



Research with Trustees: 2024

Prepared for the Charity Commission for England and Wales by BMG Research

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Executive Summary

Executive Summary (1/2)

- Trustees are **confident in their responsibilities** and their ability to protect their charity and beneficiaries from harm.
- They generally understand what they should be doing when making important decisions – such as understanding potential costs and what the charity can afford, as well as listening to different views and perspectives, but are **less sure on things they should not be doing**, including avoiding seemingly awkward questions, or making decisions based on trustees' personal views.
- This confidence and understanding of role and responsibility is **greater amongst more experienced trustees**, and those who have had **more interaction with the Commission**.
- **Confidence** in the abilities of the Commission, and **perceptions of fairness are also strong**, and again influenced positively by higher levels of interaction with the Commission. Trustees are aware of their own role in upholding the reputation of the charity sector.

Executive Summary (2/2)

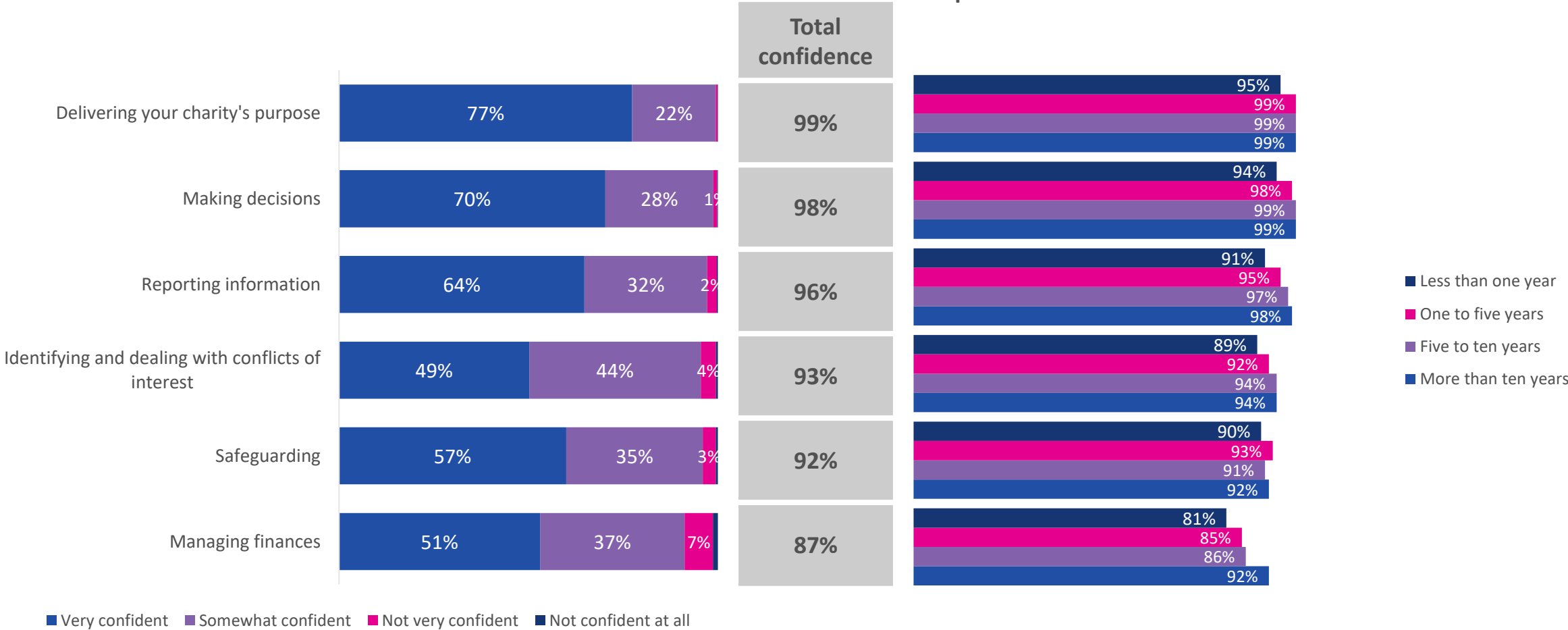
- Generally, perceptions among those who don't interact with the Commission aren't negative, they just **reflect a lack of knowledge about the Commission.**
- In focus groups, some trustees suggested more of a **partnership-style relationship and more signposting** to the ways in which they can get support- particularly in terms of current issues such as banking.
- As not all trustees recognise an opportunity or reason to directly interact with the Commission, the challenge is around **how to shift perceptions and raise awareness among those who don't interact.** Trustees in focus groups had some ideas around how to encourage this.

Trustee Role

Confidence in different areas of trustee work is high, though slightly lower amongst new trustees

Stated confidence in different trustee areas

Total Confidence amongst trustees of different experience levels

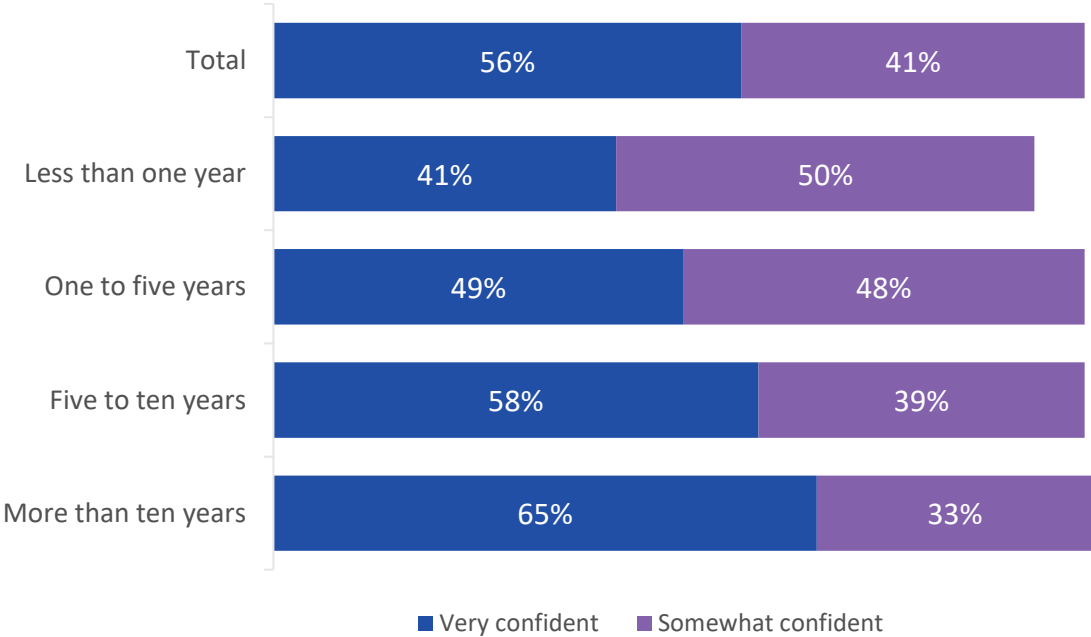


C01: In your role as a trustee, how confident would you say you are in the following areas?
 Base: All trustees (2541) Less than one year as trustee (164) One to five years (853) Five to ten years (618) More than ten years (906)

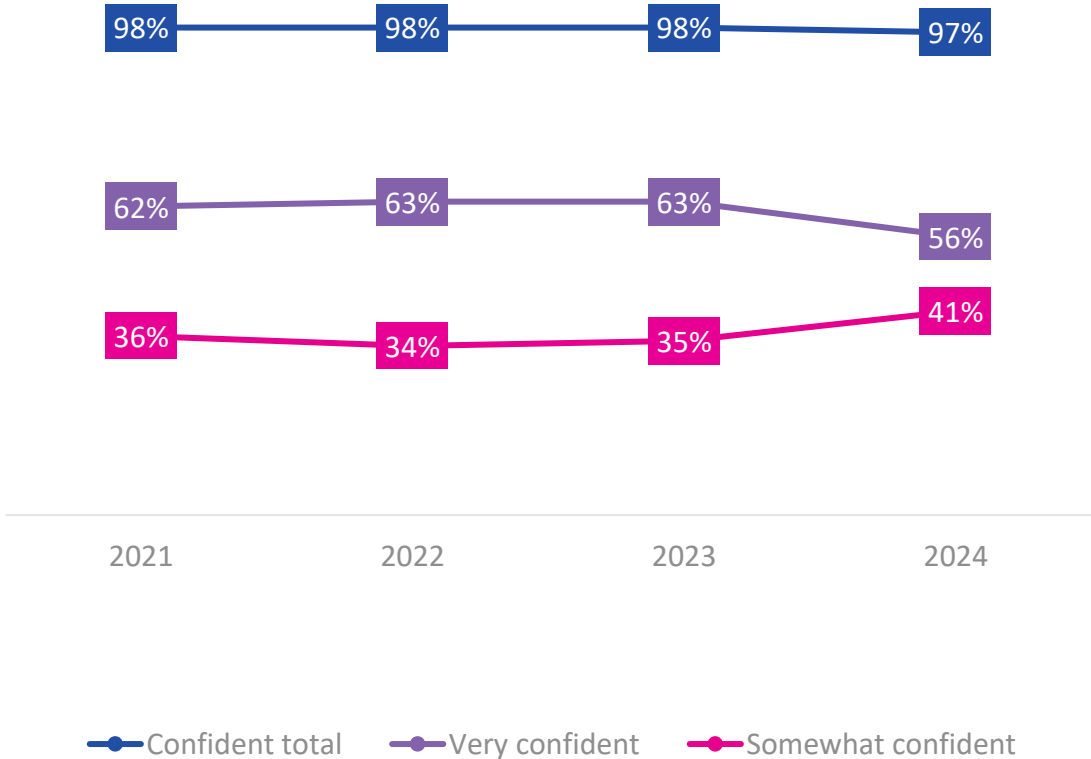


Nearly all trustees are confident in their ability to protect their charity and beneficiaries from wrongdoing and harm, though the level saying they are very confident has dropped

Confidence in ability to protect charity and beneficiaries from wrongdoing and harm, by trustee experience

