities you work with, and your staff, are safe and secure?” and “should you be speaking out (more) about prospective threats to your work?”

Researchers point out that their findings support the views of previous research released in recent months into the impact of the far right on the charity sector.

Sheila McKechnie Foundation (SMK)’s annual report warned in March that the rise of the far-right as well as societal division, misinformation and hate are among specific challenges charity campaigners face.

Charities responding to an NCVO survey last year “described rising levels of fear, intimidation and online hate”. They also warned of a “pervasive climate of fear”.





LEGAL LOWDOWN

Legacy gifts are a vital source of income for charities, but protecting them requires careful stewardship. Legacy dispute specialist Naomi Ireson explains why charities should take proactive steps to safeguard bequests, maintain effective legacy processes, and minimise the risk of gifts being lost or challenged.

Legacy gifts remain one of the most powerful ways for donors to support the charities they care about. For many supporters, including a gift in their will is a deeply personal choice that allows their values to endure. Because these decisions are often made many years before a donor passes away, charities should take proactive steps to ensure those gifts reach the right place. Now is the time to strengthen legacy stewardship and safeguard future support.

Why do people leave legacies?

Donors choose to leave legacy gifts for one core reason: they want to make a difference. Whether they are long-standing supporters or passionate about the charity's mission, including a gift in a will is a thoughtful decision. Because these legacies are usually drafted with a solicitor's help, charities should ensure their information is accessible and accurate.

What can go wrong and how to avoid it

Even when donors' intentions are clear, practical issues can delay or jeopardise gifts. Fortunately, many of these problems can be avoided with the right preparation.

1. Donors may not have your correct

Practical steps for charities encouraging legacy giving in wills

details: A surprising number of will clauses contain outdated or incomplete charity information. Practical steps for your charity:

- Keep your website updated with your full charity name, registered number and contact details.
- Consider sending a legacy information pack to patrons and major supporters.
- Create a standard template letter confirming your charity's details for solicitors' use.

- Ensure your charity is listed correctly in relevant directories commonly used by professionals.

2. Your charity may cease to exist: If your charity winds up, merges, or rebrands, a legacy gift may fail unless the Will contains appropriate wording.

Practical step: You should encourage supporters to include a clause empowering their personal representatives (PRs) to redirect the gift to a charity with similar aims. This simple addition protects the donor's intention, even if the charity's structure changes over time.

3. Incorrectly drafted gift clauses:

Ambiguous or incomplete clauses can create legal uncertainty and can put the legacy at risk. **Practical step:** If a clause appears defective, specialist legal advice can establish whether rectification or a court application may preserve the gift. In many cases, these issues can be resolved, provided charities seek advice promptly. Legacy Dispute solicitors are routinely instructed to assist with rectification or construction of will claims.

4. Personal representatives cannot

find or contact you: Personal representatives must be able to locate your charity. **Practical steps:**

- Maintain clear legacy specific contact details on your website.
- Include a dedicated "Legacy Giving" section that is easy to locate and share.

5. Mergers and changing charity numbers:

If your charity merges or receives a new charity number, Personal Representatives must be able to trace this connection.

Practical steps:

- Clearly signpost any mergers on your website.
- Reference both old and new charity numbers in your materials.
- Ensure all external communications reflect your charity's historic and current identity.

Nine times out of ten, legacy gifts reach the intended charity without difficulty. But when something does go wrong, the right legal guidance can make all the difference. Most problems can be untangled, whether through correspondence, clarification, or formal steps such as rectification.

If your charity is facing uncertainty over a legacy gift, or if you simply want to strengthen your legacy giving processes, Legacy Dispute Solicitors can help. Naomi and her team specialise in resolving legacy disputes, advising on Will drafting safeguards, and supporting charities to protect the gifts so generously intended for them.

For clear, practical, and expert support, get in touch with Legacy Dispute Solicitors. We are here to ensure your charity receives the legacies intended for it.

People on the move

The latest appointments from across the charity sector

If you have any appointments to announce please contact melissa.moody@charitytimes.com



CLAIRE HOYLE
BBC Children in Need has confirmed the appointment of Claire Hoyle as chief executive.

She takes up the role with immediate effect, having served as CEO on an interim basis since December 2025, and before that, chief campaigns and engagement officer at the charity. Prior to joining BBC Children in Need, she held senior leadership roles at the NSPCC, including Deputy Director of Fundraising and at Bloodwise.



KATHRYN PRETZEL-SHIELS
Bowel Research UK has appointed Kathryn Pretzel-Shiels as its

new chief executive officer following a period as Interim CEO. She has been involved with the charity since 2016, initially serving as a trustee and later as chair of the fundraising, marketing and communications committee. Pretzel-Shiels previously spent 28 years at American Express, working across three continents, and later served as marketing



ASHLEY HIGHFIELD
The conservation charity **WCMC** has appointed Ashley Highfield as chair. He began his career as a

management consultant in the technology, media, and telecommunications sector before joining the BBC, where he became the youngest member of the executive board and played a key role in launching iPlayer and BBC.co.uk. He later served as MD of Microsoft's UK Consumer and Online business and then as CEO of the UK's largest regional press company.



EMMA MCCARGOW
Emma McCargow has taken up the role of co-managing director with blood cancer

charity DKMS UK. In her new role, she will be jointly responsible for running DKMS UK alongside her co-managing director Peter McCleave. She brings over two decades of experience in health research and life sciences. Most recently she held a senior leadership role at a national genomics organisation where she led cross-functional initiatives.



KEON WEST
The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust has appointed Keon West as head of reparations.

He is currently the head of research at Runnymede Trust and a visiting professor at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He will design and lead a reparations programme that addresses the legacy of JRCT's endowment. JRCT's endowment originates from the Rowntree Company, known to have profited from systems of colonial exploitation.

People on the move

KRISTINA MURRIN CBE

The Parkinson's UK board of trustees has appointed Kristina Murrin CBE as a trustee and chair elect.

She will join the board in September, and take on the role of chair in October, when Gary Shaughnessy CBE completes his term with the annual members' meeting. Most recently, she was CEO at The King's Foundation, and formerly a senior leader at Number 10, where she has built a career across the private, public and charity sectors.



DAME MELANIE WELHAM

The Royal Society of Biology has appointed Professor Dame Melanie Welham DBE FRSB as its president. She takes over from Professor Sir Ian Boyd FRSB, whose term is ending after four years. Welham was the former executive chair at BBSRC (Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council) 2018-2023. She was the first female professor at the University of Bath and was the UKRI Executive Champion for People, Culture and Talent.



PROFESSOR CECILIA FENERTY

Glaucoma UK has appointed Professor Cecilia Fenerty as its new chair of the trustee board, succeeding Professor Anthony King, who stepped down after completing four years as chair and nine years as a trustee. Fenerty brings more than 25 years' experience as a consultant ophthalmologist. She is widely respected, and has a long standing commitment to improving outcomes for people living with



MARK GAME

Mark Game has been appointed CEO at **FoodCycle**.

The founder of food clubs charity The Bread and Butter Thing (TBBT), will join the FoodCycle team in mid-April, as current CEO Sophie Tebbetts is to step down. He was the co-founder of the UK's first social supermarket The Community Shop in 2013, before founding TBBT in 2015. Game also previously served as a trustee with FoodCycle for almost a decade.



MOHINI RAICHURA-BROWN

Learning disability charity **Mencap** has announced the appointment of its new executive director of fundraising, Mohini Raichura-Brown, who will take up the role in June 2026. She joins Mencap with over 20 years' experience achieving income growth across charity and corporate sectors. Most recently she was interim director of fundraising at the British Asian Trust, and prior to that she was Chief Partnerships Officer at UNICEF UK.



RICHARD NIGHTINGALE

International disaster relief charity **ShelterBox** has welcomed Richard Nightingale as its new director of people & culture. With more than 20 years' experience leading HR teams in the corporate world, he has held senior roles on executive and leadership teams. Nightingale previously worked in financial services and held HR Director roles in Barclays, Kensington Mortgages, Investec and Sun Life of Canada.



Celebrating diversity: is it all it's cracked up to be?

“Too many organisations “celebrate diversity” in ways that are shallow”



**SRABANI SEN
IS CEO AND
FOUNDER OF
FULL COLOUR**

July sees the arrival of South Asian Heritage Month. While not as big or well known as Black History Month in October, it has been steadily growing in profile over the last few years.

Organisations that have cottoned onto South Asian Heritage Month will no doubt be planning celebrations to make their Asian colleagues feel valued and included. Personally, I find celebrations of diversity more than a little “ick”.

Valuing people with different characteristics for who they are and what they bring to your organisation is a wonderful and important thing to do. However, too many organisations “celebrate diversity” in ways that are shallow, like asking colleagues of a certain heritage to bring in traditional food to share.

I am not trying to be a killjoy. I'm all for recognising and valuing the contribution of minoritised people. However, there are five things that bug me about organisations “celebrating diversity” in superficial ways.

1. Why are we singling out certain forms of diversity and not others?

There are numerous forms of diversity, and yet most organisations focus on only a few, e.g. Black people during Black History Month. Does that mean people with Albanian heritage don't count?

2. The underlying assumption is that a minoritised characteristic is somehow not “normal”

The fact that a characteristic is different is what makes it noteworthy and therefore the focus of celebration. Unless we connect that celebration to something meaningful, (e.g. the contribution of LGBTQI+ people to your organisation during Pride month), isn't this just another form of “othering”?

3. There is an uncomfortable undertone of “diversity as entertainment”

The term “celebration” implies fun, yet for many people with minoritised characteristics, the thing(s) that make them different can be the source of anything from unconscious bias,

microaggressions, outright discrimination and aggression. Celebration risks trivialising the impact of living with minoritised characteristics, unless handled with extreme care.

4. Celebrating a “month” can give people a false sense of one and done

Putting a rainbow flag filter on their social media photo for a few days may give people a false sense that they are doing something supportive or being an ally, but how meaningful is it if minoritised people continue to experience prejudice in these people's organisations or communities?

5. “Celebrating diversity” risks masking the failure of an organisation to address systemic issues

In some organisations, events that celebrate diversity allow “majoritized” people, leaders in particular, to feel good about doing the small stuff. It provides a screen to hide behind for failing to do the things that would really create change.

Resources are limited, so if you are taking time, money and attention away from those things that would actually move the needle, why not focus on the important stuff instead?

Most importantly, the audits we do at Full Colour surface that many organisations have challenges that cannot be ameliorated by “celebrating diversity”.

If you want to celebrate diversity in your organisation, whether for Asian Heritage Month or otherwise, here are some questions to consider.

- What does “celebrating diversity” mean exactly?
- What is your organisation trying to achieve in celebrating diversity?
- Does your organisation “celebrate” some kinds of diversity and not others? If so, how do you choose?
- After the “month” is over, what will have changed in your organisation's culture or ways of working?

And the most important question of all. Who benefits from celebrating diversity? Minoritised people, or those who get to feel good about themselves for joining in the celebrations?

The only way is ethics?

“How can we fit ethical contemplation into our existing processes?”

Beneficiaries, staff, volunteers, funders, trustees, the community... there are so many stakeholders to keep in mind when making decisions. Don't forget celebrating diversity, building inclusion, looking out for the carbon footprint, maintaining compliance and being well-governed. Demand is rising, while people have fewer places to turn. Oh, and the money needs to add up too... and what's the organisation's impact?

There are so many competing – and sometimes conflicting – perspectives and angles to keep in our heads, it's no wonder charity leaders are feeling the pressure and burnout is on the rise. I suspect you are nodding along.

With all this to deal with, why on earth have I thrown 'ethics' (and a terrible punny headline) at you? Surely we are all working in organisations that were set up with good intentions, are here to do good in the world, and are doing it in good ways? As leaders, we spend a lot of time thinking about values and behaviours. Surely that's 'ethics' ticked off the to-do list?

These assumptions are deep-rooted in the charity sector and, as with many assumptions, can often be overlooked when so much else is going on. I've been doing some thinking lately, inspired by a day at the inaugural convening of the Non-Profit Ethics Lab at the Gradel Charity Institute.

Schools of ethics have a range of approaches to this situation.

Consequentialists would argue that 'the end justifies the means.' In that situation, we might cut a few corners to achieve a great result for our beneficiaries – and that would be morally justifiable.

Kantians would take the opposing view, arguing we must always treat people as ends in themselves, and never simply as the means to an end.

But can we really think at that scale in practice – or do we paralyse ourselves, trying to account

for every possible consequence? Virtue ethics develops the Kantian position, suggesting that the methods we use in pursuit of our goals inherently define the moral quality of the resulting outcomes.

I've been thinking how we can fit ethical contemplation into our existing processes and systems. Many of us are familiar with the evaluation model that follows 'inputs, actions, outputs, outcomes, impact' and I believe there are potential spaces between these steps for ethical assessment and reflection. By embedding ethical pause points throughout the delivery cycle, we can ensure not just effective, but responsible and reflective practice.

The model becomes: Inputs - Pause - Actions - Pause - Outputs - Pause - Outcomes - Pause - Impact - Pause - Learning

For example, an awareness campaign might meet its targets (output), but whose awareness was raised – and whose wasn't – might raise ethical questions about access, our communications work, and inclusion. Without taking the time for that thinking, we might never change our practices.

This thinking is at an early stage, and I plan to work through the steps with my colleagues. We'll also be working together to identify how we assess or recognise something as 'ethical' in practice. I won't pretend I have all the answers – but perhaps that's the point. Ethics isn't something we finish; it's something we practise. And in a sector built on doing good, making space to ask not just what works, but what is right, might be one of the most important disciplines we can build. Done well, this doesn't add to the pressure leaders face – it helps cut through it.

One thing I am clear on: I believe we need more intentional uncertainty: more structured moments to pause, question, and reflect. Because if we don't create space for ethical thinking within the way we already work, it won't happen at all.



**CLARE MILLS IS
CO-CEO OF
CHARITY FINANCE
GROUP (CFG)**

'Charity PR needs a higher bar'

WRITTEN BY MELISSA MOODY

'The sector talks a lot about transparency, but its PR responses don't always live up to it'

There's a particular kind of frustration that comes from asking clear, direct questions and receiving an answer that looks polished, considered, and entirely misses the questions asked.

The sector often talks about trust as its most valuable currency. It is invoked in funding appeals, governance guidance and leadership speeches. But trust is not built through mission statements alone. It is earned, and re-earned through how organisations behave when they are challenged.

But in recent years, charity PR has drifted towards a style that will feel familiar to anyone who has dealt with corporate crisis management: cautious statements, broad references to values, and a reliance on process-heavy language that says very little. The intention may be to reassure. The impact can be the opposite.

Unlike the corporate world, charities are not simply defending market position or shareholder value. They are stewards of public trust, donor money and, in many cases, moral authority. That difference matters. It means the bar for transparency and authenticity should be higher, not lower.

The recent coverage involving the NCVO, from allegations around workplace culture to its response to an open letter on transparency, is a case in point. Across both stories, I put forward detailed, considered questions designed to reflect the concerns of small charities and sector professionals. The responses provided were careful

and measured, but they answered little to none of the questions asked.

This is not about one organisation getting it wrong; it reflects a wider pattern of how the sector responds under pressure.

Too often, when journalists or sector voices raise legitimate questions about culture, governance or accountability, responses fail to engage with the substance. Specific questions receive general answers. Concerns are acknowledged without being addressed. Statements gesture towards openness while limiting what is actually disclosed.

But why is that the case? Is it the assumption that cautious language will retain trust? Because it rarely does.

Evading questions does not neutralise scrutiny; it intensifies it. As journalists, it makes us want to dig deeper and those who work in the sector will wonder what else is hiding. And, in a sector built on credibility, that is a risky trade-off.

There is also a deeper contradiction at play. Organisations that position themselves as champions of transparency and good governance are held to a higher standard. When their communications fall short of those expectations, the gap between principle and practice becomes harder to ignore.

Transparency does not mean saying everything. It means saying something meaningful. It means answering what can be answered and explaining clearly what cannot.



Perhaps most importantly, it means respecting the audience. The charity sector is not naïve. Staff, trustees, funders and the public are able to tell the difference between necessary confidentiality and careful deflection.

When large, influential bodies get this wrong, it sets a tone. Charities rightly expect more from themselves than from the corporate world. That expectation should extend to communications. PR responses should reflect the values the sector promotes: honesty, humility and responsibility to the communities it serves.

At a time when the sector faces increasing financial, political and cultural scrutiny, trust cannot be managed through carefully constructed statements alone. It is built through responses that engage directly with reality, even when that reality is uncomfortable.

Ultimately, if the sector wants to be believed when it talks about transparency, it has to be willing to demonstrate it, especially when the questions are difficult, and especially when the answers are not straightforward.

