

Chairing through Covid: above and beyond

AoC Chairs' survey supported by CCLA

2021

About Us

The Association of Chairs (AoC) is a membership organisation supporting Chairs and Vice Chairs of charities and social enterprises in England and Wales.

We aim to help Chairs run effective trustee boards and ensure their organisations are well-governed. Good chairing, governance and leadership are not an end in themselves, but a route to more effective social change. The ultimate change we seek is to increase the positive impact of charities and social enterprises by ensuring they are well-governed and led.

During the pandemic, our small team has held 85 events for Chairs with 2,925 attendees. This includes 24 peer surgeries and 21 expert sessions to help Chairs access professional guidance.

About the survey

The aim of this survey is to understand better the needs of Chairs during these difficult times and how AoC can best support them. The survey was conducted online in November 2020 during the height of the pandemic.

It was sent to AoC members and newsletter subscribers and promoted on social media. Just over half of respondents (51%) are current members of AoC, 6% are former members and 43% are non-members. **We received a total of 710 useable responses from Chairs.**

Respondents collectively made more than 5,000 comments on the survey. In addition to the quantitative analysis, we have included many quotes from Chairs to enable their direct voice to be heard.

Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to CCLA for its support of the survey. CCLA has been a consistent and core supporter of AoC since we were founded. We very much value the partnership we have with it and the support it gives to the sector.

The survey and report have been produced by AoC trustees Chris Cornforth and Diane Reid with support from fellow board members Peter Beverley, John Williams, Malcolm John and Jane Hustwit and the AoC staff team. The report has been designed by Becca Liversidge.

Introduction from CCLA

For even the most experienced Chairs with strong relationships with their CEOs, these are challenging times. First and foremost, we have seen many charities understandably concerned about their operating model and finances. Those that rely heavily on public support, fundraising or membership fees have found their finances running particularly close to the line.

Despite devastated finances and decreased funding, charities face an increase in demand for their services. With their offices, shops and venues closed, some charities have reassessed their investment policy by examining the level of liquid reserves, anticipated spend, scrutinising income from all sources and determining if there is any flexibility in their spending plans. However, we also know that the prolonged uncertainty brought about by the pandemic has made decision-making difficult.

This survey gives voice to the increasing, and possibly overwhelming, demands placed on Chairs. We are delighted to support the Association of Chairs as it sets out calls for action from charities, funders and policymakers.

CCLA provides ethical and responsible investments exclusively for not-for-profit organisations. We have been working with charities for more than 60 years, responding to their changing needs. Our clients look to this wealth of experience for answers to the difficult questions they are facing today.

Executive Summary

The role of the Chair is crucial to the effective running of charities and social enterprises. It is a key leadership role, especially in the vast majority of charities that have few or no staff¹. The Chair's leadership becomes even more important in a crisis. The skill and dedication of these volunteers are crucial to the success or failure of their organisations.

Even before the Covid pandemic struck, the role of Chair was becoming increasingly demanding, with each year seemingly bringing more regulatory burdens and higher levels of scrutiny. During the pandemic, the challenges for Chairs have been multiplied.

Our study shows that Chairs and boards have been faced with complex and tough decisions. In some instances, they have had to cut or completely reconfigure services, furlough or lay off staff and even increase support for service users while at the same time reducing resources.

The decision-making process has become more difficult, with boards having to meet online and, in some cases, review their governing documents to allow them to meet virtually. During this period, some Chairs have overseen the most challenging decisions the organisation has ever faced, often making decisions at speed and sometimes with limited information.

Much more time-consuming

This has come at a personal cost, according to our study. As a result of the challenges organisations have faced, Chairs found themselves giving significantly more time to their role: 62% of respondents reported spending four or more days a month on their chairing role compared with 43% before the pandemic. A total of 18% reported spending more than 11 days a month on chairing, compared with 10% before the pandemic.

The most common reason given for the increase was the time spent supporting staff, particularly the CEO (32%). Other common reasons cited were additional time spent in meetings, including more frequent board meetings and communicating generally (25%) and Covid-related funding and crisis management (24%).

Alarmingly, chairing had become a full-time job for some. 'I have always put in many hours,' said one respondent. 'But establishing a Covid-safety

plan, staffing problems and recruitment have kept me working over 40 hours a week.'

Another said: 'I stepped down from my paid position to leave me more time.'

While Covid-related matters dominated Chairs' concerns, what was particularly striking was the sheer range of challenges it brought them. Not only did it require their organisations to reconfigure their finances, staffing levels and fundraising activities but it raised more practical issues such as ensuring staff could work remotely and operate services safely.

The fact that Covid struck did not mean the perennial problems Chairs face went away either. Many Chairs raised concerns over governance issues such as recruiting enough trustees with the right skills, dealing with difficult board dynamics, ensuring inclusion and diversity, and managing the relationship with the Chief Executive.



'I have always put in many hours,' said one respondent. 'But establishing a Covid-safety plan, staffing problems and recruitment have kept me working over 40 hours a week.'

¹ Taken on Trust, Charity Commission (2017) indicates 80% of charities have no staff at all.

Motivation largely remains high

The experiences of the past year have not been entirely negative for Chairs. Many found this period motivating despite the added pressures. In fact, 44% of Chairs said their levels of motivation increased compared with 13% whose motivation decreased.

A variety of factors were behind this rise, including the board and staff supporting each other and working more closely together. One respondent went as far as saying the crisis had helped to foster a 'wartime mentality' within their organisation with 'everyone supporting each other'.

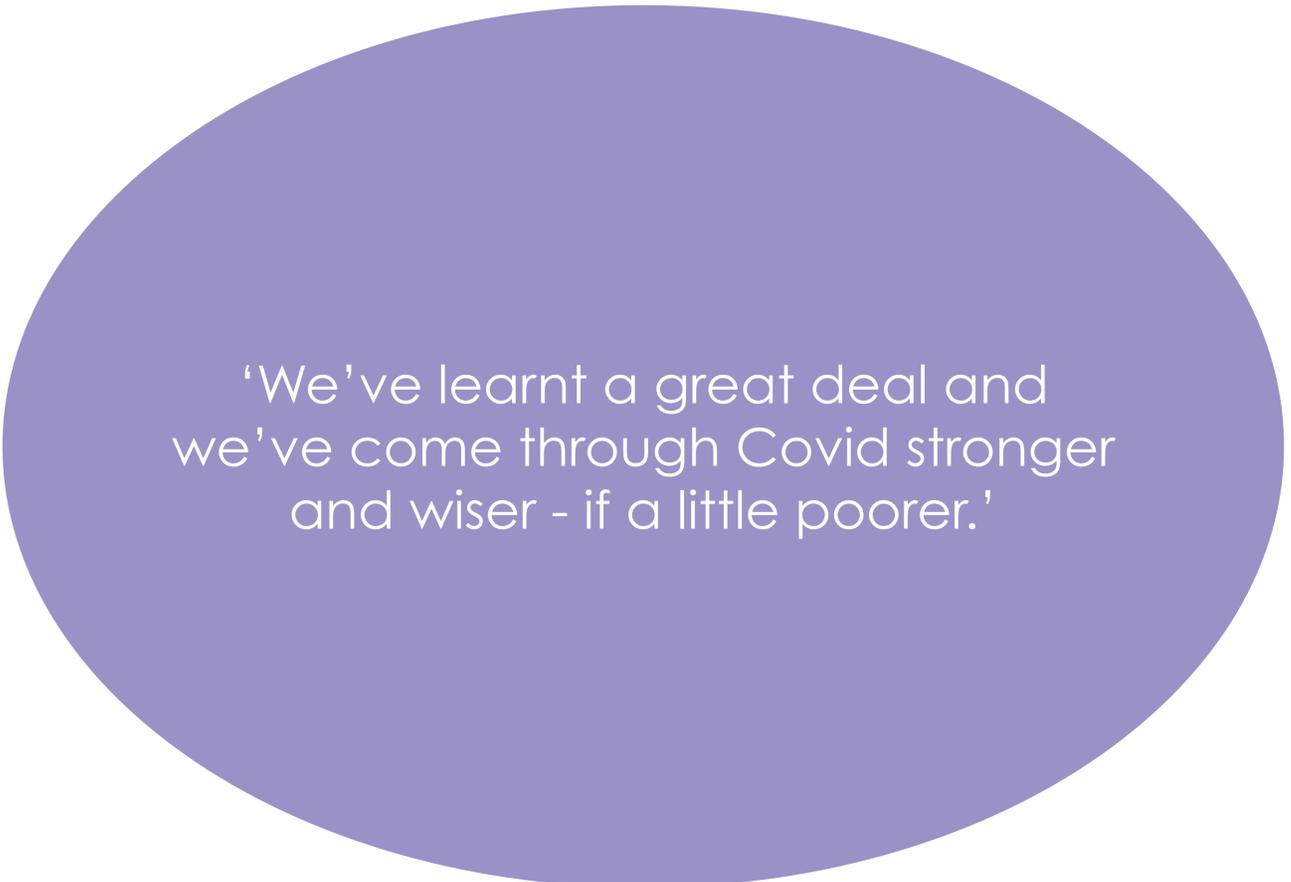
Another described it as challenging and exciting. 'We've learnt a great deal and we've come through Covid stronger and wiser - if a little poorer,' the respondent said.

