ACRE Membership Survey 2023 Summary Report

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank colleagues from the 37 ACRE Members who took time out of their busy schedules to complete the 2023 network survey and provided the information featured in this report.

Contents

Summary

This report provides information about the work of ACRE members including their size and reach, the services they offer to rural communities across England, and the challenges they face including pressures associated with the cost-of-living crisis.

Data is drawn from a survey undertaken by all 37 county-based members in the Spring of 2023, with comparisons made to a previous survey in 2020 which posed many identical questions.

Background

The ACRE Network is England's largest rural grouping of community support agencies. There are currently 37 member organisations, plus ACRE as the national representative body, which work in support of community-led initiatives in almost every county of England.

The ACRE Network has a long history with some members celebrating their centenary this decade. As the evidence in this report shows they support a wide range of initiatives, from the running of village halls to community-led affordable housing projects. And through ACRE, their collective knowledge and insight is combined to inform national advocacy on issues that matter to those living and working in the countryside.

This survey was conducted by ACRE to gather up to date information about members which can inform strategic decision making and provide evidence to support influencing and funding activities. Because this was the second survey of its kind, the data captured also shows how the ACRE Network has changed since 2020.

Key findings

The survey shows how ACRE members share commonality of focus in terms of working to improve conditions for rural communities, but also how their capacity and reach varies from county to county. Some of the most interesting findings are detailed below.

- ACRE members spent 73% of their time working in support of rural communities in 2022/23, down one percentage point on 2019/20.
- Between them, they reached over 28,000 groups and organisations across England whilst levering in approximately £40m in support of community initiatives.
- The largest ACRE member had a turnover of £4.7m and employed 114 full time staff. The smallest member of the network had a turnover of £102k and employed the equivalent of 1.4 full time staff. Overall, the network has grown slightly in size over the past three years both in terms of income and staffing.
- All members continued to provide support and advice for voluntary committees who manage village and community halls in 2022/23 making this a unique selling point for the ACRE Network.
- 30 other services were provided, the most common being health & wellbeing initiatives, support for community consultation & engagement and funding advice. Since the last survey in 2019/20 there has a been a significant increase in the number of members offering support for households experiencing

fuel poverty, and to a lesser extent, food distribution schemes and environmental initiatives. This has been in response to growing demand for these services, most likely due to the cost-of-living crisis and growing concern about the climate emergency.

- Transport, health and wellbeing, loneliness and isolation and affordable housing were ranked the most pressing issues for rural communities by members. The number of members able to provide support for transport and affordable housing did not match up with the strength of concern about these rural issues at the time of conducting the survey.

- ACRE members strive to make a difference to rural communities. Respondents to the survey told us reducing social isolation and loneliness was the main type of impact they attribute to their work, followed by providing a stronger voice for rural communities and better social cohesion.

- Members derived 64% of their income from local grants and contracts in 2022/23, up from 50% in 2019/20. This was largely in place of national grant funding which only made up 25% of the network's income at the time of the survey, down from 34% in 2019/20. A greater share of revenue was also attributed to paid for services and membership fees (18%) compared to the previous survey (10%); many of which are often charged in connection with support for village halls and community consultation.

- Risk profiling by members demonstrated that financial security was the main concern for ACRE members. Respondents referred to the challenge of responding to increased demand for their services from communities due to the cost-of-living crisis, whilst the cost of staff salaries, rent and utilities was all increasing. Dependency on one or more significant sources of income was cited as a particular vulnerability.

- Despite these challenges, the outlook for the ACRE Network can be interpreted as being generally more promising than it was in 2019/20. Most respondents said they were confident about the future of their organisation with many anticipating their revenue and staff compliment to increase during 2023/24.

For more information about the data presented in this report, please email contact@acre.org.uk

Survey responses

All 37 active members of the ACRE Network took part in this research covering every rural county of England except for Action with Communities in Rural Kent which went into administration at the beginning of 2023.

An online form which re-used many of the questions from the first ACRE members survey in 2020 was sent to organisations in March 2023. All returns were received by April, bar one which was received later in June. A copy of the questionnaire form used can be found in ***Appendix A***.

This section provides a summary of the responses received for the whole network. Please note information identifying specific member organisations has been omitted, other than where this is already in the public domain.

Network history

ACRE members have a long history of working in support of rural communities. In the last survey we canvassed members to understand the year they were established. We have updated these records for the purposes of this report (see ***Figure 1***).

The oldest member of the ACRE Network is Community First Oxfordshire which recently celebrated its centenary. Five other members in Gloucestershire, Leicestershire & Rutland, Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire and Cambridgeshire have or will be celebrating their 100th anniversary in 2023-24.

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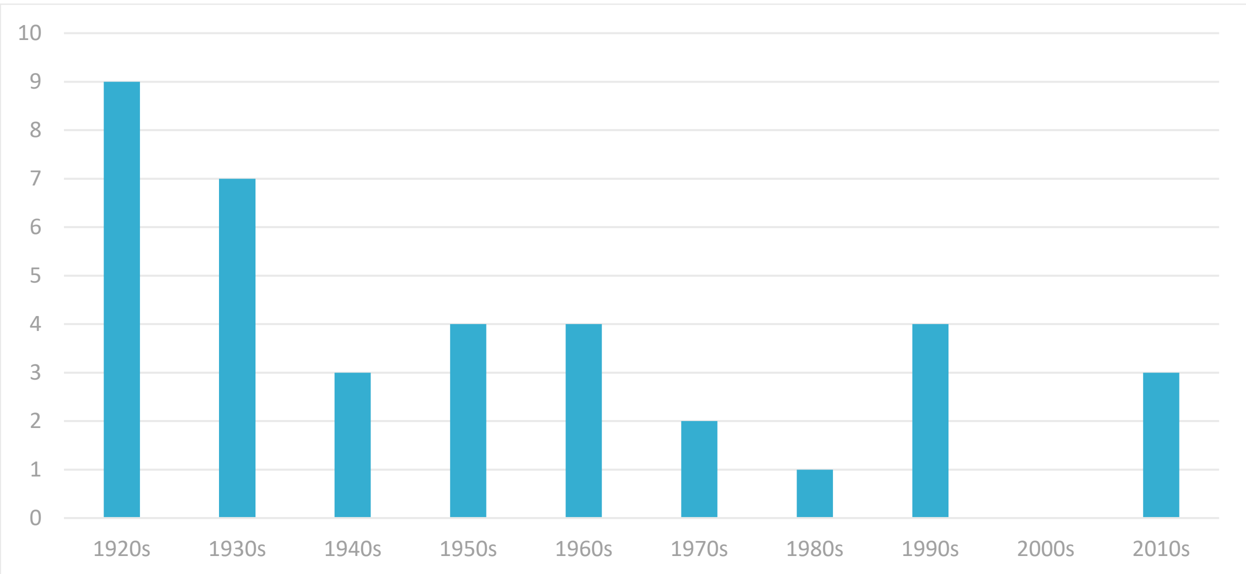
The newest member to the network is Support Staffordshire which was formed in 2014 and joined the network in 2018 to take on the delivery of support for rural communities following the closure of the Community Council of Staffordshire.

The average age of organisations in the ACRE Network is currently 70 years and taken together they have 2,593 years' experience of supporting England's rural communities.

Figure 1: Distribution of ACRE members by date established



Finances

ACRE members are independent, county-based organisations of different sizes and financial capabilities.

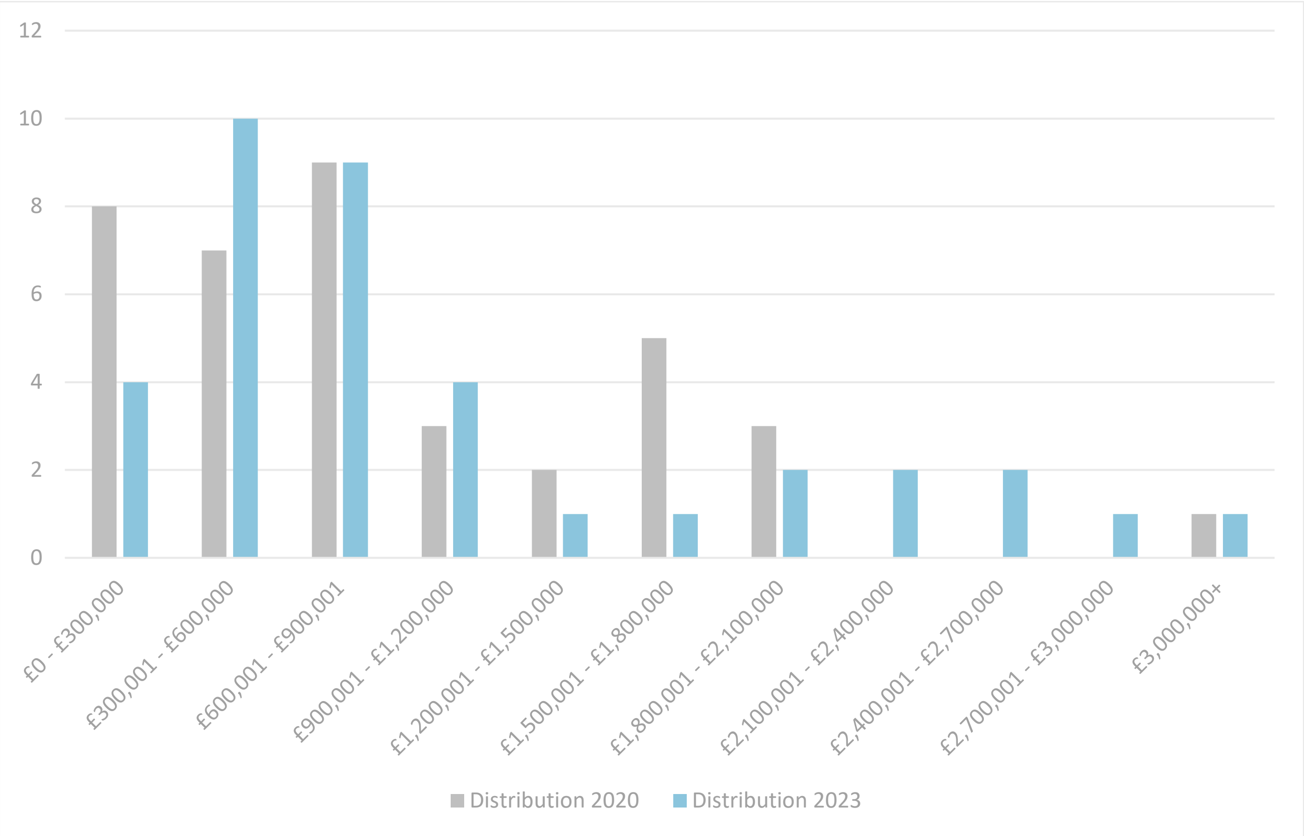
Member's annual income for the previous financial year was varied, ranging from £102k for the smallest organisation to £4.7m for the largest. Most members (*n* 23) have an income between £300k and £1.2m.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of members' income in 2022/23 compared to 2019/20. Whilst the majority of members (*n* 26) saw their income increase, 11 saw a reduction in the amount of money coming into their organisation. Generally speaking, incomes of the largest eight ACRE members grew whilst the largest drops in income were reported by five smaller members with incomes under £600k. This suggests a divergence in ACRE members fortunes but the reasons for this require further investigation.

Taken as a whole, members combined annual income in 2022/23 equated to £40m worth of investment in rural communities.

Taken as a whole, members combined annual income in 2022/23 equated to £40m worth of investment in rural communities, up from £34m in 2019/20 which is roughly in line with inflation for this period (*c* 16%).