PROFILE

MAT COTTLE-SHAW

Building belief from within

How Mat Cottle-Shaw helped a hospice recognise its own excellence and transform its future.

Mat Cottle-Shaw is the first to admit that his path to chief executive was anything but conventional. “The reality is it’s probably through a lot of luck and opportunities given to me,” he reflects.

Originally aspiring to be an architect, Cottle-Shaw left university early and “fell into a charity role”, an experience that redirected the course of his career. But like many CEOs, Cottle-Shaw acknowledges that one of his biggest ongoing challenges is striking the right balance between presence and interference.

“I’m very passionate about getting involved... but that has to be in good measure,” he admits.

His leadership analogy is drawn from gardening, a personal hobby of his. Just as plants require the right conditions to grow, so too do people. He believes that the leader’s role is to create that environment, not to force outcomes. People, he says, should be trusted to do their job.

He advocates consistency, authenticity and a willingness to step back, allowing teams to lead while maintaining a clear strategic direction.

And external recognition has played a powerful role in reinforcing internal confidence at Rotherham Hospice. Success at the 2025 Charity Times Awards, alongside regulatory achievements, provided a moment for reflection for the entire organisation.

“It made everybody... sit back and go, ‘Oh wow, we’re an award winning team,’” Cottle-Shaw says.

For a workforce that had previously underestimated its own impact, this validation



proved transformative. It also strengthened the organisation’s position in the local community and supported recruitment efforts.

But to get him, and the charity, to where they are now, he ultimately believes his progression was shaped by others’ belief in his potential; colleagues and managers who spotted something and gave him a chance to prove it. “There’s a lot of people I would thank... without those opportunities I probably never would have stayed in the charity sector.”

And the sector would have been at a loss without him, his work at Rotherham Hospice, where he has overseen a period of striking transformation, has become a story worth sharing.

Listen and learn

It is impossible to separate Cottle-Shaw the leader from Cottle-Shaw the person. His reflections return continually to the individuals who shaped him and he particularly credits female leaders who encouraged him in his roles. “Nearly every opportunity I’ve been given... has come from a female leader,” he says.



Equally formative have been the challenges. He speaks candidly about experiencing imposter syndrome and the importance of affirmation from others who encouraged him to recognise his own capability.

This openness extends to his approach to leadership today. Having lost his dad at a young age and experiencing and benefiting from hospice care, he carries a deeply personal connection to the sector.

Cottle-Shaw is also candid about the impact of mental health challenges in his life. Rather than concealing these experiences, he sees

authenticity as essential to effective leadership.

"It's important to be real for the people around you," he explains. "The reality is I could very easily come in to the hospice or into any organisation and sit in a room and people think 'oh you're doing CEO things' and it'd be okay... be a bit of an absent figure, but actually that's not being a proper leader."

For Cottle-Shaw, being visible, accessible and real builds trust. It reminds staff that their work matters and that their leader understands the emotional weight of what they do. The balance between vulnerability and resilience is not always easy, but he believes it is necessary in a sector built on compassion.

However, when Cottle-Shaw arrived at Rotherham Hospice, he was struck by a contradiction. The organisation was full of, what he says, were "committed, passionate people delivering high quality care", but many did not recognise their own excellence.

"That was the thing that really struck me," he recalls. "Every day the team were doing amazing

work, but they didn't recognise it."

His first instinct was simple: listen. He met staff across the organisation, investing time in long conversations to understand both their passion and their frustrations.

From there, his approach centred not on imposing change from above but on creating the conditions for people to thrive. "There was a culture of 'oh no, I can't do that, I'm not a director or a manager'", but he challenged that, focusing on empowering individuals and giving teams the authority, resources and confidence to act.

The results have been tangible. Under his leadership, the hospice achieved its first ever 'Outstanding' rating from the Care Quality Commission, a milestone he attributes to the team and their work.

Inspectors, he remembers, spent little time with him. "I started off doing a tour with three inspectors and one by one I lost them... they spent all their time with the team," he says, smiling and describing how those conversations with staff spoke louder than any formal presentation.

The outcome validated his belief that leadership is less about directing performance and more about enabling it.

Rethinking strategy

One of the most significant shifts at Rotherham Hospice has been the shift in strategy and how it was developed.

Cottle-Shaw recognised early that traditional approaches, documents written by senior leaders, felt disconnected from frontline realities. "The team weren't talking in terms of strategy... they care about the person in front of them," he explains.

His response was to fundamentally rethink the process. Instead of top down planning, the hospice undertook a broad public consultation, placing patients and the community at the centre of decision making.

The resulting strategy reflected what staff

instinctively knew but had not formalised; the need to expand services, support people earlier in their journey, and reach more of those who could benefit.

When shared back with the team, it sparked a moment of collective clarity, “a lightbulb moment,” as Cottle-Shaw describes it

Crucially, it also shifted mindsets from short term task delivery to long term thinking, connecting day to day work with a broader vision for impact.

As part of that broader vision, Cottle-Shaw has taken a deliberate stance that people must not be treated as a cost to be minimised.

At a time when many charities are grappling with funding pressures, he argues that “people in the charity sector are highly skilled and should be remunerated on a national level,” challenging the notion that passion for a cause justifies lower pay.

This philosophy led to a comprehensive review of pay structures and job descriptions within the hospice, benchmarking roles nationally rather than locally. The impact has been significant, with the organisation attracting talent from far beyond its immediate area for the first time.

Equally important is his commitment to professional development. Despite running a financial deficit, the hospice has protected its training budget, an area he considers non negotiable.

“Whilst people are here, doing their very best, the worst thing we could do is take that away from our people,” he says, outlining investments ranging from apprenticeships to advanced clinical training programmes.

His reasoning is straightforward: support people to grow, and they will stay, or come back.

It is a long term view that contrasts with short term cost cutting pressures but reflects a broader belief that organisational success

is inseparable from employee wellbeing and development.

Familiar challenges

Despite its progress, Rotherham Hospice faces challenges familiar across the sector: rising demand, constrained funding and increasing scrutiny.

The organisation currently supports more than 2,000 people annually, but Cottle-Shaw estimates that need could be closer to 3,000. Expanding services is therefore essential but financially difficult.

A key issue, he argues, is the systemic underfunding of hospice care. While end of life care is a statutory requirement in the UK, it is not fully funded by government in the same way as other parts of the healthcare system. The result is a reliance on charitable income to bridge a substantial gap, a model he believes must be reconsidered.

“How do you grow and meet rising demand when there isn’t a clear commitment to funding?” he asks.

But if there is a single thread that runs through Cottle-Shaw’s leadership, it is a relentless focus on people, staff, patients, volunteers and the wider community.

“I am not perfect,” he says, reflecting on his own leadership. But his willingness to acknowledge that, and to keep learning, may be one of his greatest strengths.

In a sector often defined by constraint and complexity, his approach offers a reminder that transformation does not always begin with systems or structures. Sometimes, it starts with belief, helping people see what they are capable of, and creating the conditions for them to achieve it.

And, as Rotherham Hospice’s recent story shows, that can be enough to turn the organisation’s excellence into something widely recognised.



Are small charities being left behind?

WRITTEN BY **MELISSA MOODY**

While demand for services continues to grow, smaller charities are increasingly questioning whether the system is stacked against them.

At a time when demand for charity services is rising and public finances remain constrained, a growing number of sector voices are warning of a widening imbalance: funding, visibility and influence are increasingly concentrated among larger organisations, whilst smaller charities are struggling to compete.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, there was a marked shift towards supporting smaller, community-based organisations, as funders responded to urgent local need. Analysis of over 66,000 Covid relief grants found that 67% were for £10,000 or less, with many designed to be distributed quickly and reach grassroots groups.

It also found that 79% of emergency grants went to small charities, reflecting a deliberate attempt to get funding to those embedded in communities and delivering frontline support.

However, that momentum has not been sustained. As the sector has moved out of crisis mode, funding patterns appear to have reverted in favour of larger organisations. NCVO data shows that small charities saw funding fall by £4.6bn in 2020/21, while larger organisations' income rose by £4.5bn over the same period. More recent figures paint an equally stark picture, with small charities now receiving 4% of total government funding.

For many, this is not a new story, but there is a sense that pressures are intensifying, and the consequences becoming more acute.

"The data is unambiguous: 92% of charitable income goes to just 13.5% of organisations," says Luke Wilkinson, founder of raiser.uk. "The grant-funding system has evolved to reward organisations that are good at applying for funding, not necessarily those delivering the greatest impact."

Capacity vs capability

At the heart of the issue is a persistent imbalance between capacity and capability. Larger charities, with dedicated fundraising teams, established systems and stronger

brand recognition are often better equipped to identify opportunities, respond quickly and meet increasingly demanding application requirements. Smaller organisations, by contrast, frequently operate with limited staff and resources, with fundraising responsibilities sitting alongside service delivery. "The system isn't neutral," Wilkinson adds. "The rules of engagement favour those who have capacity."

That challenge is being compounded by broader changes in grant-making. Jo Jeffrey, curator of The List, a resource tracking changes across the funding landscape, has documented more than 800 shifts in funder behaviour in just two years, ranging from programme pauses and restructures to tighter criteria and shorter application windows. "We are no longer dealing with anomalies," she says. "The pace, scale and relentlessness of change continues to surprise me." Increasingly, funders are moving away from open, rolling programmes toward tightly controlled funding rounds, often with limited timelines and high levels of competition.

For smaller charities, these shifts create practical as well as strategic challenges. Angela Coton, CEO of CAPE, describes a funding environment in which opportunities can appear and disappear within hours. "I have seen a fund open at 9am and close at 1pm the same day," she says.

In such conditions, organisations without the capacity to respond immediately are effectively excluded before they can even begin.

As Jeffrey notes, the burden of simply tracking and interpreting these changes is significant: "That's before an application is even started. The mental load, pressure and stress is immense."

Even when organisations do manage to submit strong applications, success

is far from guaranteed. Many funders receive far more applications than they are able to successfully grant, meaning that high-quality, impactful work may go unsupported simply due to lack of available resources.

Coton points to CAPE's own experience of being turned down for continuation funding despite clear evidence of impact. "The feedback was not that the work lacked impact, but that there simply was not enough funding available," she says. "Strong projects are missing out regardless of impact." For smaller charities, which often rely on relatively small numbers of grants, such outcomes can have significant consequences for sustainability and growth.

Similar dynamics are evident in commissioning and procurement, where requirements around scale and delivery can favour larger organisations. CAPE recently lost out on a major contract to a national charity that was better positioned to demonstrate pan-regional reach, only to later be approached to deliver elements of the work locally. "The successful organisation has approached us because we have the community relationships and trust that they do not," Coton says. This kind of arrangement raises questions about how value is recognised within funding decisions, and whether local expertise is being fully accounted for. "Complex procurement requirements can inadvertently favour larger organisations," she adds, "rather than those with the strongest community insight."

The visibility gap

Alongside these structural barriers, visibility and brand recognition are becoming increasingly important factors in funding success. "Visibility wins regardless of impact," Wilkinson

argues. "The best charity in the world that no-one knows about will never get funded." For smaller organisations without dedicated communications teams or marketing budgets, building that visibility can be a significant challenge.

Cat Ross, CEO of Baby Basics UK, sees this tension clearly. "We don't have the capacity or the means or the skills to be able to advertise ourselves in the same way that the larger charities do," she says. "And therefore we're not those household names." This lack of recognition has a direct impact on funding outcomes, particularly when competing with larger, better-known organisations. "You're in competition with much bigger charities, and you're never going to get a look in sometimes, because they go with the more well-known names."

For mid-sized organisations, the situation can be particularly acute. "There is funding for small charities," Ross explains, "but it might be £2,500 when actually you really need £50,000. So you get stuck in the middle." Many organisations find themselves in a limbo where they're too large to qualify for many small grants, but without the scale or infrastructure to compete for major funding streams.

This pressure is compounded by expectations around innovation and programme design, which can be misaligned with the reality of frontline delivery. "I think the other thing that small charities find really hard is that we're often asked to reinvent the wheel or invent a new project," Ross says. "And we don't have the capacity to come up with new ideas all the time... often what we're delivering is what is still needed. Whether that's three years of delivery, 10 years of delivery, or like us, almost 18 years of delivery. The need is still exactly the same." For smaller organisations, she argues, this

creates a frustrating imbalance: while larger charities may have the resources to pilot and repackage initiatives, smaller charities are often focused on sustaining proven, essential services. “Larger charities have capacity to try out projects in a way that smaller charities just don’t,” she adds.

She also highlights how certain reporting requirements can distort perceptions of financial health. “It looks like we’ve got more finance than we actually have,” she says, referring to the inclusion of donated goods in income figures, “when it’s items, not money in the bank.

Survival strategies

In response to growing pressures, collaboration is becoming increasingly common across the sector. Partnerships and consortia can enable smaller charities to demonstrate scale and access opportunities that might otherwise be out of reach. However, there is a risk that collaboration becomes less a strategic choice and more a necessity. “There is a risk that collaboration becomes a survival mechanism,” Coton says, particularly if larger organisations act as intermediaries or gatekeepers.

Ross also shares concerns about what the future may hold if current

trends continue. “I think we’re going to start to see more charities disappearing,” she says. “Especially small ones, and especially those grassroots community groups that just won’t be able to meet the standards required.” The implications extend beyond the organisations themselves. “If we disappear, I think government is going to get a shock at how much the charity sector has actually been holding things together,” she adds.

At the same time, charities are dealing with rising operational costs and changing public attitudes. “Our costs go up like everyone else’s, energy, rent, everything,” Ross says. “The cost-of-living hits charities as much as it hits the public.”

Misconceptions about how charities operate, including expectations that they should not cover overheads or pay staff, can also limit public support and understanding of the sector’s financial realities. The result is an increasingly challenging operating environment, particularly for smaller organisations with limited reserves.

“When a large charity makes cuts, it matters,” Ross reflects. “But when a small charity makes cuts, it could be half of their service delivery gone.” In this context, funding decisions are not only about organisational

sustainability, but about the continuation of services and support within communities.

What needs to change?

There is broad agreement across the sector that change is needed, though views differ on how best to achieve it.

For Jeffrey, improvements to communication and process design would make an immediate difference, from clearer timelines to more proportionate application requirements.

Wilkinson advocates for a more fundamental shift toward evidence-led funding, supported by better data infrastructure.

For practitioners like Ross, trust and flexibility are key. “Get away from restricted funding,” she says. “Make funding unrestricted and trust charities to make good decisions on how it’s spent.”

Ultimately, the question is not whether large charities should be funded, but whether current systems adequately recognise the different forms of value that organisations bring. Smaller charities often have deep roots in their communities, strong relationships with service users, and the ability to respond flexibly to emerging needs. As Coton puts it: “Smaller charities are not lacking innovation, impact or community trust. The challenge is ensuring systems genuinely value those strengths alongside organisational scale.”

But what is clear is that without meaningful reform, there is a risk that the sector becomes more concentrated, less diverse, and less connected to the communities it serves.

For a sector built on addressing inequality, that would represent a significant and potentially lasting shift.



Beyond the balance sheet

WRITTEN BY SALLY MURDOCH, UNIT 4 NON-PROFIT MARKETING

Why nonprofit finance teams are drowning in complexity

Ask a nonprofit finance leader what keeps them up at night, and the answer isn't dramatic. It's not fraud or a funding cliff. It's something quieter: they don't trust their own numbers.

Across the sector, finance teams are drowning in complexity. Many spend enormous amounts of time correcting coding errors on invoices or re-imbursements. No matter how often end users are trained, the wrong codes get applied. Purchase orders land against the wrong projects. The result? Analysis built on unreliable foundations. Budget meetings that don't reflect reality. Hours lost.

The spreadsheet trap

Recent research surveying 100s of finance leaders from nonprofits reveals a startling reality: 61% still rely on spreadsheets for core financial management. One organisation uses 12 separate systems. Another uses 26. And almost everyone surveyed pointed to the same fallback tool holding it all together: Excel.

Spreadsheets are familiar and flexible, but the cost is real. Massive amounts of manual reconciliation. Version control issues. The constant debate over who has the "right" number. And a huge lag between reporting a figure and understanding what it means for the organisation.

Every grant becomes a new tab. Every funding restriction needs manual tracking. Every funder report requires custom formatting and consolidating

data from multiple sources. The more grants you win, the more complex the spreadsheet architecture becomes.

The hidden costs

The most damaging cost isn't financial - it's informational inequality. While 79% of boards have direct access to financial data, only 51% of program staff can access financial information directly. Boards get reports. The people delivering the mission often don't.

