fair collective

Breaking Point

The Mental Health Crisis in Small Organisation Leadership

Feb 2025

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Fair Collective

Photo: Men join Sew Positive's 'Men's Hems' launch, a creative space for mental health conversations. Sew Positive contributed to this report's research.

Contents

This report covers research into people's health and may share some experiences that you might find distressing.

If you are affected by this, or need help, the Samaritans are here – day or night, 365 days a year.

You can call them for free on **116 123**, email them at **jo@samaritans.org**, or visit **samaritans.org** to find your nearest branch.

Introduction

This report, produced by Fair Collective in partnership with NCVO and funded by The Talent Fund, presents research on the mental health of leaders in small social purpose organisations in England. Conducted between August and October 2024, it focuses on leaders of charities, social enterprises, and not-for-profits with incomes under £1 million.

The report aims to give a specific and detailed picture of the impact of leadership roles in small organisations on mental health and wellbeing, the contributing factors and the experience of leaders in meeting their needs and accessing support. It does not compare these experiences with larger organisations or other sectors. We recognise that small organisation leaders are not alone in facing these challenges.

However, this report highlights some of the unique challenges faced by small organisation leaders, which stem from organisational capacity, financial and governance models, and leaders' personal relationships with their organisation's cause.

This means we can put forward a specific combination of solutions that can make a difference to this group. The research has identified recommendations that could make a real difference to small charity organisations, aimed at individual leaders, small organisation boards and funders.

We would welcome your feedback and views on this research and how we share these recommendations and put them in place.

Thank you

We are hugely grateful to all of the leaders who took the time to complete the survey and take part in interviews and focus groups. The research, depth and insight would simply not have been possible without you.

We would also like to thank The Talent Fund, a grant making and philanthropy advice charity, who provided a grant to allow us to do this important work, and for giving us the scope to invest time in taking the trauma-informed approach that we felt that this subject matter required.

Research team

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Background

Context

The external environment is incredibly challenging for small voluntary organisations. **Need** in communities is rising, while **costs** are going up and **resources** including income, staff and volunteers are scarcer. **Inequities** in communities are widening and demand on small organisations is increasing.

In 2021/22, there were approximately 166,000 voluntary organisations in the UK. The vast majority (80%) of organisations remain micro and small (income below £100,000). (NCVO Almanac 2024)

When the **Small Charities Coalition** and **The FSI** closed, NCVO took on the responsibilities of Small Charity Week and the small organisation helpdesk. Working with partners, they identified gaps in support for small charities and recognised the increasing challenges facing the sector.

The need for **co-produced**, **sustainable solutions** became clear.

The Power of Small

The **Power of Small,** an initiative funded by The National Lottery Community Fund, led by NCVO and partners, and delivered by Fair Collective until Autumn 2024, aims to explore the support needed by small charities and voluntary and community organisations to thrive across England.

Seeing the Power of Small project, The Talent Fund approached Fair Collective to collaborate on a complementary piece of research looking specifically into the **mental health** of **small organisation leaders**.

Small organisations are integral to supporting communities, delivering across the whole range of causes and charitable activities. **Supporting these organisations to fulfil their potential is a key outcome of the project**.

By developing a comprehensive support offer for small organisations, we can enable small organisations to build **capability** and **capacity** to focus on effective, **impactful delivery** to the communities they serve.

> " Small organisations are integral to supporting communities "

The mental health and wellbeing of small organisation leaders seems to be at an **all-time low.**

It should come as no surprise that small organisation leaders are struggling.

Post-pandemic, expenditure outstrips income in small charities as organisations respond to rising local needs. This is clearly unsustainable, as evidenced by the fact that small organisations account for 97% of charity closures in the last 10 years. Unfortunately, without a levelling of the funding landscape, there could be **further increases in grassroots organisation closures**.[1]

97% of **charity closures** in the last 10 years were **small organisations**

Income for the small organisation sector has **declined** by **£4.6 billion**
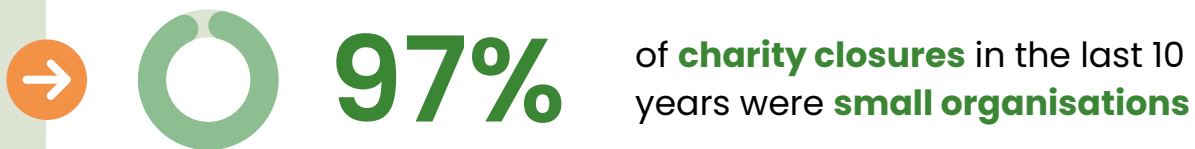
Income for the small organisation sector has declined by £4.6 billion, compared with an overall **increase in funding of £4.5 billion for larger charities** post-pandemic.[2]

[1] Centre for Social Justice (2024). Underfunded and Overlooked.
[2] Ibid.

Small organisation salaries are shrinking

compared to bigger charities, and their staff are **disproportionately** feeling the effects of the **cost-of-living crisis**.[3]

31%

of charities say that more staff are **working outside of their normal hours**/during annual leave.[4]

Anecdotally, in our **peer networks** and through the NCVO small organisation help desk, we were hearing stories of

small organisation leaders experiencing:

burnout

vicarious trauma

compassion fatigue

loneliness

depression / anxiety

[3] NCVO, 2022, UK Civil Society Almanac 2022. Available at: NCVO Almanac, 2022.

[4] Civil Society Media, 2023. N.b. we do not yet know what proportion of that 31% are staff from small charities

At Fair Collective, we heard stories of small organisation leaders feeling suicidal due to the pressures they feel to keep their small organisation running.

"I know there's a **strain on the system** and that always, especially after Covid and stuff, I reached out to so many people asking for somebody to talk to because **I knew I was in a bad place** and knew I needed help, I suffered from mental health all my life, especially when I was younger, and all the rest of it, self-harm, worked through all of that, I become very aware of how I need to look after myself and talk to myself. But **when I was actually reaching out and desperate, there was nothing there unless I was willing to pay £60 an hour**." – research participant

The current evidence base into challenges faced by leaders within the social purpose sector, showed the **need for more research** into their mental health. Given the **specific challenges experienced by small organisations**, this research set out to specifically understand whether the role of a small organisation leader is affecting people's mental heath, their experiences and what leaders think would **help**.

Executive summary

85% said they felt their experience as a small organisation leader has **negatively impacted their mental health**

20% of these said it had a **severe impact**

67% **have no budget** to support the mental health of themselves or their teams.

93% of those who feel their mental health has been affected say it has some **impact on their ability to do their work**

54% feel it also has some impact on their team or organisation. 24% are unsure.
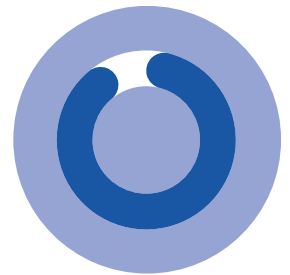
29% feel well-supported in their role as small organisation leaders.

28% do not feel supported at all

A blend of **internal** and **organisational** issues, on top of **systemic** sector-wide challenges, combine to impact leaders' mental health.

Contributing factors include:

Board relationships

Board relationships have a **significant influence**. When they work well they are a valuable source of support, but some leaders identified boards or individual trustees as a major contributor to **stress** in their roles. Some leaders experienced **bullying**.

Team relationships

Like Board relationships, team relationships offer support but also pose challenges. Leaders referenced managing internal conflicts and being responsible for team wellbeing as challenges. Many feel they **put their team's needs ahead of their own**.

Small teams

Small teams mean that leaders usually have a **multi-faceted role** and have multiple responsibilities including technical functions such as HR and finance, for which they have had limited **training** and often cannot afford to buy in **support**.

Financial sustainability

Systemically, financial sustainability is one of the **biggest** concerns for small organisation leaders with a "perfect storm" of **increasing demand for services** and a more **competitive funding** landscape, causing **instability**. Within this environment, leaders often feel solely responsible for bringing in the funds on which the people who use their services and their staff depend.

Societal issues

Societal issues and the nature of the work often add to pressure, particularly where leaders have a public-facing role. Several have faced public **criticism** and **harassment** on social media. Several leaders feel that the **Covid** period has added to their pressures - the reasons for this vary, including short-term boosts in funding for some, and significant reduction in activity for others. Others mentioned changes in staff and societal attitudes, and the post-Covid economic and social situation that continues to have an impact.