But, worryingly, it was clear from some respondents that the pressure of taking tough decisions in tough circumstances was becoming too much. Some talked about their concerns of dealing with stress and their fears about 'burnout'.

'Everyone is voluntary and, quite frankly, Covid has left us exhausted, especially the co-founders,' said one respondent.

Among those who felt demotivated several cited the lack of support from the government, the Charity Commission or elsewhere for the charity sector at this time, as well as 'so many changes'. One respondent new to the third sector said the pandemic had highlighted the sector's 'dysfunctional funding arrangements and a dysfunctional legal structure', which in their view, 'hinder efficient and sensibly accountable delivery of benefit'.

Other demotivating factors cited by respondents included difficulties with the Chief Executive or the senior leadership team, the drain of not seeing people face-to-face and the implicit requirement to support others who previously had not required support. 'I felt so demotivated I have resigned,' said one respondent candidly.



'We've learnt a great deal and we've come through Covid stronger and wiser - if a little poorer.'

A testing time for relationships

It was clear from the study that the pandemic had also redefined relationships between many Chairs and their boards and senior leadership teams. Many respondents (42%) said board relationships had improved since the pandemic, with several respondents citing the arrival of new trustees as a reason.

Others said that this period had given the board the opportunity to work together more closely. One respondent said: 'All of the trustees have rolled up their sleeves and they are forming more working groups to respond at pace.'

Another added: 'A couple of board members supported the staff with practical tasks, which improved working relationships between the board and staff.'

'All of the trustees have rolled up their sleeves and they are forming more working groups to respond at pace.'

However, 14% of respondents believed relationships with their boards had become worse. For those Chairs, the principal cause cited was the use of technology, which led to challenges in maintaining strong relationships when most engagement was online.

In total, 41% of those who had a Chief Executive reported improved relationships with their Chief Executive compared with 8% saying the relationship had worsened.

One respondent said: 'There have been ups and downs. The CEO has felt under huge pressure personally as well as professionally and it was challenging to balance support and accountability. The relationship is fundamentally strong so we have been able to work through the sticky moments.'

In some instances, the pandemic has led to a greater appreciation of the contribution individuals make. 'Rather shamefully, we were ignorant of the dedication of the CEO and managers,' said one Chair. Another commented: 'Our relationship was strong to start with but more regular

contact has made us both more aware of each other's personalities and capabilities. It was a good learning opportunity.'

Online working a challenge for some

The charity sector has generally lagged behind other sectors digitally². As a result, many organisations had to rapidly upskill digitally when most workplaces were required to close. For many Chairs, this meant conducting meetings online and having little or no face-to-face interaction with board members or staff teams. Some respondents deemed online meetings helpful for chairing meetings, with one respondent citing how they ensured 'fuller engagement by board members.' Others noted how virtual meetings had helped to raise attendance, reduce travel time and improve accessibility. 'One of our trustees is deaf,' said one respondent. 'The auto-caption facility on Google Meet means the whole conversation is much more accessible for him.'

But some Chairs have struggled with the virtual experience. 'It is more difficult meeting at a distance and controlling the meeting,' one commented.

Another said: 'The lack of face-to-face contact means we don't know one another as well. The efficiency of board meetings is probably better, but no socialising means no networking.'

Lack of investment in training

Despite the very demanding nature of the role, our study shows very little is spent on the training and development of Chairs. Just over half (54%) of respondents reported nothing had been spent on their training in the past year, and 30% reported a spend of between £1-£100. Almost half (47%) of Chairs paid for training themselves.

However, many Chairs did report making use of free training and online resources provided by AoC and other sector bodies. In a few instances, Chairs expressed reluctance to ask their organisation to pay for training as budgets were tight.

²<https://www.thirdsector.co.uk/half-charities-lack-basic-digital-skills-says-lloyds-bank-report/digital/article/1449119>

Advice needed

About two-thirds of respondents had sought advice on their chairing responsibilities.

About 30% of those had sought support on matters related to governance, the board and the Chair role. A similar percentage had sought advice on HR-related matters. About a quarter had sought advice on financial matters and fundraising.

Other common issues where advice was sought included legal and regulatory matters, strategy and organisational problems, IT and online working, and inclusion and diversity.

Conclusions

The pandemic period has been incredibly challenging for many organisations. Our study shows that Chairs have overwhelmingly stepped up during this period of crisis, taking on additional responsibilities and making difficult organisational decisions.

As a result, many Chairs found themselves going above and beyond what is usually reasonably expected of their role. While many have felt motivated during this period, some Chairs have found it challenging and demotivating, raising questions about their willingness to carry on.

All too often failures in charity governance tend to attract attention, but there is another story emerging from our report: one of selfless service. In AoC's experience, and from the evidence of this survey, most Chairs keep on going whatever gets thrown at them. Not always getting it right but keen to do so.

Actions needed

• For Chairs

With so many Chairs spending significant time on their roles, we urge them to take care of their own well-being. We recommend they seek out support from colleagues, other Chairs and support organisations such as AoC.

We also encourage Chairs to invest time in building constructive relationships with their CEO and amongst board members. These relationships are especially important in challenging times.

• For board colleagues

Individual trustees have a role to play in supporting the Chair. This ranges from simply being committed, engaged and reliable board members, to being more proactive in finding ways to support the Chair by taking on additional tasks and working to enhance relationships within the board and beyond.

• For Chief Executives and charity staff

We urge Chief Executives to signpost Chairs to sources of support and where appropriate to create a budget for development or to access support. Charities should not expect Chairs to pay for that themselves.

• For funders, including government

Flexible funding, especially core or unrestricted funding, is invaluable to many organisations at this time. Application processes and reporting requirements also need to be proportionate.

We urge funders to increase their commitment to supporting governance costs and support for these key volunteers.

'We had to grow to meet demand whilst our whole fundraising activities stopped completely.'

These included the additional costs involved, the loss of volunteers who fall into vulnerable groups, and the problem of supporting beneficiaries who do not have internet or a mobile phone.

One respondent said: 'All our counselling services went online via Zoom and our referrals to the service doubled to 300 plus this year. Our volunteer counsellors and staff increased their hours to cope with demand.'

Keeping staff, volunteers and users of services safe was an important concern. Some respondents expressed concern about remote working and the difficulty of communications during the pandemic.

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'It is more difficult meeting at a distance and controlling the meeting,' one commented.

Another said: 'The lack of face-to-face contact means we don't know one another as well. The efficiency of board meeting is probably better, but no socialising means no networking.'

Not surprisingly a key concern for several respondents was about developing a new strategy and business plan for their organisation.

'The charity has done very well with funding through Covid grants but next year may be a different story yet the demand for services will still be high,' one respondent said.

The need for good governance

A large number of respondents had concerns relating to the governance of their organisation.

Several concerns centred around the recruitment of trustees and the composition of boards. These included the ability to recruit enough trustees, finding people with the right skills and commitment, ensuring diversity and inclusion, recruiting younger trustees and board succession.

One respondent cited the challenges of 'having a board that adds substantial value in strategy, direction and advocacy'.

Improving diversity and inclusion was identified as a top concern by 6%. This was discussed in general terms, rather than identifying particular groups. For example, one Chair identified as a concern: 'Diversity on the board - and by diversity I mean all types of diversity including cognitive.' Several identified recruiting more young trustees or members as a priority. A handful specifically mentioned disability.

How the board worked together was a concern for some. This included building and maintaining trustee motivation and engagement, ensuring board member attendance, board development, dealing with problematic board member behaviour and difficult board dynamics, board members 'bringing their own agenda' to the board and ensuring trustees engage in strategy and oversight.

One said: 'Many trustees don't realise that they are faced with information asymmetry at each board meeting and they need to constructively challenge.'

Around 6% of respondents identified as a top concern issues relating to their CEO. These included recruiting the right CEO, concerns about the capability of the CEO, regular reporting of the CEO to the board, dealing with staff changes and ensuring good relations with staff.

Appropriate structures and systems

The pressure to put in place appropriate structures and systems concerned some respondents - perhaps not surprisingly given the growing regulatory demands on trustees and charities. Some cited concerns about making sure governing documents were 'fit for purpose', changing legal structures, putting effective assurance processes in place, and meeting legal and regulatory requirements.