Figure 2: Distribution of ACRE members by income

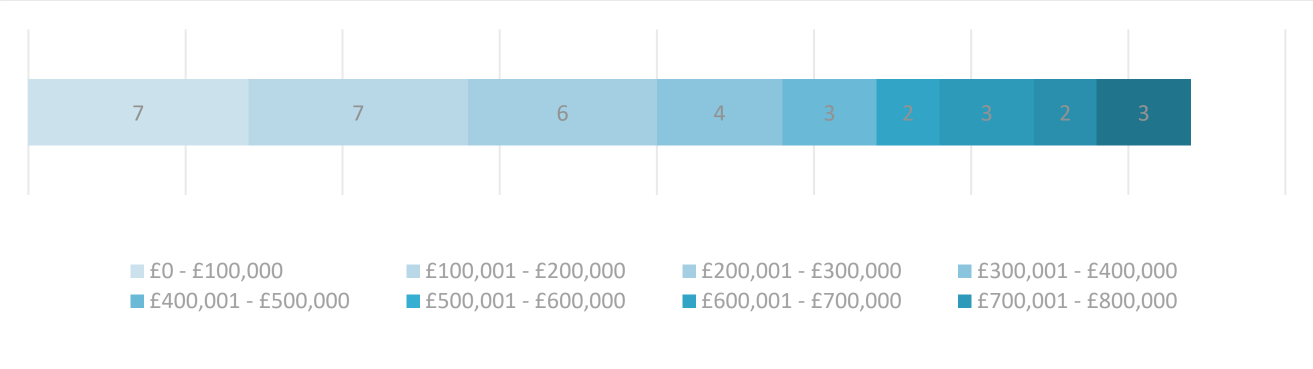


New to the 2023 survey, we asked what members' expenditure was for the past financial year. This ranged from £133k to £4.7m and was broadly comparable in distribution to income, albeit most members (*n* 24) showed a deficit balance at the end of the year – none of which gave rise to immediate concern.

The Charity Commission expects trustees to decide, publish, implement, and monitor their charity's reserves policy. Whilst there is no single level, or even a range of reserves specified for charities, in principle they are held as unrestricted funds which may be drawn upon at any time to spend on the charity's purpose and are particularly important for carrying on activities in future should there be financial difficulties[1].

The value of unrestricted reserves held by members is shown in ***Figure 3***. As is to be expected, there is some correlation between the proportion of reserves held by members and their turnover, ranging from 150% to 8% but averaging 38%. Smaller organisations with incomes under £600k appear to have marginally larger reserves to fall back on.

Figure 3: Value of unrestricted reserves held by ACRE members by distribution



The survey also captured information about where ACRE members derive their income. ***Figure 4*** shows the proportion of income by source for all members in 2022/23 compared to 2019/20.

Since the last survey, income derived from contracts (33%) has overtaken local grant funding (31%) as the largest source of revenue for members overall. That said, the proportion of income derived from contracts varies between members. At its limits, two members reported earning 90% of their income from contracts, whilst five members did not specify any contract delivery locally. The same can be seen with dependence on local grants which ranges from 85% of income for one member to nil returns for four members. In practice, there may be little to distinguish between these two types of income; both are usually tied to local public bodies such as councils who often fund the services of ACRE members, whether this be in the form of a contract or grant. Perhaps more significant is the fact that these two types of income combined have increased from providing 50% of members' income in 2019/20 to 64% in 2020/23.

In contrast, funding obtained from national grant funding, including the Defra grant administered by ACRE[2] is down from 34% in 2019/20 to 25% in 2020/23. This is unsurprising given the first survey was undertaken during the first Covid lockdown, at which time emergency support was made available to community and voluntary sector organisations by government such as the Coronavirus Community Support Fund (CCSF). Whilst the Defra fund makes up a small proportion of overall revenue for the ACRE Network (9%), for four smaller members it constitutes more than a quarter of their income.

Most members (*n* 32) also derive some income from paid for services and membership fees. This comprises 18% of funding to the ACRE Network, up from 11% in 2019/20. Again, there is variation between members. One member

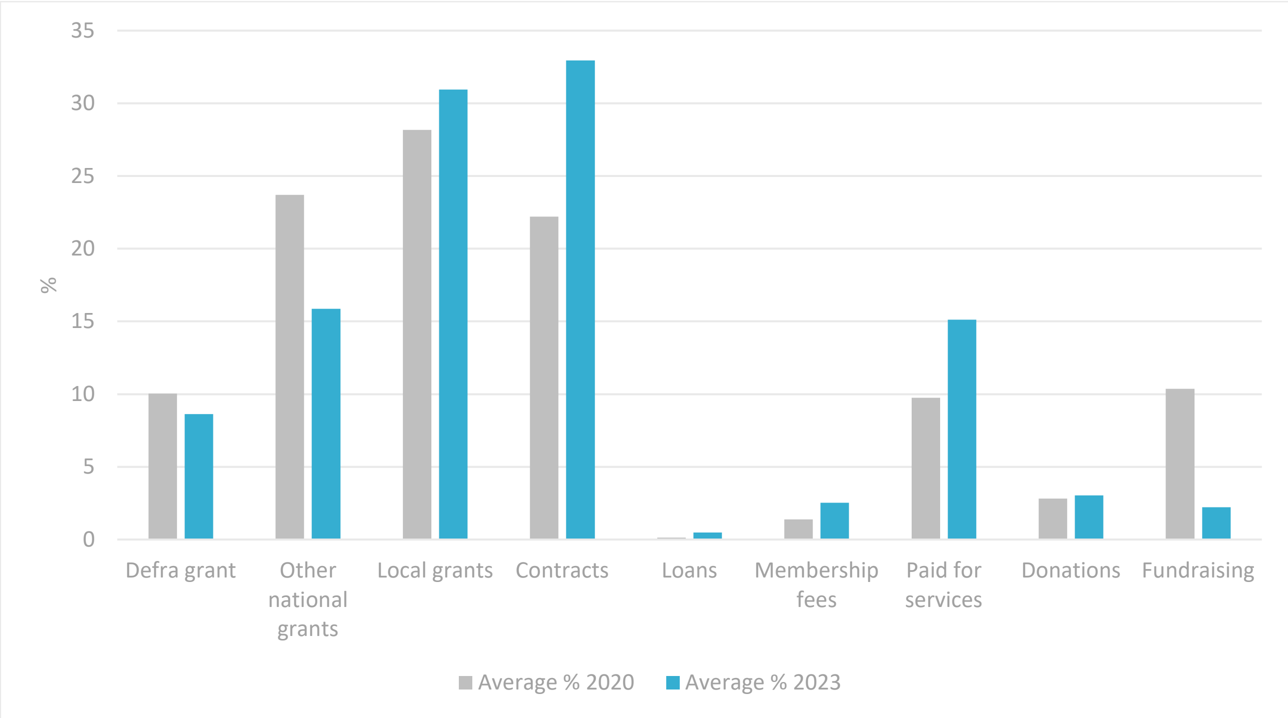
[1] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/charities-and-reserves-cc19/charities-and-reserves

[2] We have a long-term, strategic relationship with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) who grant-aid ACRE Network members to support rural community projects and provide intelligence on rural matters.

earns 79% of their income in this way, whilst five members indicated they generated negligible income from charging end users.

There has also been a significant drop in funding derived from fundraising from 10% to 2% between the two surveys, perhaps reflective changing priorities or wider financial pressures owing to the cost-of-living crisis.

Figure 4: ACRE members' sources of income

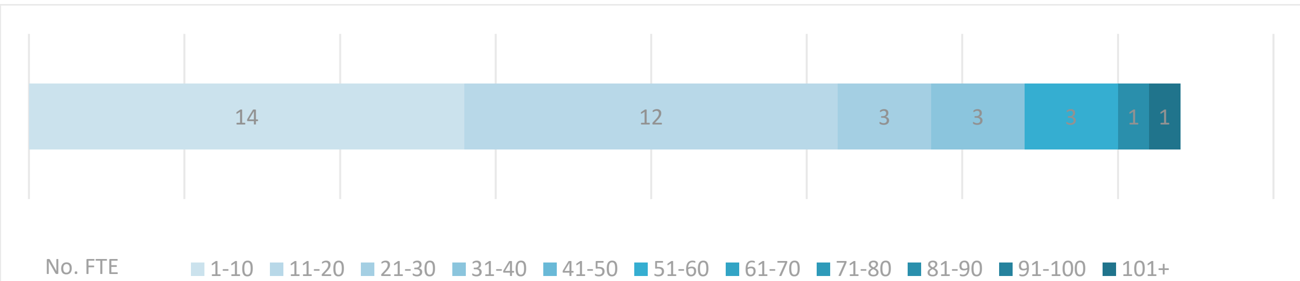


Staffing

The survey found there has been a modest increase in the number of staff employed by ACRE members over the past three years. 1,147 members of staff were employed at the time of the survey, up from 1,063 in 2020. The Full Time Equivalent (FTE) was 797 compared to 723 in 2020.

On average, members employ 31 members of staff, equivalent to 21.5 FTE. This however masks significant variation between members. As shown in ***Figure 5***, five members employ over 51 FTE staff members, six members have between 21 and 50, whilst the majority (*n* 26) are much smaller organisations, employing between 1 and 20 FTE colleagues.

Figure 5: Number of FTE staff employed by ACRE members by distribution

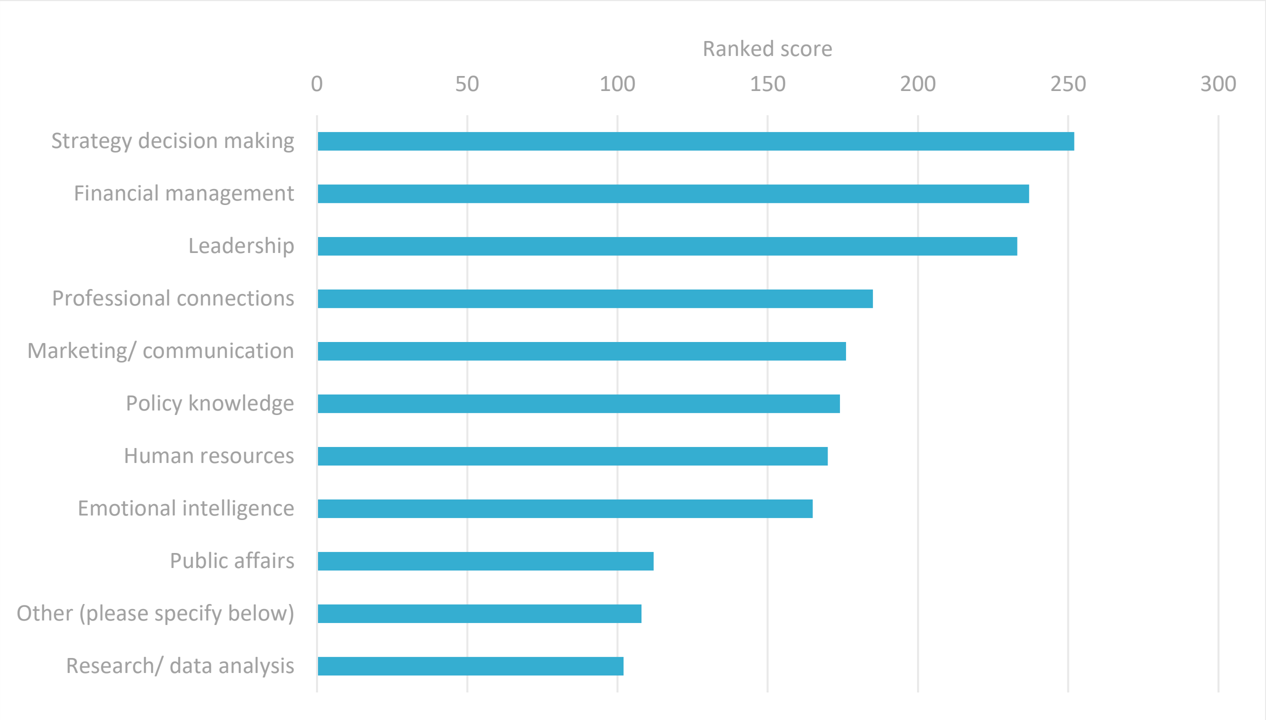


Governance

In the 2020 survey, we established some baseline information about the composition of ACRE members' boards. On average, each member had about nine trustees, serving terms of between 6 – 10 years except for 12 members who did not have a cap.