Methodology

A mixed methods approach was used to gather the data, including:

- → A digital survey open between 29th August and 1st October 2024 (**337 responses**)

- → A series of 1-1 interviews and focus groups (**58 participants**)

Interviews and focus groups followed a semi-structured guide mirroring the survey questions and allowing for greater insight into key topics.

There is some overlap between survey respondents and participants in interviews and focus groups but we are confident that more than 350 people contributed directly to the research.

Trauma-informed:

All team members involved in interviewing received training in trauma-informed practice, including a refresher at the start of the research.

One team member is a qualified Counsellor and member of the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP). They were fully involved in process design, including survey and interview/focus group question development.

After we secured expressions of interest from small organisation leaders to take part in the research, we issued a pre-screening assessment. This offered participants the option of either a 1-1 interview or a focus group with up to four others. This screening also asked questions to assess participants' current and recent emotional state, which then informed whether they met with our counsellor, or another member of the research team and informed whether there was any additional support needed. Questions were shared in advance with all participants, emphasising they could opt out of answering any of them or take a break at any point.

All participants were offered a free 50-minute "debrief" session with a qualified counsellor after their interview/focus group, and an information sheet with organisations they could contact for further support was also provided. Any participant or survey respondent who shared suicidal ideations was contacted specifically to signpost to support.

Limitations of research

Within the research we have also prioritised hearing directly from **small organisation leaders**. We are aware that some support with mental health is already available and some participants alluded to this.

We did not seek to map this comprehensively, rather focusing on the support leaders said they had accessed and found useful.

A **mapping activity** of the mental health support available for small organisation leaders may add value as part of any response to the survey findings.

It may also be useful to compare support made available to small organisations to other sectors, including corporates.

While we aimed for diversity in perspectives in the research, survey data shows that the majority of respondents identify as white, female, heterosexual and do not consider themselves to have a disability. Most fall within the 35-64 age range.

We acknowledge that it is likely this will produce some biases in the results but that also this is in part attributable to broader trends in the demographic representation of leaders in the sector.

Finally, we acknowledge the **complexity of mental health** and that it is rarely attributable to a single cause.

We have focused on the **impacts** and **causes** that leaders have told us about rather than drawing any conclusions or making assumptions about the role of non-work-related factors.

Findings

What **types** of organisations contributed?

While we focused on small organisations with an income below £1 million, the leaders represent a broad range of sizes, areas of focus and locations.

We also included a category for over £1 million and asked any organisation who identified as 'small' to take part - recognising that some organisations with incomes of £1-2 million still feel 'small'.

47% of contributors have income levels between £100,000 - £500,000
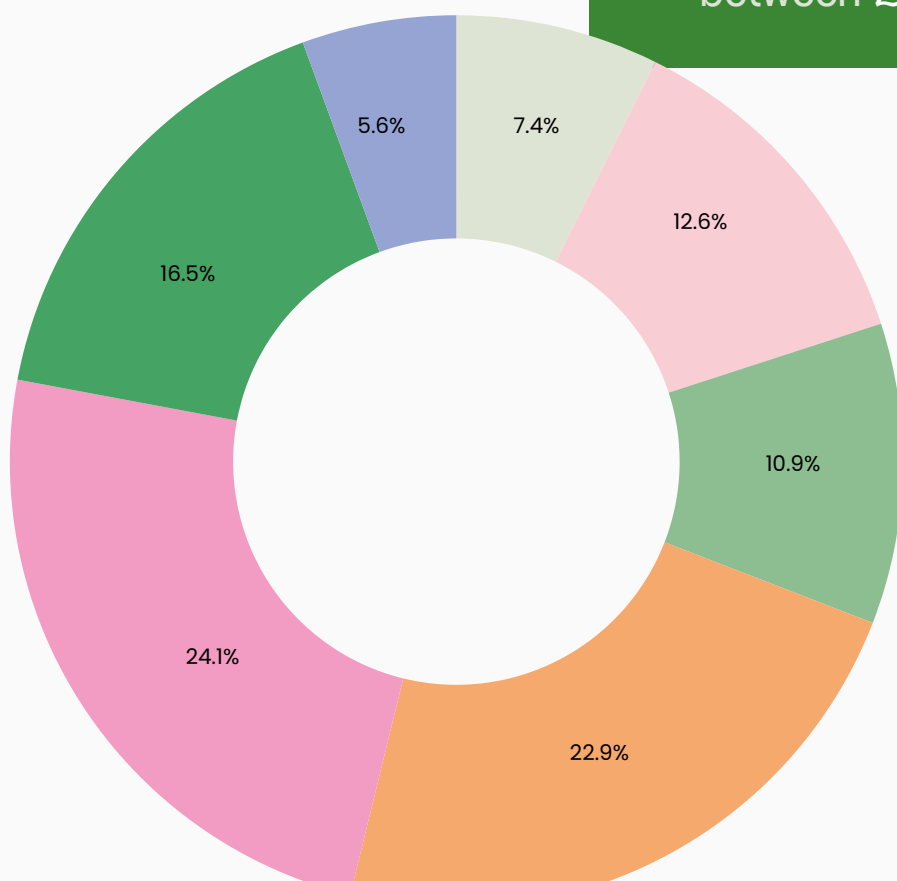
Q: What is your organisation's income level?

▢	Less than 10,000
▢	£10,001 - £50,000
▢	£50,001 - £100,000
▢	£100,001 - £250,000
▢	£250,001 - £500,000
▢	£500,001 - £1 million
▢	More than £1 million

Chart segments: 7.4%, 12.6%, 10.9%, 22.9%, 24.1%, 16.5%, 5.6%

7% have an income of less than £10,000

Q: How many paid staff does your organisation have?

Staff	Count
None	37
1-5	129
6-10	82
11-20	58
21-50	26
50+	6
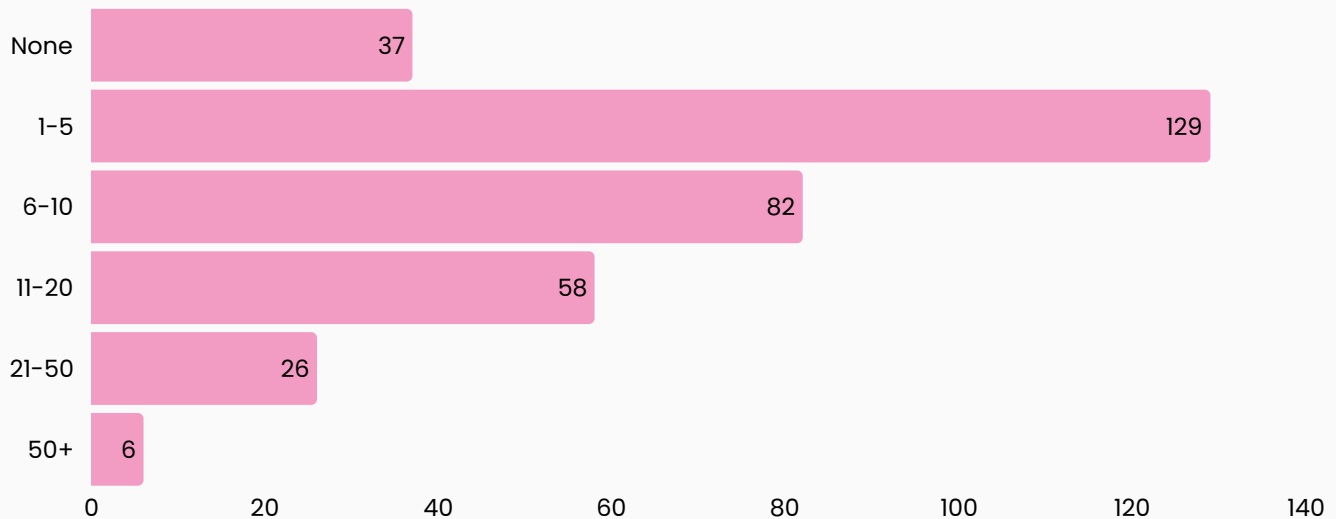
38% have been **1** and **5** members of paid staff