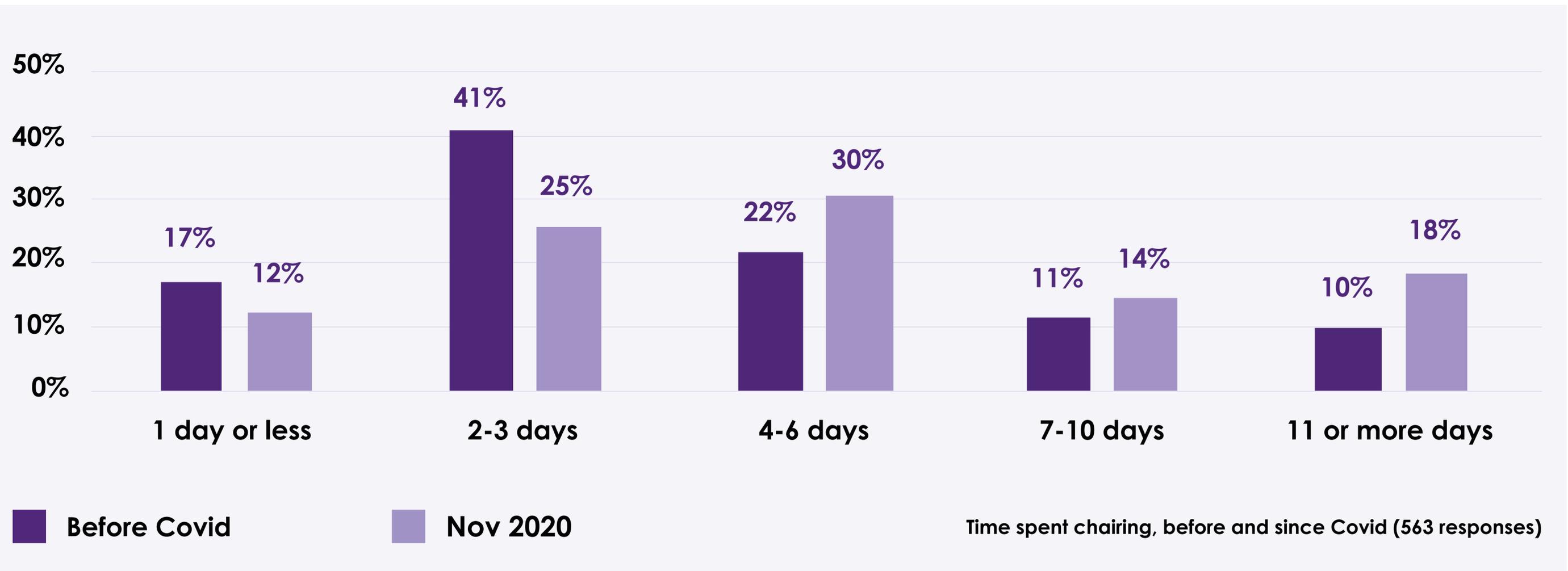
One commented: 'The challenge and impact of increasing regulation on a small charity like ours has been problematic.' Another described 'balancing compliance with not being bureaucratic, while making sure nothing falls into the inch-wide, mile-deep crack'.

A further set of concerns related to governance. These included maintaining the organisation's mission, respecting the boundary between governance and management, risk management, safeguarding and being open and transparent to members.

Personal concerns

A few Chairs mentioned more personal concerns such as dealing with stress, managing the chair role alongside other responsibilities, the danger of 'burnout' for self or staff, the problem of being steered by a forceful manager, 'how to get out gracefully with a succession plan', 'lack of confidence in chairing meetings' and 'lack of technical knowledge in how to be an effective Chair'.

'I've struggled to manage the Chair role alongside all my other responsibilities and work', said one respondent.



Time commitment grows

Even before the pandemic hit, the demand on Chairs' time was growing. During the pandemic, this trend was accelerated. This is in line with previous research⁴ which suggests that during a crisis boards and their Chairs need to step up their engagement to deal with resulting problems.

In total, 62% reported spending four or more days a month on their role compared with 43% before the pandemic. Notably, 18% were spending more than 11 days a month on chairing, compared with 10% before the pandemic.

Alarming, chairing had become a full-time job for some. 'I have always put in many hours,' says one respondent. 'But establishing a

Covid-safety plan, staffing problems and recruitment have kept me working over 40 hours a week.'

Another said: 'I stepped down from my paid position to leave me more time.'

Chairs were asked to give the reasons why time spent chairing had changed or not. Approximately, 230 respondents did so.

Among the Chairs who spent more time on their role, the most common reason given was time spent supporting staff, particularly the CEO (32%). These included Chairs spending time on HR-related matters, sometimes because the organisation had no formal HR function.

⁴ Lorsch, J. W. and MacIver, E. (1989). Pawns or Potentates: The Reality of America's Corporate Boards (Harvard Business School Press, Boston). Mordaunt, J. and Cornforth, C. (2004) 'The role of boards in the failure and turnaround of non-profit organizations', Public Money and Management, August, 227-234.

'I stepped down from my paid position to leave me more time.'

One respondent commented: 'I have had to deal with poor staff performance, litigation over staff errors, Covid, and trustee issues.'

The next two most common reasons were additional time spent in meetings, including more frequent board meetings and communicating generally (25%) and Covid-related funding and crisis management (24%).

One commented: 'We had to have more meetings to review the finances. There has been more need to support the small executive team on so many fronts.'

The Vice Chairs and Committee Chairs in our sample also reported spending more time, but not to the same extent as Chairs.

'We had to have more meetings to review the finances. There has been more need to support the small executive team on so many fronts.'

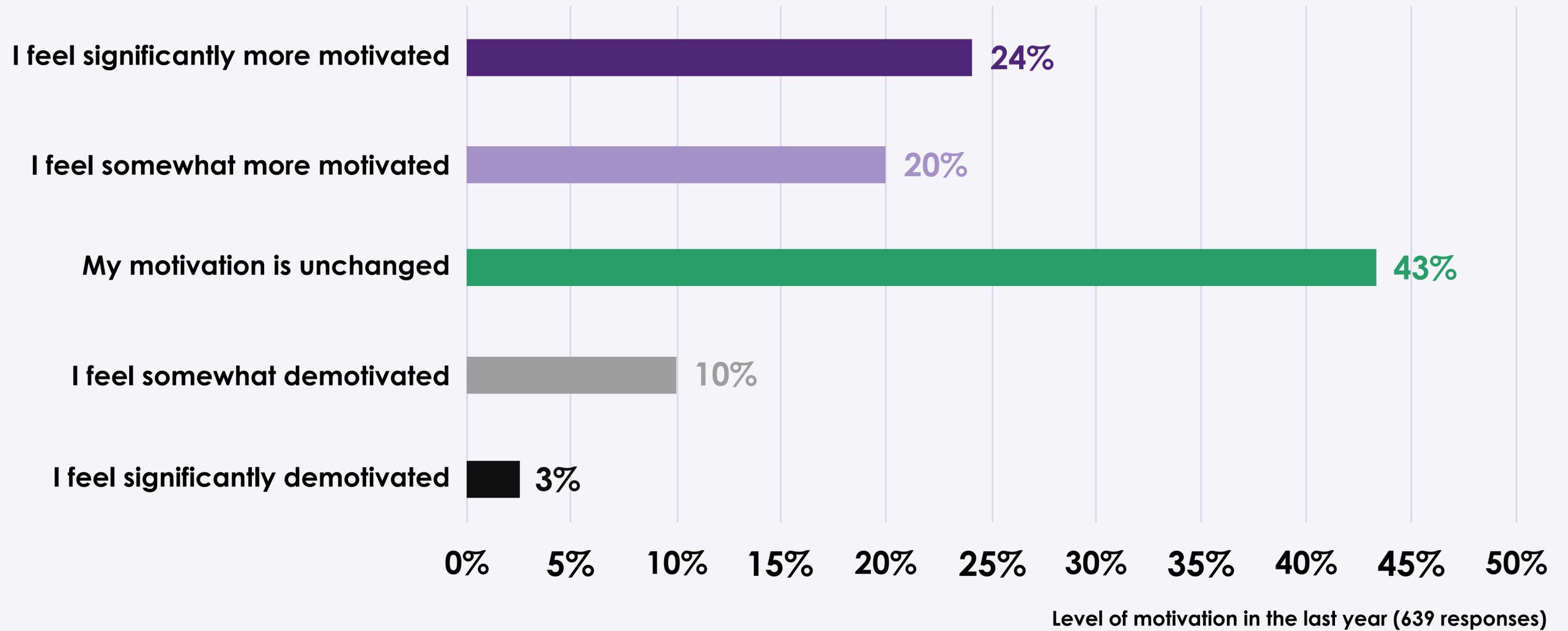
More involved in operational matters

While it is not unusual for Chairs to spend time on operational matters, the study indicates they became more involved during the pandemic period.

In total, 20% of respondents had increased time spent on operational matters, including backfilling for sick or furloughed staff.

As one respondent put it they were 'dragged into the operational weeds as a result of Covid'. For those Chairs who spent less time, reasons included Covid organisational and personal restrictions, as well as fewer events.