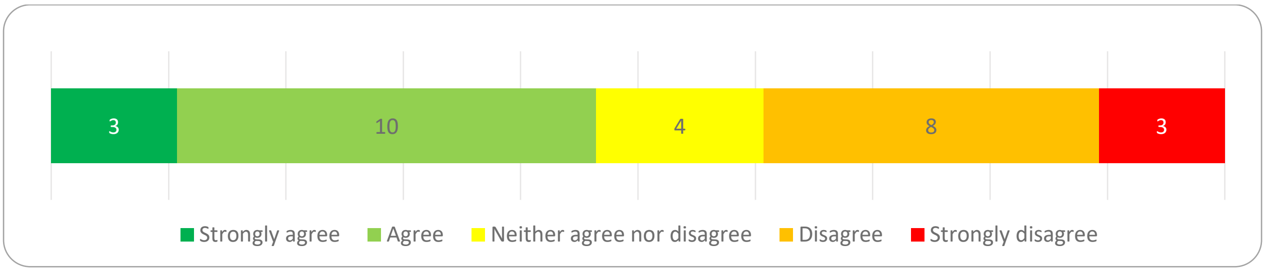
Rather than repeat these questions, we decided to capture additional information about the recruitment of new trustees. We learnt that 29 members had attempted to recruit new board members in the past 12 months. When asked to rank the types of expertise sought from new trustees, these organisations told us they were most interested in candidates with strong strategy and decision-making skills, followed by financial management and leadership experience (see ***Figure 6***). Knowledge and experience of public affairs and research was least desired.

Figure 6: Relative importance of skills and knowledge sought from new trustees



Members were also asked about the ease with which they recruited new trustees to their board. Views on this were split; 13 agreed it had been easy to recruit new trustees with the competencies desired whilst 11 disagreed (see ***Figure 7***).

Figure 7: ACRE members' agreement with the statement "I found it easy to recruit trustees with these competencies"

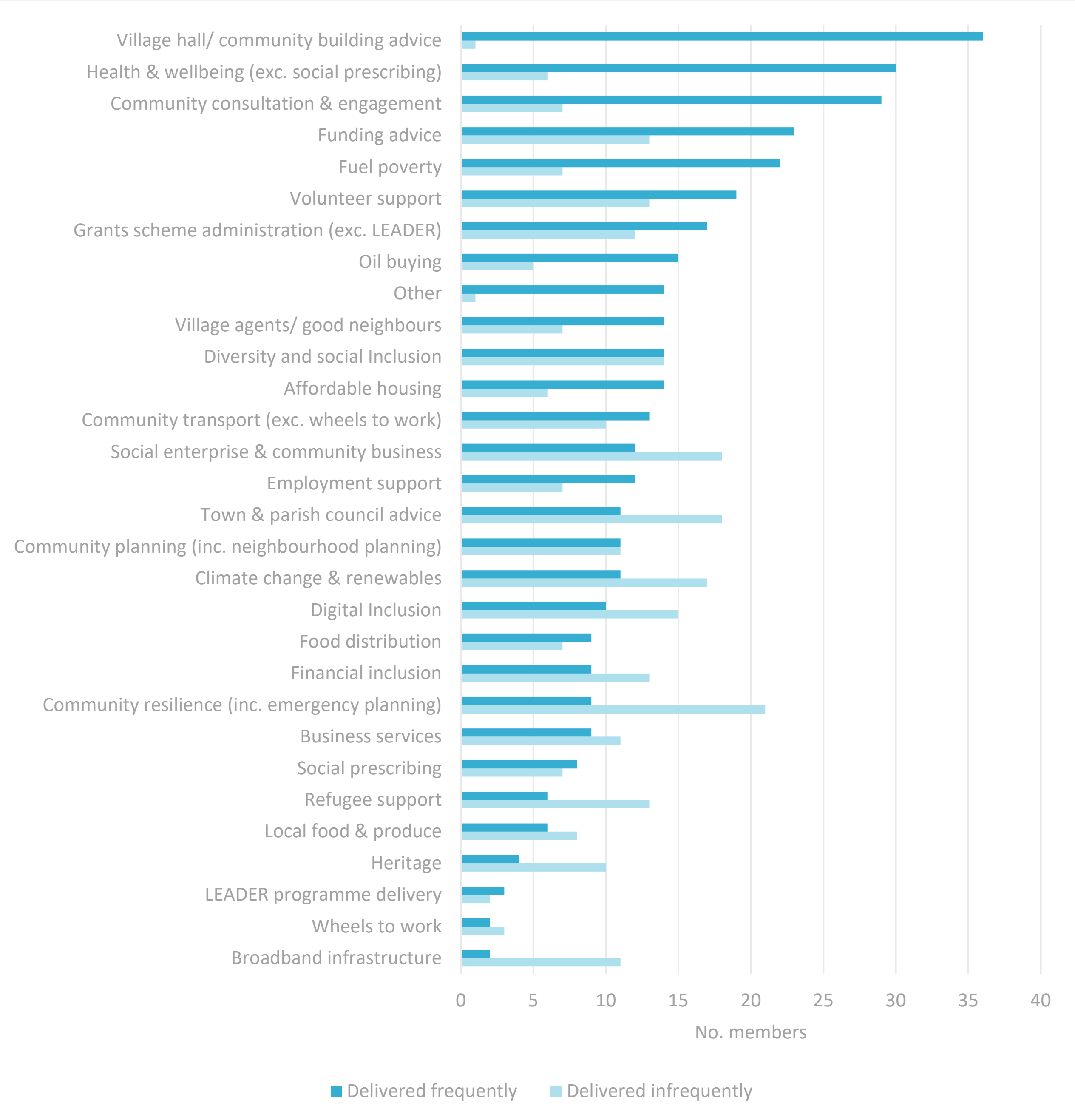


Services and projects supported

It can sometimes be difficult to define the work of ACRE members because they provide a wide range of support for community-led initiatives. The survey did however find there was a great deal of commonality in the services provided (see ***Figure 8***).

All ACRE members provide support and advice for the voluntary committees that manage village and community halls, representing a truly comprehensive national service. Other services provided by the majority of members include health & wellbeing initiatives (*n* 36), support for community consultation & engagement (*n* 36), funding advice (*n* 36), and fuel poverty (*n* 29).

Figure 8: Services delivered by ACRE members by frequency



There has been a significant increase in the number of members who offer support for households experiencing fuel poverty, a trend which suggests the network has played an important role in responding to the staggering energy price increases seen in 2022.

Comparison with the last survey provides an opportunity to see how ACRE members provision of services has changed over the past three years. ***Figure 9*** shows the number of members who said they 'frequently' provide different types of services in 2020 and 2023. In this period, there has been a significant increase (+9) in the number of members who offer support for households experiencing fuel poverty, a trend which suggests the network has played an important role in responding to the staggering energy price increases seen in 2022. Similarly, five more members are involved in food distribution schemes aimed at people most affected by the cost-of-living crisis.

Other services that have become more commonplace in the ACRE Network are support for climate change and renewable projects (+4), and digital inclusion (+4). We are also aware of four members who now offer dedicated support for refugee groups which was not noted in the 2020 survey.

Conversely, there has been a reduction in the number of members frequently providing support for social enterprises and community businesses (-8), community resilience (-8), and funding advice (-7).

Members were also asked if they had seen a change in demand for services they offer (***Figure 10***). Responses to this question roughly align with changing provision. There has been an increase in demand for initiatives addressing cost-of-living related needs such as health and wellbeing (+30) and fuel poverty (+25), as well as funding advice (*n* +25) and support for tackling climate change (+24).

Members also report a sustained increase in demand for village halls information and advice (+28), which can be most likely attributed to interest in the Platinum Jubilee Fund that was launched in the months prior to this survey. It is also plausible that ACRE members gained a greater profile and relevance amongst village halls during the pandemic when they helped management committees apply for emergency funding and navigate complex lockdown rules.

Interestingly, a few members report a decrease in demand for support relating to community planning, consultation and engagement and affordable housing. It's possible there are local circumstances at play here in terms of political encouragement or resource available for such initiatives.