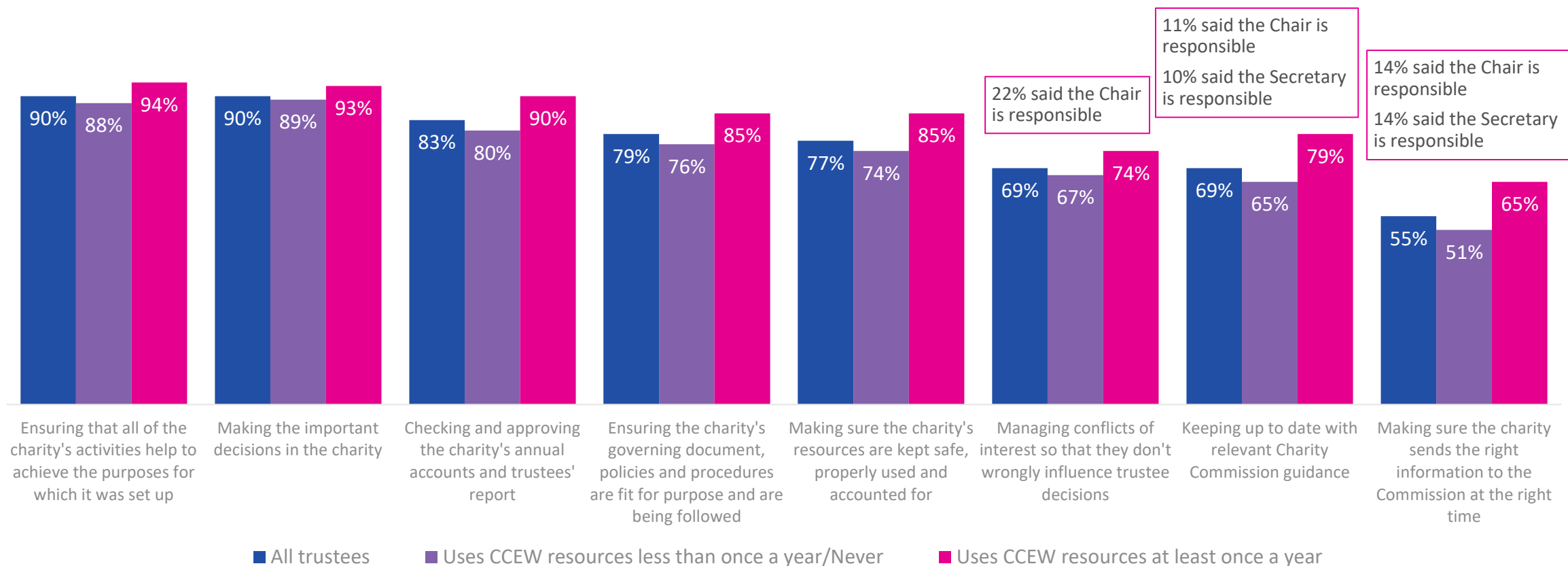


Confidence over time



Trustees are generally aware of their main legal responsibilities, although there are some gaps in their knowledge. Those who use Commission resources are better informed

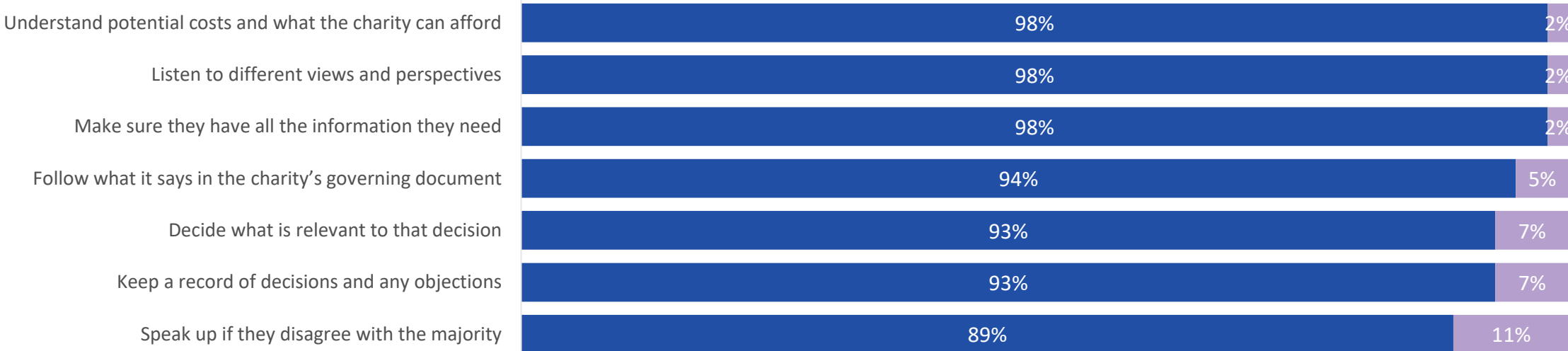
Answered 'the board of trustees are jointly responsible'



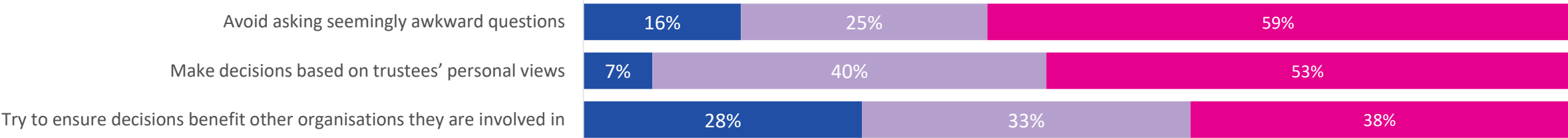
Most trustees know what they should always do when making decisions, but they are less sure about basing decisions on personal views, or recognising conflicts of interest

Things trustees should do

Trustees should always do this It depends Trustees should never do this



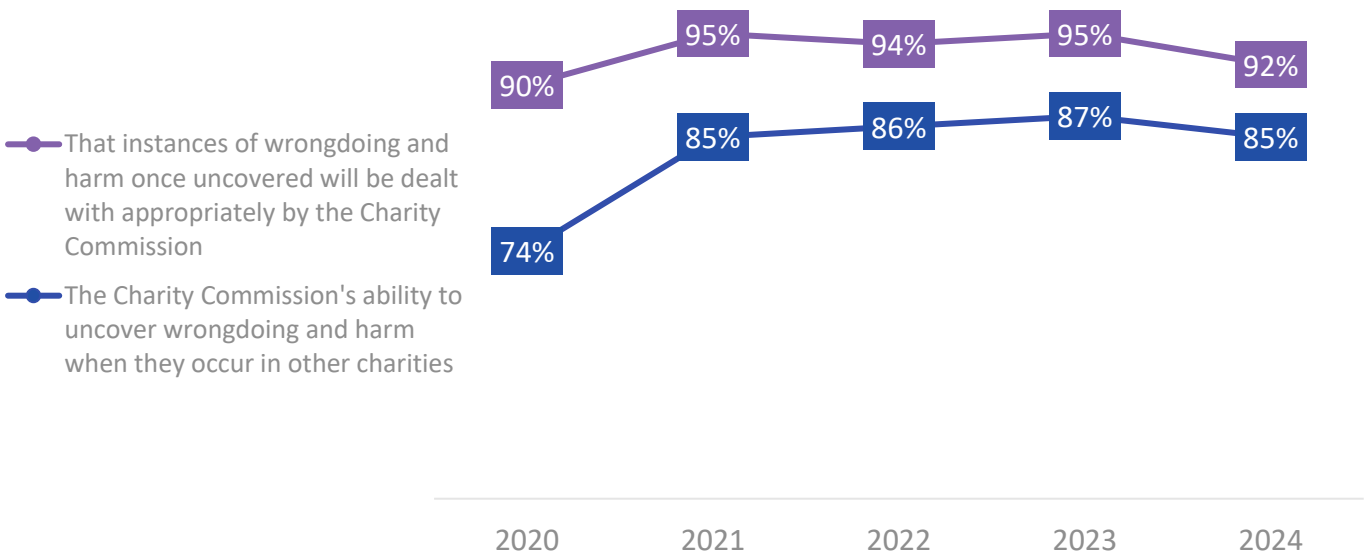
Things trustees should not do



The Commission and Charities in Society

Confidence in the Charity Commission’s ability to uncover wrongdoing and harm, and that wrongdoing will be dealt with appropriately, continues to be high

Confidence in the Charity Commission’s abilities over time



Analysis

Generally most trustee groups have a similar level of confidence in the Charity Commission’s ability to uncover wrongdoing. Those more likely to be confident include:

- Those aware of the 5 minute guides (88%)
- Trustees in Wales (94%)

The only group more likely to be confident in the Charity Commission’s ability to deal with wrongdoing appropriately when uncovered are:

- Those aware of the 5-minute guides (94%)

In focus groups, trustees expressed doubts about the Charity Commission's ability to detect wrongdoing, but confidence that it could tackle it when needed

Confidence in the Charity Commission's abilities

85% are confident in the Charity Commission's ability to uncover wrongdoing and harm when they occur in charities

92% trustees are confident that instances of wrongdoing and harm, once uncovered, will be dealt with appropriately by the Charity Commission



Focus Groups

In focus groups, trustees seemed more sceptical of how the Commission would be able to **uncover wrongdoing itself**, despite it being seen as primarily a regulatory body.

Trustees said that this is expected, given the volume of charities that exist and the limited information that they receive.

They did not consider this a flaw, but rather accept that they might have to rely on other sources reporting wrongdoing.