Overall, it was apparent that Chairs generally faced an increased workload and were undertaking a more diverse range of activity. This included reorganising budgets and plans quickly and having to restructure so services can continue somehow.



Motivation

Despite the challenges, our study finds 44% of Chairs feel ‘somewhat’ or ‘significantly’ more motivated in their role over the last year. Reassuringly, only 13% reported feeling ‘somewhat’ or ‘significantly’ demotivated. Vice Chairs had similar results.

Chairs attributed the increased motivation to a range of factors, including working more collaboratively with the Chief Executive, the board and the senior staff.

Strong governance arrangements and a robust board were motivating factors, as well as external validation of their work. ‘We have won a huge award and it is a massive validation as a tiny volunteer-run charity,’ said one respondent.

Another commented: ‘I have always been highly motivated by our mission and that hasn’t wavered.’

And another said: ‘My motivation remains unchanged but the demands are much greater. Long term the role will exhaust me.’

Several Chairs viewed this period as a big opportunity for change and creating solutions for ongoing difficult situations. ‘We’ve recast our budget, recast a new national strategy and have received unprecedented levels of financial support,’ said one respondent.

'The role is bigger than anticipated, with more operational challenges and support required than I expected.'

'Everyone is voluntary and, quite frankly, Covid has left us exhausted, especially the co-founders.'

Some pushed to the brink

But it was clear that some Chairs had found the past year challenging and, ultimately, demotivating. Among the Chairs who described themselves as demotivated, several cited the lack of support from the government, the Charity Commission or elsewhere for the charity sector at this time, as well as 'so many changes'.

One Chair new to the third sector said the pandemic had highlighted the sector's 'dysfunctional funding arrangements and a dysfunctional legal structure', which in their view, 'hinder efficient and sensibly accountable delivery of benefit'.

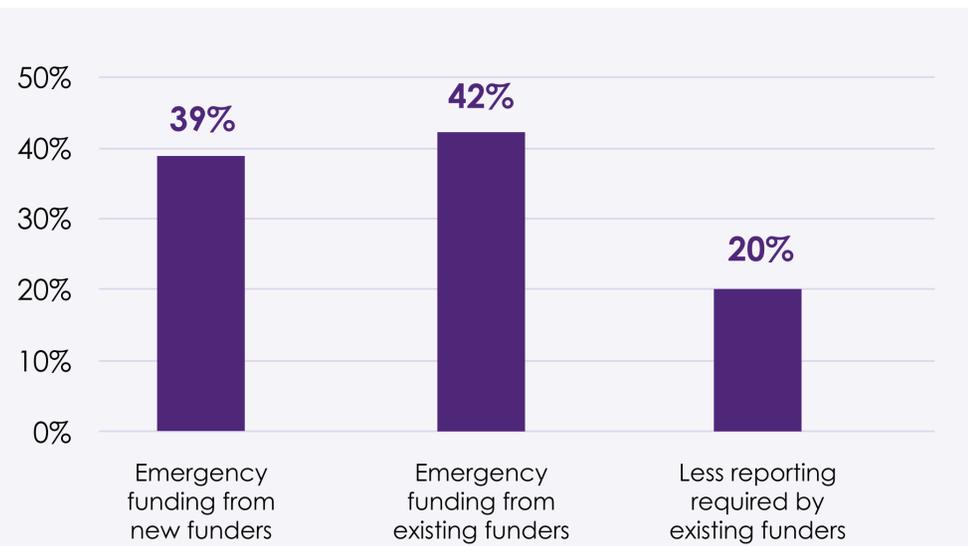
Other reasons cited for demotivation included difficulties with the

senior leadership team, the drain of not seeing people face-to-face and the implicit requirement to support others who previously had not required support. Some Chairs reported declining personal and mental health and burnout.

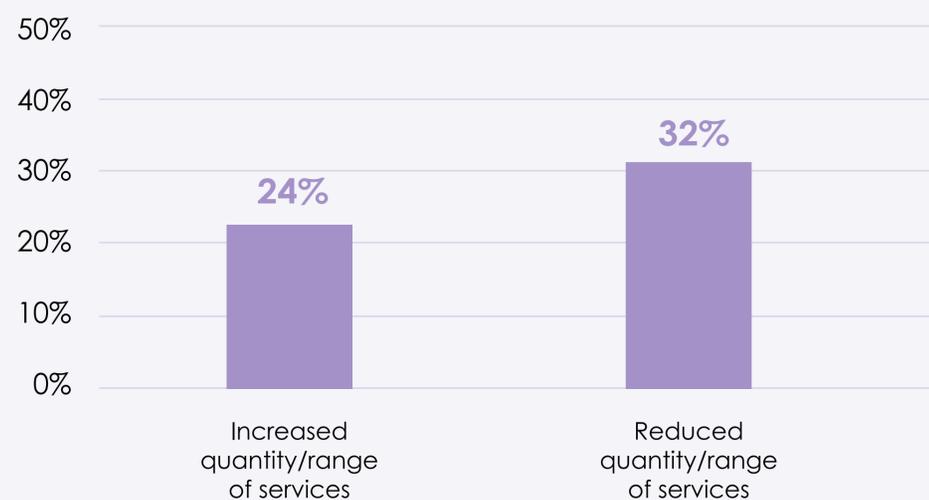
One commented: 'The lack of support is really getting to me.'

Another said: 'The role is bigger than anticipated, with more operational challenges and support required than I expected.'

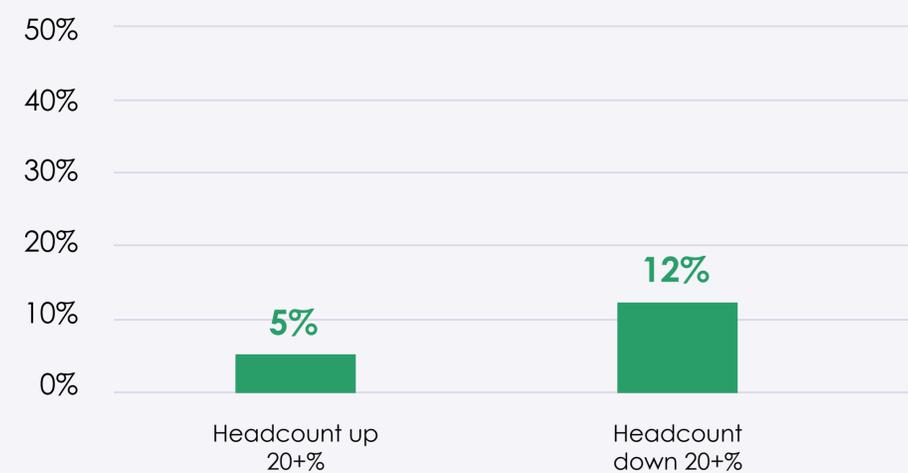
A further contributor said: 'Everyone is voluntary and, quite frankly, Covid has left us exhausted, especially the co-founders.'



Impact of Covid on funding (645 responses)



Impact of Covid on service delivery (645 responses)



Impact of Covid on staffing levels (645 responses)

The impact of Covid

The pandemic has adversely affected many organisations' funding streams and, consequently, their financial stability⁵. Our survey suggests in many cases funders have stepped up to assist organisations during the crisis.

According to respondents, 42% of their organisations had received additional emergency funding from one or more existing funders, and 39% had attracted emergency funding from new funders. In addition, 20% reported that one or more existing funders had reduced reporting requirements.

One respondent said: 'The charity has done very well with funding through Covid grants but next year may be a different story. The demand for services will still be high.'

Many employers in the sector have cut staff roles to reduce their overheads. The extent of the cuts has varied, but, in some cases, they have been high. According to our survey, 12% of respondents said their organisations had reduced headcount by 20% or more.

Perhaps more surprisingly, 5% reported that their organisations had increased headcount by 20% or more, which may reflect the fact that some have needed to deliver more services during the pandemic and had access to emergency funding.

Almost a third (32%) reported their organisations had reduced the range and quantity of services compared with 24% that had increased the range and quantity of services, an indication that more organisations had scaled back rather than scaled up.

Just under 2% of respondents said their organisations had or were due to merge with another organisation. Reassuringly, fewer than 1% said their organisation had closed or was due to close. One respondent whose organisation had decided to close said: 'The decision has been incredibly difficult. It leaves clients vulnerable and staff without jobs.'

Several Chairs paid tribute to the talent or flexibility of charity staff. 'Rather shamefully, we were ignorant of the dedication of the CEO and managers,' said one Chair.

However, many were struggling to plan given all of the uncertainty: 'Our staff pulled together amazingly well, and we have come through this time with only one bereavement and low Covid-19 cases,' said one respondent. 'We worry though about the future of our services.'

⁵ NCVO Respond study Jan 2021

Relationships within the board and with the CEO

A strong working relationship between the Chair, the board and the Chief Executive is pivotal to the successful running of an organisation. If these relationships break down, it can be damaging.