11% have **no paid staff**; only **2%** have more than 50

Q: What sector does your organisation work in?*

Sector	Count
Healtth	143
Education	107
Environment	32
Arts & culture	39
Children & young people	137
Social services	35
Homelessness	32
Sports	18
Elderly people	45
Women & girls	73
Faith	16
International development	38
Community development	58
LGBTQIA+	21
Other	64
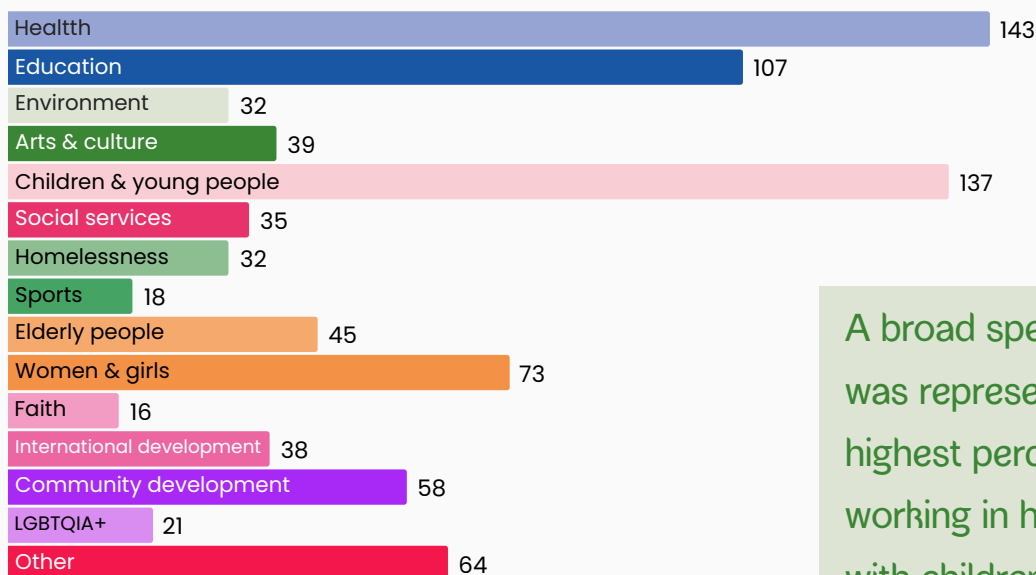
A broad spectrum of sectors was represented, with the highest percentages being those working in health, education or with children and young people.

*Respondents were able to select more than one option.

Q: Do you consider your organisation to be representing a particular minoritised group?

Other
14%

Disability
19%

No
51%

LGBTQIA+
4%

Global Majority
12%
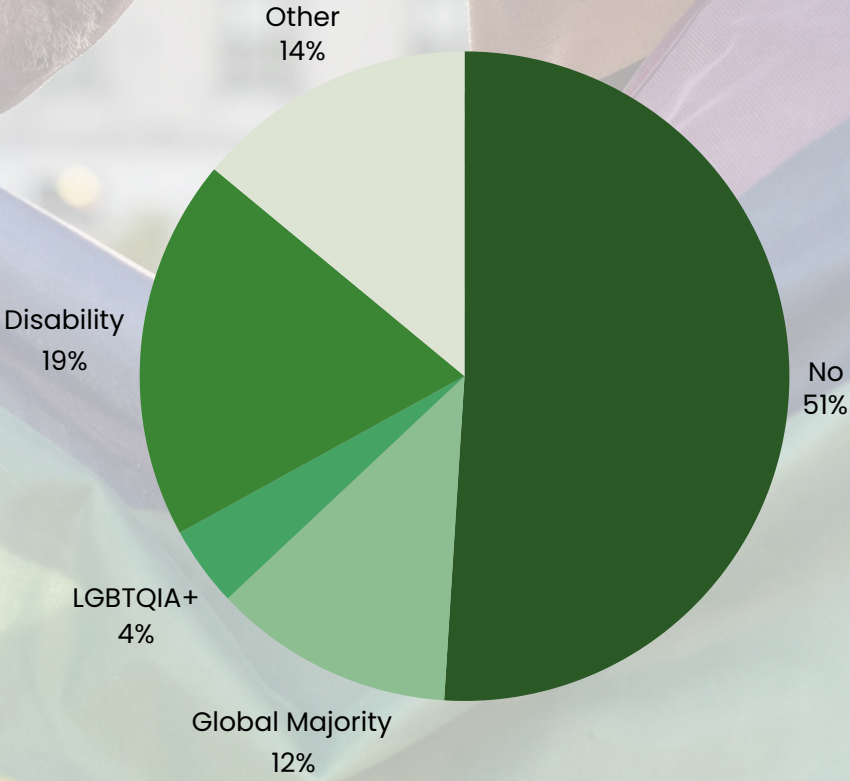
49% of respondents said their organisation represented a particular minoritised group.

It is important to note at the outset, that while this research focuses largely on the challenges of leading a small organisation, and the negative impact this can have on leaders' mental health and wellbeing, this does not mean leaders don't also recognise the positives.

We explored this in more depth in the interviews and focus groups, with many of the leaders identifying a strong sense of purpose, the motivation of creating an impact in their communities and alignment with the causes and values of the organisations they work in.

"You have a mission and you see the impact and I think that's really great. So that's benefited my mental health certainly."

Research participant

How do small organisation leaders' roles affect their mental health?

"

"Generally I find that the energy and excitement of being a leader can protect my mental health - it gives me a space where we can focus on something and build together, which in many ways is the opposite of my usual mental health challenge of loneliness, isolation and fear. So work can be a bubble which is safe."

"I really love what I do, absolutely love it."

"We always say, you know, it's just a question of doing what you can, when you can, and focusing on what's within your control, making small steps. And if you can do that and successfully detach yourself from any feelings of overwhelm, then it's very rewarding."

"

I think one word to
sum it up would be

rollercoaster

Q: To what extent has your role negatively affected your mental health?

Review of the data reveals a degree of subjectivity in the participant's self-assessment of the impact of roles. For example, participants reflecting on current circumstances, whereas there had been a more severe impact in the past. For example one respondent who told us that their work affects their mental health moderately, said:

Percentage	Level
31.2%	Mildly
49.1%	Moderately
19.6%	Severely

"

"I have experienced a burn-out that led me to be hospitalised in the local psychiatric hospital. I was feeling overwhelmed and depressed by the level of need and my inability to make 'enough of a difference/impact'..... I even contemplated suicide as the sector has been my entire life for the last 10 years and I didn't know how I would live without it but couldn't also comprehend continuing. It took me several months to recover to a point of stability."

85% of respondents feel their mental health has been negatively impacted by their role.

For 20% of them, this has had a severe impact.

Physical symptoms

Leaders frequently mentioned:

- disturbed sleep
- palpitations
- dizziness
- hair loss
- digestive problems
- aches and pains

At the most extreme, one survey respondent and one interviewee felt that stress had contributed to **heart attacks**.

”

"Stress has affected my sleep - I'm now sleeping hours less a week than I did before I took this job and sometimes struggling to get to sleep for hours, waking in the middle of the night or early morning and being unable to sleep."

Emotional symptoms

These physical symptoms are often combined with emotional impacts with **anxiety**, **depression**, **burnout** and **tearfulness** frequently mentioned.

Others reported a **loss of enthusiasm** and energy and some suffered **panic attacks**.

Worryingly, seven survey participants told us they had experienced suicidal feelings.
Counselling support was offered to all of the respondents that reported suicidal feelings.

Behavioural symptoms

Participants reflected that challenges with their mental health can also lead to negative behaviour, with difficulties in achieving work-life balance and strain on **personal relationships** with both friends and family, including some who felt work-based stress had contributed to relationship breakdowns.

Some also told us their self-care has been affected, including a lack of **exercise**, unhealthy **eating habits** and drinking more **alcohol** than usual.