When the people closest to mission delivery lack access to financial information, strategic decision-making suffers. Program staff can't plan effectively. Development teams work without visibility into fund status. Finance teams spend hours creating customised views for each department manually, pulling skilled people away from the analysis and strategic work they were hired to do.

Breaking the cycle

The organisations that recognise these challenges share a common insight: fix the process first, then fix the tech. Multiple leaders described a pattern they'd seen repeated - an organisation buys a new system, migrates its existing mess into the new platform, and wonders why nothing improves.

Here's what works:

- Process before platform. Review workflows before buying new tools. Understand what's broken and why.
- Data before AI. Clean, consistent, trustworthy data is the prerequisite for



everything else. Without it, AI will only scale your mistakes.

- People before automation. Invest in training. Build confidence. Help teams see technology as something that frees them, not threatens them.
- Foundations before ambition. Document policies. Consolidate systems. Tighten controls. Then, and only then, build upward.

How Unit4 helps nonprofits

We don't just sell software - we partner with organisations on their journey, bringing sector knowledge and honest guidance about what works and what doesn't. This close partnership has enabled us to build solutions that you need, to handle the complexity of multiple funding streams, sophisticated grant portfolios, and diverse stakeholder reporting requirements.

We truly believe that every hour saved on reconciliation is an hour returned to mission. Every system connected is a team no longer working in the dark.

Nonprofit finance deserves better than 26 disconnected systems and a prayer.

Building a support system that works for small charities

WRITTEN BY AMY WALTON, FRANKIE HOCKHAM & JOSIE HINTON

Three experts draw on decades of experience inside small charities and infrastructure bodies to ask a simple but urgent question: what does effective small charity support really look like and how do we sustain it?

The contraction of specialist support for small charities has rightly raised serious concern. The closure of the Small Charities Coalition (SCC) and the Foundation for Social Improvement (FSI) followed by NCVO's recent decision to make its Practical Support team redundant, have exposed growing uncertainty about who should provide this support, how, and on what basis it can be sustained.

A small charities are defined here as social impact organisations with an income under £1m. Registered small charities alone make up 96% of the sector.

Before debating delivery models or ownership, the sector needs a shared understanding of what effective small charity support looks like in practice. This is not about replacing the essential guidance and oversight of the Charity Commission or other regulators, but about ensuring that practical support complements and reinforces regulatory expectations in ways that are accessible to small charities.

As the SCC's 2022 closing report emphasised, voice and support are inseparable: those seeking to represent small charity needs in the 'corridors of power' must understand and engage with them on an operational level. It's the practical part of the equation that

we focus on here, drawing on decades of experience of working with and for small charities to set out tried and tested principles of effective support.

Work with small charities, not for them
Support for small charities works best

when it is developed with them, not done to them. They are the experts in their own realities, so why would we not start there? "Small for small" approaches have sometimes struggled to deliver sustained impact because they face the same capacity and funding constraints



as the organisations they support. Larger infrastructure organisations can help fill this gap, but only if they are willing to listen rather than broadcast, and consult meaningfully. Engaging small charities as equal partners, early enough that their input can genuinely shape decisions, and closing the loop by being open about what was heard, what changed, and what did not and why.

NCVO's Small Charities Advisory Panel recognises its potential role here. As co-chair Vicki Beevers puts it: "If we are serious about supporting small charities, it has to be done with them, transparently and in partnership, not retrospectively."

Recognise small charity leaders as experts by experience and remunerate them for their time, as with any collaborators. When small charities are treated as partners rather than recipients, support becomes more grounded, trusted and effective.

Be accessible and inclusive

Support needs to be accessible, open and inclusive, removing unnecessary barriers rather than reinforcing them. Use clear, plain English, make complex issues easier to understand, and create a non judgemental environment where charities feel safe to ask questions. Cost can also present a significant barrier to access. Provide free and low-cost support to small charities running on small budgets.

Small charity leaders usually reach out for help having already exhausted what they can find online, so access to a real person still matters. Many need to talk things through, sense check their ideas and work through problems in conversation. AI can help by cutting down on admin, freeing up specialists to focus on the conversations and relationships that only humans can provide. But it needs to be used carefully. Poorly implemented digital

tools can exclude organisations with limited digital skills and widen existing inequalities.

There is no single right way to access support. Offering multiple routes means different organisations can get help in the way that works best for them.

Choose collaboration over competition

In practice, small charities rarely arrive with one neat, isolated issue. A funding question quickly connects to governance, staffing, digital tools or safeguarding. When support is disconnected, small charities are left to navigate the gaps, often feeling forced to pay for help they cannot afford. When infrastructure organisations collaborate, referrals are quicker, support is joined up and duplication is reduced.

The Small Charity Friendly Collective offers a practical example of this approach in action, showing how organisations can share expertise and come together to create a clearer, stronger support offer.

In our experience, some areas are best owned locally. Navigating local funding landscapes and commissioning practices are areas where local infrastructure organisations have unmatched credibility. But there are areas where a national perspective adds real value: tackling banking barriers; navigating Companies House changes - issues that affect small charities everywhere. The answer is not local versus national. It is local and national together, each playing to their strengths and respecting each other's expertise and credibility amongst distinct and shared audiences.

Partnership is not an abstract principle. It is what makes support more coherent, more credible, and more useful.

Be informed and trusted

The best support comes from truly

understanding what it is like to run a small charity. That can mean having worked in one, but not always. What matters most is whether those offering support have taken the time to understand the reality on the ground: the limited resources, the difficult decisions, the pace of work, and the diversity of circumstances.

For those under intense pressure, generic advice can be a burden. Advice designed for a £10m charity with a fundraising team won't translate to a volunteer led organisation without in-house expertise.

Small charities are far more likely to engage when advice feels relevant to their situation, is honest, and does not overcomplicate things.

Effective small charity support is like a lighthouse, helping organisations navigate a confusing and crowded landscape by pointing them towards trusted, reliable help, and connecting them with the right support at the right time.

Use data and sector insights

Lead with evidence about the issues with which small charities are grappling, not assumptions. It is easy to rely on anecdotes or respond to the loudest voices, but this can distort reality.

Support must be shaped deliberately by sector data, local intelligence, and direct feedback from small charities. Enquiries to NCVO's Small Charity Helpdesk historically shaped webinar and help and guidance priorities, to meet current needs.

Used well, data is about listening properly, targeting support where it is most needed, and making sure what is offered stays relevant. And these insights are crucial to advocating for what's really needed at decision-making tables makes charities better at the services they exist to provide.

NDA in the charity sector: Protection or problem?

WRITTEN BY LAUREN WEYMOUTH

There is growing concern about the misuse of NDAs within organisations, but what does this mean for charities and are they still fit for purpose?

Non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) have become one of the most controversial employment tools of recent years. Once viewed primarily as a means of protecting commercial secrets, they are now increasingly associated with attempts to prevent whistleblowing and limit public scrutiny.

The charity sector has not escaped this debate. Campaigners, employment lawyers and sector leaders have raised concerns about the use of confidentiality clauses in settlement agreements, particularly where allegations of bullying, harassment or poor culture are involved.

Recent calls for reform have intensified following moves to restrict the use of NDAs in workplace harassment and discrimination cases. The debate raises important questions for charities, which are expected to uphold high ethical standards and public trust.

Charities also manage sensitive information relating to beneficiaries, donors, employees and commercial partners. For many organisations, confidentiality agreements remain a legitimate tool.

What are NDAs?

A non-disclosure agreement is a legal contract that prevents one or more parties from sharing certain

information with others.

In an employment context, NDAs are most commonly encountered as part of settlement agreements when an employee leaves an organisation. They may require both parties to keep details of the dispute, settlement amount or circumstances of departure confidential.

NDAs are widely used and often serve legitimate purposes. Charities may use confidentiality agreements to protect sensitive beneficiary data, intellectual property, donor information, fundraising strategies or commercially sensitive partnerships.

Importantly, NDAs do not usually prevent individuals from reporting criminal activity, cooperating with regulators, seeking medical support or obtaining legal advice. In the UK, employment law has increasingly clarified that confidentiality clauses cannot be used to prevent legitimate whistleblowing or the reporting of wrongdoing. Concerns arise when individuals feel an NDA discourages them from speaking up, even where disclosure remains legally permitted.

Why might a charity use an NDA?

There are several reasons why a charity may choose to use NDAs. First, charities often deal with highly sensitive information. Organisations working with vulnerable people may need to

ensure that personal details about service users remain confidential. Similarly, charities may wish to protect donor information or commercially sensitive partnerships.

Second, settlement agreements can provide certainty for both employers and employees. Where workplace relationships have broken down, a mutually agreed departure may allow both parties to move on without prolonged disputes or costly legal proceedings.

For charities with limited resources, avoiding expensive employment tribunals can preserve management time and funds for frontline services. Public disputes can also damage organisations that depend on public trust and confidence. In these circumstances, confidentiality provisions may be viewed by trustees and senior leaders as a practical risk-management tool.

What are the risks of using NDAs?

Despite their legitimate uses, NDAs carry significant risks, particularly in organisations that depend on trust and accountability.

The most obvious danger is the perception that an organisation is concealing wrongdoing. Even lawful confidentiality clauses can raise questions about transparency. There are also concerns about organisational

culture. Critics argue that widespread reliance on NDAs may discourage employees from raising concerns or create a perception that speaking out carries personal and professional risks. This can be particularly problematic in charities, where staff are often highly mission-driven. A culture in which concerns are suppressed can undermine morale, trust and employee wellbeing.

The reputational consequences can also be severe. If allegations later emerge that a charity has used confidentiality agreements to silence staff, the resulting public scrutiny may cause significantly greater damage than the original dispute. For trustees, there is an additional governance challenge. Boards must balance legal, financial and reputational considerations while ensuring that decisions align with the charity's values. An NDA that appears legally sound may still be difficult to justify ethically.

When have charities used NDAs?

Perhaps the most high-profile example in recent years involved Alzheimer's Society. In 2020, allegations emerged that the charity had used non-disclosure agreements as part of settlement arrangements with staff who had raised concerns about bullying and workplace culture. *Charity Times* reported claims that the organisation had spent substantial sums on settlements and was accused of using NDAs to "silence" staff who made allegations relating to bullying and a "toxic management culture".

The charity strongly rejected the allegations, stating that it had a "zero tolerance of bullying and discrimination" and that settlement agreements had only been used for "legitimate reasons". The case attracted significant public attention

and prompted scrutiny from the Charity Commission. Following an investigation, the regulator concluded that the trustees had acted in line with their legal duties and found no evidence that confidentiality clauses were designed to prevent staff from reporting whistleblowing, bullying, harassment or discrimination concerns.

The case demonstrated how quickly NDAs can become governance and reputational issues. The issue is not confined to one organisation. When speaking to charity employees in the course of reporting on sector issues, *Charity Times* has frequently encountered individuals who express a desire to speak openly about their experiences but feel constrained by confidentiality agreements they have signed. Many remain uncertain about what they can discuss.

This uncertainty may be one of the most significant consequences of NDAs. Even where agreements are legally limited in scope, employees may interpret them more broadly than intended and choose to remain silent out of caution.

What does it mean if you have signed an NDA?

Signing an NDA does not necessarily prevent someone from speaking about their experiences. Its effect depends on the wording and legal framework. In many cases, confidentiality clauses cover specific information such as settlement terms, commercial information or internal processes.

Generally, individuals retain the right to report criminal conduct, cooperate with regulators, make protected disclosures under whistleblowing legislation and seek professional legal advice. Employment lawyers frequently emphasise that NDAs are not blanket bans on discussing wrongdoing.

However, because confidentiality



NON DISCLOSURE AGREEMENT

agreements can be complex, individuals who are unsure of their rights should seek independent legal advice before making disclosures that may fall within the scope of an agreement. Uncertainty about these distinctions can create a chilling effect even where no legal restriction exists.

Are NDAs fit for purpose in charities?

NDAs are neither inherently good nor inherently bad. Used appropriately, they can protect sensitive information, resolve disputes and safeguard charitable resources. Most charities that use confidentiality agreements do so within established legal frameworks and for legitimate reasons. Yet the sector's reliance on public trust creates a higher ethical bar than that faced by many private organisations.

Where confidentiality agreements contribute to perceptions of secrecy, discourage staff from raising concerns or appear inconsistent with organisational values, they risk undermining the very trust charities depend upon. The question is therefore not whether charities should use NDAs at all, but whether they can demonstrate that any use of them genuinely serves the interests of beneficiaries, staff and the public.

As scrutiny of workplace culture continues to grow, charities may increasingly find that transparency, rather than confidentiality, is the stronger safeguard for their reputation.

AI vs young Londoners: Who funds better?

WRITTEN BY NATASHA FRIEND

An experiment in participatory grant making shows what AI can learn from communities, and what it can't, writes Natasha Friend, Director of Camden Giving

Everyone in the charity sector is talking about what AI can and can't do right now. We decided to find out - and what we learned says as much about the limits of traditional grant-making as it does about the limits of AI and large language models (LLMs).

At Camden Giving, funding decisions aren't made by professionals. They're made by community members with first-hand and lived experience of the issues we're addressing; young people, residents, people who've lived the problems that charities like ours are trying to solve and support. We call it participatory grant-making. And earlier this year, we ran an experiment to understand what that approach actually adds.

We fed ChatGPT our young panellists' funding criteria alongside standard grant-making principles - things like maintaining a balanced risk portfolio - and asked it to select four organisations to fund from a set of real applications. Then we ran our normal panel session without telling the young people about the AI. We compared the results afterwards.

Two of the four organisations matched. The divergences are where it gets interesting.

Interestingly, the AI recommended an organisation that our young panellists

rejected. However, the young people had good reason to have selected differently. They knew of equivalent services that were already available for free in Camden. That is exactly the kind of local knowledge that no algorithm, and no professional funder sitting outside a community, could ever hold.

In the end, the young people funded an organisation that AI didn't select. It works with young people involved in gang violence. It resonated because several panellists knew it personally. "I've seen people go into that room and come out fundamentally different," one said. The reason that organisation works isn't necessarily in its application. It's in the background of its leader, and the trust it has built in very specific streets in a very specific borough. That doesn't show up in a grant assessment framework. And it doesn't show up in an LLM prompt. We didn't tell the young people that we'd consulted AI before they awarded the grants (but we did gain permission to use AI to access criteria from all our applicants). We wanted the exercise to be a kind of 'blind test' and ensure there was no artificial persuasion.

The AI also surprised us in a different way. One organisation that our own team had privately felt submitted a weaker-than-usual application was still

ranked highly by the model. That made us examine our own assumptions and familiarity bias.

This is what participatory grant-making forces into the open: not just what communities know that funders don't, but what everyone in the room - including Camden Giving staff - is bringing to the table that has little or nothing to do with the application paper in front of them.

We'll keep running these experiments. We're building a voting platform that will eventually let us analyse patterns across hundreds of decisions - identifying where community panels diverge most from algorithmic recommendations, and what that divergence tells us about whose knowledge the sector is currently leaving out of funding decisions.

The question for funders, then, isn't whether AI is useful. It probably is; for due diligence, for summarising applications, and for the administrative weight that currently consumes so much of our time.

The question is whether we're using it in ways that add to community decision-making power, or inadvertently replacing it.

At Camden Giving, we think we're starting to find out.

charitytimes

REPORT

What keeps charity leaders up at night?



Drawing on anonymous insights from UK charity leaders, this report explores the financial, workforce and operational pressures shaping leadership in an increasingly complex environment.

What keeps charity leaders up at night?

WRITTEN BY MELISSA MOODY

INTRODUCTION

Charity leaders are arguably operating in one of the most challenging environments the sector has faced in recent years.

As a result, *Charity Times* wanted to understand what exactly was causing leaders the most sleepless nights. This piece brings together anonymous insights from senior leaders across the UK to explore the pressures shaping their work and the realities behind the role.

The responses highlight a sector under strain, with leaders balancing financial uncertainty, rising demand for services,

and increasing expectations from funders, boards and regulators. At the same time, workforce challenges, from recruitment to burnout, are placing additional pressure on already stretched organisations.

Beyond day-to-day operations, many leaders describe a wider sense of instability, driven by economic, political and technological change. Together, these insights paint a picture of resilient leadership navigating constant complexity, often with limited support.

This report examines these challenges, offering a snapshot of what it means to lead a charity today.