Our study shows the pandemic appears to have affected organisational relationships - but largely in a positive way: 42% said board relationships had improved since the pandemic compared with 14% that said they were worse.

One respondent said: 'All of the trustees have rolled up sleeves and are doing more working groups to respond at pace.'

A total of 41% reported improved relationships with their Chief Executive compared with 8% saying the relationship had worsened. This may reflect the fact that many Chairs and their boards have become more involved and engaged during the crisis.

One respondent said: 'There have been ups and downs. The CEO has felt under huge pressure personally as well as professionally and it was challenging to balance support and accountability. The relationship is fundamentally strong so we have been able to work through the sticky moments.'

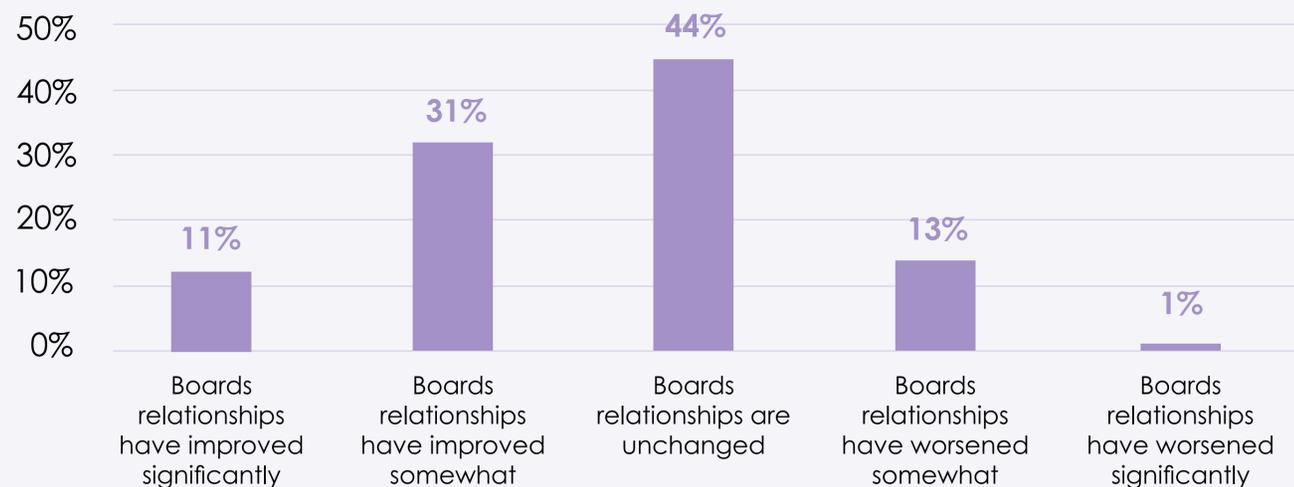
Out of the 224 Chairs who gave additional comments, the improvement in board relationships was mainly attributed to the board pulling together during the crisis (c.46%) and to the use of technology to meet (21%).

One commented: 'A couple of board members supported the staff with practical tasks, which improved working relationships between board and staff.'

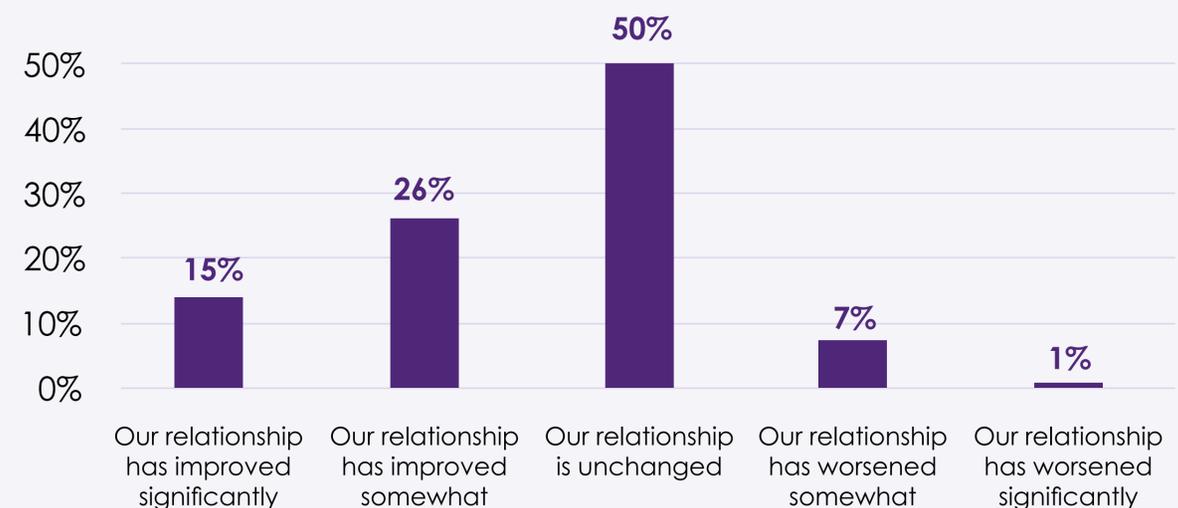
Another said: 'We already had good board relationships but working to get on MS Teams and getting insights into each other's homes/lives have brought us even closer. Wanting to keep our people safe during Covid also helped us pull together.'

A total of 160 Chairs commented on changes in the relationship with the CEO since the start of the pandemic. Of those who reported an improved relationship, 31% attributed it to more time spent together, often working closely on complex and challenging issues, thereby increasing mutual trust.

'We have a superb Chief Executive,' one Chair commented. 'Agreeing levels of support, joint planning and watching for burnout have been priorities.'



Changes in board relationships during the pandemic (633 responses)



Changes in the relationship with the Chief Executive during the pandemic (478 responses)

A further Chair commented: 'Our relationship was strong to start with but more regular contact has made us both more aware of each other's personalities and capabilities. It was a good learning opportunity.'

One of those who noted a worsening relationship commented: 'The CEO has had to act fast to manage changes in the organisation and attract emergency funding. I do not feel I have been kept as informed as I need to be, but understand the pressure of the additional work on the CEO.'

Online meetings have their benefits

The charity sector has generally been slower to embrace digital technology than other sectors⁶. As a result, many organisations had to rapidly upskill digitally when workplaces were required to close. It should also be acknowledged that not all trustees have online access.

For Chairs, a significant change has been the need to conduct most, if not all, meetings online, and have little or no face-to-face interaction with board members or staff teams.

'We have a superb Chief Executive. Agreeing levels of support, joint planning and watching for burnout have been priorities.'

Some respondents deemed online meetings helpful for chairing meetings, with one respondent citing how they ensured 'fuller engagement by board members'. Others noted how virtual meetings had helped to raise attendance, reduce travel time and improve accessibility. 'One of our trustees is deaf,' said one respondent. 'The auto-caption facility on Google Meet means the whole conversation is much more accessible for him.'

But some Chairs have struggled with the virtual experience. 'It is more difficult meeting at a distance and controlling the meeting,' one commented.

Concerns that led Chairs to seek advice

About two-thirds of respondents said they had sought some form of advice. The list of issues mentioned illustrates the breadth of the challenges faced by Chairs.

Approximately 30% sought advice about matters relating to governance, the board and the Chair role. Issues where they required advice included board recruitment, board member behaviour and conflict, diversity and inclusion, board effectiveness, the role of the Chair, and running virtual board meetings and AGMs.

About 30% of respondents mentioned seeking advice on HR and staffing issues, which is likely to reflect the fact that many charities are too small to be able to employ HR professionals.

Issues raised included employment law, downsizing and making redundancies, remuneration, trade union challenges, staff restructuring, staff motivation and performance and furloughing staff. Other staff-related issues included recruiting and retaining volunteers during the pandemic, staff recruitment and induction, staff and volunteer health and welfare, health and safety, and safeguarding and child protection.

About 24% of Chairs had sought advice on financial matters and fundraising. This included bid writing, crowdfunding, gift aid, as well as financial planning, debt collection, treasury management, ethical investment policy, financial risk, investments, fraud, insolvency and VAT.

⁶ <https://www.thirdsector.co.uk/half-charities-lack-basic-digital-skills-says-lloyds-bank-report/digital/article/1449119>

Legal and regulatory issues were identified by about 16% of Chairs. These included issues relating to charity law, changing legal status, governing documents, employment law, contracting, reporting requirements, property, relationships with affiliates, consultants' contracts, tenancies and landlords, merger and closure.

One in 10 Chairs mentioned seeking advice on the relationship with the CEO. This included recruiting a new CEO, line managing the CEO, dealing with a conflict with the CEO, a CEO overstepping his or her authority and going against the board. Other issues that required support included CEO remuneration, how to manage situations of emergency decision-taking between Chair and CEO, supporting the CEO and keeping up morale, CEO performance and removing a CEO.