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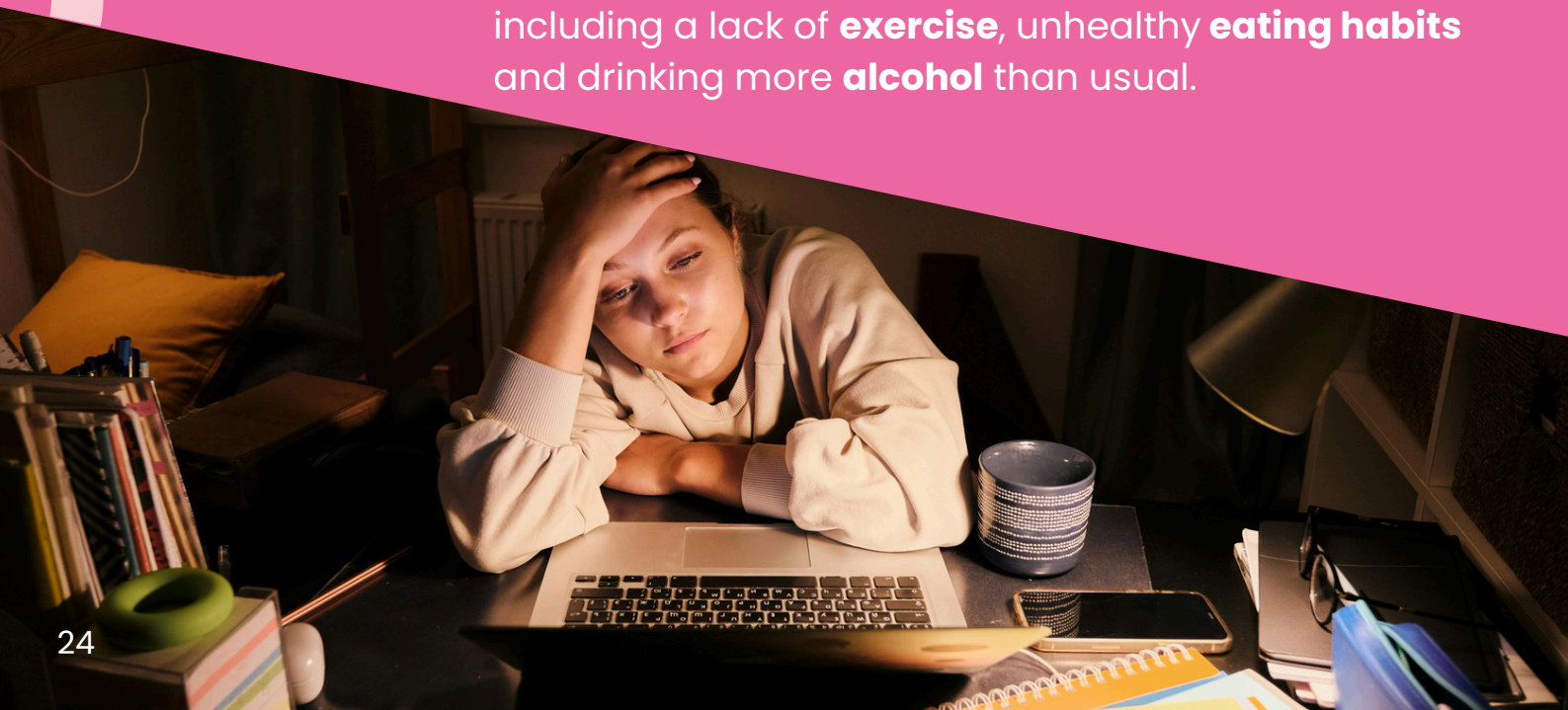
"Despair, regular (daily) crying, helplessness, deep sadness, frustration, lack of caring/no motivation."

"I often had panic attacks at my desk or broke down in tears, which I had to quickly get over so I could get on with my work. I once collapsed at work at the end of the day after everyone had left and had to get myself to the ER - this was all extreme stress related."

"I just get in a cycle where I think I should be working 24/7. It's hard to know when to stop as there is always so much to do."

"I feel guilty about spending time with family friends/having a weekend."

"I've gained a lot of weight through unhealthy eating and inactivity."

Q: Have you ever been **signed off** work by your GP?

10% of participants answered yes. However, comments show this does not give the full story. Several reported that being signed off had been suggested, but they **refused**, and one also said they are currently working on a sick note.

> "I have had it suggested by a GP to take a week off, however I said no as I felt I would feel worse. I discussed this with my board of trustees who allowed me to take 1-2 weeks off work as holiday on top of my usual allowance and they were extremely supportive."

Other respondents haven't visited their GP, with concerns over work building up, or financial considerations meaning that they feel **unable to take time off**. Some had taken sick leave without being signed off, or agreed additional annual leave with their trustees.

> "Not an option. I am a single mother, need to work for my kids, no other contribution exists to support us."

What aspects of the role impact leaders' mental health?

Organisational factors

Personal factors

The nature of the role

Sector / systemic issues

We explored with leaders the challenges in their roles that can impact their mental health. The nature of the role itself is significant, and there is also a range of other organisational, sector-based, and systemic issues, as well as often a combination of multiple factors. A number of leaders also identified how more personal issues combine with work-based stressors, having a negative impact on their mental health.

Nature of the role

By definition, smaller organisations have **less internal capacity** than larger ones, and leaders' roles often span multiple functions. 39% of respondents have only 1-5 paid staff and within this group sometimes the leader is the sole paid employee. 11% have no paid staff at all.

In practice, this means not only **high volumes of work**, and frequent **task-swapping** but also the need to operate in more specialist areas such as finance and HR, with **limited technical knowledge** or training.

Organisational factors

There are also multiple factors within individual organisations that have a significant impact on leaders' wellbeing. Most frequently these are **relationships** with **trustee boards** and **staff teams**.

Boards can be **unhelpful** and **demanding**, and at worst, leaders have experienced **bullying** and **harassment** from Board members. This was specifically mentioned by six survey respondents with others mentioning bullying, but without referring to the source.

> Boards can be unhelpful and demanding, and at worst, leaders have experienced bullying and harassment from board members.

"

"Too much **task switching** is very **anxiety provoking** and this is what small organisation leadership constantly requires - I feel **spread too thinly**."

"Basically being a **one stop shop** for all professional services that other larger organisations buy in i.e. HR, fundraising, legal, bookkeeping, writing all policies and standard operating procedures, branding, webmaster, IT support, marketing, stewardship, being the project manager of numerous projects and **the list goes on.**"

"You can't run a big organisation on an Excel sheet... There's **resistance to investing in systems** like CRMs".

"Previously - a very **toxic, bullying chair** - I reported her to the charity commission who **wouldn't do anything** about it. There needs to be a body to scrutinise boards, it is a **huge problem** for small charities."

"The **stress** of **funding** is ongoing but not a surprise. What was surprising was the **impact that trustees can have** on a charity leader, even if I only spend a small fraction of my time interacting with them."

Similarly, the ability to **rely** on and **delegate** to team members is questioned by some leaders.

Dealing with challenging **HR issues** has placed significant strain on some of the leaders in our surveys and interviews.

As with boards, leaders have experienced **bullying from staff** and managing **internal conflicts** is challenging and draining, particularly in a small team.

"
"Generally the level of HR need is draining. Conflicts, complaints etc."

There were several cases where leaders felt that they had "inherited" challenges that resulted from long-term mismanagement.

"I experienced significant stress and clinically moderate depression in managing a particularly toxic, decades-long workplace conflict between employees (I had inherited the matter from my predecessor)."

Leaders also experience challenges specific to their organisation's work.

Several shared stories of media and public **criticism** and **harassment**. At its most extreme, this has led to them **fearing for their own safety**.

In other cases, the **emotional strain** of working with people experiencing **hardship**, **discrimination** and **emotional distress** affects leaders directly. This leads to concerns about team wellbeing, and the need to safeguard them against **burnout**.

There is some evidence that this is particularly true where this reflects **leaders**' own life experiences.

Some leaders also told us about **pressures** associated with **organisational growth**, either building and financially sustaining the systems and capacity to support a growing organisation, or a constant feeling of **pressure to expand**.

"My role has a high profile in the community, and not everyone supports our work. There's been abuse online and in person, and there are times when I don't feel safe. Until recently, my trustees were not responsive to my concerns about the safety of the team and me. Much of this anger is from culture wars fostered by the government and local politicians."

"

"Team experience vicarious trauma."

"Trauma response linked in with lived experience of the issue we're dealing with."

"I mean part of the issue we've had with money is that we grew and grew and grew and it felt like we were sort of unstoppable, we kept growing and growing. We doubled our income in a year and therefore doubled the staff team, and then what happened was because we looked like we've got to a point where we were stable and we came out of that scrappy start-up mode... some of the funders then found us less interesting."

"Your reward for achieving last year's ambition is ambition plus one... The expectation becomes completely unrealistic."

Sector/systemic issues

Leaders' sense of **isolation**, in part due to a **lack of sector support**, is explored later in this report. However there are structural and systemic issues that specifically affect social purpose organisations, with disproportionate impacts on smaller organisations.

This is a **multifaceted** issue, which can impact leaders' wellbeing in several ways. They often shoulder the burden of managing **precarious financial situations**, whilst feeling **responsible** for maintaining salaries and service levels for those they support. Some mentioned **guilt** where funding applications are unsuccessful or where cuts are endured.

Financial sustainability is a significant challenge, mentioned repeatedly by leaders.

"I don't take a salary over £530 (per month) from my own charity out of fear of what that means or how it is interpreted and therefore have had to take on additional work alongside it often inhibiting my ability to do the charity work. "

"We beg, borrow, and steal… We're never more than a few months away from falling over."