Figure 9: Services ACRE members deliver 'frequently' in 2020 and 2023

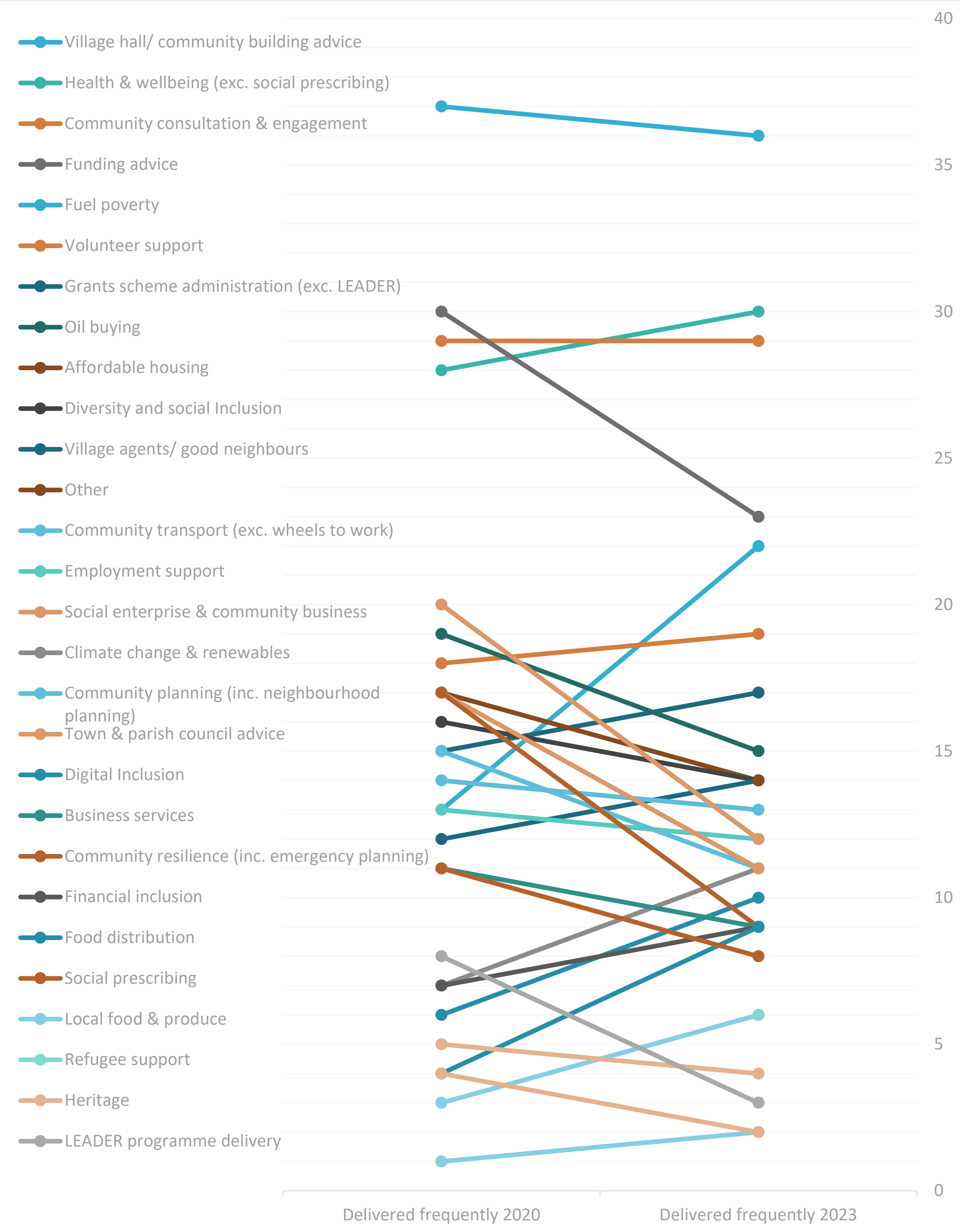
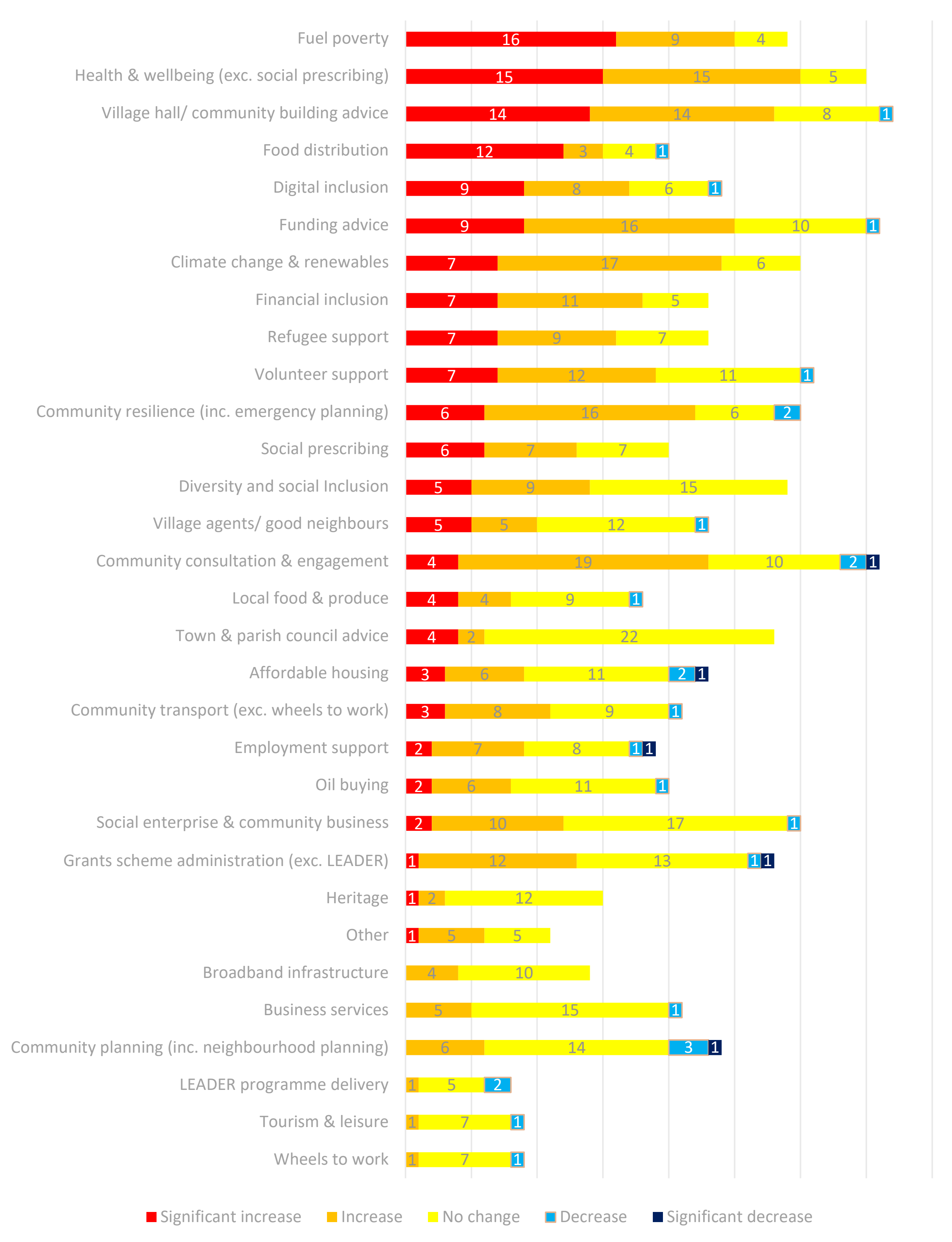


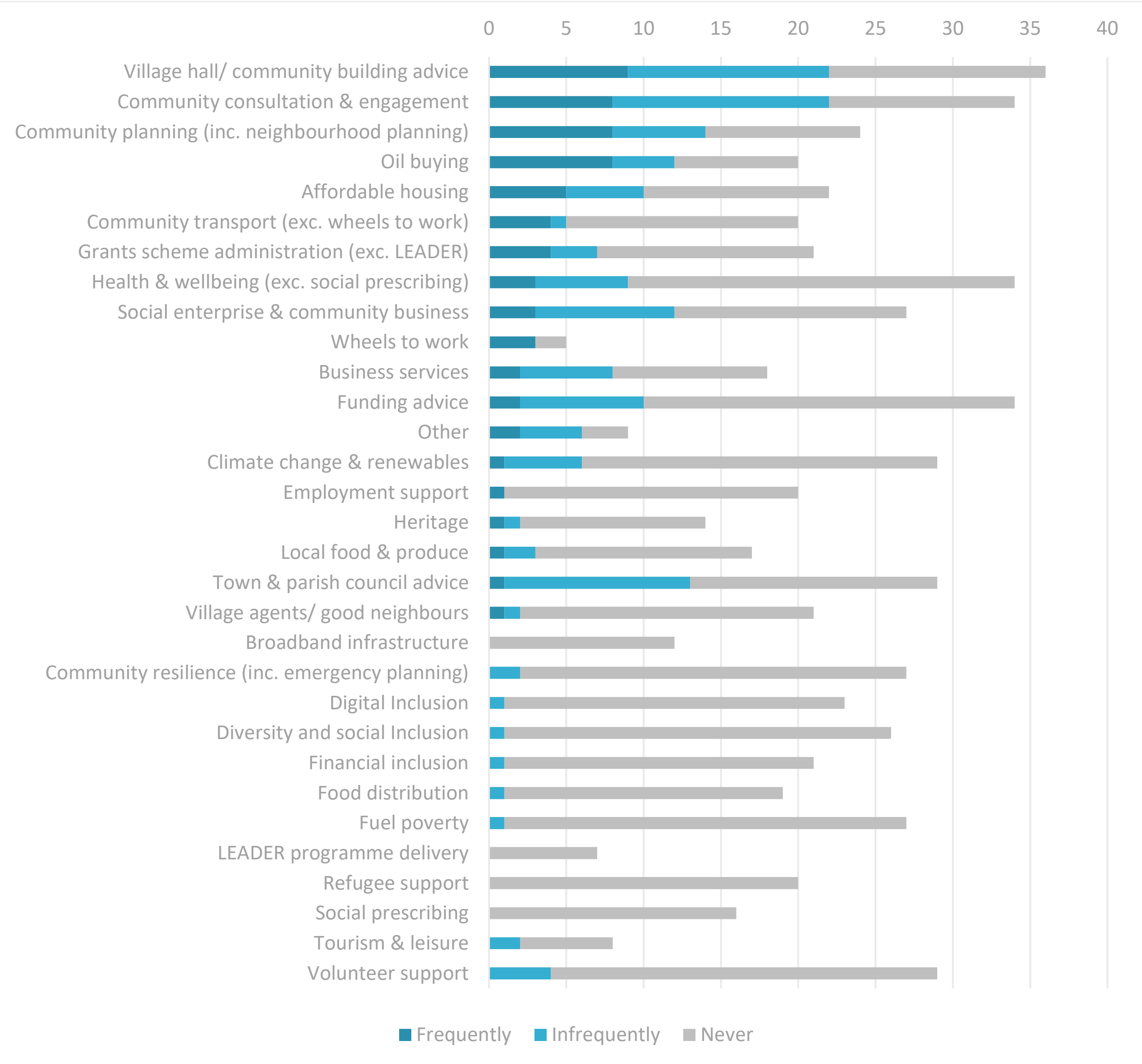
Figure 10: Change in demand for services delivered by ACRE members in the past year



Paid for services

Although ACRE members are run as not-for-profit organisations, many recoup at least some of their costs by charging for the use of specific services. **Figure 11** shows that more than half of ACRE members charge village hall management committees for advice and information (*n* 22), as well as supporting community consultation and engagement activities (*n* 22). Community planning facilitation (*n* 14), fuel buying schemes (*n* 12) and help with affordable housing projects (*n* 10) also attract fees from some members to a lesser extent. This is broadly consistent with 2020.

Figure 11: Services ACRE members charged users for in the past year



Most of these paid for services are likely to be one-off transactions, or linked to membership schemes where there is limited or no grant funding available to sustain this type of activity locally.

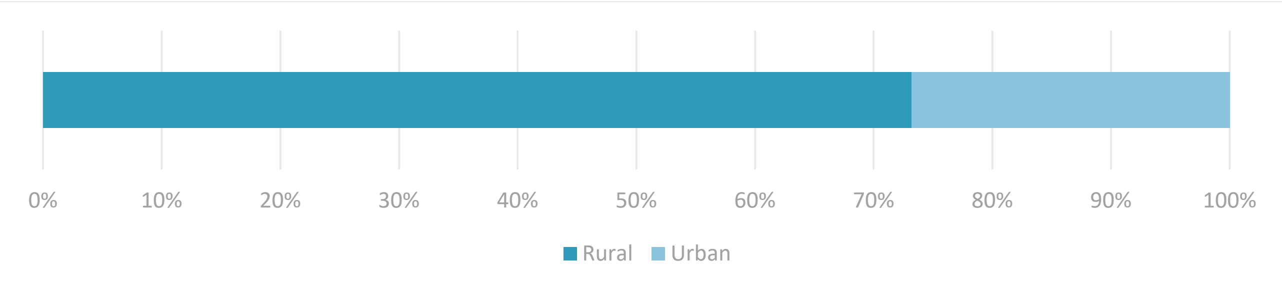
Taken as a whole, paid for services generate 15% of the network's total income, up from 10% in 2020 (see ***Figure 4***).

Rural/urban focus

ACRE members share a focus on rural communities, but their work also often extends into urban areas.

In the survey, members were asked what proportion of their time they spend working with rural communities, vis-a-vis those in urban settings. ***Figure 12*** shows they work with rural communities approximately 73% of the time, down one percentage point on 2020.

Figure 12: Rural/urban balance of work (all ACRE members)



Network reach

At the time of the survey, members of the ACRE Network were operating in every county of England, except for Kent, providing them with an unparalleled geographical reach into rural communities.

It is not possible to accurately say how many people members support each year as there is no regularised mechanism for recording this across the network. However, the survey asked those completing the survey to estimate how many village halls and other community groups they had contact with in the past 12 months.

Whilst the figures provided by respondents should be approached cautiously, we estimate the network reached approximately 7,000 village halls in 2022/23 down from nearly 8,000 in 2020. This equates to about 70% of the total population of village and community buildings thought to exist in England[3]. The drop in engagement is not unexpected as the previous survey was conducted during the Covid pandemic when many management committees were seeking help to negotiate complicated lockdown rules. Some members said they had been in contact with more halls than others, ranging from 522 in one instance to 12 in another (suggesting the question was interpreted differently), whilst the average was 190.

Of course, members also serve many other types of local stakeholders. The survey also revealed they reached over 21,000 other community groups and local organisations in the past year (compared to 27,000 in 2020) with the network average being 568 contacts per member.

Taken as a whole, ACRE members can be said to reach over 28,000 community groups and organisations across England each year.