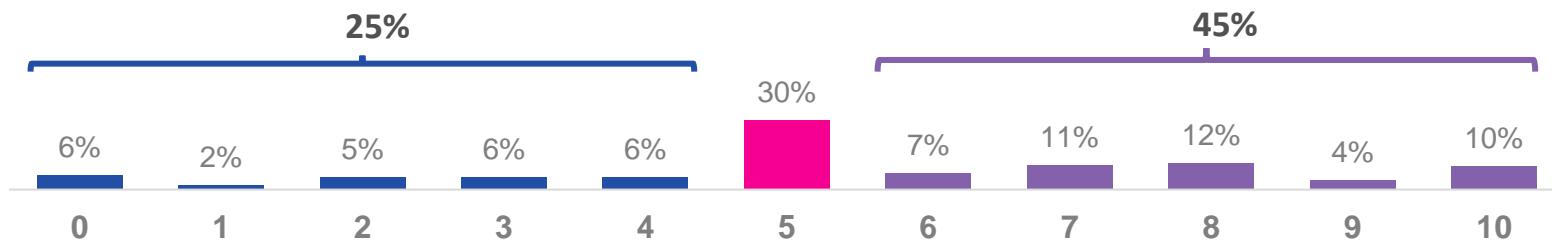
In terms of **dealing with wrongdoing once uncovered**, trustees feel that in well-known cases the Commission has done the right thing.

When citing firsthand experience, there is more mixed opinion, with one trustee mentioning the Commission taking immediate action with a charity that was not being run properly, while another told of an incident of fraud that, when reported, they felt went with little help or support from the Commission.

Trustees are more likely to feel that their charity's standards of conduct and behaviour should be higher due to its registered status

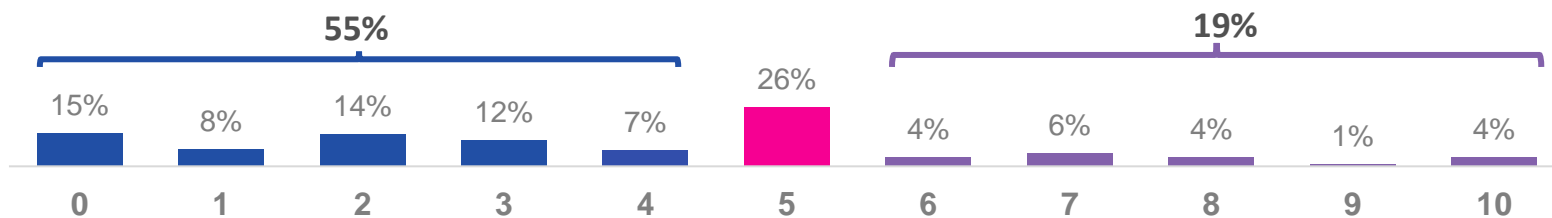
Understanding of charities' impacts on the public and wider sector

Where charities fall short of public expectations it is usually because the public doesn't understand the complexities and difficulties in those charities delivering their purpose



Where charities fall short of public expectations it is usually because charities don't spend enough time and trouble understanding those expectations and trying to meet them

I have a clear understanding about how public expectations ought to shape the way charities go about doing what they do

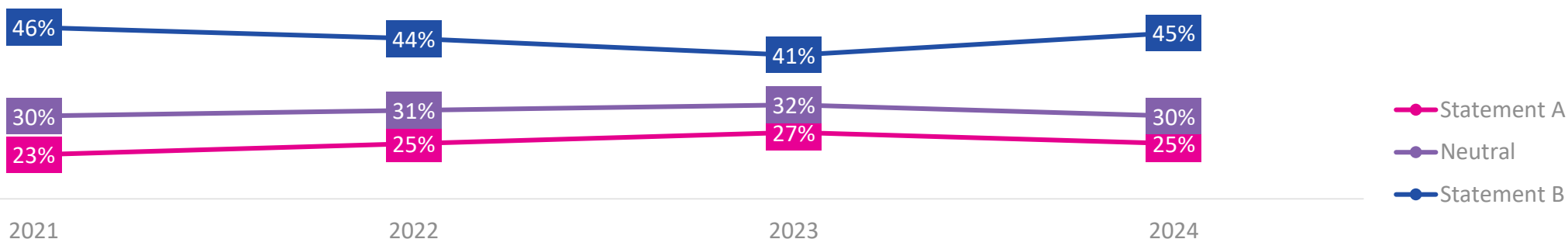


I am unclear about how public expectations ought to shape the way charities go about doing what they do

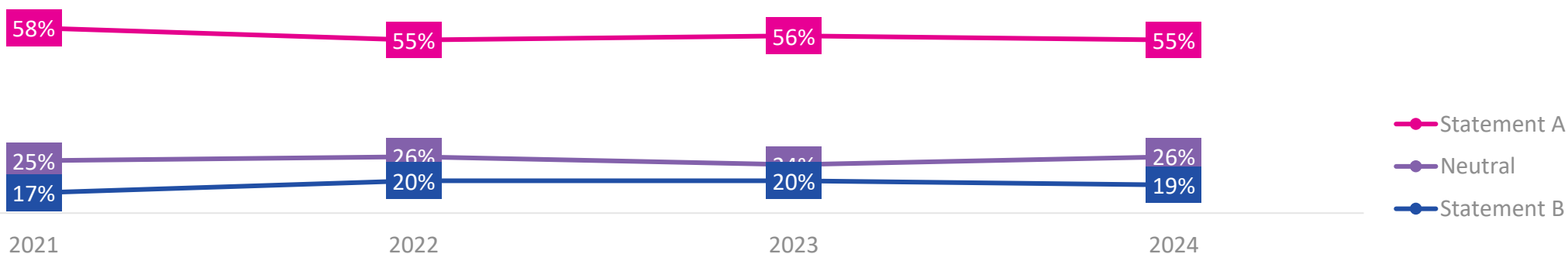
There has been little change over time in trustee perceptions of public expectations

Understanding of charities' impacts on the public and wider sector over time

Statement A: Where charities fall short of public expectations it is usually because the public doesn't understand the complexities and difficulties in those charities delivering their purpose/ Statement B: Where charities fall short of public expectations it is usually because charities don't spend enough time and trouble understanding those expectations and trying to meet them



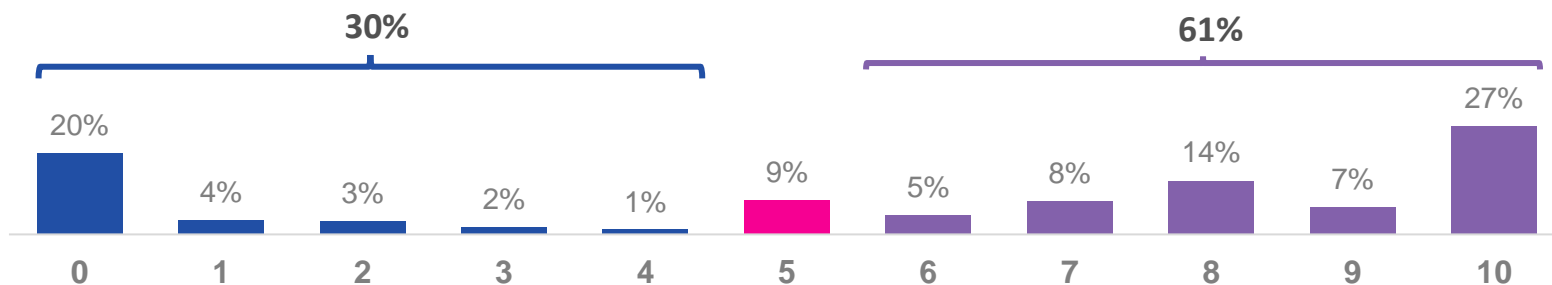
Statement A: I have a clear understanding about how public expectations ought to shape the way charities go about doing what they do / Statement B: I am unclear about how public expectations ought to shape the way charities go about doing what they do



Trustees tend to feel their standards of conduct should be higher, and that one charity's actions can impact perceptions of all charities

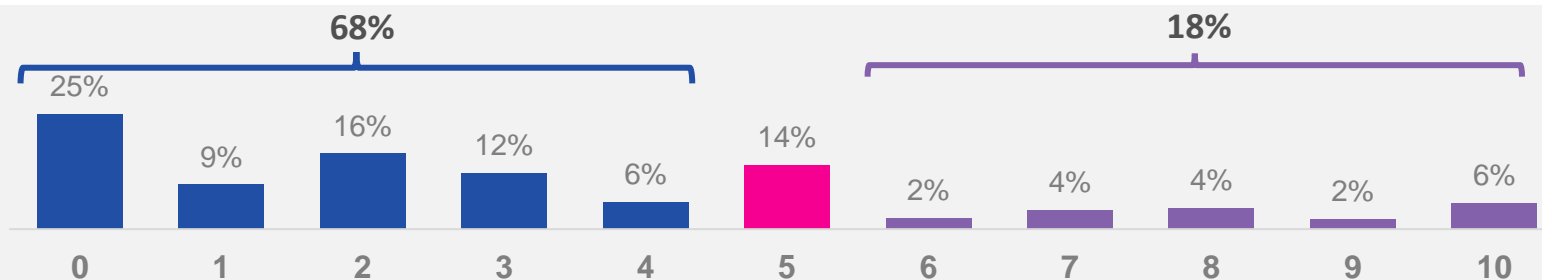
Understanding of charities' impacts on the public and wider sector

My charity ought to have the same standards of conduct and behaviour as any other organisation



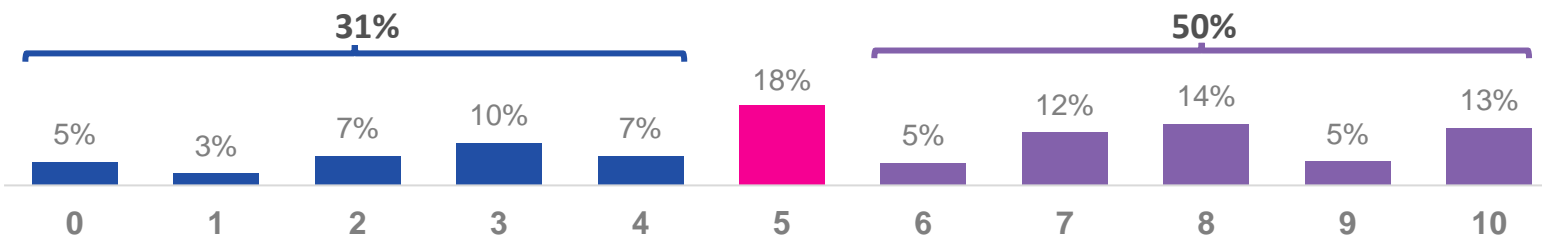
Because of its registered status, my charity's standards of conduct and behaviour ought to be higher than in other organisations

If you are a charity, how you act impacts what people think of other charities in England and Wales



If you are a charity your actions have no impact of what people think of other charities

If there is story about a charity breaking the rules in the news, the public may think my charity is also breaking the rules



If there is a story about a charity breaking the rules in the news, the public will think it only applies to the charity in question

Qualitative research found that there is a clear sense of collective responsibility amongst charities, and that the media does not wholly influence public perceptions

Focus Groups

Discussions amongst trustees highlighted that there is a level of **distrust in the media**. They also mentioned that **things would not necessarily reach the news unless it was negative, and unless it was uncommon**. They generally feel the public see charities in a positive light, however wrongdoing can have a widespread effect and as one trustee said *“you only hear when something goes wrong”*.