"Constant stress regarding funding - the fear that if I fail at this I will let down our beneficiaries and trustees, but it will be a betrayal of the staff as they need their salaries."

At the same time, stretched financial resources mean that leaders and their staff are often underpaid (if they are paid at all) for the work that they do and that there is little or no scope to invest in the systems and professional support they need, or provide wellbeing support for them and their teams.

The specific causes of income generation pressures are to some extent driven by individual organisations' financial models, i.e., there are different challenges with different funding sources.

But overwhelmingly, comments focus on an increasingly competitive funding environment, driven by a surge in demand and a retraction in available funding since Covid-19.

Some also attribute reductions in public and corporate donations to the current cost of living, which they also connect to a decrease in volunteers, adding to resource pressures.

Income

generation

pressures

"Pressure of leading a small organisation in the perfect storm of rising levels of need and decreasing resources - increased competition for limited funds (I described one recent funding 'competition' for corporate funds to my trustees as the Hunger Games for charities)."

"Covid really was like, I don't know, a honeymoon, I suppose, in a way. … riding the kind of the Covid wave of charities just throwing money at organisations. And we thought, wow, this has been so successful. This is really great. And 2021 came, and I think we got in half the income that we generated in 2020."

"The demand on our service has exponentially grown, and while we have been able to increase our funding we have had to hire more people to manage the demand which then just increases the need for more funding.

Over the last two years, we have seen a drop in successful grant applications with the common feedback being that the demand on the grant funder was too high. It constantly feels like two steps forward one step back.

Government funding has been non-existent and yet they keep telling us how much the service we are providing is needed."

Photo credit: Colindale Communities Trust (CCT).

For those with significant dependency on **charitable grants**, there are criticisms of:

short-funding cycles

a focus on project funding and new initiatives rather than core funding to sustain ongoing work

complex, time-consuming and repetitive applications

limited feedback and reporting processes

"Constant worry about funding - we have been in a short-term agreement with our main funder for the last four years, meaning that we can't properly plan for the future."

"We just kept getting knocked back left, right and centre, and didn't know why. I'm like looking at all the work we're doing, all the amazing people helping and it just didn't make any sense and you're not getting any feedback. You're bringing grant and bid writers in and just nothing, nothing, nothing."

"It's because of [funders'] constant desire, generally speaking, for new things. So there may be a project that's funded by a funder and it's a new project for us and it really takes off and does well. When we go back to them and say, look how great this project has run. It's been really good value for money. Could we please ask for additional funding for it to continue this thing? No, we want you to do something new though."

The disappointment of unsuccessful applications can also take its toll –

"

"I think that someone said about funding applications that the sense of hope is actually worse than the despair. And it's true. And I think I got over it. You move on. It's a fact of life that we'll be working in a charity, but you can't help it."

particularly where significant time has been put into proposals.

These complexities can extend to other forms of funding.

One interviewee is investing significant time in building **corporate relationships** to **reduce grant dependency,** but has found a lack of consideration from some businesses about how stretched capacity is within organisations and the impact of drawn-out decision-making.

> "It can be very rewarding when a business really gets it and is great, fantastic to deal with, and it's really impactful, but sometimes, you know, businesses can often string you along for quite a long period of time."

Some respondents also receive funding through **public sector contracts**, again experiencing difficulties in **tender processes** and a lack of understanding of organisations' **cost bases**, the impact of **increasing referrals**, and **unfair treatment**.

> "Lack of understanding from the local authority and NHS - they'll happily refer to us, use us as their pathway but not support/fund us."

> "I have found, coupled with many CEOs in our area, that our relationship with council officers tends to be characterised by bullying. The relationship is hostile and they abuse their power over us as we receive a grant from them."

Lack of understanding from partners and commissioners plus public perception of charities goes wider than funding issues and is also a source of frustration for leaders.

- It impacts the **conditions** that they need to work in.
- It leads to an **under-appreciation** of the work that small organisations do.
- It has an impact on **relationships**.

"

"Not being taken seriously by public sector bodies, there is an attitude of looking down on charities and a lack of recognition for the bank of knowledge and experience we possess."

"Unpredictability of service users who are vulnerable and high risk. Lack of background information and mental health history as well as a lack of support from statutory and other support systems when service users need clinical support. Increasing statutory needs are placing a demand on our services at a time of reduced funding streams. We deliver from 3 sites to 135 people a week, those landlords can give us 24 hours' notice."

Regulations and associated reporting requirements are also a burden for leaders, with several mentioning that they felt these should be more proportionate to organisation size. There was also a discussion in a focus group about having the potential to pay trustees.

"Charity Commission requirements - some of the guides are 100 pages long, which is a challenge to read and absorb."

"

"The pressure and the sense of responsibility, from being a founder and thinking I've created this unwieldy octopus that no one else might dare take on or judge the chaos and the bits I've missed behind the scenes."

"I'm trying to prepare myself mentally for stepping away, but I can't fully imagine it... It's going to be like a bereavement."

"I have had no formal management training and never really wanted this responsibility!"

"We started from a passion/idea, not from or with any expertise, so much of this experience has been learning new systems. If there had been a step-by-step guide when setting up that would have been so useful instead I have picked up this and that from different places and now I am going to back and putting in processes/systems that I should have done three years ago."

Personal factors

There are also factors that are more personal to individual leaders. Twelve of our interviewees and focus group participants, and eight survey respondents, mentioned that they are the organisations' founders or co-founders.

Alongside a likely emotional attachment to the cause, and sometimes lived experience, this appears to contribute to additional pressures, including a heightened sense of responsibility for organisational success and fears around succession planning.

Some of the founders also told us that they had started organisations based on their passion for the cause, without being fully prepared for the practicalities and challenges of the role, and with a lack of available training and support opportunities for newer CEOs.

A further group of participants were either relatively new to post and/or had risen rapidly, and sometimes unexpectedly to that position. They face similar challenges.

"

"I feel out of my depth - low salaries in the sector mean top talent isn't attracted and so there aren't many role models or leaders I feel I can look up to, learn from and be managed by - I feel I'm stepping up too soon in my career."

A number of respondents also told us that they find **virtual working arrangements** difficult.

- It increases a sense of **isolation**.
- It reduces **team bonding**.
- It means that work invades **personal space**.

> "I think in a lot of instances I feel quite unsupported because I'm here on my own and everyone else is around the country."

> "It basically took over my life and essentially up until a couple of weeks ago even my bedroom where like I'm doing this meeting from slowly became an office."

14% of those who completed the survey told us they are **neurodivergent**, with some of them directly attributing some of their challenges to this. Most frequently **ADHD**. This was also the case for several of our interviewees and focus group participants.

→ **14%** of survey respondents are **neurodivergent**

Others also mentioned symptoms associated with hormonal changes, in particular peri-menopause/ menopause.

> "I have ADHD, and it impacts my ability to switch off... The tiredness from not sleeping makes it harder to do my job."

> "I have ADHD and when I wasn't enjoying my work this had a huge impact on my mental health, and I became trapped in a cycle of executive dysfunction."

How do leaders' mental health challenges affect their ability to do their work?

And what impact do they feel this has on their organisations and teams?

Beyond the personal impacts of mental ill health, we talked to leaders about how this affects their ability to do their job, and how they feel this impacts their organisations and teams.

Q: If you experience(d) work related mental health difficulties, does this impact your ability to do your work?