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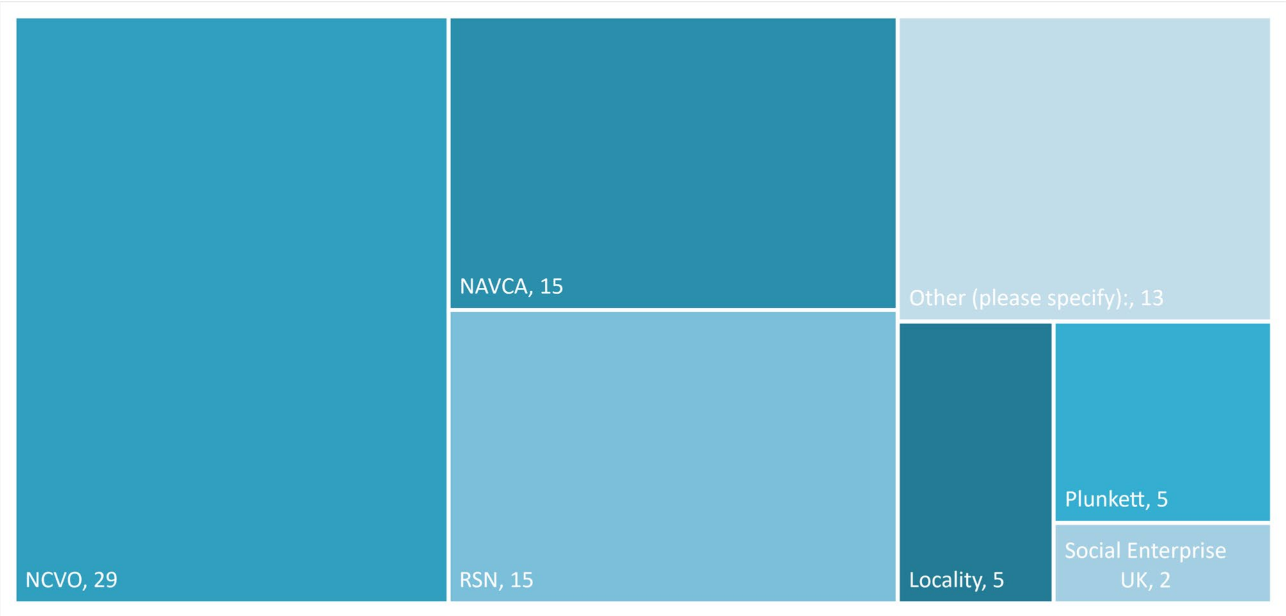
[3] https://acre.org.uk/the-english-village-and-community-hall-survey-2020/

Affiliations

ACRE members also affiliate to other national organisations and networks, reflective of the breadth of services and support they provide.

Figure 13 maps out these relationships and shows that 29 members are affiliated to NCVO[4] which chimes with their focus on supporting volunteering. More than one third of members also have a relationship with NAVCA[5] (an organisation representing local voluntary and community sector infrastructure organisations) and RSN[6] which campaigns specifically on rural services. A few ACRE members also have a relationship with Locality (a network of local community organisations), Plunkett and Social Enterprise UK who support the community business and social enterprise sectors respectively. Other organisations singularly mentioned include VCSP, Community Transport Association, Community Land Trusts Network, Charity Finance Group, ACEVO and the Federation of Small Businesses.

Figure 13: ACRE members affiliation to other organisations



Main areas of expertise

As part of this year's survey, we decided to find out where ACRE members have the most expertise. Respondents were asked to rank up to three types of specialism from a pre-given list where they felt their organisation excelled.

The ranked scores for each type of specialism in ***Figure 14*** shows that the ACRE Network self-identifies as having the most expertise in providing advice to village halls and community buildings which is unsurprising given this is a service provided by all members. But support for community consultation and engagement, and to a lesser extent, good neighbour schemes and volunteering also scored highly. Together these can be seen to represent the ACRE Network's unique selling point.

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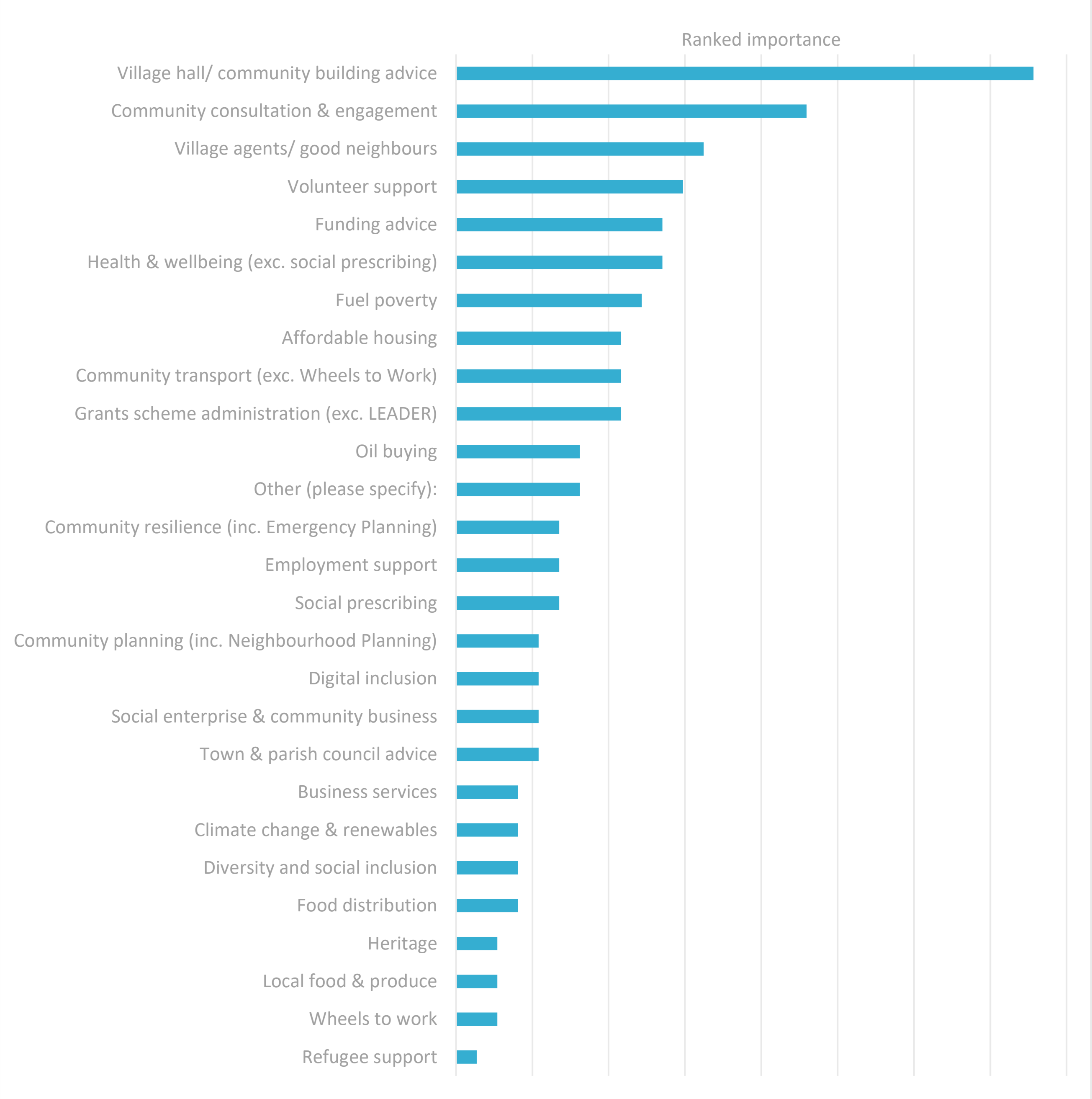
[4] National Council for Voluntary Organisations https://www.ncvo.org.uk/
[5] National Association or Voluntary and Community Action https://navca.org.uk/
[6] Rural Services Network https://www.rsnonline.org.uk/

Responses to this question also suggest there are some areas of the network's expertise that may need to be developed when considered alongside the changing demand for services and the issues thought to be a priority locally. For example, members report increasing demand for support with initiatives linked to addressing climate change and use of renewables, yet this attracted a relatively low score in terms of their self-reported areas of expertise. It would also make sense for more members to expand their capacity and expertise in the areas of community transport, affordable housing and fuel poverty as these are considered to be key issues in their constituencies (see ***Figure 18***).

Figure 14: Main areas of expertise as ranked by ACRE members



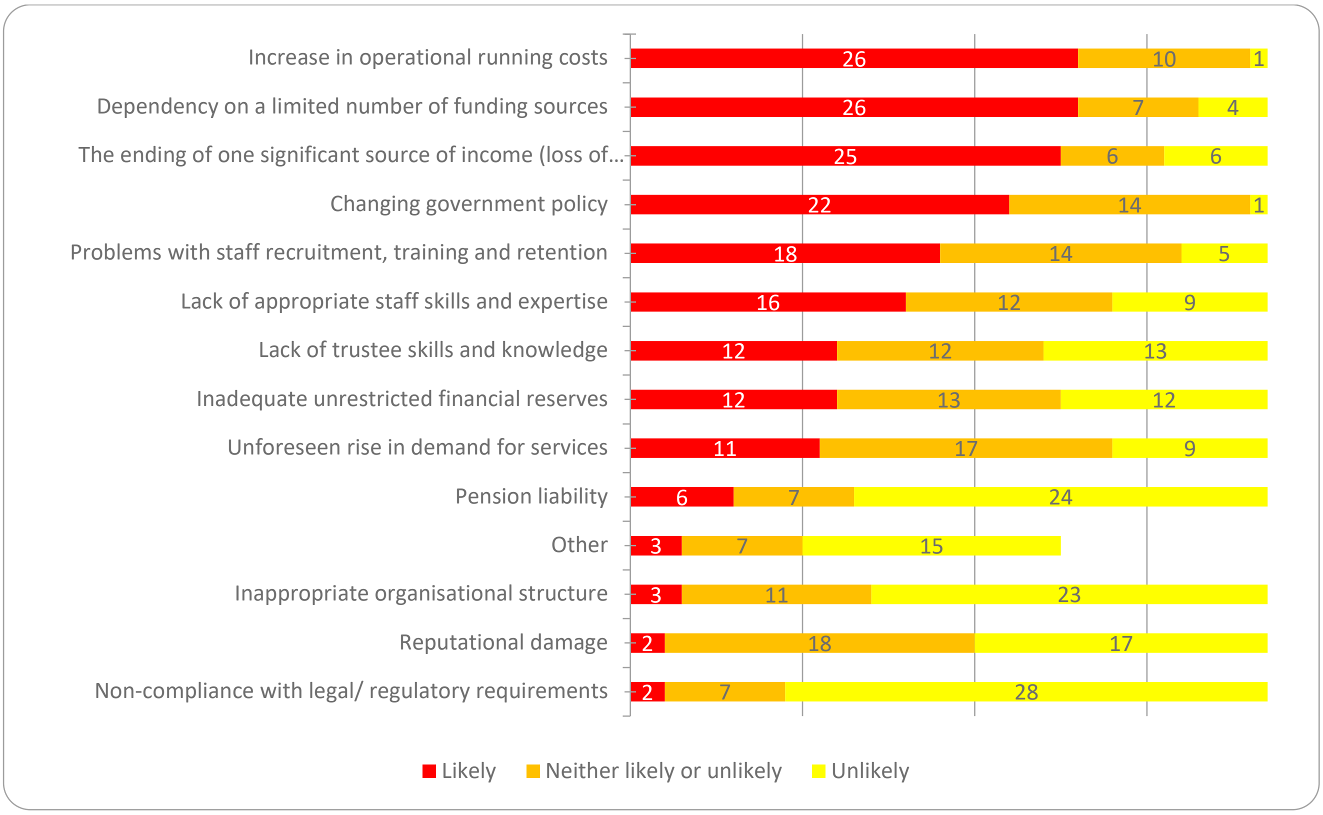
Corporate risks

Also new for the 2023 survey were questions about corporate risks. We wanted to understand what threats members perceive to exist for their organisation in terms of their likelihood and impact.

Figure 15 shows that 26 members believed increases in operational running costs are possibly making this the most likely risk facing the ACRE Network. This is unsurprising given rates of inflation were at a 20 year high in the first quarter of 2023 when the survey was completed. Increased running costs can be attributed to rent, energy costs and staff salaries all going up, amongst other factors.