THE TOP ISSUES KEEPING LEADERS AWAKE AT NIGHT

1. Income – 80%

2. Staffing – 48%

3. Costs – 25%

4. Demand – 15%

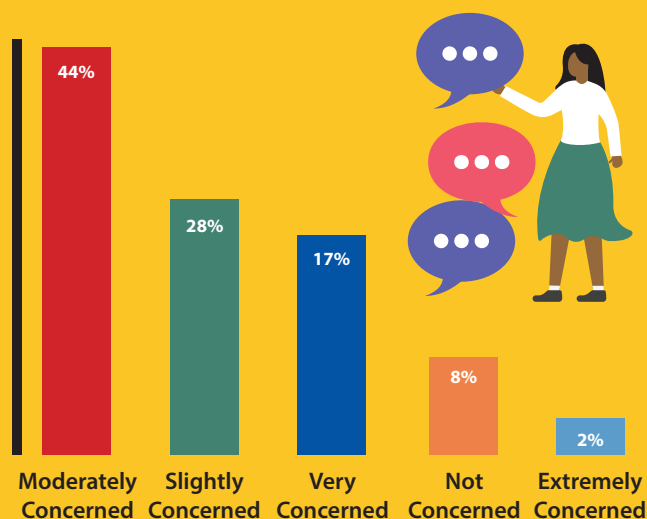
5. Politics – 15%

6. Board issues – 12%



The issues point to a sector under intense strain, with financial insecurity dominating. Income is the biggest pressure, highlighting relentless funding challenges. Alongside this, staffing issues affect nearly half of leaders, from recruitment to burnout, with some reporting they “can’t recruit the right people.” Rising costs and increasing demand are compounding pressures, leaving organisations stretched by “diminishing resources” and wider uncertainty also plays a role, including political instability and concerns about governance. Together, these findings show leaders balancing competing pressures in an increasingly complex environment.

How would you rate your overall level of concern about the future of your organisation?



Leaders' reflections reveal a cautious but persistent anxiety about the future, shaped less by immediate crisis and more by sustained pressure. Many describe an environment where uncertainty has become the norm, with one noting that "things are constantly changing and getting more pressured for the sector." Underlying this is a sense of limited control, particularly in the face of economic and political shifts. As one respondent put it, "there's nothing much we can actually do about this". For others, concern is tied to financial fragility and rising demand, creating a feeling that organisations are being stretched to their limits.

FINANCIAL PRESSURES

What financial pressures cause the most concern?

Concerns about declining income sit alongside rising costs, creating what one respondent described as a struggle with "spiralling costs... and ability to retain staff." Leaders also highlight the instability of funding streams, with uncertainty around grants and contracts making long-term planning difficult. At the same time, competition for funding is intensifying, while day-to-day pressures such as cashflow add immediate strain. As one put it, organisations are facing "increased demand for services... with diminishing resources." Together, these pressures point to a sector caught between rising costs, uncertain income, and growing need.

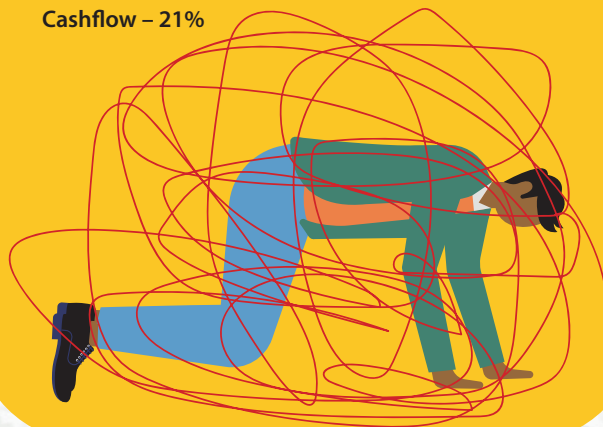
Declining donations – 35%

Grant funding instability – 58%

Delivery costs – 61%

Fundraising competition – 43%

Cashflow – 21%



Have you had to make budget cuts in the past year?

Yes – 71%

No - 29%

Nearly three-quarters of leaders report having made budget cuts in the past year, underlining how widespread financial strain has become within the sector. These decisions are often difficult and ongoing, with organisations reporting that they're "cutting back on management and infrastructure" just to sustain front-line services." As a result, organisations are having to do more with less, raising concerns about long-term sustainability.

Many respondents acknowledged that local authorities are under similar pressures, with inc



STAFFING

How concerned are you about staff burnout and wellbeing?

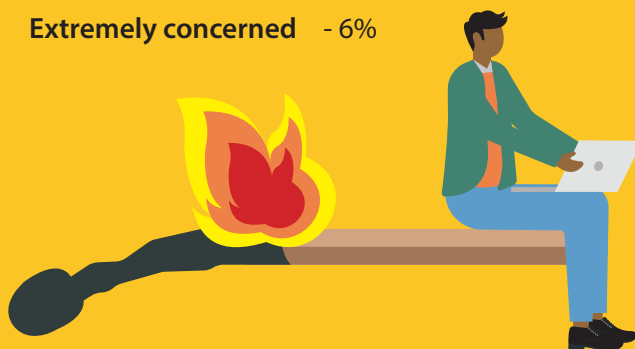
Not concerned - 5%

Slightly concerned - 19%

Moderately concerned - 37%

Very concerned - 32%

Extremely concerned - 6%



Concern about staff wellbeing is widespread, with many leaders describing workforce pressures as a growing challenge. Responses point to rising workloads, recruitment difficulties and the emotional toll of sustained demand. One leader highlighted the strain of "staff capacity because we can't recruit the right people," while others pointed to burnout linked to "workload, increasing costs, lack of support". There are also more acute examples of workplace stress, with reports of "toxic culture" and burnout emerging in some organisations. Overall, responses suggest that protecting staff wellbeing is becoming as critical as financial sustainability.

Have you had difficulties recruiting or retaining staff in the past year?

LOOKING FOR A JOB



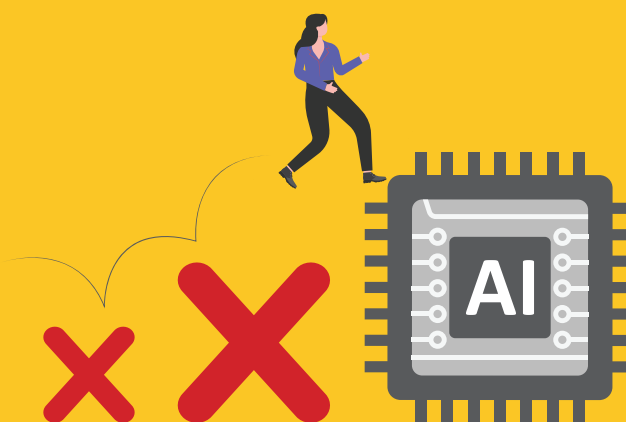
Yes – 57%

No - 43%

Recruitment and retention challenges remain a persistent issue, adding to wider workforce pressures. Leaders point to the difficulty of maintaining stable teams in a demanding environment, with one highlighting “recruiting and retaining high quality staff” as a key concern. Limited capacity, rising workloads and competition for talent are leaving organisations stretched, increasing pressure on teams and impacting long-term stability.

TECHNOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

Digital and technological challenges are a growing concern, with many leaders struggling to balance innovation with risk and limited capacity. AI is a dominant theme, but often accompanied by uncertainty, with one respondent noting the need to “implement AI adoption securely” while keeping at pace with change. At the same time, charities face practical barriers, including the “lack of integration of systems” and the cost of upgrading ageing infrastructure. Alongside this, gaps in skills and resources mean many are struggling to benefit from new technologies, leaving leaders trying to modernise without the tools to do so effectively.



AI - 49%

Cost - 16%

Cybersecurity 13%

Equipment - 4%

Systems - 12%

Skillset - 5%

EXTERNAL FACTORS

Which external risks most affect your sleep?

External risks are a major source of anxiety, with leaders highlighting a constant backdrop of economic and political uncertainty.

The cost-of-living crisis and funding competition dominate, alongside concern about policy changes. As one leader put it, organisations must navigate “political change and policy” while responding to growing and shifting demand.

Cost-of-living/Inflation - 65%

Funding competition - 49%

Policy or legislative changes - 34%

Shifting social needs - 25%

Cyber attacks - 24%



What external factors do you feel most unprepared for?

Technology/AI - 24%

Political instability - 22%

Global instability - 17%

The economy - 17%

Funding - 15%

Rising demand - 8%



Leaders feel most unprepared for fast-moving external forces beyond their control. Rapid technological change, particularly AI and cyber risk, tops the list, alongside political uncertainty and economic instability. Global events and funding insecurity add further unpredictability, leaving many navigating a complex landscape where change is constant and difficult to anticipate.

CONCLUSION

The findings paint a clear picture: charity leaders are operating under sustained and multidimensional pressure. Financial insecurity, rising demand and workforce challenges are not isolated issues, but deeply interconnected and reinforcing. Many leaders describe a sector stretched to its limits, adapting constantly in the face of uncertainty while striving to maintain impact.

At the same time, newer pressures (from rapid technological change to political instability) are adding further complexity to an already demanding role. As one leader said: “Things are constantly changing and getting more pressured for

the sector,” capturing a wider reality of leadership in today’s environment.

Despite these challenges, the responses also reflect resilience, commitment and a determination to continue delivering for communities. However, this resilience should not be taken for granted. Without greater stability in funding, stronger support for leadership and workforce wellbeing, and a more enabling external environment, the pressures identified here risk becoming unsustainable.

As the sector looks ahead, the question is no longer just what keeps leaders awake at night, but what needs to change to let them sleep.

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LEADERSHIP DIARY: Coalitions, campaigns and classrooms

The CEO of School Food Matters shares the realities of strategy, partnerships and impact in action



School Food Matters wants a school food system that delivers for all children, so they can enjoy nutritious, delicious and sustainable school food and leave school with an informed and positive relationship with food.

To achieve this, the charity campaigns for a better school food system and delivers fully funded food education and school food improvement programmes in schools across the country.

MONDAY

I started the week a little earlier than expected when I ran into a journalist on my commute.

STEPHANIE SLATER MBE SHARES A WEEK IN HER LIFE AS CEO OF SCHOOL FOOD MATTERS, THE CHARITY SHE FOUNDED AS A GRASSROOTS PARENT CAMPAIGNER IN 2007

I had planned to dive into Sally Rooney's "Intermezzo" but instead spent 23 minutes discussing school food policy. With the government's announcement that revised school food standards are coming in September 2026, interest in school food policy has surged.

It is encouraging to see that the importance of delivering good school food becoming national conversation again.

Once at my desk, I tried to quickly order a new desktop computer but got scuppered by our overzealous bank which blocked the payment. Seventeen minutes on the phone later, the mission was thankfully accomplished.

From there, I moved into a thoroughly enjoyable Monday Morning Meeting – our weekly whole-team catch-up – followed by our six-month strategy review.

It was brilliant to hear our team of 29 school food enthusiasts reflect on how we can increase our impact.

The afternoon was spent in a Department for Education advisory group meeting discussing the roll out of the universal primary school breakfast programme, followed by a lovely send-off for our policy and advocacy manager who was heading off on maternity leave.

TUESDAY

Tuesday began with an early morning run and a moment to enjoy some spring sunshine.

My working day started with the School Food Review – a coalition of charities, unions, academics and education specialists working to improve the school food system in England.

Today's focus was on eligibility for free school meals.

Next came a funding meeting, followed by some protected time (earphones in!) to work on a funding bid with a fast-approaching deadline.

In the afternoon, I chaired a School Food Alliance meeting, which brings together organisations and individuals with an interest in school food.

Today included presentations on dinner money debt, new allergy regulations and findings from research School Food Matters conducted with the University of Birmingham exploring how our Nourish school food transformation programme can be effectively delivered in secondary schools.

WEDNESDAY

I started the day with yoga, followed by an impromptu coffee in the sunshine with a fellow yogi – an unexpected silver lining of the tube strike.

Next was an interview with a trade magazine on school food funding and the changes ahead.

To support schools with the changes coming in September, School Food Matters has joined forces with four other leading organisations in school food – Bite Back, Chefs in Schools, Jamie Oliver Group and The Food Foundation – to form the School Food Project coalition.

Together, we will be providing practical guidance and support to help schools navigate the new standards.

After the interview, I went straight into a kick off meeting with a new funder. Then came a complete change of pace. With the tube still disrupted, I drove to Belazu in Greenford for our annual Fresh Enterprise tasting panel.

One of our funded food education programmes, Fresh Enterprise teaches young people about careers in the sector by giving them the opportunity to develop and create their own food products.

The panel had the challenging task of choosing a winning paste created by students from eight

secondary schools in Ealing. It was such a treat to spend time with these enterprising young people.

The winning paste – Barberry Burst Blend created by Belvue High School – will now go into production and be available for purchase on the Belazu website!

Back at home, it was a late night finishing that funding bid.

THURSDAY

It was another early start (and a chilly one!), this time with Sadie the border collie, as we both got some exercise in the park.

I then hopped on the train to meet our funders at Impact on Urban Health to reflect on the conclusion of our five-year Nourish programme in Lambeth and Southwark schools.

Following its success in London, we are now expanding the programme to work with schools across the country.

This year, we will be working with schools in Birmingham, Cumberland, Hertfordshire and Worcestershire to support them to transform their school food environment.

Back at the office, it was time for our monthly quiz! This month was 'Food in Films' which prompted plenty of debate. In Pulp Fiction, what did fast food represent?

The afternoon moved quickly from 'Royale with Cheese' to a meet and greet with a new recruit, a quick senior leadership catch-up and preparation for an upcoming funder review.

I ended the day with a two-and-a-half hour trustee meeting. Thankfully, the evening was rather more zen with music at Union Chapel.

FRIDAY

I began the day with yoga before heading into what I try to keep as my catch-up day.

I keep meetings to a minimum so I can dive into my emails. The goal was to clear the inbox in time for an early finish to enjoy the sunshine.

Mission accomplished at 16.55.

Got a diary to share

If you're a charity leader – CEO, COO, chair, trustee or department head – and would like to document a typical work day, week, or project, please get in touch with Charity Times' deputy editor at: melissa.moody@charitytimes.com



charitytimes

What is the Charity Times Leadership Network?

The Charity Times Leadership Network is a membership service, created by the publishers of Charity Times, which has been designed to help provide charity leaders with the tools and guidance required to be a stronger and more influential leader.

What does membership include?

Premium membership to the network includes the following:

- A print edition of Charity Times magazine bi-monthly, delivered to an address of your choice
- Discounts on all Charity Times events in 2021
- A daily e-newsletter, containing key headlines and exclusive, in-depth content on issues affecting charity leadership
- Exclusive invitations to Charity Times events
- Access to regular surveys and reports
- Access to in-depth case studies, exclusive interviews and leadership diaries
- Access to the full archive of Charity Times digital magazines
- A monthly e-mail from the editor, providing a digestible round-up of the month's most popular and important content

Our team of investigative journalists are working hard to uncover some of the biggest trends and

issues from across the sector to ensure our members are constantly kept up to date with all aspects of charity leadership.

Additionally, we've teamed up with leaders from across the sector to help members feel part of a community, whereby sharing ideas and experiences leads to better professional development. Members will be offered the opportunity to share their own leadership experiences – in the form of diaries, case studies, interviews and blogs – in exchange for access to the same content from others across the sector.

Why should I join?

Good charity leadership has never been more important. By being a part of the Charity Times Leadership Network, you'll be provided with a range of tools designed to help you lead your organisation to success, whilst being influential in the process.

Sold already? Visit www.charitytimes.com to select the appropriate package for you.

Or reach out to Shannon.Woods@CharityTimes.com to find out more



On alert

WRITTEN BY **MELISSA MOODY**

Faced with rising hostility and emerging risks, charities are adapting in new ways to safeguard their work, their people and their purpose

For most charities, risk used to mean burst pipes, minor theft or the occasional safeguarding incident. Today, the picture is more complex. From online abuse and cyber attacks, to targeted harassment and physical threats, a growing number of UK charities are recalibrating how they operate in an environment that feels increasingly volatile.

The Charity Commission explicitly acknowledges this shift. In guidance published in December 2025, it notes that some organisations are operating in a context “where a section of the public is actively hostile to their work,” advising trustees to assess risks, strengthen safeguarding and plan for incidents of intimidation or abuse.

Yet beneath that cautious official language lies a deeper transformation that is playing out inside organisations. It’s changing how services are delivered, how staff are protected, and how boards weigh mission against safety.

A changing threat landscape

While insurers are careful not to overstate the scale of extreme incidents, the sense of exposure is real. Natalie Bate, head of housing, education and charities at Zurich Municipal, stresses that “serious incidents... are still rare,” with most claims relating to routine issues, but acknowledges that charities,

depending on who they serve, may feel “particularly exposed.”

She adds: “The world feels like a riskier place right now. Society feels more divided and that sense of uncertainty is affecting all organisations.”