92%

of those surveyed who said their mental health has been negatively affected by their role, feel this can **affect their ability to do their job** to some extent.
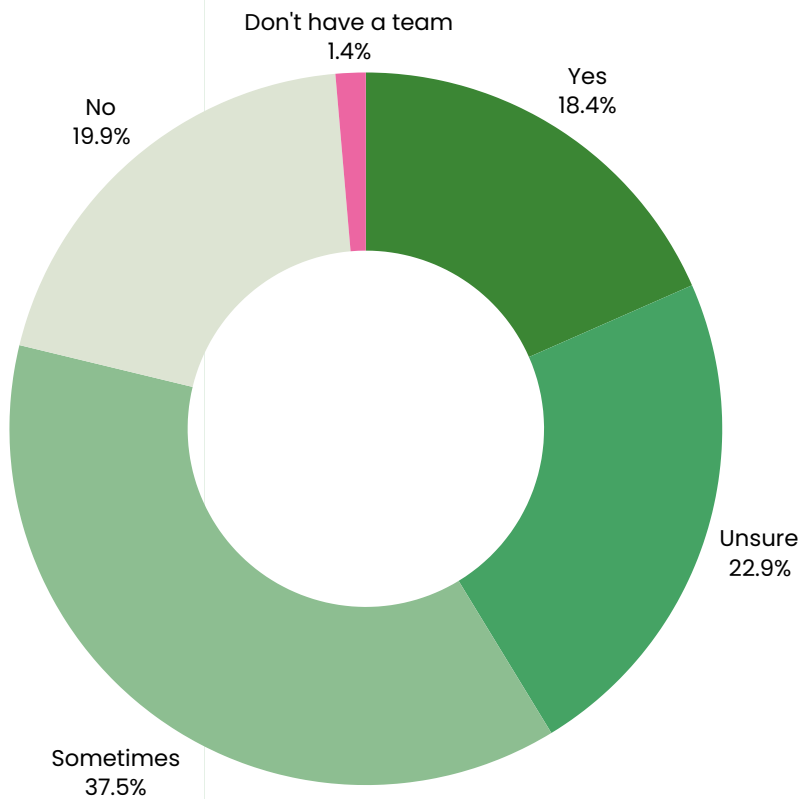
17%

For 17% of these, it affects their ability **a lot**.

Not at all
7.7%

Not a lot
20.2%

Intermittently
1.4%

A lot
16.5%

A little
54.2%
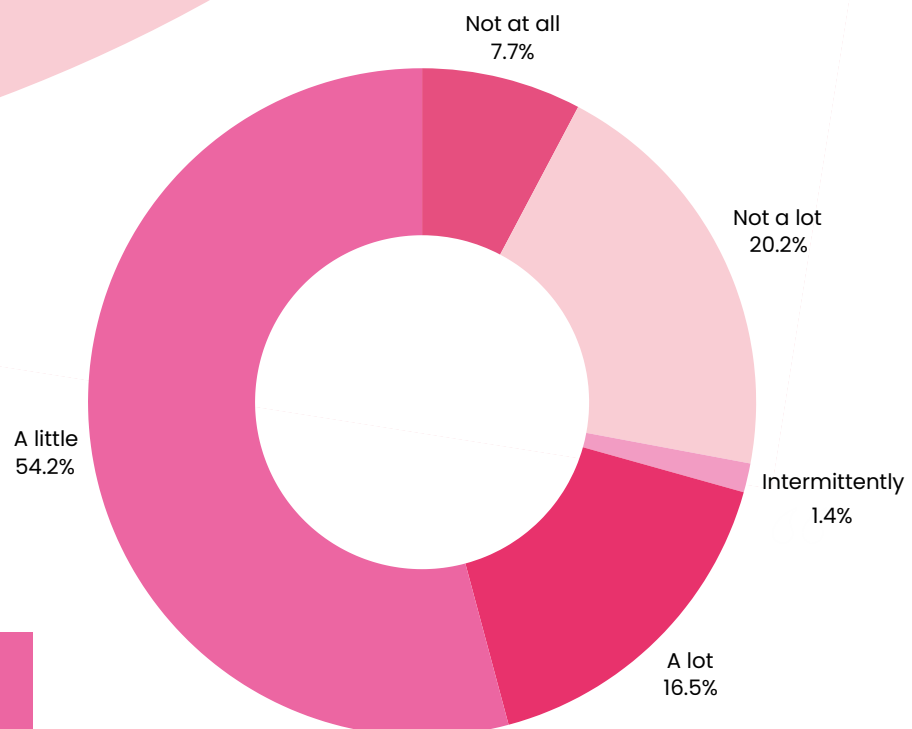
"Some of the time it can be debilitating, but not always."

Q: Does the impact of your role on your mental health negatively impact your team or organisation in any way?

Don't have a team
1.4%

No
19.9%

Yes
18.4%

Unsure
22.9%

Sometimes
37.5%

55% believe the impact of their role on their mental health has some effect on their **team** or **organisation**

While data suggests that a significant percentage do not feel there is any impact on their work, they have provided few additional details on this.

Although some leaders suggest that they feel they do not allow their mental health to impact on their team or organisation, but rather deal with the impacts outside of work.

Ability to do their work

For those where there is an impact, they told us that their effectiveness can suffer in a variety of ways. For leaders who are time-poor and feeling overwhelmed by the volume of work to do, their mental health's impact on efficiency compounds the issues, leading to a "**vicious cycle**".

Leaders told us that they find it difficult to **concentrate**, **focus** on specific tasks and **prioritise**, and that they procrastinate or avoid tasks completely.

"I struggled to concentrate on simple tasks, procrastination, paralysis by analysis"

"When I feel overwhelmed it can be hard to start projects or know what to focus on. Sometimes I don't feel able to achieve anything at all."

"I overthink decisions and worry about repercussions of my decision making, which can cause delays or ineffective decision making.

Leaders told us that their **decision-making** is sometimes impaired, and that they can end up focusing mainly on small and operational tasks, rather than strategic thinking.

"I have so many demands on my time and attention, sometimes I feel unable to tackle anything other than things that are quick and easy to tick off. I rarely have mental bandwidth to tackle more strategic work, with a lot of procrastination and guilt."

Interpersonal relationships

Some also feel that their interpersonal relationships, particularly with **team members**, can be affected which is explored in this report.

A number of responses also show that leaders begin to **doubt their abilities** and experience "impostor syndrome".

"

"Sometimes I have felt a sense that I am failing, and a lack of confidence in my abilities."

"

"I can end up focusing on fire-fighting rather than longer term and more strategic pieces of work, which feel overwhelming."

"If stress mounts and feelings of worthlessness creep in, then this leads to things being missed, some small things but occasional bigger things. It also impacts my decision-making and makes me extremely risk-averse. Perhaps opportunities are missed in these periods."

"

THE IMPACT ON
Teams

Leaders identified a range of ways that how they are feeling can impact their teams. In practical terms, where they have been **absent** from work, this has added to others' workloads. They also feel that **slower decision-making** and delays in their own tasks can have a **knock-on effect** on team members.

Several also indicated that they feel that negativity on their part can have a direct impact on team **morale** and **motivation**.

"When I was signed off work, it left a gap in our small team for a number of weeks, meaning some jobs had to be absorbed by others, and some of my work was just not progressed while I was away."

"When I am overwhelmed and avoiding work communications, this may have a domino effect of stressing others out, or making them frustrated."

"I set the culture. If I am low it brings the energy down."

Others feel that they are less able to support team members than they would like to, or that the teams' own wellbeing is impacted by concerns about the leader.

"I know I am forgetful when under pressure, sure staff members worry about me and my wellbeing and worry that I might leave which makes them nervous."

Many also note changes in their behaviour and communication styles, becoming withdrawn, short-tempered, aloof and abrupt.

"I can be short with people, then feel riddled with guilt and over compensate. I can also be physically present but mentally have too much in my head to focus on the person in front of me."

"It gets harder and harder to motivate your team when you don't feel motivated yourself."

"Comments by others feel more personal to me, I become increasingly defensive and withdrawn."

How do leaders balance their own and others' needs?

While some leaders feel that their mental health has an impact on their teams, the research shows that they frequently **prioritise others' needs** over their own.

Q: Do you prioritise the mental health needs of others in your team, over your own needs?

Other
15

Sometimes
66

No
16

Yes
241
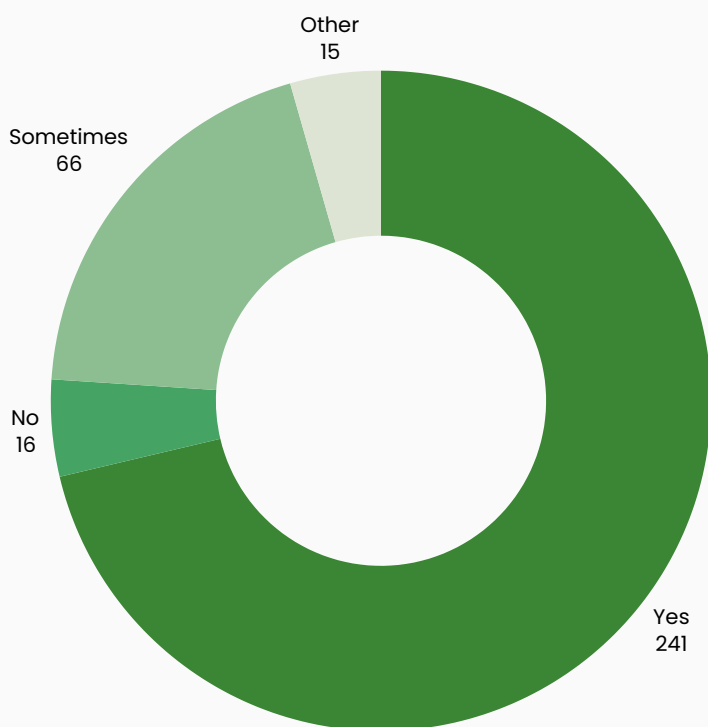
Some admitted that they don't apply the same wellbeing standards to themselves as they do to team members:

> "I know I should take actions that I would ask of my team - e.g., taking preventative time off to reduce stress, reducing or delegating work, taking mental health days - and although I advocate for my team to do this, I find it incredibly difficult to do myself."