“I think unfortunately charities have done things that have been exposed by the press and I think that that does tar the brush of a lot of other charities.”

Overall, there is a **strong sense of collective responsibility to uphold the positive perceptions of charity**, and that some charity actions can result in negative feelings from the public, such as fundraising via ‘cold-calling’ and TV adverts. These were examples which trustees agreed may negatively impact public perceptions of charities in general.

“You’ve only to watch the television for three or four days to find that the general public are bombarded with requests for assistance from charities and, of course, that tends to have a negative effect...no one can support or give a bit of cash to every charity.”

Social media was seen as a serious asset if trustees had the skillset

Focus Groups

Social media was seen by trustees as **very valuable** to charities. The uses and benefits of social media mentioned included:

- Advertising their fundraising events
- Inviting people to get involved in fundraising and volunteering
- General marketing and promoting the purpose of the charity
- Informing people on how they can donate
- Interaction with audiences including reading reviews and asking opinions

No one denied the importance of social media, however, it was agreed on that the **quality also counts**. Those who did not use social media in their charity explained that they did not have anyone with the skillset to run an effective social media page, so it was better not to have one at all.

No one brought up any specific risks associated with social media, but there was general concern about cyber security and the lack of expertise most charities would have in this area.

“Everyone uses social media now. As a charity in such a big county we wouldn’t be able to get the message out, we would dwindle without it.”

“Charities need to ensure that there are people who are able to create good quality content to engage people – not many trustees would have that skillset.”

AI is used more by charities with higher incomes, being used mainly for drafting web content or communications

Does charity use Artificial Intelligence in operations? By income



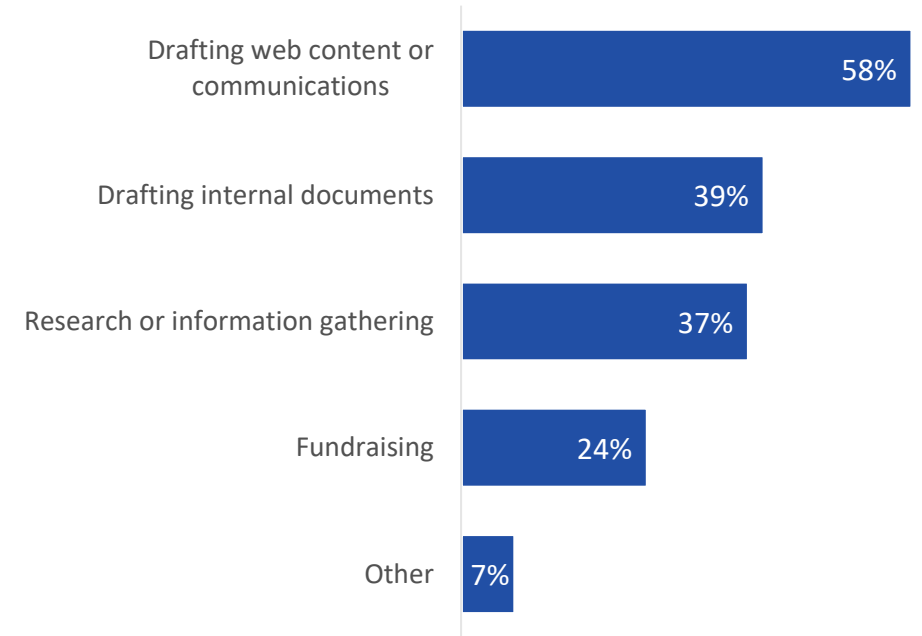
Breakdown for charity income between £10k-£100k:

- £10k-£25k: 3%
- £25k-£100k: 3%

Breakdown for charity income over £500k:

- £500k-£1m: 2%
- £1m-£5m: 8%
- Over £5m: 8%

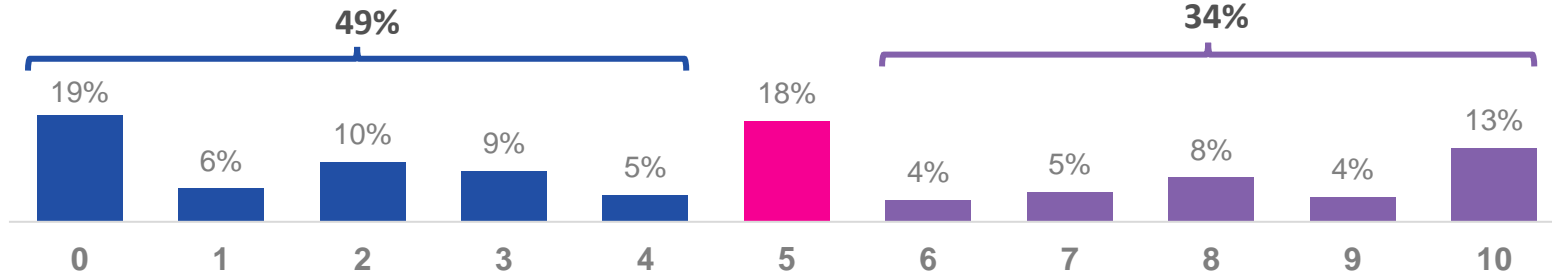
What does charity use AI for?



Trustees are more likely than not to say there is nothing wrong with campaigning for societal change, and that charities should respond to debates to stay relevant

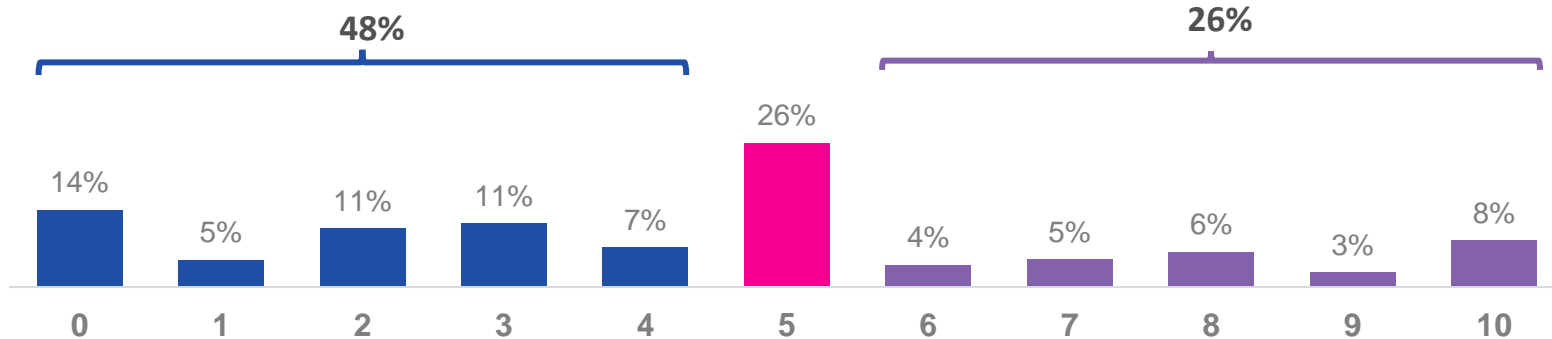
Understanding of charities' impacts on the public and wider sector

There is nothing wrong with charities campaigning for change in society, if it helps them meet the needs of those who rely on them



Charities should focus on meeting the needs of those who rely on them, rather than campaigning for change in society

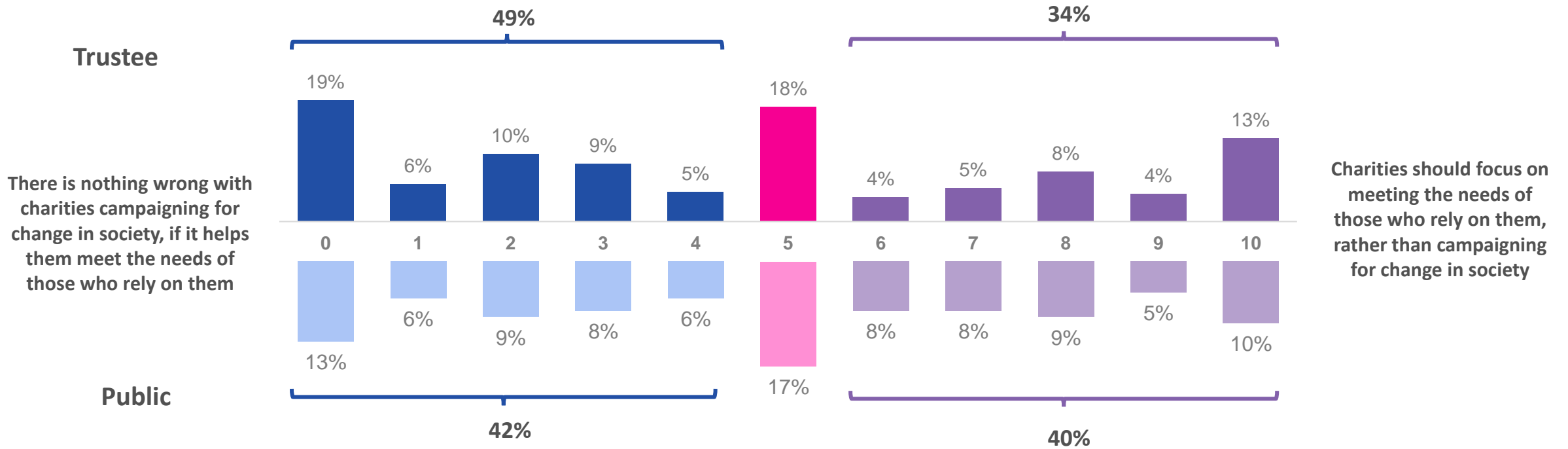
Charities should respond to social and cultural debates if they want to stay relevant and keep the support of the public.