Nearly 10% of Chairs sought advice on a range of issues concerning strategy and organisational issues. These included strategic and business planning, scenario planning, emergency planning, change management, stakeholder management, marketing, policy development, organisational culture and rebranding.

One Chair said they had sought advice on a range of subjects including GDPR compliance and implications, branch mergers, virtual AGMs and insights into how to retain volunteers during the pandemic.

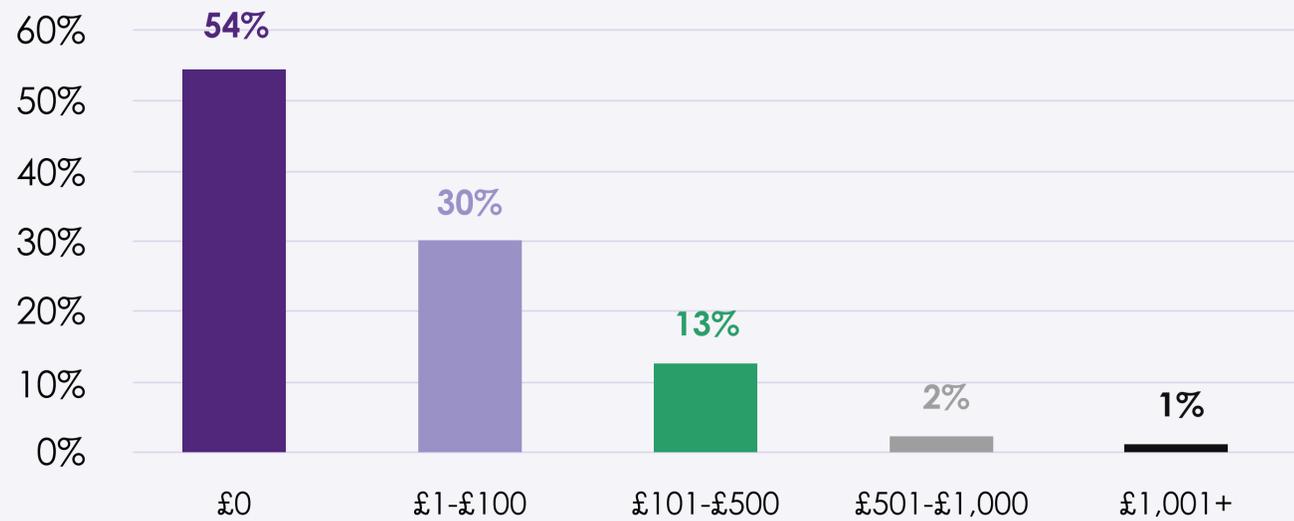
Another commented: 'As a new organisation, we've required advice on absolutely everything: charity status, governance, trustee status, funding, strategy, policies, recruitment, general finance, publicity and IT.'

30% sought advice about matters relating to governance, the board and the Chair role.

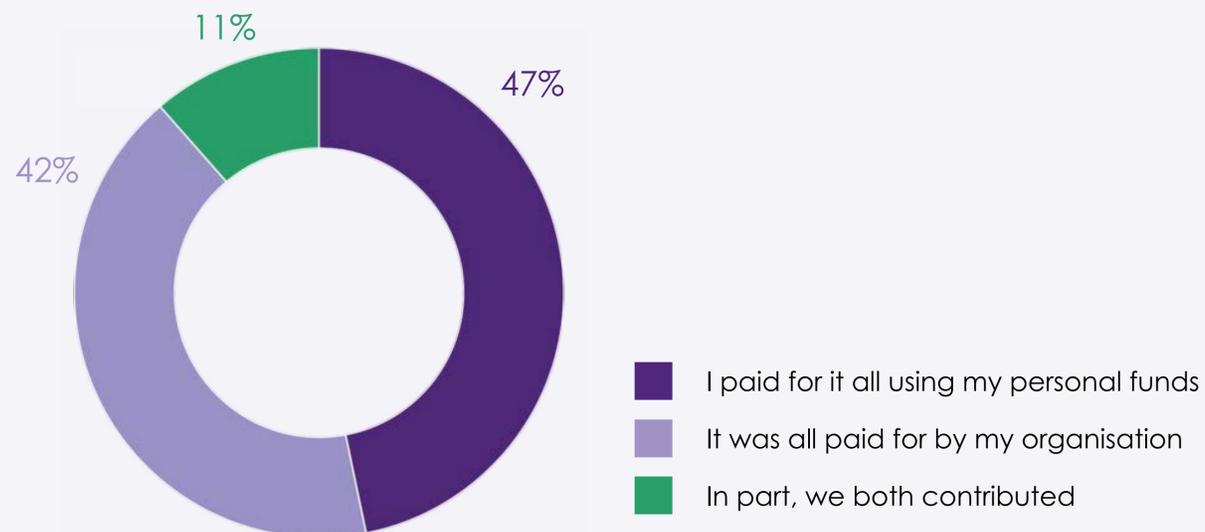
30% mentioned seeking advice on HR and staffing issues.

24% sought advice on financial matters and fundraising.

'As a new organisation, we've required advice on absolutely everything: charity status, governance, trustee status, funding, strategy, policies, recruitment, general finance, publicity and IT.'



Spend on Chair training and development in the last 12 months (635 responses)



Who paid for Chair training? (334 responses)

Spending on training and development

Despite the very demanding nature of the role, very little is spent on the training and development of Chairs.

More than half (54%) of respondents reported that nothing was spent on their training and development in the past year. Just under a third (30%) spent between £1-£100; 13% spent between £101-£500 and 2% spent £501-£1,000 and 1% more than £1,000. A few Chairs had training paid for in previous years.

However, the additional comments give a more nuanced picture. Many Chairs have made use of free training and online resources provided by AoC and other sector bodies.

A few indicated how Covid had restricted development opportunities this year, or there was no funding for training.

As about half the sample were AoC members and pay a membership fee, these results are likely to be an overestimate of spending on training and development for Chairs compared to the wider population.

Of those who undertook paid training or development 47% said they paid for it themselves, and a further 11% contributed to the cost, and for 42% the organisation paid.

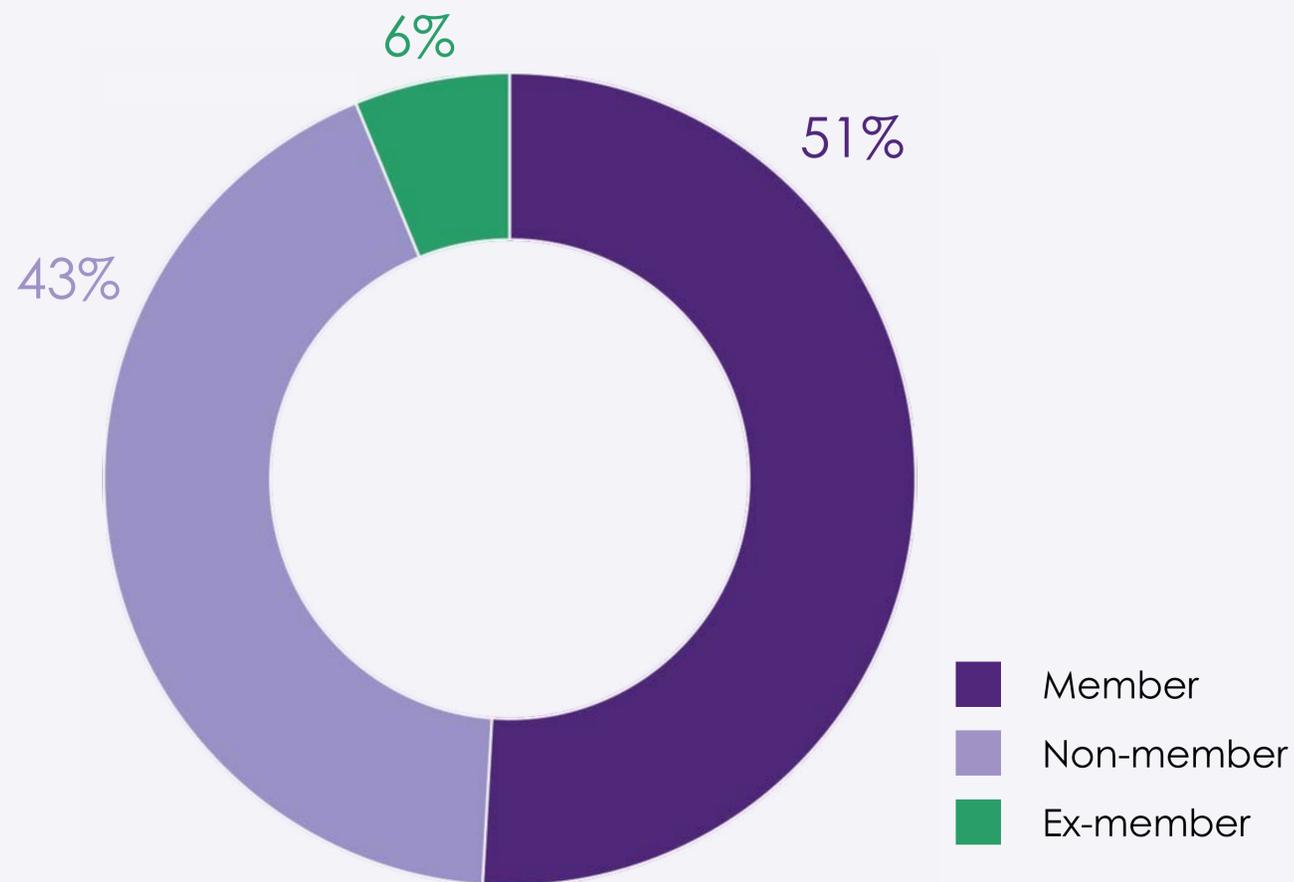
A few Chairs expressed a reluctance to ask their charity to pay. 'We are a tiny charity and I'd rather pay for myself.' one said.