The reasons for this vary but perceptions of what a leader "**should**" be and how they behave seem pertinent. Leaders fear that revealing their concerns may reduce their teams' **confidence** in them and that it is their **responsibility** to look after their teams:

> "As the leader you protect the team first to keep the organisation running. There's an expectation for you to simply get on with it."

"

"I'd love to **delegate** but I'm conscious that the team tell me they're full and they're **stressed** so how can I give that responsibility?"

"I've not taken **sick leave** when I should because of the **pressure** it would put them under. I've delayed moving to a four day week and haven't reduced my hours for the same reason."

"I have definitely made space to **listen** to staff having a difficult day when I am not feeling great myself - I feel like **my staff's wellbeing is my number one priority,** so I always pick up the phone to them."

"It's tough out there and they are **dealing with a lot**. Racial hatred and cost of living is really impacting the team. **My number one priority is to support them** to feel ok, which often means picking up their work, taking on **emotional weight** of their experiences."

What **structures** and **strategies** are in place to support leaders' and their teams' wellbeing?

We asked leaders if their organisation has a budget for mental health support for them or their team:

- **67%** have no budget.
- For those with a budget, **42%** say the support is not accessed often.
- **36%** say the support is accessed often.
- **22%** said their team accesses it but not them.

67%

have **no budget** for mental health support.

42%

of those with a budget say the support is **not accessed** often.

Leaders told us about a variety of measures in place to support team wellbeing, these include a blend of formal provision and informal methods, demonstrating creative approaches when working within scarce resources.

There are limited details about why leaders and their teams are not accessing support even where it is available, although one told us:

"We used to pay for Spill but it wasn't being used and the team voted to have their own £500 professional development budget instead which some of them have used for coaching."

Formal provision

Employee Assistance Programmes were commonly mentioned, as well as clinical supervision for those working in mental health, as their channel of formal provision for mental health by respondents, plus having team members trained in Mental Health First Aid. Some leaders have had access to coaching and mentoring. While it seems likely most of this is paid for, several mentioned access to pro bono support through corporate and sector-based programmes.

> "We're quite lucky that there's quite a bit of support around if you know where to find it that might be free or, you know, people offering pro bono consultancy pieces funding."

Informal/internal measures

While salaries are often low, some mitigate this by a focus on working conditions, offering flexible working, additional annual leave and wellbeing days. Others focus on building bonds within their teams, particularly where members are working remotely. This includes more infrequent events such as away days, but also regular check-ins, virtual tea rooms and social events and a focus on transparency and building a positive internal culture.

> "We close for Summer and Xmas for one week each time. We also have a new annual leave rule which is 'take as much as you need'."

> "3x a year team away days are greatly appreciated by the team. Also weekly meetings to offload and get support. The team have requested more socials so we are getting together outside of work more frequently."

What do leaders do to manage their wellbeing?

Some leaders have accessed their own **professional support** including counselling, coaching and hypnotherapy.

Others have focused on building their **resilience** and implementing strategies in the workplace, including reviewing **boundaries** and using software such as **Microsoft Viva Insights**.

Pursuing **interests** outside work is also important, as well as personal wellbeing practices such as **exercise**, **mindfulness**, meditation and massage.

"I try to fill my spare time with positive activities and family time."

"I know that sometimes going for a walk and just doing a photography walk or something really simple can actually just help me even if it can just be half an hour."

Q: Do you feel supported in your role as a small organisation leader in terms of your mental health?

Category	Value
Yes	98
No	93
Sometimes	134
Other	13

(Bar chart x-axis: 0, 20, 40, 60, 80, 100, 120, 140)
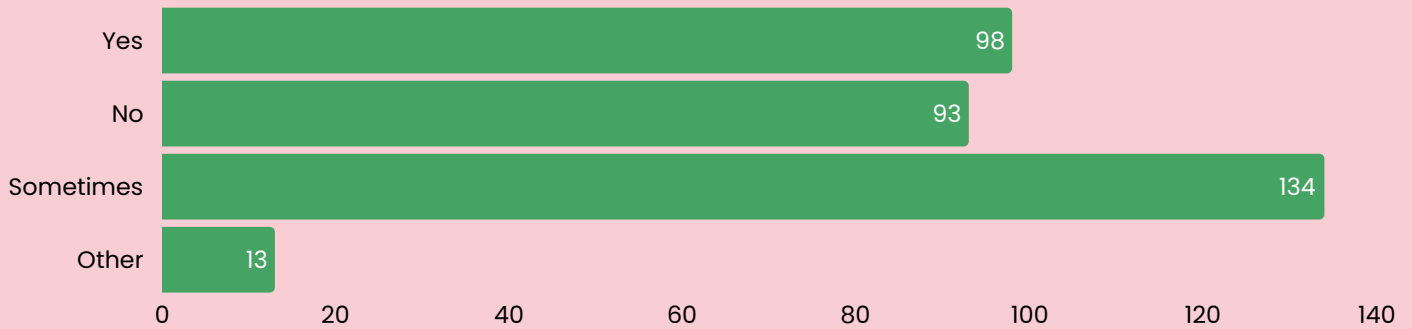
Key influencers on how supported leaders feel include:

- Relationships with trustee boards/teams
- Workplace culture
- Access to support (informal and external)
- The role of professional networks and sector infrastructure organisations

> "My team are generally very understanding, I do not feel supported by the Trustees."

Trustee Boards

Leaders' relationships with trustee boards have a crucial impact on their wellbeing at work. Challenges in these relationships can be significant drivers of poor mental health and their strength can also be an important factor in how supported, or otherwise, leaders feel.

For those who feel positive about the support they have at work, trustees who regularly check in with them, provide assistance where needed, and offer flexibility when leaders face personal challenges are important factors.

> "We are a small organisation of 5 volunteers, 3 work full time, all have children with rare conditions and significant need. They can't do much at all due to personal circumstances so I'm doing everything."

Multiple respondents acknowledged that while they would like more support from trustees, they recognise that this is a voluntary role, and that Board members' capacity is often limited, fitting with their own day jobs and personal responsibilities. This can be particularly acute where trustees have lived experience and in volunteer-led organisations.

"My board of Trustees are really supportive and understanding and are always looking out for my wellbeing."

"They are fully appreciative of the hours I work and the emotional strain and are always encouraging me to have boundaries."

"When my father was dying and when I've had my two recent operations, my trustees were very understanding and realised that I had to take a lot of time off."

"

"

"I don't believe the board know what the stresses are and whilst I provide an overview in meetings, they are not good at looking at ways to reduce the likelihood or reducing issues that impact."

"My Trustees do not seem interested in the charity, let alone me! They don't bother to attend meetings or reply to my emails."

"My Chair is a large part of the problem with mental health and this role - she is not well suited to the role being very detail focused, treating me like a junior administrator who she directs to do admin tasks."

Teams and workplaces

Some respondents simply have no team to support them. For those who do, a strong team and positive workplace culture feature highly among those who feel well-supported at work.

"

"We all really support each other. Thankfully our group feels like an extended family rather than work team."

Photo above: Colindale Communities Trust (CCT) walking group.

Some organisations' work focuses on wellbeing and mental health support which can enhance the team's understanding of, and commitment to, applying this at work.

"We're a user-led mental health charity so it helps that most of us struggle with our mental health and are there to support each other."

"

Photo left: Steven Smith taking part in a Horticultural Therapy session - nature based activities to improve mental mental health and well-being. Steven is completely blind, and in the activity they are making wildflower seed bombs.

Jewish Action for Mental Health (JAMH)

58

"

"There's a **small organisation CEO group** on Facebook it's the only one on Facebook I check it every day there's something that you relate to almost every day that gets posted online,"

"I do not **feel at all supported** by the sector infrastructure."