That perception is reflected in sector-wide reporting. Charities

working with migrants, refugees, faith groups, LGBTQ+ communities and other marginalised groups say they are increasingly targeted because of “who they support and what they stand for.”

Far-right activity is a major driver. Research from Open Briefing highlights a “wide spectrum of adversaries,” from organised extremist groups to





opportunistic local actors engaging in vandalism, intimidation, and harassment. These risks are amplified by hostile rhetoric in politics, media and online spaces, creating what some leaders describe as a “permission structure” for abuse and aggression.

In practice, this can translate into a mix of threats, including: online abuse, doxxing and disinformation; vandalism and break-ins; harassment of staff and volunteers; organised protests and demonstrations; and physical violence or credible threats.

Charities at risk of those threats are having to systematically rethink the way they work, changing everything from online visibility to frontline events.

Government data shows that around

30% of UK charities experience a cyber breach or attack each year, equating to roughly 61,000 organisations. Phishing remains the most common threat, affecting the vast majority of those targeted, but identity-based organisations are finding themselves under threat for simply being online.

Heather Paterson, head of partnerships and development at the LGBT Consortium, a membership organisation for LGBT organisations explains how a number of their members have made the decision to remove staff photos and names from the charity’s website after individuals were targeted and harassed online and offline. In one extreme case, materials featuring staff were printed on posters and plastered up in the local area with

accusatory and derogatory labels simply because they worked for a local LGBT organisation.

Meanwhile, refugee and migrant charities are adjusting operational security in subtler ways, balancing the need to remain open and accessible with contingency planning for sudden escalation.

One refugee charity leader, who asked to remain anonymous for safety reasons, describes the atmosphere as one of constant vigilance: “It’s just a constant thing in the back of the mind... it feels like something could happen at some point,” with the level of risk influenced by surges in political rhetoric and media attention.

In response, they have deliberately strengthened ties with local authorities and police to help identify potential risks early. At one point, the organisation even chose to temporarily close its services out of concern that a planned protest might escalate into violence.

Paterson describes how organisations in the LGBT space have also shifted from open, public engagement to more controlled, guarded approaches. Events that were once “loud and proud” are now more likely to be ticketed, held in private venues, or not publicly advertised at all. In a previous role, she recalls how security became a factor almost overnight. “We’d never ever thought about security, and suddenly we’re having to get paid security guards.”

And those paid guards have a cumulative effect, she adds: “All of those compromises that you’re being forced to make for safety and security are limiting. That might mean one less vulnerable person that you don’t reach... they just don’t know about you because you didn’t do that public outreach because of safety concerns,”

For charities facing these threats, security costs are becoming part of core service delivery decisions. For small organisations with little to no spare cash available, hiring security staff can be prohibitive. It can even determine whether an event happens at all, having direct consequences for reach and impact.

The hidden burden

These changes carry a cost that goes beyond headline security spending.

Time is one of the most significant pressures facing the charities at risk. Safeguarding reviews, risk assessments, staff briefings and contingency planning all require additional capacity, often without additional funding. As Paterson points out: "There's more planning meetings and more policy updates and more safeguarding reviews... and all of that is taken from your resource and capacity."

Even a small increase in planning time, multiplied across hundreds of organisations, amounts to a substantial diversion of resources away from frontline services.

There is also a growing emotional toll. Staff and volunteers, which are often from the very communities they serve, are exposed to the same hostile climate as beneficiaries. Burnout among the staff in these positions is rising, prompting some organisations to introduce mental health support and counselling for staff as a core operational necessity rather than a "nice to have."

Insurance providers are seeing the implications in how charities engage with risk. Jade Winter of Norris & Fisher Insurance Brokers, who specialises in charity insurance notes a clear shift: not necessarily more claims, but more concern. "It's definitely on people's minds... not what they need to do, but what they should be doing," she

says, particularly around duty of care, safeguarding and governance.

At board level, these pressures are crystallising into more complex decision-making.

Trustees must now balance competing priorities of delivering services versus protecting staff and beneficiaries, maintaining visibility versus reducing risk and controlling costs versus investing in mitigation measures.

The Charity Commission's guidance reinforces trustees' responsibility to act "in good faith" and in the charity's best interests, but also to respond proportionately to emerging risks.

Bate notes that Zurich's approach that structured risk mapping, assessing both likelihood and impact, is becoming standard practice. "Something we actively help our customers with by providing guidance and templates," she adds.

"By looking at risks in terms of both their likelihood and their potential impact, organisations can move beyond gut instinct and be much clearer about where their attention needs to be focused, should the worst happen."

Winter also acknowledges that insurance plays a role, but complexity is a challenge. Smaller charities often lack in-house expertise, increasing the risk of gaps in cover. She notes that insurers are responding not by raising premiums significantly, but by scrutinising governance, safeguarding and risk processes more closely.

She stresses that documentation is increasingly critical, not only to secure cover, but to demonstrate that trustees have fulfilled their duty of care in the event of an incident.

Adaptation

Despite the pressures, the sector is adapting. One of the most notable

trends is collaboration. Charities are increasingly sharing intelligence, learning from each other's experiences and drawing on support from umbrella bodies and networks. This collective approach is helping smaller organisations access expertise they would otherwise lack. As Winter advises: "Speak to each other, don't just sit on your own and muddle through it."

Perhaps most importantly, there is a growing recognition that security must be embedded into organisational culture, not treated as a separate function. As Bate puts it, the message is to "face your risks, but don't fear them".

Ultimately, charities are navigating a landscape where risk is more visible, more complex and more intertwined with their mission than before. For all the challenges, charity leaders are striking a careful balance between caution and commitment.

Most are resisting major operational changes unless absolutely necessary, determined not to allow potential threats to define their mission.

The reality is that security is no longer peripheral to the charity sector, it is central to how organisations operate, govern and sustain themselves.

And while much of this adaptation happens quietly, behind risk registers, policy reviews and internal conversations, it is reshaping parts of the sector and how they operate in the current political environment.

The question now is not whether charities face a more hostile environment, but how they can continue to serve those who need them most within it, safely, sustainably and without losing sight of their purpose.

As Paterson puts it: "We might need to do it a little bit differently, but we're still going to do it."

The sector that stands to win or lose on AI imagery

WRITTEN BY EMMA BRACEGIRDLE

The founder of The Saltways explores how charities are adopting AI imagery, the legal and ethical risks they are walking into, and why trust and transparency will determine who thrives.

There is something happening inside charity communications teams. Staff are reaching for AI-generated imagery to solve very real problems.

We all know what it feels like - tight deadlines, stretched budgets, the impossibility of filming in certain communities. So, you reach for a solution. But this is being done without frameworks, without disclosure policies, and in many cases without fully understanding what they are risking.

Over the past few months, we surveyed 116 charity communications professionals and spoke in depth with eleven of them to find out what was really happening with AI generated imagery in the third sector. The results were unexpected. More than half of those using AI imagery were not labelling it consistently, and 94% were unclear about their legal disclosure obligations. These were not bad people making bad decisions. The sector is simply operating in the dark on this, and assuming a great deal it has not yet stopped to question..

What struck me most was not the scale of use, but the absence of any conversation around it. These decisions were being made quietly, at an individual level, inside tools that staff already use every day.

Then there are the legal risks. The legal landscape is shifting faster than most teams realise. Under the EU AI Act, obligations for deployers, which is what charities become when they use AI tools in their communications, are already there, with a final Code of Practice expected in June 2026 and obligations applying from August. Where imagery could reasonably be considered designed to appear real, disclosure requirements apply. The sector is largely unprepared for what is coming, and the window to get ahead of it is narrowing.

Here is where it gets interesting, though. The same research that surfaces all of these risks also reveals something that should encourage the sector. Seventy-six percent of respondents agreed that authentic content helps charities stand out and build donor trust.

Supporters are already becoming more sceptical about what they see online, and the organisations that choose transparency, that lead with real stories told with real care, and that are honest when they do use AI and clear about why, are the ones that people will increasingly choose to trust with their money and their loyalty.

The standards the sector developed around beneficiary consent, dignity, and ethical representation were hard-



won over many years. AI imagery used without thought risks undermining that progress far more quickly than it was built. The charities that will be trusted five years from now are the ones making those values visible in their content decisions today, including the small ones, including the ones nobody is watching.

Trust, authenticity and transparency are the sector's superpower - let's embrace them!

Download the Report and your free guidelines here: <https://mailchi.mp/thesaltways/aiguideelines>

charitytimes

CONFERENCE



The 2026 Charity Times Conference explored how charities of all sizes are having to rethink themselves to become resilient to survive and thrive in a changing sector

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Resilience, reinvention and the realities of a changing sector

WRITTEN BY MELISSA MOODY

As financial pressures, technological disruption and shifting expectations reshape the charity landscape, this year's Charity Times Annual Conference explored how organisations must rethink resilience to survive and thrive

The Charity Times Annual Conference returned in May 2026, with topics aimed at helping charity leaders navigate a rapidly changing environment.

Held at the America Square Conference Centre in London, the event offered not just a snapshot of current challenges, but a deeper exploration of how the sector must evolve to meet them.

The tone was set early during the opening keynote panel: 'The charity weather report', which sought to answer a deceptively simple question: what does the current funding environment look like?

Paul Bott, CEO of SJOG, was quick to challenge conventional narratives about scarcity. "We don't have an income problem," he told the room. "The amount of income for the charity sector last year was £106 billion... the problem we have is around margin." Increasing costs, rather than declining income alone, are driving instability, he argued, leaving many organisations caught between rising demand and shrinking operational flexibility. His conclusion was blunt but memorable: "No margin, no mission."

Bott also grounded the discussion in the reality of sector diversity, pointing out that much of the debate risks being

dominated by larger organisations. "Sixty percent of charities have no employees," he said, "and 85% have fewer than five." Against this backdrop, many of those in the room represented only a small fraction of the sector, with access to resources and infrastructure far beyond the norm. This imbalance, he suggested, should shape how solutions are approached.

From a funder's perspective, Nadine Smith, director of communications, impact and influence at the National Lottery Community Fund highlighted the scale of demand. "We receive an idea every three minutes," she said, "and we fund an idea every eight," illustrating both the need across the UK and the limits of what funding bodies can provide. Smith also described a growing shift in funding philosophy, away from isolated, short-term interventions and toward deeper, place-based work. "We can't just keep only doing responsive funding and throwing money at problems," she said. Instead, funders are increasingly looking to tackle "interconnected issues" by working in partnership with charities, local authorities and communities themselves.



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Aditi Thorat brought an international perspective: “I don’t think these words like ‘challenging environment’ or ‘risks to funding’ are sufficient,” she said. “What we’re living through now is a structural shift.” With international aid budgets shrinking and domestic giving also under pressure, she warned that the changes underway are not temporary. “These cuts are not temporary belt-tightening moments,” she said. “They are a permanent reordering of priorities.”

Towards the end of the discussion, the panel attempted to identify what set resilient organisations apart. Thorat emphasised clarity: “Organisations that are going to survive and thrive are those who can demonstrate that what they’re doing leads to real impact.” Smith meanwhile reinforced the importance of partnership, urging charities to embed themselves within wider systems, while Bott added a note of pragmatism, warning that not all organisations will find it easy to adapt. “The ones that are going to struggle, are those in the middle, he said” In some cases, he suggested, organisations may need to consider structural change, including mergers. “We have too many charities... the money is being spread too thinly.”

Rethinking fundraising

That sense of challenge, and the need to rethink established assumptions, carried into a session led by Herdify. Founder and CEO Tom Ridges approached fundraising from a behavioural science perspective, offering a different lens on declining donor numbers. “This isn’t just a fundraising problem,” he argued, “it’s a trust problem and a future growth problem.” At the heart of his argument was the idea that giving is socially driven. “Humans copy humans,” he said, adding that “giving is contagious.”

This insight reframes the implications of a declining donor base. “If the numbers of donors decline, fewer



people are going to copy,” Ridges explained. “If fewer people are copying, the decline continues.” The risk, he suggested, is not just immediate income loss but a longer-term erosion of social norms around giving. The solution lies not in simply reaching more individuals, but in embedding fundraising within communities. “Think less about the individual motivations of your donors,” he advised, “and think more about the collective influence on others.”

The following panel returned to the practicalities of fundraising and income resilience. Ben Black, national donation development manager at RNLI described how broader societal changes are transforming donor expectations. “Everything seems a lot more fast moving,” he said. “People want to just

tap and go.” He explained how the RNLI’s shift towards contactless donations reflected this change, generating dramatic results. “We transitioned from £25,000 to over £1.5 million in five years,” he explained, adding how the organisations actually saw donations rise. “Reduced friction actually increased the generosity,” he said, with average donations rising as giving became easier.

However, for smaller organisations, adapting to these trends is far from straightforward. Cat Ross, CEO of Baby Basics explained the pressures faced by charities operating at a smaller scale. “You feel like you’re in constant competition,” she said, particularly when funding priorities shift toward innovation rather than

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ongoing need. She described the challenge of maintaining services while also investing in fundraising and relationships, noting that time and capacity are often the scarcest resources.

Despite these challenges, Ross highlighted the importance of nurturing partnerships. When Baby Basics faced a funding gap, it turned to its corporate supporters. "In a week we had £23,000 in," she said. "For a small charity... that's huge." Her message to the room was clear: "Diversify, diversify, diversify."

During an investment session, led by Guinness Global Investors, analyst Sagar Thanki focused on how charities can strengthen their financial resilience through their reserves. Thanki argued that organisations often overlook this opportunity. "It is far easier to grow those reserves via investing than it possibly is to gain those reserves via fundraising," he said. In an uncertain economic environment, his advice centred on consistency and discipline. "Time in the market is better than timing the market."

Despite geopolitical instability and concerns about AI-led market growth, Thanki offered reassurance. "Stock markets recover," he said, emphasising the importance of staying invested and diversifying portfolios. His emphasis on diversification, quality investments and dividend growth reflected a long-term approach aligned with many charities' need for stability. He also addressed the importance of ethical investment, explaining that ESG considerations are built into their processes and can be tailored.

Lessons from the frontline

The case study panel that followed brought the day's themes into focus through real organisational experiences. John May, CEO of Cats Protection described leading through a period of



governance crisis and financial strain. His approach relied on honesty: "People don't need false reassurance... they like clarity, they like honesty and a sense that there's a route through."

He also emphasised the emotional dimensions of change, particularly in volunteer-led organisations. "You can't simply announce a new model and expect people to fall in line," he said, stressing the need to understand "what people feel they may be losing." For May, resilience is about transformation, not restoration: "It's not about bouncing back... it's about becoming the version of the charity that the future needs."

Othman Moqbel of Action for Humanity painted a picture of global pressures, describing "rising demand in a collapsing environment" as crises multiply and funding contracts. Having lost around \$50 million in USAID support, his organisation has leaned into localisation and values-led leadership.

Meanwhile, Helen Stevens of STARS Dorset provided an account of leadership a small charity supporting survivors of sexual trauma. Her story of rebranding the charity illustrated both the challenges and opportunities of change. Recognising that the organisation's name was a barrier to engagement, she led a process to create a new identity that felt more accessible.

Stevens also challenged the sector to talk more openly about failure. "We learn more from our failures," she said, "and yet we don't talk about them."

The first of the afternoon sessions shifted focus toward technology, with a panel exploring how AI and digital innovation are reshaping the sector. While much of the discussion centred on opportunity, speakers were equally candid about the uncertainty that accompanies it. Sam Reeve, head of innovation and change in technology at the British Heart Foundation, made a clear distinction between what she described as "everyday AI" and "game-changing AI," noting that while the latter often captures attention, it is the former that is already delivering tangible benefits. Incremental tools embedded within day-to-day workflows, she suggested, are quietly transforming efficiency, freeing up staff time and improving decision-making in ways that are both practical and scalable.

Yet alongside this optimism sat a recognition that many charities are still at an early stage of adoption. For Reeve, the challenge lies not simply in implementing technology, but in understanding where it can genuinely add value without creating unnecessary complexity or risk.

Christopher Brewer, growth director – nonprofit at UNIT4, picked up on

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this theme, encouraging organisations to think beyond legacy systems and toward more adaptive, intelligent platforms. He urged charities to move “from systems of record to systems of reason,” framing AI not as a replacement for human judgement, but as a tool to enhance it. “You still need humans in the loop,” he said, underscoring the importance of maintaining oversight, ethics and accountability as technology evolves.

That balance between innovation and responsibility was echoed by Samina Taj of Human Appeal, who spoke about the organisation’s use of AI to deepen engagement with supporters. For Taj, the goal is not simply automation, but connection. AI, she suggested, can enable more meaningful relationships when used well, supporting “more personalised, two-way journeys” with donors while maintaining a strong ethical framework. At the same time, she emphasised the importance of approaching new tools thoughtfully, ensuring that innovation enhances, rather than replaces, the human connection at the heart of charitable work.