Charities should not get involved in social and cultural debates if they want to keep the support of the public.

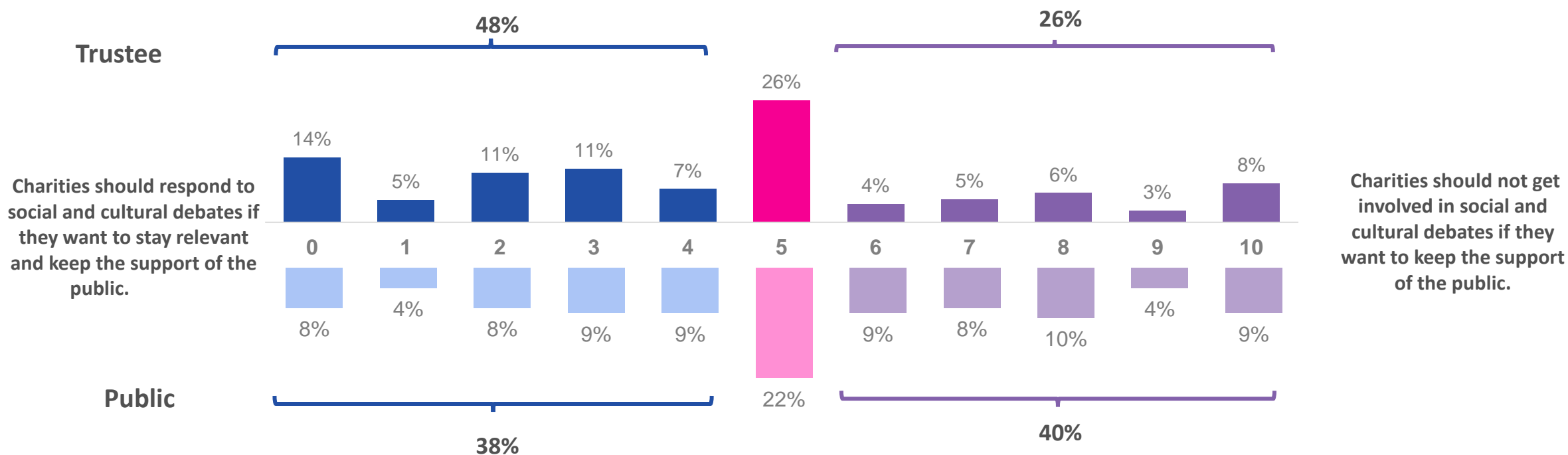
The public are more evenly split in their views on charity campaigning

Trustee vs. public



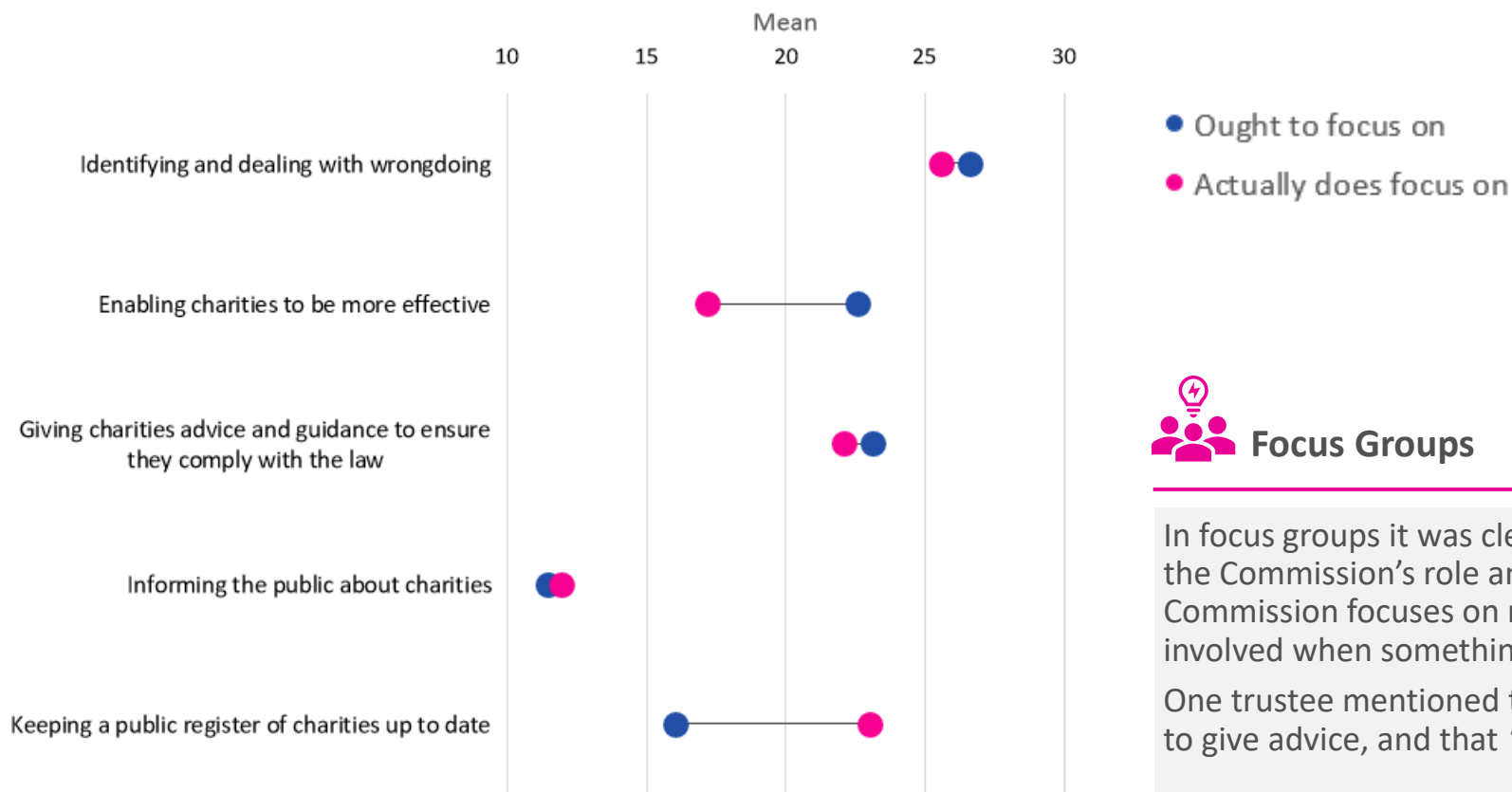
The public are also more divided on charity participation in social and cultural debates

Trustees vs. public



Trustees feel the Commission should focus more on enabling charities to be more effective, and less on keeping a register of charities up to date. They feel that the Commission is focusing the right amount on enforcing compliance with the law

Where the Charity Commission ought to, and does, focus its work (1-100 mean)*



*Trustees were asked to allocate 100 points across these five areas to show their perceptions of what the Commission focuses on, and what they think it ought to focus on. For example, a trustee thinking the Commission ought to focus on all of these equally would allocate 20 points to each.

 Focus Groups

In focus groups it was clear that trustees were not completely certain of the Commission’s role and aims. There was a general agreement that the Commission focuses on regulating, or ‘policing’ charities, and getting involved when something goes wrong. One trustee mentioned that the Commission is a regulator but also aims to give advice, and that “*the two roles in one can be challenging.*”

While there is some ambiguity around the meaning of fair, balanced and independent, trustees generally think that the Commission upholds these values



Focus Groups

Trustees in focus groups were asked to dissect the meaning of the Commission's aim to be **"fair, balanced, and independent"**.

There was not a universal consensus on these words, with trustees saying they could be very subjective and ambiguous – as well as overlapping in their definitions or being *"three versions of the same thing."*

Generally, trustees thought that these were good values that aligned with their own.

Fair and Balanced

There was some overlap in these definitions. Fairness was interpreted as treating all people and organisations **equally, and transparently**, while balanced shared a similar interpretation as not shifting one way or the other and to **be a middle ground**.

Examples of balance and fairness were given, such as offering guidance about statements around the Israel/Gaza conflict.

Trustees did however ponder about how balanced the Commission can be in investigating wrongdoing when it relies on others to raise concerns, and that this might lead to an investigation being one-sided.