"A **lack of support**, the **lack of structure** within the whole third sector. I came into the charity world with no experience just wanting to do good. I think a lot of people start, but you definitely need a lot more knowledge and information to **survive** in the sector."

"I get some support from other charity CEOs and sector infrastructure but honestly time and mental energy is a **barrier to accessing** that."

"I'm sure there is more support out there, but I **haven't found it yet** and not sure I have **time** to!"

External support

There were positive comments about several professional networks including Small International Development Charities Network (**SIDCN**), Small Charity CEOs **Facebook Group** and **Gunnercooke Inspire**. Others spoke positively about **ACEVO**, including the CEO in Crisis service.

However, others were critical about how the sector supports them. Some suggest that a lack of time or awareness of what is available means it is not accessed.

Funder relationships

While funding is a significant cause of stress, some leaders also spoke of some positive funder relationships:

"

"We are very lucky, there are a lot of very loyal supporters as well, a lot of loyal donors… it does feel, it does give you a bit of a cushion, yeah, it can be quite reassuring when you know about it."

"You get some funders like National Lottery, for example, who are really, really, good. They are one of the biggest funders in the UK, but really flexible."

"I had honest conversations with major donors, telling them the organisation wasn't sustainable, and they gave more money to address our operational capacity."

"

What do leaders think would make the biggest difference to their mental health?

Personal and organisational changes

Some participants felt that they could set clearer **boundaries**, adjust their working hours or change their schedules to allow for more time off.

Others felt they could pursue organisational changes including **budget adjustments** to include wellbeing support. This could be including this in funding bids, or by reframing existing training budgets to include wellbeing.

The potential for structural changes and alterations to internal processes that could **reduce reliance on the leader** were mentioned, along with offering teams training on mental health and wellbeing, and encouraging more **open conversations** about it at work.

One participant also felt that there is a need for organisations to reduce reliance on volunteers and grant funding, and look for ways to generate their own income.

"We also need to get the charities and the CICs and not for profits to understand their own value and not be relying on funding, it's just not it's not feasible. You need to have a saleable product of some description…just sort of trying to professionalise that area I think needs to happen. I've got so many people you talk to who aren't even taking a wage they're literally trying to pay everybody else generally they don't take a wage…. and end up in financial difficulty."

Infrastructural and sector support

There was a strong call for increased peer **networking** and **knowledge-sharing** opportunities.

Others would like to have the opportunity for regular, **subsidised supervision** and **counselling**, potentially including wellbeing support in membership bodies' fees.

Support with **technical** aspects of the role would also be appreciated, particularly access to **HR** and **financial** expertise. There was also interest in the development of a resource or **skill-sharing** platform.

Systemic changes

Funding and regulatory pressures have a significant impact on leaders and they would like to see changes at this level. In particular changes to the **funding system**, more **core funding** in place of project-based opportunities, more **streamlined application processes** and offers of funding to support wellbeing initiatives.

Interviewees emphasised the importance of more conversation, **collaboration** and understanding across sectors, particularly between small organisations and statutory bodies.

At a regulatory level, suggested reforms include the development of more **proportionate regulatory and reporting requirements** for smaller organisations, and the consideration of **paying trustees**.

"

"It would be good to have some sort of bursary support, mental health support for CEOs because I don't have the funds to buy counselling."

"A pool of different things that we can offer each other as charities... but I would like to offer [wellbeing sessions] to other charities CEOs if they have something that they could offer me."

"We've been talking with NHS representatives, as well as a council. The people are actually feeding the money in need to have the conversations with the people on the ground floor... talk to these organisations, have some easier access of communication. Local councils and MPs need to be involved with the organisations."

"More understanding from statutory sectors about the genuine cost and value of what we do, because I think we're often seen as the cheap option and maybe the unprofessional option."

Recommendations

Given the various factors impacting and influencing the mental health of small charity leaders, there's no quick fix.

However, based on this research and extensive UK charity sector experience, the Fair Collective team has identified several recommendations – for individual leaders, small organisation boards and funders.

These recommendations are also not intended to contribute to a 'them and us' culture, particularly between leaders and boards and/or organisations and funders.

We recognise there are many funders and sector bodies who are engaging meaningfully with small charities and who are advocating for better funding practices. However, these activities and good intentions are yet to make a difference for most small charities.

Against the backdrop of increased demand and less funding for all non-profits, regardless of size, we would urge boards, funders and infrastructure bodies to adopt a power-lens to their work.

Any response to the depth and complexity of today's challenges will need small charities, who are often deeply embedded in and trusted by their communities.

To ensure their survival, we need a shared understanding of the unique pressures they, and their leaders face. This must then be combined with a collective commitment to creating more equitable processes attuned to their needs and strengths.

Recommendations for individual leaders

1

Embrace self-care and remember it's good to talk

Connect with peers, for example, **Small Charity CEOs Facebook Group** and **SIDCN Facebook Group**.

Identify other small charity leaders via local infrastructure organisations, for instance through **NAVCA**.

Prioritise organisational openness

Share this report with staff and trustees and start conversations to nurture a culture of openness and wellbeing.

Increase trustee commitment just mortality lead to mental health by prioritising organisational 'health' in onboarding, strategic plans, and trustee meetings to underpin a culture of openness.

2

Take advantage of existing help

Explore pro bono support opportunities via **Pilotlight's Pro Bono Network**, consider joining **ACEVO**, and explore the dedicated support for small charities offered by NCVO's small charity help desk and others such as:

- Association of Chairs
- Fair Collective
- Charity Excellence Framework
- Small Charity Friendly Collective
- Leaders Together (Ella Forums)
- Fundraising Everywhere
- Reach Volunteering
- Charity Digital

3

"Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation and that is an act of political warfare."

Audre Lorde – writer and activist

Recommendations for small organisation boards

Prioritise organisational health (beyond financial health)

Co-create healthy working policies which, for example, set expectations on out-of-hours working and contact, and avoid unintended consequences, such as mandated time off in busy periods.

Ensure all Trustees understand their responsibilities, especially in managing risk by including leader absence in risk mitigation planning, so leaders feel able to take time off. Ensure that all trustees receive inductions and training in line with **Charity Commission guidance**.

Invest in creating trusting and supportive relationships

Relationships between the board and leaders should be based on shared values and mutual respect. Ensure regular check-ins and line management which helps to ensure the mental health of leaders isn't ignored or deprioritised.

Prioritise delivering support

For leaders who need it. We recognise that budgets are very tight but if required, consider paying for counselling, clinical supervision or other kinds of mental health support. **Every Mind at Work** and **Mental Health at Work** also offer free resources and signposting.

Recommendations for funders

Make unrestricted and multi-year funding the norm

Rather than the exception. Trust and empower small charities as the experts they are.

Embrace a common application and reporting process

Enable small charities and their leaders to focus on social impact rather than fundraising. Moving to a standardised application which could be used for multiple funders would save small charity leaders - often the only 'fundraiser' - time and stress (read more about this issue with **Grant Advisor's Fix The Form**).

Funders are encouraged to explore, learn and/or adopt the United States' **Common Grant Application**. Infrastructure organisations are urged to amplify and advocate for harmonisation. At the very least, funders should adhere to **IVAR's Open and Trusting Grant-making Commitments**.

Become a small charity champion

Lead by example and encourage organisations to consider allocating some funding to support team and leadership wellbeing and good mental health. If you are doing things differently, be bolder in advocating for and influencing change among your peers and the wider sector.

fair collective

Thank you for reading.

Fair Collective is a social social enterprise that connects charities and other social good organisations with more than 100 **experienced, talented,** and **friendly freelancers** and **consultants.**

We were founded in 2016 specifically to **support small charities**, but now we work with organisations of **all shapes and sizes.** From tiny unconstituted groups to large national and international charities and NGOs.

With day rates by organisation income level and **50% of profits donated to super small charities** through pro bono support, Fair Collective is the UK charity sector's **feel-good go-to** when organisations need an extra pair of hands.

We're all about supporting good humans and great organisations and we're here to make your job a little less overwhelming. If you need a **helping hand** finding the perfect person for your project, **we've got it covered.**

Need mental health support?

You can contact the **Samaritans** – day or night, 365 days a year. You can call them for free on **116 123**, email them at **jo@samaritans.org**, or visit **www.samaritans.org** to find your nearest branch.

Thank you

If you would like to **discuss** any of the findings and recommendations from this report, please contact Vic Hancock Fell, Founder and Director of Fair Collective:
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