Collaboration emerged as another key enabler of progress, particularly for smaller organisations. Peter Marshman, CEO of Digitall, highlighted how knowledge-sharing and peer networks are helping charities bridge the gap between ambition and capacity. Rather than competing in isolation, he suggested, organisations are increasingly learning from one another through informal partnerships and shared experimentation. The sector, he argued, must continue to become more open in how it tests, adopts and refines digital tools, recognising that collective progress will be essential if smaller charities are not to fall further behind.

That interplay between innovation

and human experience carried through into one of the most reflective sessions of the day, delivered by Dr Sarah Hughes, CEO of Mind. Her keynote moved beyond systems and strategy to focus on the emotional reality of leadership in a time of sustained pressure. Describing a landscape marked by “rising demand, financial volatility, and increasing scrutiny,” she also pointed to “political exhaustion” and the cumulative toll these pressures take on those leading organisations.

For Hughes, resilience cannot be understood purely in operational terms. Instead, it must include the wellbeing of leaders and teams. “Leadership is about creating thriving environments,” she said, emphasising the importance of peer support, coaching and self-awareness. She spoke openly about the concept of moral injury and the importance of acknowledging that reality rather than ignoring it. In doing so, she reframed resilience as something deeply human, rooted in honesty, compassion and the ability to sustain oneself while leading others.

People and purpose

In a live Q&A session featuring Tom Yeowart, chief investment officer at Troy Asset Management, discussions moved across governance, ethical investing and the challenge of maintaining focus amid constant change. Yeowart emphasised the importance of long-term thinking, noting that resilience is built not through reactive decisions but through disciplined, consistent strategy. Echoing earlier themes, he reminded attendees that progress takes time. Building sustainable organisations, he suggested, is “a marathon, not a sprint,” requiring patience as well as ambition.

The final panel discussion of the day brought the conversation back to people and culture, exploring how inclusion underpins organisational

resilience. Speakers reflected on the practical realities of building equitable, people-first workplaces at a time when pressures are rising. Mabinty Esho, head of culture and inclusion at Comic Relief highlighted the need to close the gap between intention and impact, arguing that organisations must move beyond statements of values to measurable, lived change in how they operate.

Meanwhile, Bushra Baig-Daykin, associate director of inclusion at Alzheimer’s Society reinforced the idea that inclusion cannot be treated as an abstract principle. It requires systems, structures and sustained effort. Without the right infrastructure, she suggested, even well-intentioned organisations will struggle to embed meaningful change. And Louise Dawtry, people and culture lead at Leeds Mind focused on the importance of clarity and communication, particularly in preventing burnout among teams operating under pressure. Ensuring that staff feel supported, listened to and valued is not separate from performance, but central to it.

Across the panel, speakers returned to the importance of listening, not as a one-off exercise, but as an ongoing process. “Silence and disengagement are warning signs,” Baig-Daykin noted, highlighting the need to pay attention to what is not being said as much as what is. Data, feedback and open dialogue were all seen as critical tools in understanding organisational health and maintaining trust.

By the end of the conference it was clear that the sector is entering a new phase. The challenges it faces — financial pressure, shifting donor expectations, technological disruption and global instability, are unlikely to ease in the near term. Instead, they demand not only new tools and strategies, but new ways of thinking about resilience itself.

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Make giving visible: Why community influence matters more than ever

WRITTEN BY TOM RIDGES, FOUNDER AND CEO, HERDIFY

As donor numbers decline, charities must rebuild generosity to revive participation

Over the last decade, the UK has lost around six million donors. On its own, that is alarming. But through the lens of behavioural science and social contagion, it becomes even more concerning. Giving is socially influenced: people are 10 to 20 times more likely to donate when those around them do. As participation declines, the social signals that encourage generosity begin to disappear too.

We tend to think of giving as a deeply personal decision, guided by individual values. In reality, donating is a social act, and supporters should feel comfortable being open about their contributions. Behavioural science shows that people are far more likely to act when they see others doing the same.

A healthy charity ecosystem depends on broad participation. When fewer people give, organisations become reliant on a smaller pool of committed supporters. That concentration of generosity may sustain short-term income, but it introduces long-term fragility.

Amplifying 'social proof'

Giving, like many human behaviours, is shaped by social proof and external encouragement. When we see friends

fundraising or donating, overhear conversations about charities, or spot a membership pack on a kitchen counter, it lowers psychological barriers and makes participation feel natural. The risk charities face today is that when fewer people are giving, those social cues begin to disappear.

Fewer public acts of generosity mean fewer conversations, fewer shared experiences, and fewer reminders that charitable action is part of everyday life. Over time, this can begin to weaken the social norm around giving.

We have to acknowledge we can't spend our way out of this problem. At a time when advertising costs continue to rise, simply increasing spend is not a sustainable solution.

If giving is socially influenced, it can also be socially reactivated. The same behavioural principles that help explain the decline in donations can also help reverse it.

Repetition is a feature, not a bug.

With the desire to drive efficiency, we often forget repetition is one of the core drivers of human decision-making. Some behaviours require only a single exposure. Others require repeated reinforcement from multiple people before people act. Most human behaviours fall into the second

category.

Once we recognise that people need to encounter behaviours multiple times before participating themselves, we can design fundraising differently. Repeated exposure to visible generosity, whether through conversations, community activity, social sharing, or everyday interactions, helps normalise giving and makes participation feel easier.

Taking this a step further, by identifying where this offline advocacy is already high, marketing spend can be used to amplify giving in those communities. That shifts advertising from a blunt acquisition tool into a strategic enabler of social influence.

This brings us back to the original concern around declining donor numbers. Declining participation can reinforce further decline, but the reverse is also true. Visible generosity can create momentum.

By amplifying where giving is already visible, we create local pockets of growth that help rebuild a broader culture of participation across the sector.

When generosity is visible, it spreads. In a sector built on collective action and public goodwill, that visibility might be one of the most powerful - and underused - tools charities have.

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Are trustee boards holding charities back?

WRITTEN BY LAUREN WEYMOUTH

As charities face mounting pressures, questions grow over whether cautious boards are limiting innovation

Charity governance has long been viewed as one of the sector's great strengths. Trustees provide oversight, accountability and strategic direction, helping organisations balance mission with financial sustainability. Yet a growing body of evidence suggests that some charity boards may also be acting as a brake on innovation, growth and organisational resilience.

Recent research and testimony from across the sector raise an uncomfortable question: are boards, in some cases, holding charities back?

The issue is not that trustees lack commitment. Most volunteer significant amounts of time and bring valuable expertise to their organisations. Rather, the challenge appears to be whether some boards are equipped, willing and diverse enough to help charities navigate an increasingly complex operating environment.

One of the clearest examples comes from fundraising. Research by the Chartered Institute of Fundraising (CloF) found that efforts to attract high-net-worth donors are being undermined by organisational culture and governance barriers. The report identified 'significant challenges preventing charities from reaching their full fundraising potential' and found that 'many organisations

reported a lack of buy-in and investment from boards and senior leadership teams, limiting their ability to provide the personalised and tailored donor experiences needed to build long-term, trusted partnerships'.

The timing couldn't be worse. The UK is on the cusp of what the CloF describes as a 'great wealth transfer', with £5.5 trillion expected to pass between generations over coming decades. This transfer is likely to create a new generation of philanthropists with different expectations, values and giving behaviours. Yet many charities appear ill-prepared to seize the opportunity.

Claire Stanley, the CloF's director of policy and communications, argues that the problem runs deep: "Many of the challenges fundraisers and charity leaders shared with us, however, are deep-rooted in the sector and will need a fundamental step-change in how boards see, understand and support fundraising."

The phrase 'step-change' is revealing. Fundraising professionals are not simply asking for incremental improvements. They are suggesting that many boards fundamentally misunderstand the role that fundraising plays in delivering charitable impact.

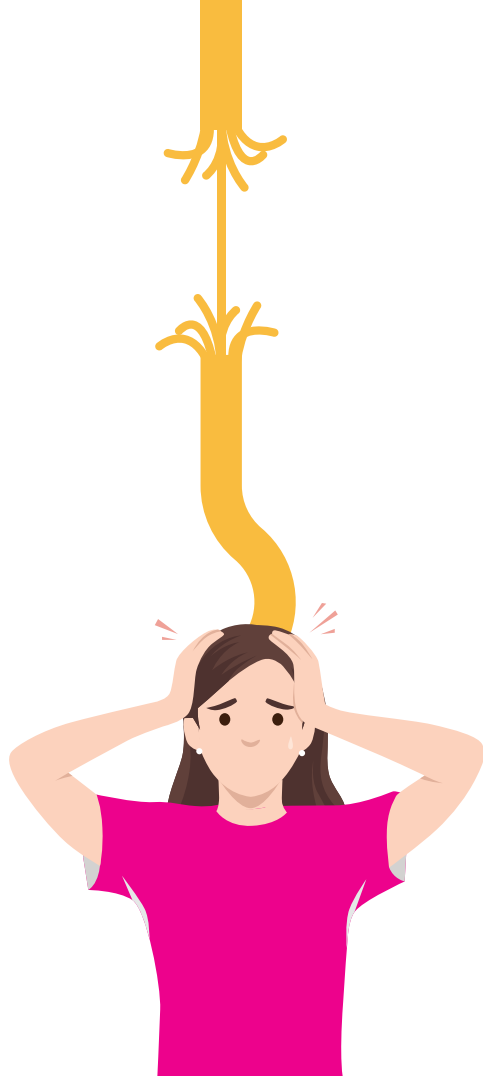
This disconnect is reflected in the experiences of individual trustees. One

anonymous trustee described joining a board specifically to help develop a marketing strategy, only to discover there was little organisational appetite to support the work.

"I joined a board with the sole focus of helping the charity to develop a marketing strategy. However, once I joined, it was made clear that no external budget could be applied to this and nobody within the organisation had the capacity to do any form of 'marketing', therefore it was implied that I would be the only person to do the work. The CEO agreed that we should allocate a small amount of budget to marketing/PR, yet the rest of the board didn't agree as they couldn't see its benefits. It really holds the charity back."

The story highlights a common challenge across the sector: boards often recognise the importance of income generation, communications and public engagement in theory, while remaining reluctant to invest in the infrastructure required to achieve them.

That tendency towards caution appears elsewhere in governance research. A survey conducted by nfpResearch for ACEVO and the Association of Chairs found that just under three in five charity leaders had experienced "challenging board behaviour". Around one in five chief



executives reported incidents such as individuals exerting disproportionate influence happening often.

More strikingly, the survey found that those newest to leadership roles were the most exposed, with more than seven in ten leaders in post for less than a year experiencing challenging board behaviour.

Not all challenge is unhealthy. Effective boards should scrutinise decisions and test assumptions. However, when challenge becomes obstruction, the consequences can be severe. One respondent reported that the behaviour of a single individual “nearly broke the board”. Another said difficult trustee behaviour had “undermined the ability for staff to do their work and to feel confident in their ability to communicate with trustees”.

These findings suggest that governance problems are not merely procedural. They can directly affect organisational culture, staff wellbeing and decision-making.

Questions about board composition also continue to surface. Half of respondents in the ACEVO survey expressed dissatisfaction with board diversity and skills. Only three in five believed trustees came to meetings prepared.

Meanwhile, Charity Commission chair Julia Unwin recently criticised the sector’s reliance on personal networks to recruit trustees, noting that only 6% are appointed after responding to a job advert. Such practices, she argued, “prevents people contributing, it narrows the mind sets of boards, and it deprives vital organisation of the best, independent engagement that a truly diverse board offers.”

A lack of diversity is not simply a representational issue. It can shape how decisions are made and how risk is assessed.

One trustee described serving on a board dominated by highly accomplished legal professionals. “The trustee board at my workplace is largely composed of very established legal academics and lawyers who have been the head of government departments or law firms, and senior judges, and it has been that way, I think, for over 60 years. As a result, the board’s decision-making is always on the more cautious side. However, members of the staff team and I in particular would like them to push the boat out and really show the organisation’s values in the sorts of decisions they make.”

This tension between caution and ambition is increasingly significant at a time when charities face mounting financial pressures. Research from Gambit Insurance Solutions found that

more than one in four charities want support meeting financial challenges, while one in five cited staffing and volunteer concerns.

The research concluded that charities are looking not only for more money but “more predictable income and more capacity to pursue funding properly”. As founder Ajay Mistry observed: “Charities are not lacking ideas, ambition or commitment. What comes through clearly in this research is that many are being held back by a lack of time, headroom and practical support.”

Governance sits at the centre of many of these challenges. Decisions about investment in fundraising, technology, workforce capacity and organisational development ultimately pass through boards. If trustees are overly cautious, resistant to change or lacking relevant expertise, charities may struggle to adapt.

That does not mean boards are the primary cause of the sector’s difficulties. Funding pressures, rising demand, workforce shortages and economic uncertainty all play substantial roles. Nor would it be fair to suggest that strong governance and innovation are mutually exclusive. Many charities benefit from boards that provide both rigorous oversight and strategic vision.

But the evidence increasingly points to governance as a critical factor in organisational performance. The question may not be whether boards are holding charities back, but whether enough boards are helping their organisations move forward.

As charities confront generational shifts in philanthropy, growing service demand and rapid technological change, the organisations that thrive are likely to be those whose boards see themselves not merely as guardians of risk, but as enablers of opportunity.

Why charity leaders must wake up to the attention war

WRITTEN BY MARY JANE ROBERTS

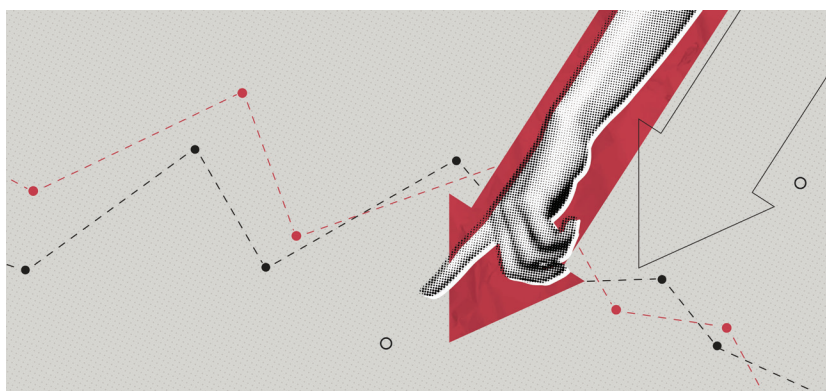
Mary Jane Roberts, CEO of Doctors in Distress, warns that with donor numbers falling and attention fragmenting, charity leaders must rethink how they cut through the noise

The UK Giving Report 2026 published by CAF gives a headline figure of individual giving. This has fallen from £15.4bn in 2024 to £14bn last year. The report does not just highlight a reduction but that the number of individuals giving has gone down – six million less givers in the last 10 years.

Reality for charity leaders mirrors this: a growing sense of a group of the population for whom it is acceptable to opt-out of this traditional plank of civil society. “Among those who did not donate 49% of higher and additional rate taxpayers suggested they were not interested in charities”.

We can describe what this challenge isn’t. It isn’t a crisis of trust. Trust in UK charities remains consistently high. Charity Commission annual figures for 2025 show a static 57% of the public have high trust. It also isn’t a lack of care by those who already fund – we can see that those who already support charities have often ramped-up their giving. A smaller number of donors are keeping the lights on at many small charities.

The reduced individual funding also isn’t the whole picture. Anyone who has cheered on their London Marathon runners or been overwhelmed by a volunteer response knows great passion abounds for some ways in which people can contribute to charity. This in the



world of marketing is experiential, in charities it can be called giving-by-experience. Whether the experience is an Iron Man, attending a tea party, or being part of a craft challenge all provide the giver with an experience as fundamental to their giving.

So it seems we face a game of two halves: offline and online. Whilst in person charities are able to drive purpose, fun, connection and motivation we are often struggling with the equivalent online. Some of the most successful elements of the online work of charities has been linked to in real life events, challenges and activism.

It’s the direct funding online that is the knottiest issue. It’s where the attention war really has to be fought. People are deluged with a flood of marketing, information and content. How people choose to see or follow information as well as algorithms

affect the visibility of charities. To say nothing of money to invest: clearly the commercial brands of this world are putting plenty of dosh into beautiful and innovative click-bait and alluring propositions.

Which leaves charities with huge questions for our future. Firstly, do we consolidate our focus to what real people can do in real places – and ally our online work to show those unique selling points? Do we try and counter the direct financial donation reductions or accept it, instead building on giving-by-experience or our own commercial income? Or do we bite the bullet and give serious investment to our online articulation of why we exist, how we fix problems, and how much better the world is because of us. All of which makes you think there’s an attention war going on in charity leaders’ minds, too.