Independent

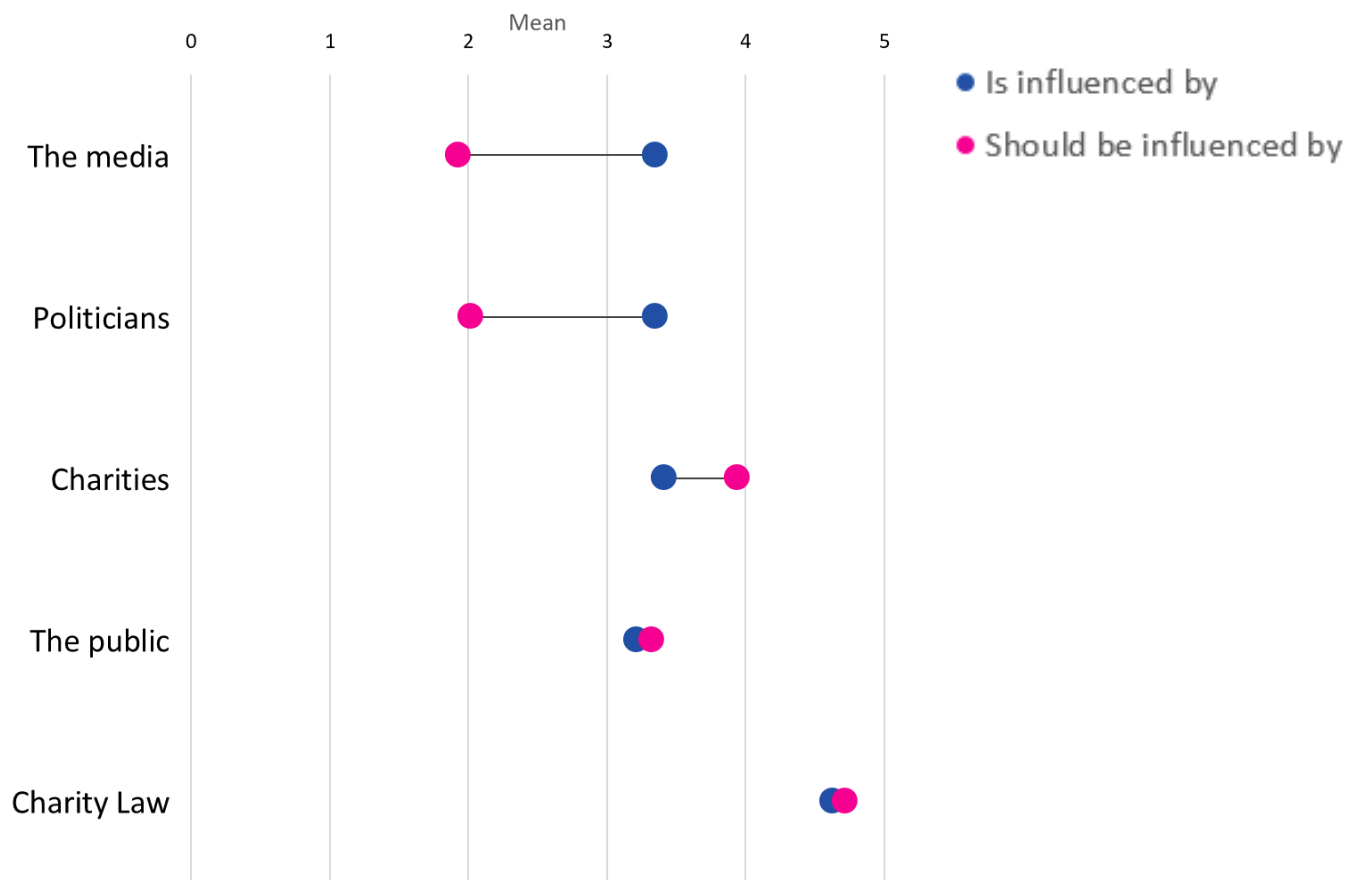
Most clear to trustees was the idea of independence, understood to mean being an organisation that is **not swayed by other bodies** like political parties, or big donations.

A common theme was a question over the extent to which it can be truly independent when it is a department of government and funded by the Treasury.

"Their email address is a gov.uk email address so I think to say independent... (independent) of what? It is a government agency."

Trustees feel that charity law is (rightly) the main influence on the Commission, but the media and politicians have more influence than they should

How the Charity Commission is /should be influenced by other factors (1-5 mean)



Focus Groups

These findings about influence were echoed in the **discussions around how independent the Commission is from the government**, with multiple trustees citing a gov.uk address on the Commission’s website.

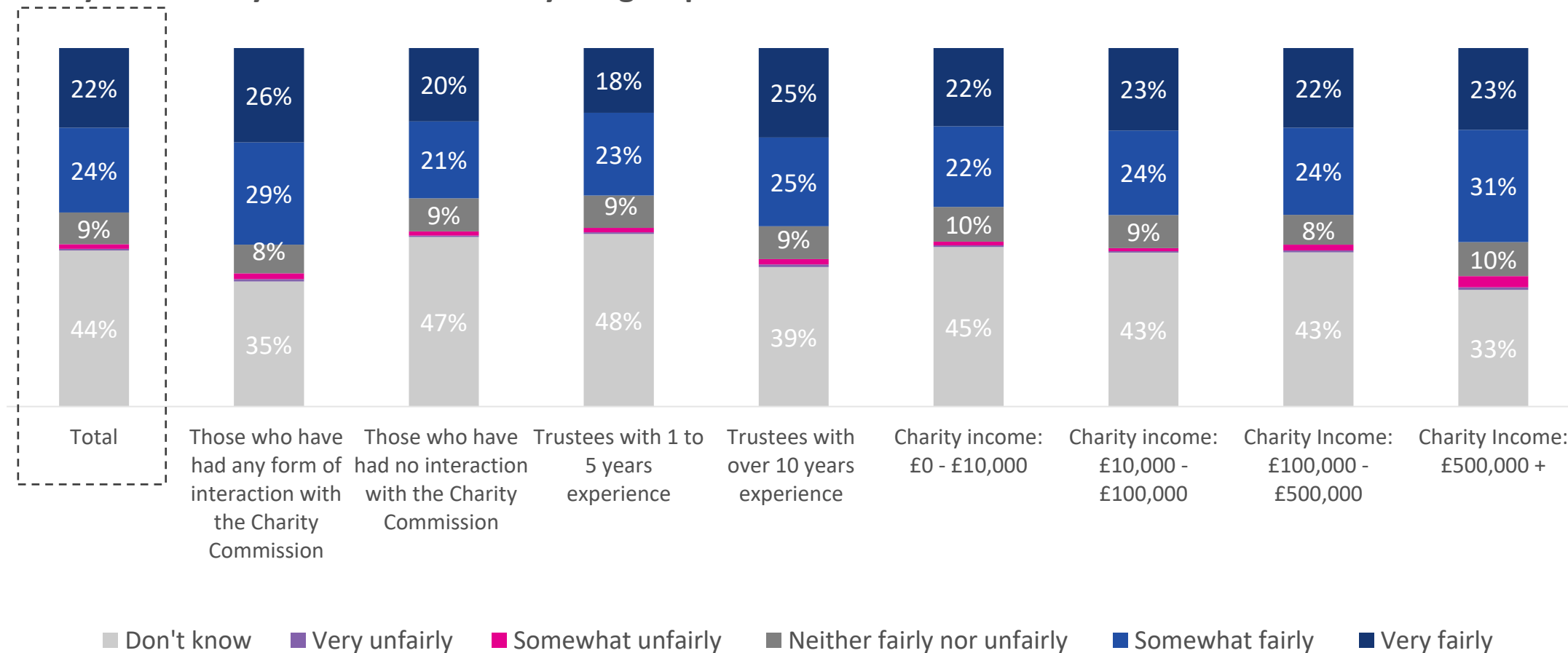
There was also discussion about the **influence of the media**, as the Commission may be more likely to act on charities that are more likely to get media attention. The Kids Company case was mentioned as an example of this.

Additionally, trustees felt that **charities’ level of influence on the Commission differs** depending on their reputation and size with larger, well-known charities having more sway.

Charity Commission Support

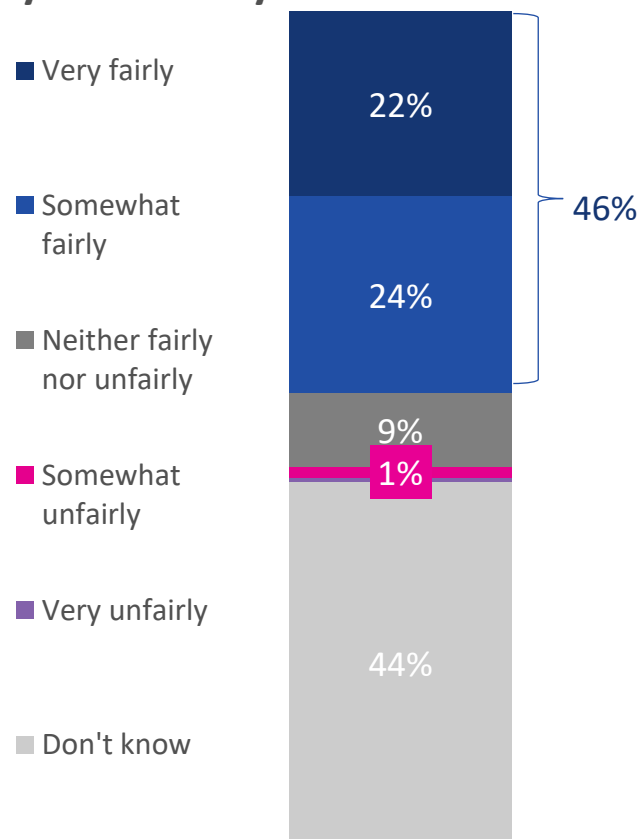
Trustees who have interacted with the Commission are more likely to think it acts fairly, while those who have not had interaction are more likely to be unsure on how it acts

How fairly the Charity Commission acts by subgroups



Nearly half of trustees say the Commission acts fairly, while just 1% say unfairly. A substantial proportion don't know whether it acts fairly or not, likely due to lack of interaction

How fairly the Charity Commission acts



Analysis

Charities with an income of over £500k are less likely to say they don't know how fairly the Commission acts (33%), as are trustees with over 10 years' experience (39%).