Other likely risks identified by respondents relate to the precarity of revenue generation, both in terms of dependency on a limited number of funding sources (identified by 26 members) and the ending of one significant source of income (*n* 25). Changing government policy and problems around recruiting and retaining staff with appropriate skills and knowledge were also considered to be likely by more than half of ACRE members.

Figure 15: ACRE members' assessment of the likelihood of risks to their organisation

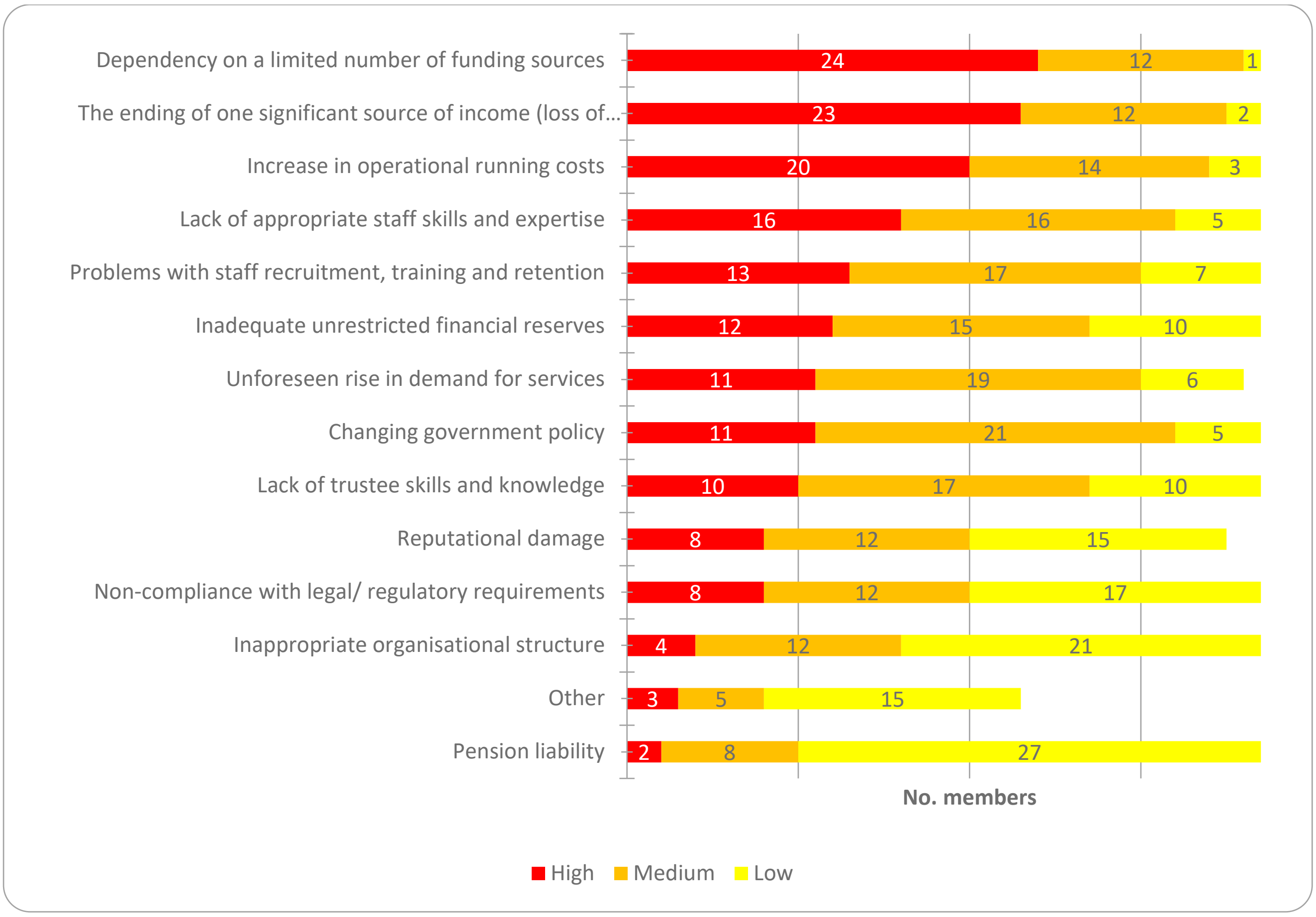


In terms of impact (see ***Figure 16***), members pointed to the vulnerability of their income as the biggest risk facing their organisation. Nearly two thirds of respondents cited their dependency on a limited number of funding sources and/or the loss of one significant source of income as having the potential to cause significant disruption.

Other risks that members believe could have a high impact on their organisation are increases in operational running costs (referenced by 20 members), and a lack of staff with appropriate skills and expertise (*n* 16).

Taking the probability and impact of risks together, clearly financial security is the main concern. Working on diversifying members' funding sources and managing ongoing running costs should therefore be priority concerns for the ACRE Network. This may involve deriving a greater proportion of funding from more reliable revenue streams such as membership fees or longer-term grants and contracts, as well as the reduction of costs such as reviewing the use of office space to keep rents and energy bills as low as possible.

Figure 16: ACRE members' assessment of the impact of risks to their organisation



Lastly, we asked members to comment on whether they felt the cost-of-living crisis had influenced their assessment of these risks. **Figure 17** shows the types of comment made by frequency.

The bulk of responses referred to how the cost-of-living crisis has resulted in increased running costs, especially with regards to staff salaries. Many members say they are struggling to keep pace with these costs and expect knock-on implications for retaining personnel.

The cost-of-living crisis is impacting on the affordability of us running our services as we are not seeing any increase in funds from our finders but are having to accept the increase in costs ourselves in terms of salary increases etc. We are going to have conversations with our commissioners about this as the contracts are fixed but the cost of living is increasing. We are also seeing a rise in our bills and the needs of our staff. Staff needs are (understandably) impacting on their ability to do their jobs (ID: 212783237)

Figure 17: Types of comments made about the cost-of-living crisis and how this has impacted respondents' assessment of organisational risks, by frequency

Comment type	Frequency
Staff salaries, recruitment & retention	19
Increased non-staff costs	15
Increased demand for services	8
Grants have not increased in line with inflation	6
Lack of new funding opportunities	4
Contract renewal	2
Increased competition with other agencies/ service providers	1
No change	1
Reducing reserves	1
Uncertainty	1
Rationalised office accommodation to save costs	1

Priority rural issues

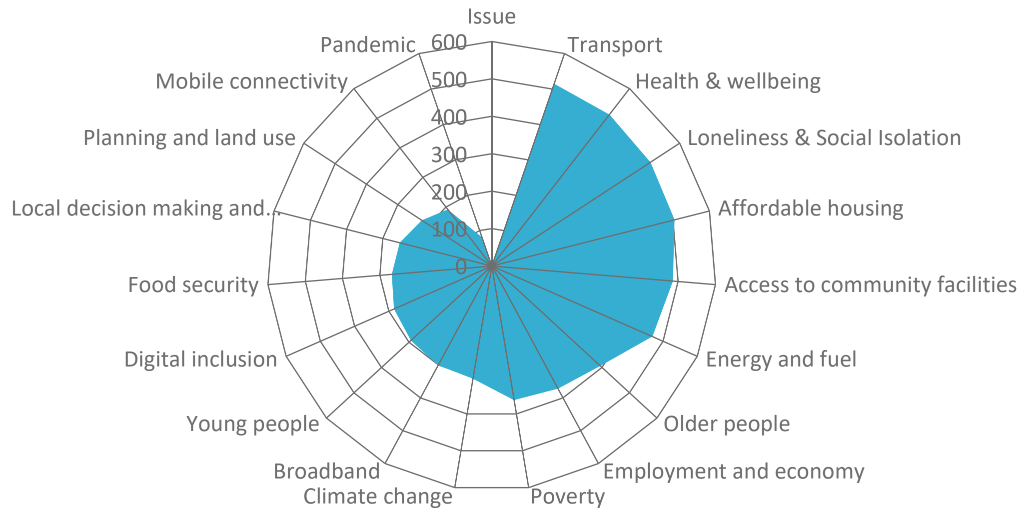
ACRE members provide a voice on rural issues, drawing on their experience of supporting rural communities and channelled through ACRE nationally.

There are many issues that are unique or have a particular pertinence to rural communities on which ACRE has provided advocacy over the years. To establish the relative importance of these concerns, the survey asked members to rank common issues by significance to their rural area. ***Figure 18*** shows the weighted score of each issue as determined by all members.

Transport, health and wellbeing, loneliness, and affordable housing were all considered the most pressing rural issues in 2023. This compares to health and wellbeing, loneliness, and access to community facilities in 2020. Very little importance was attached to the pandemic suggesting that the shadow of Covid has finally dissipated.

Network leaders may wish to consider addressing the mismatch between the strengths of concerns about transport and affordable housing and the number of members providing support for these issues (see ***Figure 8***).

Figure 18: Relative importance of local rural issues as defined by members



Many members are encountering people needing more support, particularly with regards to fuel poverty and access to services

The survey followed with a question providing respondents with an opportunity to explain how the cost-of-living crisis has impacted their assessment of local issues. The types of comments made (see ***Figure 19***) demonstrate that many members are encountering people needing more support, particularly with regards to fuel poverty and access to services, validating the prominence of these issues in the spider web above.

More and more people in rural areas are falling into poverty as a result of energy, food and transport costs. Access to services becomes more difficult and young and old people are most likely to be adversely affected and more isolated as a result. (ID: 214625430)

Our recent Warm Hubs programme has influenced these concerns as we have been directly supporting people with unmet health/poverty needs and rural isolation is more difficult for these people during the cost-of-living crisis. Access to services has also become more prominent and lacking rural transport compounds this issue (ID: 12291511)

Figure 19: Types of comments made about the cost-of-living crisis and how this has influenced respondent's assessment of priority local issues

Comment type	Frequency
Fuel poverty more of a concern	14
Access to services more of a concern	11
Housing issues more of a concern	6
Food security becoming worse	5
Employment issues more of a concern	3
Little change	3
Population health worsening	2
Local government restructuring	1
Difficult to quantify change	1
Re-prioritised issues	1
Exacerbated existing issues	1

Support from local public bodies

ACRE members work with other organisations locally in their service of rural communities. The support of public sector bodies in particular can make a significant difference to members' work as they shape the local policy and funding landscape that can help or hinder community-led initiatives.

We asked ACRE members about the support they get from different types of public bodies in their area. ***Figure 20*** shows that county councils are generally the most supportive, followed by district councils. The picture is more mixed in terms of support offered by unitary authorities which only exist in some parts of the country.

Similar to the 2020 survey, support from public bodies concerned with health and care, and local economic development is much more limited. Indeed, the majority of members reported Integrated Care Systems (formerlly CCGs) and Local Economic Partnerships to be 'neither supportive or unsupportive' suggesting that they are either ambivilent to their work or do not engage. But more worringly are those members who say these bodies are unsupportive or perhaps counterproductive to their efforts to support rural communities.

Free text comments made by six members suggest that a key concern is a blindness towards rural issues or a bias in favour of urban concerns, especially with respect to the newly formed ISCs and LEPs.