Another commented: 'We have a tight budget and must watch every penny.'

Breakdown of respondents

The survey was sent out in November 2020 to more than 7,000 recipients and promoted on social media. There were 807 responses, of which 710 were useable.

Recipients were predominantly AoC members and newsletter subscribers. Of the respondents, 51% are current members of AoC, 6% are former members and 43% are non-members.



Survey respondents and AoC membership (710 responses)

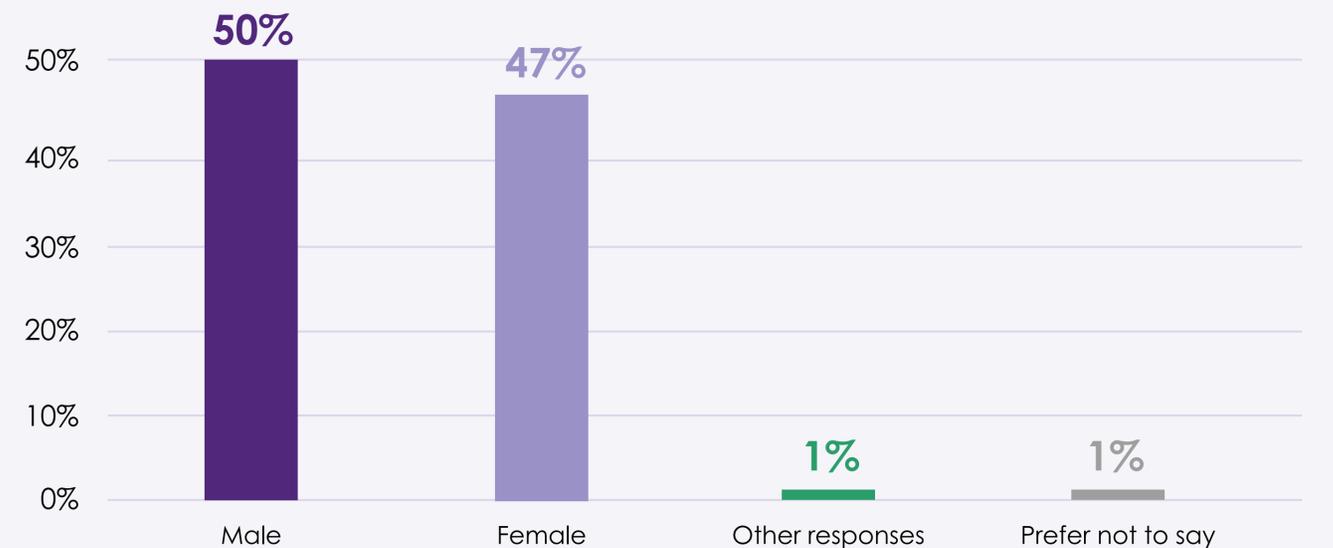
Characteristics of Chairs

The Chairs in our sample were generally older, with 76% of Chairs being 55 years and over. This is broadly in line with the 'Taken on Trust' report⁷ which presents the results of a large-scale survey of charity trustees that found the average age of trustees was 60-62.



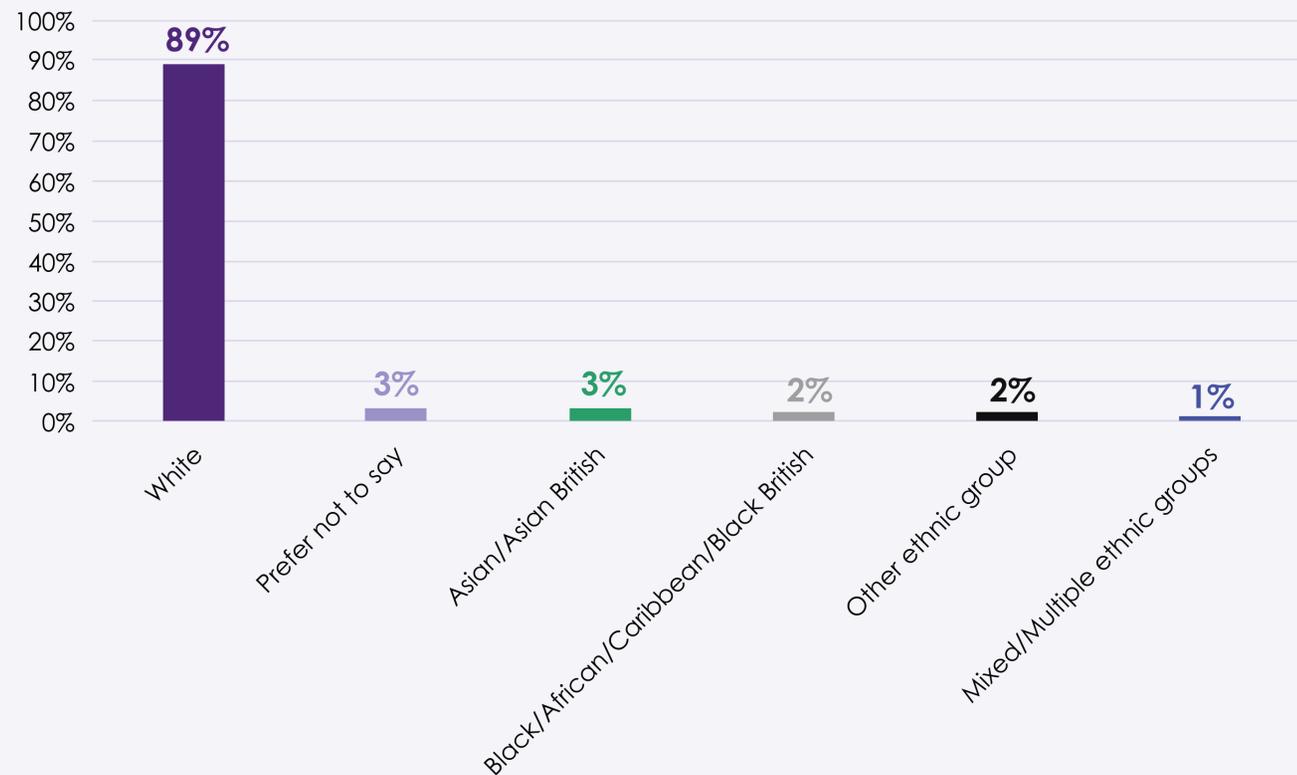
Age distribution of Chairs (617 responses)

Gender balance in our sample is nearly even with 50% male and 47% female and other responses taking the total to 100%. The 'other responses' category includes respondents who identified as gender variant, or chose to self-describe their gender. This differs from the 'Taken on Trust' report that found that 71% of Chairs were male and 29% female. This suggests that in our sample female Chairs are over-represented compared with the wider population.



Gender of Chairs (618 responses)

⁷ Taken on Trust, Charity Commission (2017)



Ethnicity of Chairs (618 responses)

In our sample, 89% of respondents identified as white; 8% identified as being from other ethnic groups, 3% preferred not say. The 'Taken on Trust' report found that 92% of trustees were white, so our sample of Chairs also seems to reflect this.

Chairs have a high level of educational attainment with 81% having a degree, higher degree, professional qualifications or equivalent; a further 7% had two or more A-levels, HNC, HND, SVQ level 4 or equivalent qualifications. The 'Taken on Trust' report also found that trustees in general had a high level of education, with 30% having a postgraduate qualification and 60% having a professional qualification.