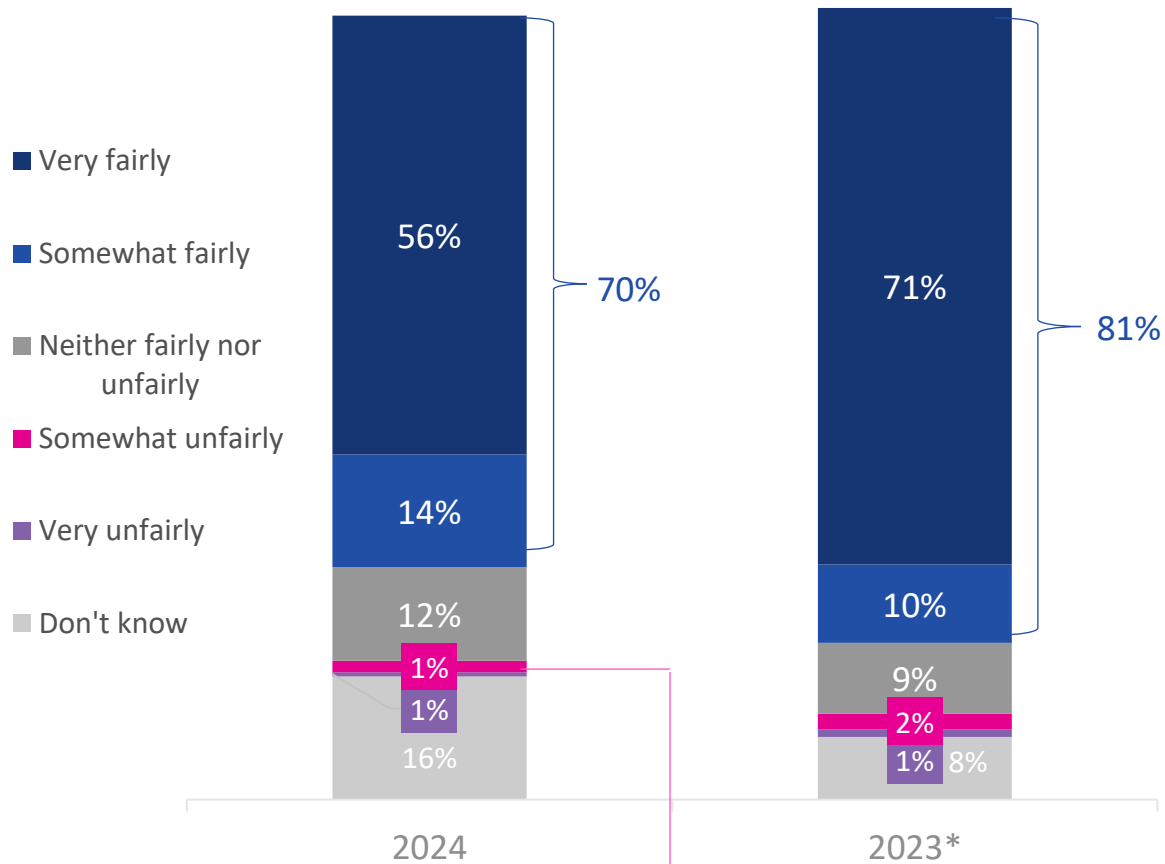
Those who have used the Commission resources at least once a year are more likely to say it is fair (53%).

Focus Groups

Trustees viewed 'fairness' as treating parties equally and transparently, including providing equal access to resources and training.

Most (70% of) trustees who had contact with the Commission around permission, advice, or disciplinary procedures felt they were treated fairly

How fairly charities have been treated by the Charity Commission



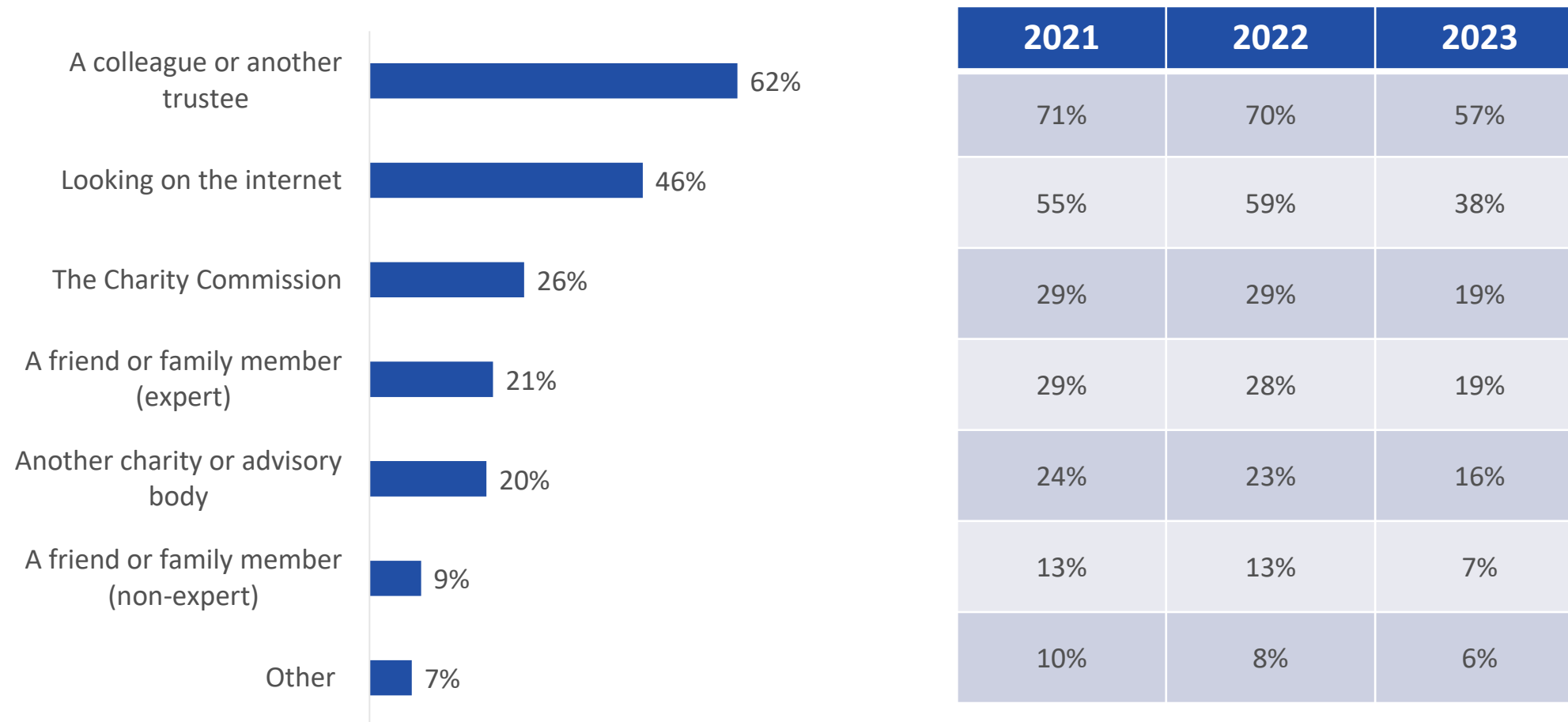
Why did you say that? (of those who said 'unfairly')

“The process was slow and bureaucratic and at one point we were sent back to square one.”

“No communication with Trustees before action by CC.”

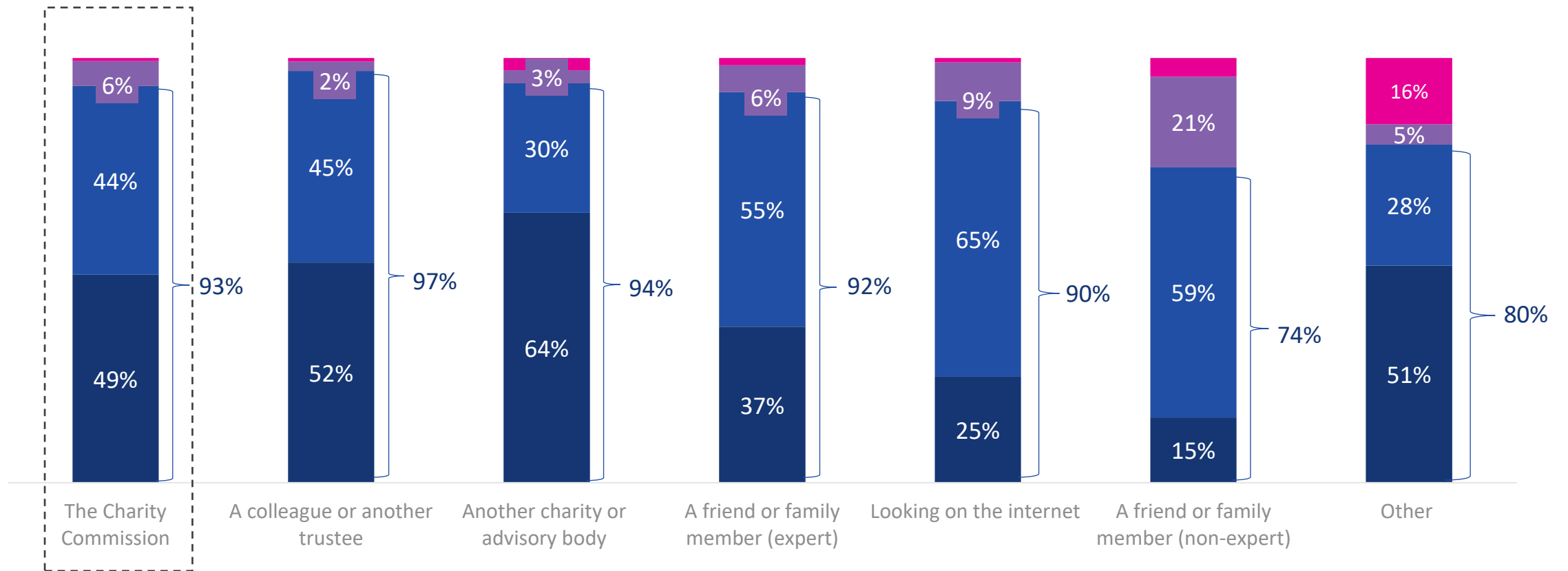
Trustees still use colleagues or other trustees as a source of information more often than the Charity Commission