"None of the local authorities or public service providers in our area have a specific rural policy or focus on rural except for the Police and Crime Commissioner who has made rural crime a priority." (ID: 214625430)

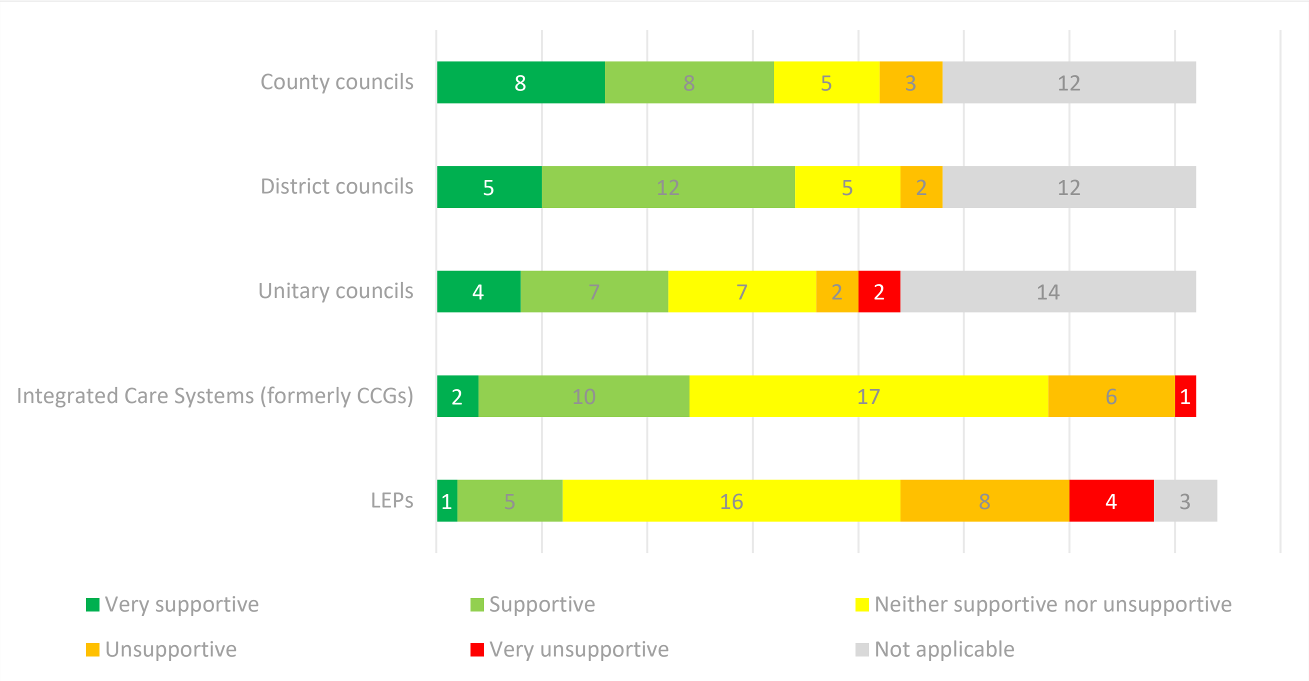
"Focus [is] on population dense areas. NHS focus on acute hospitals, which are in urban areas. LEP oblivious to anything that isnt about high-tech or major construction" (ID: 212190885)

A similar number of respondents commented that support for rural communities is superficial, and not backed up with funding.

Supportive does not always equate to funding. (ID: 213564865)

"These kinds of organisations are always very supportive of the work we do, but this support rarely extends to financial support."

Figure 20: Members' perceptions of the support offered by different types of public bodies locally



Social impact

The ACRE Network exists to make a positive difference to rural communities. Whilst information about the outcomes of local projects and programmes is often captured locally, the survey sought to ascertain members' own perception of where they achieve the most impact. It asked members to identify the top three types of impact they believe they make locally.

Figure 21 is a spider web detailing the frequency different types of social impact that were selected by members in 2023, compared with 2020. Responses are remarkably consistent to those captured in the previous survey. 'Reduced social isolation and loneliness' continues to be the most cited type of social impact (*n* 31) that ACRE members attribute to their work. This was followed by 'a stronger voice for rural communities' (*n* 19) and 'better social cohesion' (*n* 16) which squeaked above 'a stronger culture of volunteering and mutual aid' this time around (*n* 13). It is interesting to note that few members identified 'more environmentally sustainable behaviours' as a significant type of social impact, again suggested a lag between increasing demand for this type of support, and the confidence and capacity of ACRE members to respond.

Figure 21: Top three types of social impact cited by members in 2023 and 2020

Future prospects

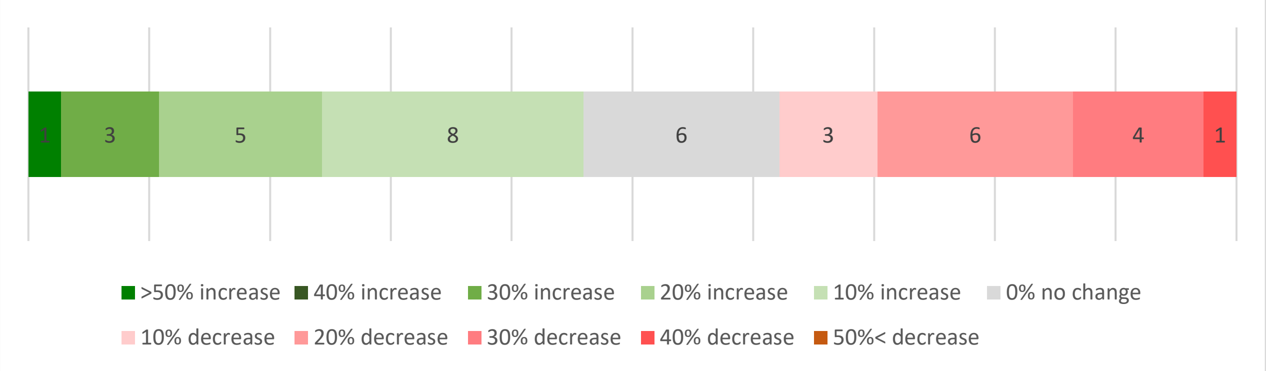
The 2023 survey concluded with a set of related questions intended to appraise the outlook of ACRE members.

First, we asked respondents to estimate their income for the next financial year in terms of a percentage increase or decrease. Albeit several members advised us they were waiting on confirmation of significant sources of funding at the time of completing the survey, the responses provided gave a mixed picture.

Figure 22 shows that 17 members expected their income to increase, compared to 14 who thought there would be a decrease. This is much more positive than the responses we received to the 2020 survey which showed that 21 members anticipated decreasing incomes, possibly because of uncertainties surrounding the pandemic and its impact on the sector.

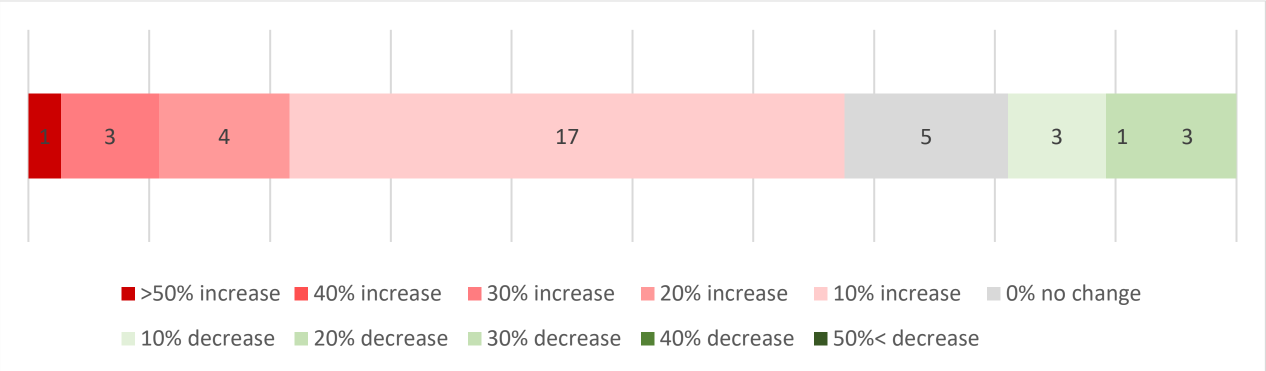
More granular analysis reveals that larger members of the ACRE Network appear to be in a more stable position with respect to their income. Eight organisations in the network have a turnover of more than £1.9m, all of whom predict increases in income of between 16% – 51%. By contrast, six members expect their income to decrease by more than 20%, five of whom have turnovers of less than £600k.

Figure 22: Distribution of ACRE members reporting an anticipated increase or decrease of income in the next financial year



The survey demonstrates much greater uncertainty about expenditure. Most members (*n* 25) told us they expected their operational costs to increase, whilst seven thought they would decrease (see ***Figure 23***). This is a likely consequence of cost-of-living pressures, as reflected in the risk profiling questions which showed that many members were concerned about increasing overheads such as staffing costs.

Figure 23: Distribution of ACRE members reporting an anticipated increase or decrease of expenditure in the next financial year

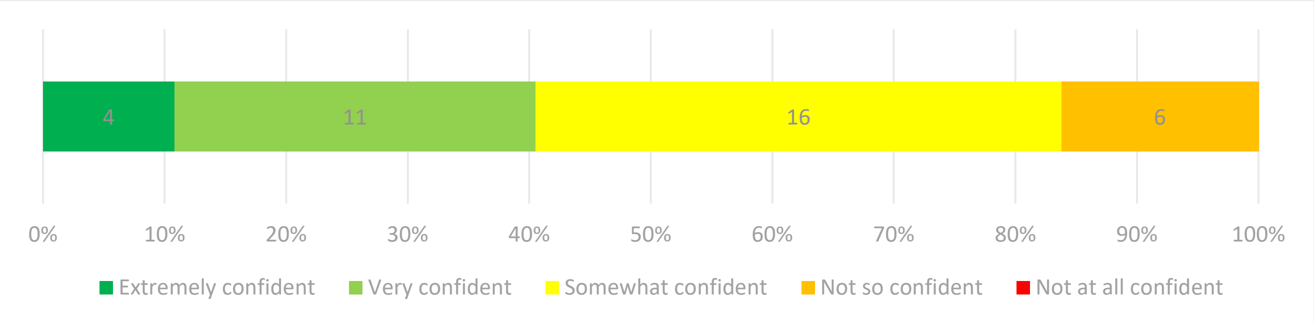


Comparing anticipated income and expenditure figures for each member also provides an opportunity to profile financial risk for individual members in terms of identifying sizable deficits. Whilst several members appeared to have deficits, none of them were for organisations reporting a significant loss in income which would give more cause for concern.

Another measure of future prospects is a view on whether staffing levels will increase. In this year's survey 18 members said they expected their staff compliment would increase in the next financial year, whilst ten said this would decrease. This compares favourably with eight members who said their staffing levels would grow in 2020, and 13 who said it would decrease.

Finally, we asked respondents to say how confident they were in their organisation's prospects overall. ***Figure 24*** shows that 15 members are either confident or very confident, whilst 16 said they were somewhat confident. Only six said they were not so confident, but these responses did not correlate to other observations for these members that would give cause for concern (e.g. significant deficits, reduction in staffing numbers etc). Again, responses to this question suggest an improvement on the 2020 survey when 12 members said they lacked confidence in the future for their organisation.

Figure 24: Distribution of responses from members when asked about their confidence in their organisation's future



Appendix A: Questionnaire Form

Introduction

In 2020 we conducted a survey to capture basic information about ACRE members. It was an opportunity for us to better understand the size and reach of your organisation, the services you provide, and the environment in which you operate. You can view the report here.

We are running the survey again to see how things have changed since then.

By completing the survey, you will equip us with data we can use to improve the work we do to promote The ACRE Network, to influence policy and to apply for funding to support the work of The Network.

The questionnaire form should be completed by a senior member of staff and should take about 30 minutes to complete. There is a facility to save and complete your response at any time.

We will only use the data you provide to report on the state of the ACRE Network as a whole and will not share details unique to your organisation with third parties without your permission.

Please complete the survey by 31 March. Thank you for spending time on this.