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2026 Better Society Awards Welcome, Judges & Winners



Lauren Weymouth,
Editor, Better Society

Welcome to the Better Society Awards 2026

The Better Society Awards 2026 marked our eleventh year of celebrating the very best the corporate and charity sectors have to offer. The awards recognised the many ways organisations are helping to build a better society, and this brochure showcases the outstanding winners and highly commended organisations whose achievements stood out this year. As these pages demonstrate, the depth and diversity of social impact work across the sector remained as inspiring as ever. The entries reflected a growing maturity in how organisations approached their social impact, with a stronger emphasis on long-term thinking, collaboration and accountability. Congratulations to all the shortlisted and winning organisations, which are all worthy of recognition for their work in helping to drive positive change across society.



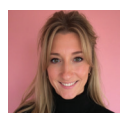
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Paul Nicoll
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Triodos Bank (UK)



Tony Dada
Founder & CEO
R-World Ents Limited/DADA Success Academy



Sarah Roberts
Executive Director
Reckitt Global Hygiene Institute (RGHI)



Sally Kramers
Head of Industry Development, Events and Membership
UKSIF



Greg Sage
Director of Corporate Affairs and ESG
Royal Mail Group



Pro Bono Company of the Year
WINNER: Q5



Corporate Volunteer Programme of the Year
WINNER: SEGRO

2026 Winners



Employee Wellbeing Award
WINNER: EPAM Systems



Best Scheme to Encourage Staff Fundraising
WINNER: Asda Tickled Pink, Breast Cancer Now and CoppaFeel!



Consultancy of the Year
WINNER: Barley Communications



Philanthropy Award
WINNER: ICG



Impact Company of the Year
WINNER: Northern Gas Networks and Solutions for the Planet



Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Award
WINNER: University of Worcester



ESG Finance Award
WINNER: Aviva



Commitment to the Local Community Award
WINNER: Playtech



2026 Winners



National Commitment to the Community Award
WINNER: Berkeley Foundation and Lord's Taverners



National Commitment to Skills and Training
WINNER: Greene King



Partnership with a Children's Charity
WINNER: Alconex and Zarach



Partnership with a National Charity
WINNER: Aviva and Citizens Advice



Partnership with a Local Charity
WINNER: Investec and the Bromley By Bow Centre



Partnership with a Health Charity
WINNER: Toolstation and Macmillan Cancer Support



Partnership with an International Charity
WINNER: Reckitt and British Red Cross



Partnership with an Environmental Charity
WINNER: Aviva and The Wildlife Trusts

2026 Winners



Carbon Reduction or Offset Programme of the Year
WINNER: Coventry Building Society Group



Circular Economy Award
WINNER: Charles Tyrwhitt and British Heart Foundation Partnership



Workplace Sustainability Award
WINNER: Aviva



Major Project of the Year
WINNER: ICG



Communication and Education Award
WINNER: DPD UK



Tech for Good Award
WINNER: esynergy and Marie Curie



Corporate Social Responsibility Leader of the Year
WINNER: Keith Breslauer, Patron Capital



ESG Excellence Award
WINNER: Aviva



2026 Winner

Pro Bono Company of the Year Winner: Q5

In an era where businesses are expected to deliver social value alongside commercial success, pro-bono work has become a powerful way for organisations to use their expertise to create lasting impact.

Q5 Partners was recognised as Pro Bono Company of the Year at the Better Society Awards for its structured, firm-wide approach to pro-bono consulting, delivered through the Q5 Foundation. The firm works across the charity and not-for-profit sector, helping organisations strengthen their effectiveness, resilience and impact.

At the heart of Q5's work is a clear purpose: building healthy organisations that propel people, economies and society forward. In 2025 alone, more than 80 Q5 employees contributed over 5,000 hours of pro-bono consulting, equivalent to more than £1.2 million in foregone fees. This support reached over 80 charities and non-profits, alongside five long-term community partners and a range of shorter "pop-up" consulting projects.

Amongst the broad work of the Foundation, the judges were particularly impressed by Q5's long-term Community Partnerships and interventionist Pop Up consulting workshops.

Q5 stood out to judges because its pro-bono work is not treated as an add-on. It applies the same rigour, insight and commitment as its commercial consulting work, using all the expertise and experience available across all areas of Q5 to support charities and social enterprises tackle complex challenges, build resilience and increase their impact.

To learn how Q5 can support your organisation, please contact Ahmad Elnashar, Head of Q5's Charity Sector, at ahmad.elnashar@q5partners.com, or Annabel Tonge, Foundation Partner, at annabel.tonge@q5partners.com.



Q5 Sign Up!

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2026 Winner

Partnership with a Children's Charity

Winner: Alconex

For most children, a bed is something easily taken for granted. Yet across the UK, thousands of children are still sleeping on floors, sofas, or temporary camp beds; affecting their sleep, wellbeing, confidence, and educational attainment.

Addressing child bed poverty requires more than donations. It demands long-term partnerships built on shared purpose and lasting commitment. That is why Alconex and Zarach were recognised at the Better Society Awards for Partnership with a Children's Charity. Their collaboration stood out not only for its fundraising success, but for the way social impact became embedded within the business.

Leeds-based Alconex, one of the UK's leading Independent Connection Providers, delivers electric, gas, and water infrastructure for major developments nationwide. In 2024, CEO Dr Steve Farmer introduced a new corporate objective: to use the company's success to create meaningful social impact. Following extensive research, Alconex chose to partner with Zarach, a charity dedicated to ending child bed poverty.

Founded in 2017 by Bex Wilson, Zarach provides bed bundles containing a bed frame, mattress, and bedding to children without a proper place to sleep. Its mission is simple but transformative: helping children arrive at school rested, healthier, and ready to learn. Since its launch, Zarach has supported more than 10,000 children across England.

To create lasting impact, Alconex set a three-year fundraising target of £75,000, enough to fund more than 500 beds. In early 2025, it launched its first major campaign, aiming to raise £25,000 in its first year. The initiative included a pledge to donate £3 for every gas, water, or electricity connection installed, alongside employee-led fundraising and volunteering.

A key factor in the partnership's success was employee



engagement. All 83 staff members took part in fundraising activities, from casino nights and golf days to personal challenges. One employee completed a 15,000-foot skydive, raising £6,755, while another ran an ultra-marathon, generating £1,739. Employees were also given paid volunteering time to support Zarach directly.

The results exceeded expectations. Within 12 months, the partnership raised £47,559, 90% above its original target, helping 317 children out of bed poverty.

The connection-based donation model alone generated more than £25,000 through 8,652 installations, creating a sustainable funding stream linked directly to business activity. Collectively, the partnership is estimated to have enabled more than 115,000 additional good nights' sleep each year.

Alconex has since increased its commitment, pledging £100,000 of support by the end of 2026. Future fundraising plans include a Mount Kilimanjaro expedition and a 2,100-kilometre charity bike ride across South Africa, while the company is also supporting Zarach's regional expansion ambitions.

What made this partnership exceptional was its authenticity. Rather than treating charity support as a standalone initiative, Alconex embedded Zarach's mission into its culture, operations, and long-term objectives. Together, the organisations have created a partnership that is not only raising funds, but changing lives.

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2026 Winner

Impact Company of the Year Winner: Northern Gas

Businesses are under increasing pressure to demonstrate genuine social impact. The most effective organisations move beyond consultation and embed communities directly into decision-making.

That approach is exactly why Northern Gas Networks and Solutions for the Planet were recognised with the Impact Company of the Year award at the Better Society Awards. Their Young Innovators Council (YIC) stood out as a pioneering example of how businesses can genuinely collaborate with young people to shape long-term strategy and create meaningful social impact.

Created in 2021, the YIC brings together young people aged 14 to 19 from across the North of England to provide direct input into Northern Gas Networks' policies, communications, culture, and future direction. Delivered in partnership with Solutions for the Planet, the initiative was designed to ensure the voices of future customers and colleagues help shape the future of the energy sector, particularly as issues such as the cost-of-living crisis and the transition to net zero affect younger generations.

What impressed judges most was the depth of integration between the youth panel and the business itself. The YIC is not a symbolic engagement programme or one-off consultation exercise; it is embedded into the organisation's decision-making processes. Members meet five times each year and contribute to real-time discussions at board level. Since launch, 132 young people from 74 schools have participated, ensuring the initiative reflects the diversity of the communities Northern Gas Networks serves.

The programme has had a transformative impact on the business. Insights from the YIC directly influenced Northern Gas Networks' £1.8 billion five-year business plan, helping shape 98 commitments, including 48 new or industry-leading initiatives. The group has challenged long-held assumptions within the organisation, encouraging leaders to be more ambitious around sustainability, inclusion, and innovation.



One of the YIC's most significant contributions has been supporting Northern Gas Networks' transition to net zero. Members helped co-design a hydrogen home visitor programme, informed and influenced its education strategy, and challenged the organisation to strengthen its carbon reduction targets. Their insights have also shaped ten internal strategies and policies, contributing to the company achieving a 100% score in Business in the Community's Responsible Business Tracker.

The impact extends beyond corporate strategy. Through co-creating a schools-based net zero engagement programme, the YIC has helped deliver 357 sessions to more than 45,000 young people, focusing on employability, creativity, and confidence-building. Designed around the Gatsby Benchmarks framework for careers provision, it has achieved a Level 4 Skills Builder impact rating.

Importantly, the programme is creating meaningful pathways into the energy industry for young people from diverse backgrounds. With 64% of members identifying as ethnically diverse, 42% eligible for free school meals, and 17% living with a disability or long-term condition, the YIC is helping break down barriers within a traditionally male-dominated sector. Several former members have already secured full-time roles in the industry, including at Northern Gas Networks itself.

The results are measurable as well as meaningful. A Social Return on Investment analysis conducted in 2025 found the initiative delivers £5.03 in social value for every pound invested. Ultimately, judges recognised the YIC as a powerful model for authentic, long-term community engagement; one that is reshaping a business and the wider utilities sector by placing young people at the centre of decision-making.

Building skills for a safer, greener energy future

At Northern Gas Networks we help young people understand energy and shape its future through our Net Zero Education Programme.

We run practical, hands-on activities for all ages including;

- Inspiring Net Zero and climate workshops
- Curriculum-linked STEM activities
- Programmes focusing on climate positive career pathways.



799 schools

engaged in the North of England
in the last 3 years

10,000 young people

supported each year through schools
and community partners

60,000 by 2031

our commitment to reach young people.

Bring our Net Zero education programme
to your community or local school:

efeducation@northerngas.co.uk



2026 Winner

Carbon Reduction or Offset Programme of the Year Coventry Group

Climate commitments are easy to announce but far harder to deliver. While many organisations focus on distant net zero targets, the organisations that stand out are those proving that carbon reduction can be both ambitious and practical, creating benefits that extend well beyond their own footprint.

That is why Coventry Building Society and The Co-operative Bank were recognised in the Carbon Reduction or Offset Programme of the Year category at the Better Society Awards. Their combined approach demonstrated how financial institutions can tackle climate change through operational improvements, customer support, supply chain engagement and community action.

Central to the programme is a shared belief that responsible finance should contribute positively to society and the environment. Before coming together as a group, both organisations had established strong sustainability credentials. Those foundations have enabled them to accelerate progress while embedding climate responsibility across their businesses.

The results are significant. Coventry Building Society reduced its Scope 1 and 2 emissions by 50% between 2020 and 2024, while The Co-operative Bank achieved a 14.8% reduction in Scope 1 and 2 emissions between 2023 and 2024. Coventry Building Society also reported a 19% reduction across Scope 1, 2 and partial Scope 3 emissions during 2024. Both organisations have eliminated waste to landfill, while Coventry Building Society has sourced 100% renewable electricity since 2021.

The judges were particularly impressed by the practical steps taken to transform operational performance. Coventry Building Society has electrified the majority of its sites, significantly reducing reliance on natural gas, while progress towards a predominantly electric vehicle fleet is helping lower emissions further. These investments are creating



long-term reductions across infrastructure and day-to-day operations. Recognising the role homes play in the UK's overall emissions profile, the group has developed products and services designed to help customers improve the energy efficiency of their properties. These include green lending options for home improvements, mortgage products that support more energy-efficient homes, and tools that help customers understand potential energy-saving measures.

The programme has also focused on engaging employees and suppliers. Colleagues have been encouraged to take climate action through tools designed to support more sustainable behaviours, while suppliers are increasingly involved in emissions reporting and reduction efforts.

Another standout feature is the emphasis on nature restoration and community engagement. Through partnerships supporting local environmental initiatives and biodiversity projects, the organisations have demonstrated that climate action is not solely about reducing emissions. It is also about helping communities create greener places while raising environmental awareness.

Strong governance underpins the programme, with sustainability integrated into reporting, decision-making, and organisational oversight. This focus on transparency and accountability has helped ensure environmental commitments are backed by measurable action.

A key winning factor in this group's programme was its breadth and authenticity. Rather than treating carbon reduction as a standalone initiative, the organisations embedded it across operations, products, partnerships and culture. The result is a programme delivering measurable environmental progress and a more sustainable future for customers, communities, and the financial services sector.



With sustainability at the heart of everything we do, we're in it for the long run

From our communities to the environment, we believe in creating long-term value for members and customers.

In 2025, we welcomed The Co-operative Bank into the family, extending our propositions to the personal current account and business banking markets. Between us, we have over 100 branches, more than 4 million members and customers and over 300 years of combined experience.

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The Co-operative Bank p.l.c. Registered office: 1 Balloon Street, Manchester, M4 4BE. Registered in England and Wales
(Company No: 990937).



2026 Winner

Consultancy of the Year Winner: Barley Communications

Social and environmental issues compete for attention in a crowded media landscape. For organisations seeking to influence behaviour, shape policy and build trust, effective communication is about translating evidence into messages people can understand and act upon.

This is why Barley Communications was recognised with the Consultancy of the Year award at the Better Society Awards. The certified B Corp consultancy impressed judges with its evidence-led approach, helping charities, public bodies and purpose-driven organisations translate complex issues into effective public engagement.

Specialising in sustainability, social impact and environmental communications, Barley only takes on projects that contribute meaningfully to social or environmental progress, with work grounded in integrity and long-term outcomes.

In 2025, Barley's role increasingly extended beyond campaign delivery into strategic consultancy. As organisations faced mounting pressure to demonstrate impact and credibility, Barley worked with clients to refine messaging, strengthen communications strategies and design campaigns that influenced behaviour and informed public debate. Central to this work is Barley's IMPACT model, ensuring projects are insight-led, aligned to measurable objectives and evaluated against outcomes.

A standout example of Barley's consultancy work was its partnership with Oceana UK on the launch of Deep Decline, a major scientific report examining the environmental impact of overfishing in UK waters. The challenge was significant: the evidence was highly technical, while public understanding of overfishing remained limited. Without careful communication, the findings risked being misunderstood or overlooked in public and policy discussions.

Barley advised Oceana UK to restructure its communications around a small number of clear, repeatable messages rooted firmly in the science. The consultancy



simplified how evidence was presented while maintaining scientific accuracy. Recognising journalists as a key audience, Barley also developed a proactive media education strategy, including advance briefings, supporting materials, and guidance on responsible interpretation of the data.

The resulting campaign combined strategic consultancy with hands-on delivery, including media briefings, spokesperson support and interview preparation. The results exceeded expectations. The campaign generated 267 pieces of media coverage, reached 647 million opportunities to see, secured coverage across nine national print titles on launch day, and achieved national television exposure alongside specialist and international reporting. Crucially, coverage accurately reflected the scientific evidence.

The judges were particularly impressed by Barley's ability to combine measurable communications performance with genuine societal impact. Beyond Oceana UK, the consultancy's work in 2025 included helping Hubbub attract new donors, supporting Nordoff and Robbins in raising hundreds of thousands of pounds for music therapy, engaging more than 70 local authorities in anti-fly-tipping initiatives with Keep Britain Tidy, and raising public awareness of scams, ticket touting, and fake vapes for National Trading Standards.

Ultimately, what set Barley Communications apart was its belief that communications should do more than generate attention; they should improve understanding, strengthen trust, and help organisations achieve meaningful change. By combining strategic consultancy, rigorous evaluation, and a deep commitment to purpose-driven work, Barley was praised for redefining the role communications can play in building a more informed and sustainable society.

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at the 2026 **Better Society**
Awards !!!



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Financial bubbles: What can history teach us?