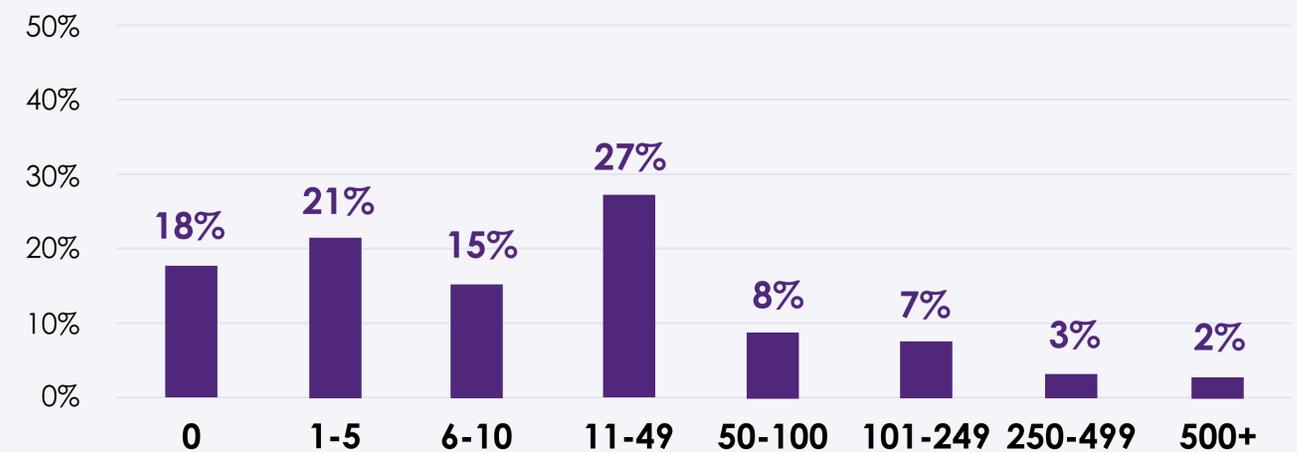
Among the respondents to our survey, 18% said they had a disability or long-term health condition.

Chairs and their organisations

More than 80% of respondents describe themselves as a Chair: the other respondents were Vice Chairs, Committee Chairs, Chair-elect or former Chairs.

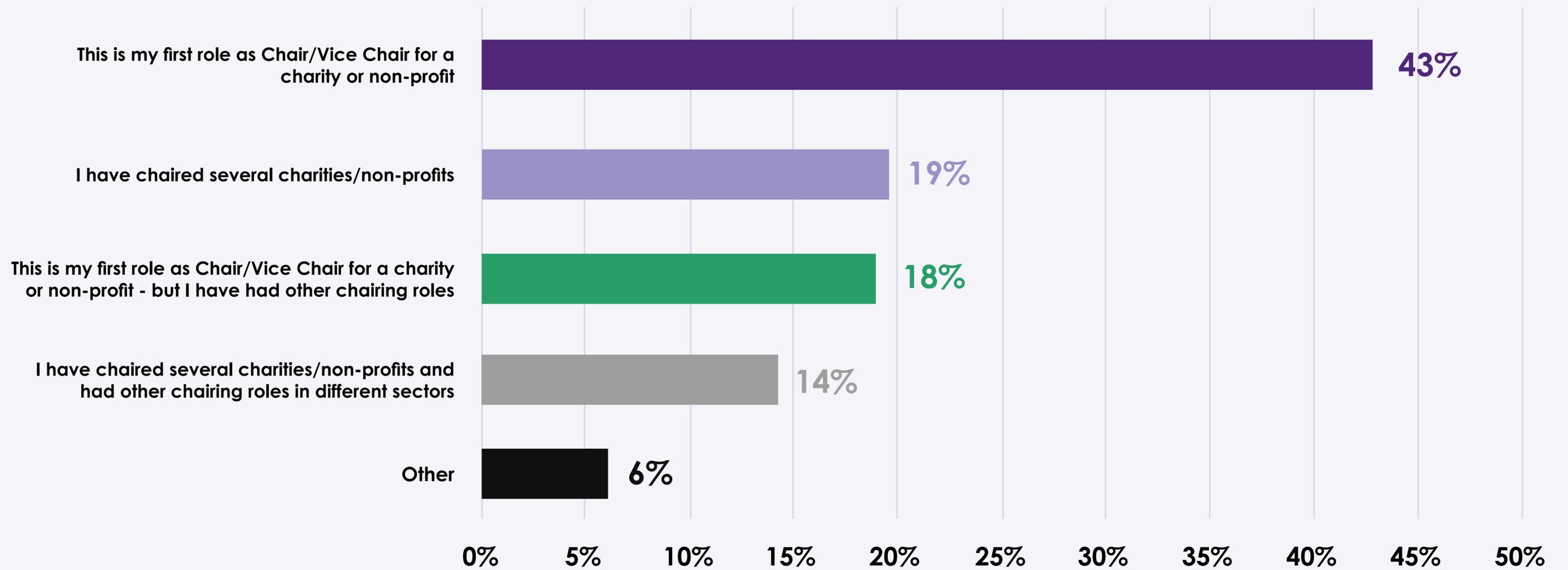
A majority of respondents had only limited experience of chairing a charity: 43% are in their first role as Chair/Vice Chair for a charity or non-profit organisation. A further 18% are in their first role as Chair/Vice Chair for a charity or non-profit - but had experience of being a Chair in other sectors.

The majority of Chairs come from small organisations: 18% are from organisations with no staff; 54% have fewer than 10 staff, and 80% have fewer than 50 staff.



Size of organisation (number of staff) (710 responses)

The breakdown of organisations in terms of income is given in the table on page 21. Compared with the broader population of registered charities, we have fewer respondents from smaller organisation (<£100k income) and proportionally more respondents from larger organisations (>£100k income).



Chairing experience (710 responses)

Income of respondent's organisation	Percentage of respondents	Percentage of registered charities ⁸
< £10k	10%	38.8%
£10k - £100k	24%	34.5%
£100k - £1m	34%	20.0%
£1m - £5m	18%	
> £5m	13%	1.3%

Income of respondents' charities compared to the wider sector

Respondents come from a wide range of sub-sectors. Of the 60% of respondents who categorised their charity, the most common subsector was health 20%, followed by culture and recreation 16%, education 14% and social services 11%.

⁸ These figures come from Charity Commission register of charities (as of Sept 2018), note for these figures the £100k-£1m and £1m-£5m income brackets are combined.

Conclusions

The pandemic has been incredibly challenging on many levels for so many. Our study shows that Chairs have overwhelmingly stepped up during this period of crisis, taking on additional responsibilities and making difficult organisational decisions often at speed. As a result, the vast majority of respondents' organisations have been able to continue to deliver their much-needed services at a time of national crisis.

With the majority (80%) of charities employing no staff⁹, in many instances the huge challenges posed by the pandemic have fallen firmly on the shoulders of trustees and Chairs.

The survey shows most have responded positively, pouring in more time and increasing their commitment. Some have already been stretched too far; others are wondering how they can go on. Their task is made harder by the lack of financial support or its inflexibility; by regulatory burdens, increased scrutiny and difficult relationships.

Over the past year, many Chairs found themselves going above and beyond what is usually reasonably expected of their role. While many have felt motivated during this period, some Chairs have found it challenging and demotivating.

All too often failures in charity governance tend to attract attention, and understandably so. But there is another story emerging from our report: one of selfless service. In AoC's experience and from the evidence of this survey, most Chairs keep on going whatever gets thrown at them. Not always getting it right but keen to do so.

Where next? Actions needed

During the pandemic, AoC has increased its support. We are currently seeking funding to further extend and deepen that support to enable Chairs to lead with competence, confidence and aspiration. But others also have a role to play in supporting Chairs. In response to the findings, we have identified the following actions:

- **For Chairs**

With so many Chairs spending significant time on their roles, we urge them to take care of their own well-being. We recommend they seek out support from

their colleagues, including the Vice Chair if they have one; from both their trustee peers within the board and with Chair peers via support organisations such as AoC; and other trustee or specialist Chair networks where they exist.

The survey suggests that there is a link between the quality of relationships with the Chief Executive and within the board and the motivation of the Chair. We encourage Chairs to invest time in building constructive relationships among board members, and with their CEO. It pays dividends, especially in challenging times.

- **For board colleagues**

Many Chairs turn to their colleagues on the board for information, support and advice. Our survey shows that motivated Chairs and good board relationships go together. Individual trustees have a role to play in supporting the Chair. This ranges from simply being committed, engaged and reliable board members, to being more proactive in finding ways to support the Chair by taking on additional tasks and working to enhance relationships within the board and beyond.

- **For Chief Executives and charity staff**

The lack of investment in support and development for Chairs remains striking. We urge Chief Executives to signpost Chairs to sources of support and where appropriate to create a budget for development or to access support. Organisations should not expect Chairs to pay for that themselves. The survey also underlines the importance of building strong and effective Chair-CEO relationships, and how this builds resilience and helps charities come through crisis.

- **For funders, including government**

Funding is a major preoccupation with increased need in many areas at the very time that resources are most stretched. But it is not just the amount of funding but how it is given. Flexible funding, especially core or unrestricted funding, is invaluable to many organisations. Application processes and reporting requirements also need to be proportionate.

The lack of investment in Chairs who give so much voluntarily is concerning, especially while the demands and pressures are increasing. We urge funders to increase their commitment to supporting governance costs and support for these key volunteers.

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