Your organisation

1. Name of organisation *

Current financial standing

2. What is your estimated income for the current financial year (i.e. 2022/2023 to the nearest £1,000)? *

3. What is your estimated expenditure for the current financial year (i.e. 2022/2023 to the nearest £1,000)? *

4. What are your estimated unrestricted reserves for the end of this financial year (i.e. 2022/2023 to the nearest £1,000)? *

Current financial standing

5. Please tell us about the distribution of your organisation's income in the current financial year (i.e. 2022/2023). Please specify the approximate % income derived from the following sources (total must equal 100%) *

Contracts %

Defra grant %

Donations %

Fundraising %

Loans %

Local grants

%

Membership fees

%

Other national grants

%

Paid for services

%

Total:

%

Current staffing

6. How many staff do you currently employ (including freelancers)? *

7. What is the Full Time Equivalent (FTE) figure for all staff currently employed by your organisation? *

Governance

8. Have you attempted to recruit new board members in the past 12 months? *

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No

9. What skills/ knowledge you were looking for when recruiting new board members?

Please order in terms of importance

Emotional intelligence

Financial management

Human resources

Leadership

Marketing/ communication ☐

Policy knowledge ☐

Professional connections ☐

Public affairs ☐

Research/ data analysis ☐

Strategy decision making ☐

Other (please specify below) ☐

Other skills/ knowledge

10. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

"I found it easy to recruit trustees with these competencies"

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

Comments:

Services and projects supported

11. What type of services and projects have you delivered in the past 12 months? Please indicate the frequency of the service provided *

	Delivered frequently	Delivered infrequently	Not delivered
Affordable housing	☐	☐	☐

	Delivered frequently	Delivered infrequently	Not delivered
Broadband infrastructure	☐	☐	☐
Business services	☐	☐	☐
Climate change & renewables	☐	☐	☐
Community consultation & engagement	☐	☐	☐
Community planning (inc. neighbourhood planning)	☐	☐	☐
Community resilience (inc. emergency planning)	☐	☐	☐
Community transport (exc. wheels to work)	☐	☐	☐
Digital Inclusion	☐	☐	☐
Diversity and social Inclusion	☐	☐	☐
Employment support	☐	☐	☐
Financial inclusion	☐	☐	☐
Food distribution	☐	☐	☐
Fuel poverty	☐	☐	☐
Funding advice	☐	☐	☐
Grants scheme administration (exc. LEADER)	☐	☐	☐
Health & wellbeing (exc. social prescribing)	☐	☐	☐
Heritage	☐	☐	☐
LEADER programme delivery	☐	☐	☐

	Delivered frequently	Delivered infrequently	Not delivered
Local food & produce			
Oil buying			
Refugee support			
Social enterprise & community business			
Social prescribing			
Tourism & leisure			
Town & parish council advice			
Village agents/ good neighbours			
Village hall/ community building advice			
Volunteer support			
Wheels to work			
Other			

12. In the past 12 months, have you seen any change in demand for the following services?

	Significant increase	Increase	No change	Decrease	Significant decrease	Not applicable/ do not deliver
Affordable housing						
Broadband infrastructure						
Business services						
Climate change & renewables						

	Significant increase	Increase	No change	Decrease	Significant decrease	Not applicable/ do not deliver
Community consultation & engagement	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Community planning (inc. neighbourhood planning)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Community resilience (inc. emergency planning)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Community transport (exc. wheels to work)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Digital Inclusion	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Diversity and social Inclusion	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Employment support	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Financial inclusion	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Food distribution	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Fuel poverty	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Funding advice	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Grants scheme administration (exc. LEADER)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Health & wellbeing (exc. social prescribing)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Heritage	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
LEADER programme delivery	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Local food & produce	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Oil buying	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

	Significant increase	Increase	No change	Decrease	Significant decrease	Not applicable/ do not deliver
Refugee support	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Social enterprise & community business	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Social prescribing	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Tourism & leisure	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Town & parish council advice	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Village agents/ good neighbours	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Village hall/ community building advice	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Volunteer support	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Wheels to work	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Other	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

13. In the past 12 months, have you charged communities/ users for any of the following services? *

	Frequently	Infrequently	Never	Not applicable/ do not deliver
Affordable housing	☐	☐	☐	☐
Broadband infrastructure	☐	☐	☐	☐
Business services	☐	☐	☐	☐
Climate change & renewables	☐	☐	☐	☐
Community consultation & engagement	☐	☐	☐	☐
Community planning (inc. neighbourhood planning)	☐	☐	☐	☐

	Frequently	Infrequently	Never	Not applicable/ do not deliver
Community resilience (inc. emergency planning)	☐	☐	☐	☐
Community transport (exc. wheels to work)	☐	☐	☐	☐
Digital Inclusion	☐	☐	☐	☐
Diversity and social Inclusion	☐	☐	☐	☐
Employment support	☐	☐	☐	☐
Financial inclusion	☐	☐	☐	☐
Food distribution	☐	☐	☐	☐
Fuel poverty	☐	☐	☐	☐
Funding advice	☐	☐	☐	☐
Grants scheme administration (exc. LEADER)	☐	☐	☐	☐
Health & wellbeing (exc. social prescribing)	☐	☐	☐	☐
Heritage	☐	☐	☐	☐
LEADER programme delivery	☐	☐	☐	☐
Local food & produce	☐	☐	☐	☐
Oil buying	☐	☐	☐	☐
Refugee support	☐	☐	☐	☐
Social enterprise & community business	☐	☐	☐	☐
Social prescribing	☐	☐	☐	☐

	Frequently	Infrequently	Never	Not applicable/ do not deliver
Tourism & leisure	☐	☐	☐	☐
Town & parish council advice	☐	☐	☐	☐
Village agents/ good neighbours	☐	☐	☐	☐
Village hall/ community building advice	☐	☐	☐	☐
Volunteer support	☐	☐	☐	☐
Wheels to work	☐	☐	☐	☐
Other	☐	☐	☐	☐

Rural reach

14. What's the balance of your work between urban and rural communities? (Total must equal 100%) *

Rural ☐ %

Urban ☐ %

Total: ☐ %

15. Approximately, how many village halls and community buildings have you been in contact with in the past 12 months? *

☐

16. Approximately, how many other community and voluntary groups or organisations have you been in contact with in the past 12 months? *

☐

Affiliations

17. Is your organisation a member of, or affiliated to, any of the following national organisations? *

- [ ] Locality
- [ ] NAVCA
- [ ] NCVO
- [ ] Plunkett
- [ ] RSN
- [ ] Social Enterprise UK
- [ ] Other (please specify):

Expertise

18. We would like to know where you think your organisation has the most expertise. From the following list, please select three areas of expertise where your organisation excels. *

- [ ] Affordable housing
- [ ] Broadband infrastructure
- [ ] Business services
- [ ] Climate change & renewables
- [ ] Community consultation & engagement
- [ ] Community planning (inc. Neighbourhood Planning)
- [ ] Community resilience (inc. Emergency Planning)
- [ ] Community transport (exc. Wheels to Work)
- [ ] Digital inclusion
- [ ] Diversity and social inclusion

- [ ] Employment support
- [ ] Financial inclusion
- [ ] Food distribution
- [ ] Fuel poverty
- [ ] Funding advice
- [ ] Grants scheme administration (exc. LEADER)
- [ ] Health & wellbeing (exc. social prescribing)
- [ ] Heritage
- [ ] LEADER programme delivery
- [ ] Local food & produce
- [ ] Oil buying
- [ ] Refugee support
- [ ] Social prescribing
- [ ] Social enterprise & community business
- [ ] Tourism & leisure
- [ ] Town & parish council advice
- [ ] Village agents/ good neighbours
- [ ] Village hall/ community building advice
- [ ] Volunteer support
- [ ] Wheels to work
- [ ] Other (please specify):

Risk assessment

19. What is your assessment of the likelihood of the following risks to your organisation? *

	Likely	Neither likely or unlikely	Unlikely
Changing government policy	☐	☐	☐
Dependency on a limited number of funding sources	☐	☐	☐
Inadequate unrestricted financial reserves	☐	☐	☐
Inappropriate organisational structure	☐	☐	☐
Increase in operational running costs	☐	☐	☐
Lack of appropriate staff skills and expertise	☐	☐	☐
Lack of trustee skills and knowledge	☐	☐	☐
Non-compliance with legal/ regulatory requirements	☐	☐	☐
Other	☐	☐	☐
Pension liability	☐	☐	☐
Problems with staff recruitment, training and retention	☐	☐	☐
Reputational damage	☐	☐	☐
The ending of one significant source of income (loss of contract, grant etc)	☐	☐	☐
Unforeseen rise in demand for services	☐	☐	☐

Other risk, please state

20. What is your assessment of the impact of the following risks to your organisation? *

	High	Medium	Low
Changing government policy	☐	☐	☐
Dependency on a limited number of funding sources	☐	☐	☐
Inadequate unrestricted financial reserves	☐	☐	☐
Inappropriate organisational structure	☐	☐	☐
Increase in operational running costs	☐	☐	☐
Lack of appropriate staff skills and expertise	☐	☐	☐
Lack of trustee skills and knowledge	☐	☐	☐
Non-compliance with legal/ regulatory requirements	☐	☐	☐
Other	☐	☐	☐
Pension liability	☐	☐	☐
Problems with staff recruitment, training and retention	☐	☐	☐
Reputational damage	☐	☐	☐
The ending of one significant source of income (loss of contract, grant etc)	☐	☐	☐
Unforeseen rise in demand for services	☐	☐	☐

Other risk, please state

21. How is the cost-of-living crisis impacting on your assessment of these risks? Please explain

Local area

22. Thinking about the area your organisation serves, please rank the following concerns in order of importance to rural communities. *

Access to community facilities	
Affordable housing	
Broadband	
Climate change	
Digital inclusion	
Employment and economy	
Energy and fuel	
Food security	
Health & wellbeing	
Local decision making and leadership	
Loneliness & Social Isolation	
Mobile connectivity	
Older people	
Pandemic	
Planning and land use	
Poverty	
Transport	
Young people	

23. How has the cost-of-living crisis influenced your assessment of these concerns to rural communities in your area?

24. Thinking about the local authorities and other public bodies in your area, generally how supportive or unsupportive are they of your work with rural communities? *

	Very supportive	Supportive	Neither supportive nor unsupportive	Unsupportive	Very unsupportive	Not applicable
District councils	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
County councils	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Unitary councils	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Integrated Care Systems (formerly CCGs)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
LEPs	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

25. If you wish to make any specific comments about the support you receive from local authorities or public service providers in your area, please do so here.

Impact

26. Please select three types of social impact from the list below which best describe the outcomes that can be attributed to your work with rural communities. *

☐ Better care for vulnerable and elderly residents

☐ Better local governance and democracy

☐ Better social cohesion

☐ Improved opportunities for young people

☐ Increased supply of affordable housing

- ☐ More environmentally sustainable behaviours
- ☐ More jobs and training opportunities
- ☐ Reduced social isolation and loneliness
- ☐ Stronger culture of volunteering and mutual aid
- ☐ Stronger voice for rural communities
- ☐ Other (please specify):

Future prospects

27. Approximately, what change in income do you expect during the 2023/2024 financial year? *

- ☐ >50% increase
- ☐ 40% increase
- ☐ 30% increase
- ☐ 20% increase
- ☐ 10% increase
- ☐ 0% no change
- ☐ 10% decrease
- ☐ 20% decrease
- ☐ 30% decrease
- ☐ 40% decrease
- ☐ 50%< decrease

28. What change in expenditure do you expect during the 2023/2024 financial year? *

- ☐ >50% increase

- ☐ 40% increase
- ☐ 30% increase
- ☐ 20% increase
- ☐ 10% increase
- ☐ 0% no change
- ☐ 10% decrease
- ☐ 20% decrease
- ☐ 30% decrease
- ☐ 40% decrease
- ☐ 50%< decrease

29. What change in the number of FTE staff (including freelancers) are you expecting in 2023/24 compared to this financial year? *

Incoming staff ☐

Outgoing staff (please enter this as a minus value, i.e. "2") - ☐

Net change: ☐

30. At the time of completing this survey, how confident are you about the future prospects for your organisation? *

- ☐ Extremely confident
- ☐ Very confident
- ☐ Somewhat confident
- ☐ Not so confident
- ☐ Not at all confident

Anything else?

31. Is there anything else you would like to tell us in relation to your organisation that has not been covered in this survey?