WRITTEN BY RICHARD MAITLAND, SENIOR PARTNER, SARASIN & PARTNERS

History is littered with financial ‘bubbles’. What can past crashes teach us, and are there asset classes today that warrant closer scrutiny?

Volatility and uncertainty are the price investors pay for potential growth. Periodically, gains in an asset class, industry or geography accelerate so sharply that investors ask: how far can this go, and is it a bubble?

Despite extensive academic work, there is no single definition. At Sarasin, we think of bubbles as periods of strong, accelerating price gains, driven by momentum and often linked to a powerful “new narrative”, such as a technological shift. They can culminate in sharp reversals and material financial loss. As Sir John Templeton warned, the four most dangerous words in investing are: “this time it’s different”.

The benefit of hindsight

In our view, a bubble is not truly a bubble unless it ‘pops’. Otherwise, it is simply strong growth. Bubbles can therefore only be confirmed after the event, which makes real-time identification difficult.

Investments can look like speculation or the infancy of something transformative. Cloud computing and digital platforms looked bubble-like in the mid-2000s to mid-2010s. In hindsight, they did not ‘pop’; losses did not materialise and the technology became core business infrastructure.

Bubbles are not all equal. Some destroy value but have contained



consequences; others are systemically destructive; and some leave infrastructure that supports future growth. Railway mania and the dotcom bubble both ended painfully, but the rail and fibre optic infrastructure left behind laid foundations for growth.

The most dangerous bubbles, in our view, are those fuelled by debt, or unsupported by real innovation. The 1929 crash, exacerbated by margin borrowing, and the 2008 global financial crisis, driven by housing risk, subprime lending, leverage and complex products, are clear examples.

Predicting bubble territory is fiendishly difficult. No two bubbles are alike, history is full of false alarms, and selling too soon can be costly. Several areas arguably exhibit bubble-like characteristics today: artificial intelligence (AI), private credit and gold.

Artificial intelligence

AI is best understood not as a single technological event, but as a long-term, capital-intensive economic transition: a gradual, expensive shift in how the economy works. It could boost productivity and create wealth. Parallels are increasingly drawn with the dotcom bubble, given elevated valuations and capital inflows. A February 2026 Bank of America survey found that 23% of institutional credit investors identified an AI bubble as their primary concern. One risk is the scale of infrastructure spending, including data centres.

There are important differences. Some AI players have seen substantial share price appreciation, but price is only half the story; earnings are the other half. Not every fast-rising price signals a bubble. Many leading AI companies are highly profitable, unlike many dotcom-era businesses.

Valuations of the 'Magnificent 7' are also well below those of the largest tech companies in 2000 (see chart), which shows the price-to-earnings

The Magnificent 7 in 2025

	12-month forward p/e ratio
Microsoft	23.7
Apple	29.2
Nvidia	21.8
Amazon	24.0
Alphabet	25.5
Meta	18.6
Tesla	171.3
Weighted average	33.6

Largest seven tech companies in 2000

	12-month forward p/e ratio
Microsoft	97.4
Cisco Systems	126.7
Intel	82.6
Oracle	169.3
IBM	26.3
Lucent Technologies	40.0
Nortel Networks	18.2
Weighted average	90.6

ratio, a measure that tells you how 'expensive' or 'cheap' a stock is relative to its profits).

We do not believe the sector is currently a bubble candidate. We remain selective, favouring profitable, high-quality businesses. Morgan Stanley estimates hyperscalers will raise around \$400bn in corporate bonds in 2026, but most big technology firms retain solid balance sheets. We also monitor interconnected cloud and AI deals, where some revenue may reflect circular funding rather than independent demand.

Private credit

Private credit has no single definition, but one common feature: it is not publicly traded. Companies raise finance directly from private lenders, rather than banks or public bond markets. Loans are often floating

rate and senior secured, ranking first for repayment in distress. It includes direct lending, distressed debt, special situations and asset-backed finance.

Estimates vary, but we believe the market stood at about \$3trn at the start of 2025, broadly comparable to the FTSE 100. Sentiment has deteriorated: fund flows have moderated, default rates are rising from cyclical lows, and listed proxies are trading at discounts to net asset value.

Could this end in a bubble? Time will tell. The asset class has grown quickly and recent news flow points to headwinds. We currently have no direct private credit exposure, though we hold limited investments in specialist lenders via listed investment trusts on the London Stock Exchange. We continue to monitor wider market implications.

Gold

Gold may seem surprising. It has long been considered a safe haven. Yet economist Willem Buiter famously described gold in 2009 as "the longest-lasting bubble in human history"; given our definition, we disagree. Its history, physical nature and familiarity support its reputation, but short-term prices are often driven by investment flows and central bank activity. Gold also generates no income.

That makes fair value hard to judge and enthusiasm easier to overextend. Its value depends on someone else paying more later. Its price is underpinned by sentiment and its record of preserving value when confidence deteriorates. This is why we continue to hold it. Gold plays a strategic role in diversified portfolios, hedging fiat currency depreciation and systemic stress. We increased our allocation as our Fragmentation work strengthened the strategic case, but have since trimmed positions as

momentum became more stretched. Gold remains useful, but ultimately belief-driven.

Predicting the 'pop'

For investors, the point is not to predict when a bubble will burst, because it may not. Selling too early can also be a mistake. The better approach is to understand bubble characteristics, recognise warning signs and maintain disciplined portfolio construction.

First, revisit objectives, time horizon and cash flow needs: investors with known liabilities should not rely on volatile assets to meet them. A cash buffer enables patience.

Second, maintain diversification. With technologies such as AI, the long-term impact is still uncertain. The right approach is measured participation across companies, sectors, geographies and asset classes. Third, remain disciplined. Exuberance and fear can tempt investors away from strategy.

Bubbles are inherent in capital markets. They end painfully, but sometimes lay the groundwork for future growth. We cannot know whether a sector is a bubble until it bursts. But there will be winners, losers and volatility. Our role is to remove emotion, apply rigorous analysis and remain active in identifying opportunities.

Disclaimer: The value of your investments and any income derived from them can fall as well as rise and you may not get back the amount originally invested. Past performance is not a reliable indicator of future results and may not be repeated. Forecasts are not a reliable indicator of future performance.

SARASIN
& PARTNERS

Source: DataStream, as at 31.12.25

Figure 1: Valuations look elevated today, but history tells a different story. These tables show the 12-month forward price-earning ratios comparing the largest technology companies today with their counterparts at the peak of the dotcom era.

Know what you own

WRITTEN BY SHAUN LE MESSURIER, CLIENT DIRECTOR, ARC RESEARCH
AND EUAN SMITH, QUANTITATIVE ANALYST, S&P DOW JONES INDICES

Understanding a charity portfolio manager's investment style, risk framework and philosophy helps investors interpret performance beyond short-term market cycles

"Know what you own, and know why you own it," Peter Lynch, manager of the Fidelity Magellan Fund from 1977 to 1990 once said.

Lynch's advice to equity investors is equally relevant when allocating to discretionary fund managers (DFMs) who manage charity portfolios. The ARC™ Wealth Indices, covering more than 500,000 discretionary portfolios across over 140 firms, provide transparency on how DFMs perform relative to appropriate peer groups. While short-term performance divergence is inevitable, understanding a manager's investment approach allows performance to be put into context.

A key starting point is to clarify what a DFM is trying to achieve. Some managers are "index aware," using a benchmark as a reference point and seeking to add value through tilts away from that index. Others are "index agnostic," focusing purely on absolute risk-adjusted returns. These approaches can produce materially different outcomes, particularly over shorter time periods.

The ARC Charity Indices categorize portfolios by realized volatility (absolute risk), but portfolios with similar risk profiles can behave very differently. Even index-aware managers may take varying degrees of risk away from their benchmark.

Tracking error helps quantify the extent to which a portfolio may deviate from the peer-group average and highlights the potential for both meaningful outperformance and underperformance. Understanding the drivers of that tracking error—such as strategic asset allocation, currency exposure and investment style—is essential when assessing results.

Investment style is one of the more important drivers of performance. Many charity DFMs exhibit an inherent style bias that reflects their investment philosophy. In the most recent ARC Research Market Sentiment Survey, 48% of the ARC Wealth Indices peer group that responded described themselves as style agnostic, while the most popular styles included quality at 27% and growth at a reasonable price (GARP) at 11%. The remainder was quite evenly split between growth, value, momentum and other styles. Each of these styles has the potential to deliver strong long-term outcomes, but none performs well consistently. Academic and market evidence clearly shows that investment styles fall in and out of favor over time.

The long-term history highlights the cyclical nature of style leadership. Periods of strong performance have often been followed by sharp reversals or mean reversion. These cycles can be shaped by broader economic conditions, market regimes and

investor sentiment. As a result, a period of relative underperformance by a DFM may reflect style headwinds rather than deteriorating skill or process.

Without understanding this style exposure, investors risk misinterpreting results and making allocation decisions based solely on short-term performance.

Understanding why a manager has outperformed is just as important as understanding periods of weakness. When investors allocate to multiple charity DFMs, simply favoring recent top performers may unintentionally result in exposure to a single style or philosophy. If market conditions change, this lack of diversification could possibly amplify volatility and result in bad outcomes.

In line with Peter Lynch's guidance, investors are best served by knowing what they own and why they own it. Investment performance cannot be meaningfully assessed without an appreciation of a manager's philosophy, risk framework and style bias. Styles and approaches are cyclical, and short-term underperformance does not necessarily signal long-term failure. By understanding the true drivers of returns, investors can make more informed decisions, combine complementary managers effectively and allocate capital with greater confidence as market regimes evolve.

Multi-Asset Funds	Investment Manager	Fund Size (£m)	Cash %	Bond %	Equities	
					UK %	Intl %
Barclays Charity Fund	Barclays	245.3	1.4	15.4	21.3	52.5
Armed Forces Charities Growth & Income Fund	BlackRock	405.8	17.9	16.6	2.0	50.4
Catholic Charities Growth & Income Fund	BlackRock	152.2	18.3	15.5	1.5	51.4
Charities Growth & Income Fund	BlackRock	118.7	14.4	18.5	2.3	49.0
IFSL CAF ESG Cautious	LGT WM for CAF	25.4	8.1	43.9	6.9	34.0
IFSL CAF ESG Income & Growth	LGT WM for CAF	137.4	9.8	26.0	15.0	46.3
IFSL CAF ESG Growth	LGT WM for CAF	103.7	4.3	16.2	14.4	61.3
Charity Multi-Asset Fund	Cazenove	873.0	4.8	7.6	0.0	73.1
Sustainable Charity Multi-Asset Fund	Cazenove	2666.0	4.0	7.7	0.0	73.8
Catholic Investment Fund	CCLA	197.4	4.7	9.9	7.1	63.7
CBF Church of England Investment Fund	CCLA	1904.3	3.0	5.9	7.7	62.9
COIF Charities Ethical Investment Fund	CCLA	1922.1	2.3	5.8	7.5	62.7
COIF Charities Investment Fund	CCLA	3158.5	2.5	5.2	7.1	63.2
"Epworth Multi Asset Fund for Charities	Epworth	52.3	2.8	12.4	10.4	59.8
M&G Charity Multi Asset Fund	M&G	279.5	1.9	24.4	28.7	42.3
Newton Growth & Income Fund for Charities	Newton	685.4	0.1	16.8	33.4	49.8
Newton Ethically Screened Fund for Charities	Newton	49.0	1.7	16.8	24.1	55.9
Newton Growth & Income Fund (Responsible)	Newton	102.6	(0.6)	15.4	17.7	66.0
Global Income & Growth Fund for Charities	Quilter Cheviot	220.7	4.5	18.8	18.3	50.2
Active Income and Growth Fund for Charities	Rathbones	222.9	1.8	20.7	16.6	47.6
Rathbones Charity Growth & Income Fund	Rathbones	365.5	1.8	14.7	7.7	67.2
Charity Assets Trust	Ruffer	518.6	1.4	53.7	10.5	18.6
Sarasin Climate Active Endowments Fund	Sarasin & Partners	589.1	6.4	11.1	2.6	66.5
Sarasin Endowments Fund	Sarasin & Partners	1938.3	4.6	10.8	3.4	66.0
Sarasin Income & Reserves Fund	Sarasin & Partners	90.8	9.5	58.8	1.0	18.2
Trojan Fund	Troy	4954.8	0.9	52.1	9.1	28.2
Waverton Charity Growth & Income Fund	W1M	178.5	3.9	16.5	6.4	61.0

Peer Group Indices¹

Sterling Cautious Charity Index	ARC	-	32.2	48.3	4.3	1.6
Sterling Balanced Asset Charity Index	ARC	-	15.2	29.3	10.4	23.7
Sterling Steady Growth Charity Index	ARC	-	6.3	21.8	14.8	38.8
Sterling Equity Risk Charity Index	ARC	-	0.9	19.3	21.9	43.0

Market Indices¹

UK Equities	iShares
International Equities	iShares
UK Sovereign Bonds	iShares
UK Corporate Bond	iShares
UK Property	iShares
Cash	-

Property %	Other %	Last Quarter	Last 12 Months	YTD 2025	Last 3 Years	Last 5 Years	Last 10 Years
3.8	5.7	(2.7)	10.6	(2.7)	25.9	31.4	99.9
0.0	13.2	(0.6)	18.7	(0.6)	27.4	29.1	100.8
0.0	13.3	(0.4)	16.3	(0.4)	27.1	30.6	105.0
0.0	15.9	(0.8)	15.3	(0.8)	21.4	22.8	-
0.0	7.2	(1.6)	6.9	(1.6)	12.2	-	-
0.0	3.0	(2.2)	11.4	(2.2)	24.1	-	-
0.0	3.8	(3.0)	11.8	(3.0)	24.8	-	-
4.2	10.3	(3.6)	12.6	(3.6)	28.5	32.8	89.2
3.3	11.2	(4.7)	9.6	(4.7)	22.1	30.2	-
4.5	10.1	(7.1)	(6.0)	(7.1)	3.6	8.6	-
4.3	16.2	(6.5)	(4.7)	(6.5)	5.2	16.5	110.5
4.9	16.9	(7.3)	(6.2)	(7.3)	4.7	14.5	99.4
4.8	17.1	(7.0)	(5.8)	(7.0)	3.7	14.8	100.6
3.9	10.6	(6.1)	3.1	(6.1)	10.5	16.1	-
1.1	1.6	1.1	15.9	1.1	31.9	48.2	101.7
0.0	0.0	(1.0)	12.8	(1.0)	29.5	46.7	126.1
0.0	1.5	(3.4)	9.9	(3.4)	22.4	30.4	113.9
0.0	1.5	(4.1)	10.2	(4.1)	24.5	31.7	104.5
1.8	6.5	(0.7)	11.5	(0.7)	30.1	32.7	-
4.9	8.4	(1.5)	11.4	(1.5)	27.2	29.4	92.0
2.8	5.8	(5.7)	-	-5.7	-	-	-
0.0	15.9	(0.1)	7.5	(0.1)	3.6	13.0	56.0
3.0	10.4	(2.5)	4.0	(2.5)	19.1	20.2	-
3.8	11.3	(2.1)	5.1	(2.1)	21.3	23.1	92.1
0.0	12.5	(0.9)	4.7	(0.9)	13.1	1.0	27.5
0.0	9.8	(2.0)	5.0	(2.0)	15.4	27.1	63.9
3.0	9.3	(2.9)	12.2	(2.9)	34.8	43.2	-
0.0	13.6	0.2	4.9	0.2	13.5	10.7	28.3
4.3	17.1	(0.9)	7.8	(0.9)	19.6	20.3	57.8
4.8	13.4	(1.9)	8.7	(1.9)	22.1	24.6	77.2
3.9	11.0	(2.5)	8.9	(2.5)	22.8	25.6	86.7
		3.4	22.5	3.4	48.1	80.9	139.0
		(1.6)	16.4	(1.6)	49.5	71.1	235.1
		(1.9)	2.5	(1.9)	1.2	(19.6)	(7.7)
		(1.9)	4.5	(1.9)	13.4	(5.0)	21.5
		(8.7)	(1.4)	(8.7)	(2.2)	(18.2)	(13.5)
		0.9	4.0	0.9	14.8	17.6	20.2

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W: www.cfg.org.uk/

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T: 020 7149 6610
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For further information please contact:
Natalie Yapp
E: natalie.yapp@rathbones.com
T: 020 7399 0128
W: rathbones.com/charities

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All figures as at 30 September 2023

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Ruffer LLP

**80 Victoria Street
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For more information contact:
**Ajay Johal - Investment
Manager**
T: +44 (0)20 7963 8040
F: +44 (0)20 7963 8175
E: ajohal@ruffer.co.uk

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Contact: John Handford
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F: 020 7038 6864
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