What sources of information trustees have used at least once a year



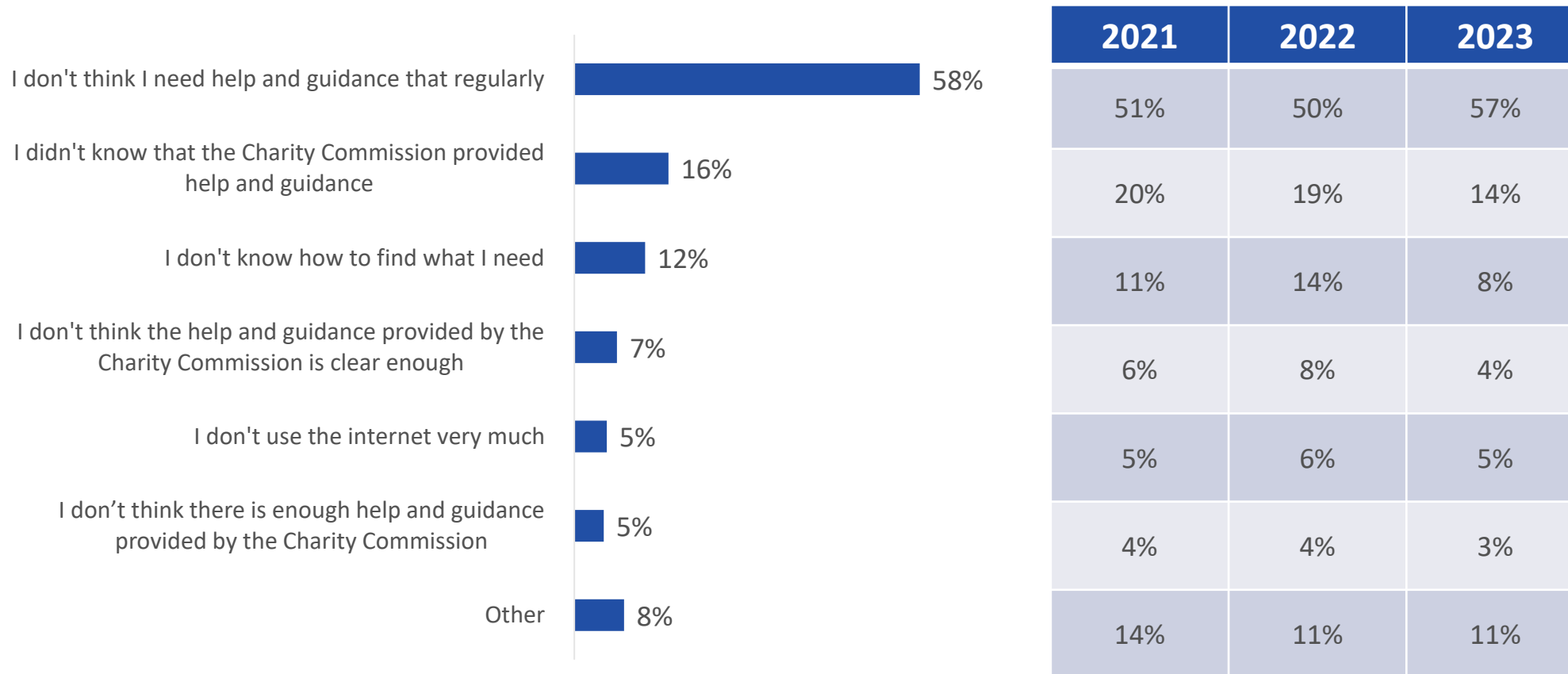
Trustees have found a colleague or another trustee the most helpful source of information. 93% of those who have used the Charity Commission as a source of information have found it helpful

How helpful trustees have found each source of information



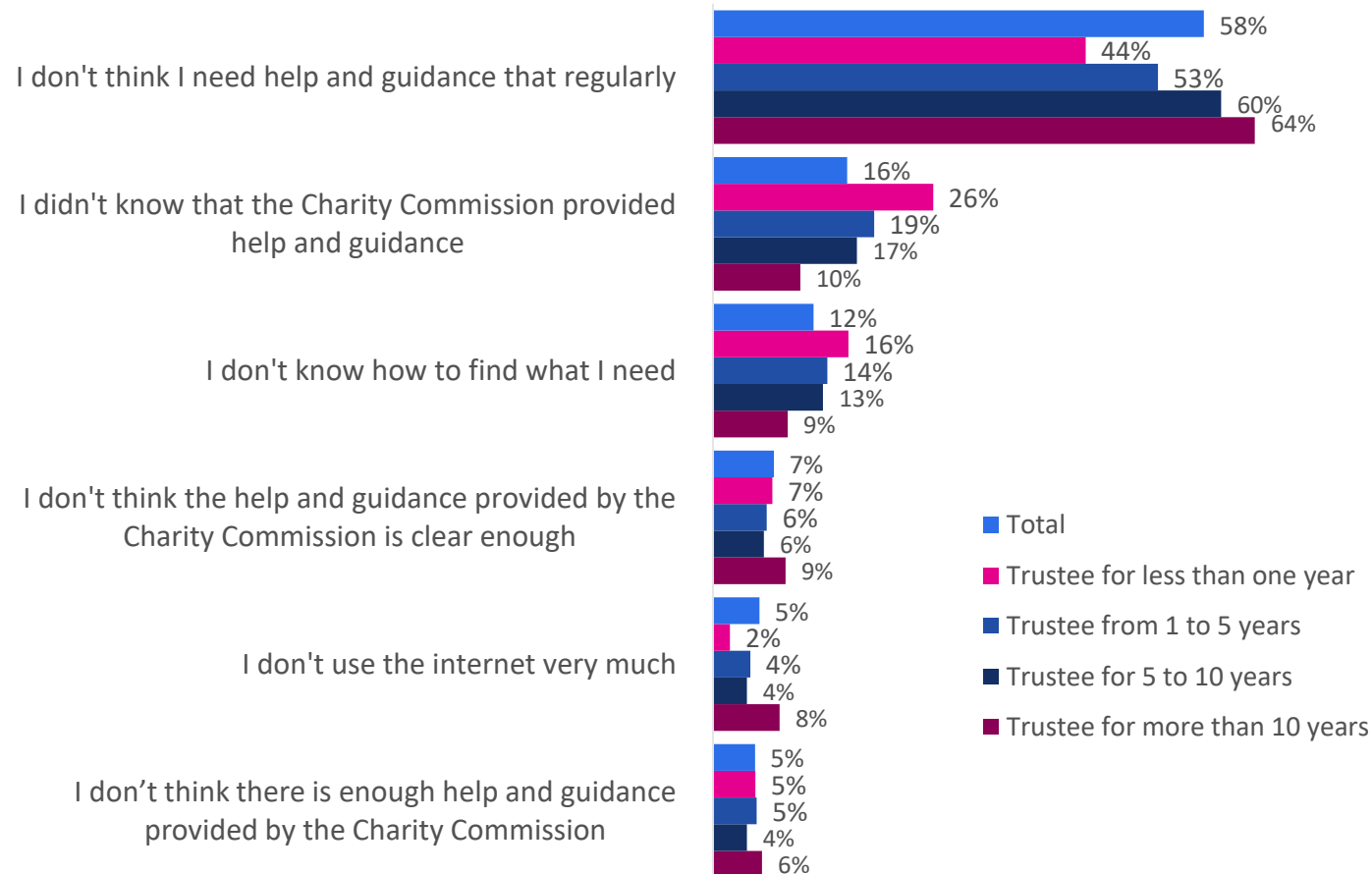
Most trustees who have not used Commission guidance at least once a year said they don't need help and guidance that regularly, consistent with previous years

Why the Charity Commission has not been used as a source of information



The main reason for not using the Commission as a source of help or guidance more often is a belief that trustees don't need help regularly – particularly amongst those with more experience

Why the Charity Commission has not been used as a source of information



Analysis

Interestingly, the sub groups showing the most noticeable differences from the total were trustees who have been in the role less than a year, and those who have been in the role for more than 10 years.

Those who have been a trustee for less than a year are more likely to be unaware of the Charity Commission providing help and guidance, and more likely to not know how to find what they need compared to the total.

Trustees who have been in the role for more than 10 years are less likely to think that they need help and guidance that regularly but are more likely to know that the Charity Commission provides help and guidance, and how to find what they need than the total overall.

Levels of interaction and experiences with the Commission vary



Lower Interaction with the Commission

Higher Interaction with the Commission

Qualitative research uncovered a range in the extent to which trustees interact, or have interacted, with the Commission. Reports of how helpful the Commission was were varied



At one end of the spectrum, trustees had had very little to do with the Commission and did not consider this to be interaction at all. Some were **not aware that it even offered resources** to help trustees in their role.

At the other end of the spectrum were trustees who had sought advice from the Commission around matters including the following:

- Help ensuring due process was followed when making a volunteer a full-time paid member of staff
- Guidance in dealing with an incident of fraud
- Setting up a new charity

Some trustees felt that the Commission had been helpful once they had spoken to it and acknowledged its usefulness for charities, but others felt it offered little support when reached out to. One trustee also mentioned that they felt the Commission reverted to a regulatory rather than supportive role when it was unsure of an answer to a query.

Furthermore, trustees mentioned that it could be difficult to get hold of someone at the Commission and that there were often **slow response times**.

“The Charity Commission certainly answer the phone but then go into bureaucracy mode quite quickly, so they’re defensive.”

“They (the Commission) should be a trustee’s first point of reference.”

The Commission's guidance is valued, but some trustees feel that there are gaps in support



Most trustees had had at least some exposure to Commission resources, including training materials and governance papers.

Overall, the guidance and training material is considered **practical and valuable**. This was felt particularly in reference to training new trustees, or to help refresh knowledge of specific responsibilities.

It was seen as positive that the Commission didn't bombard trustees with information on learning and guidance, but trustees acknowledged that it did exist if they knew how to look for it.

"They do some really good practice stuff, [such as] what the treasurer should do. A really useful source of information."

Some trustees felt relevant guidance was **difficult to locate**, and in some cases, lacking.

Trustees also felt that the value and usefulness of the guidance could differ depending on the type of charity, and that for some it may be easier to reach out to other bodies such as Companies House.

One participant, who had set up their charity themselves, faced many challenges for which they needed support and said a phone call from the Commission would have helped.

"The usefulness depends on the size of the charity and the way it's set up."

Trustees **identified gaps** in the guidance and resources on offer, with the participant who set up their charity on their own suggesting short phone calls from the Commission would help others in setting up a charity, as an introductory audit.

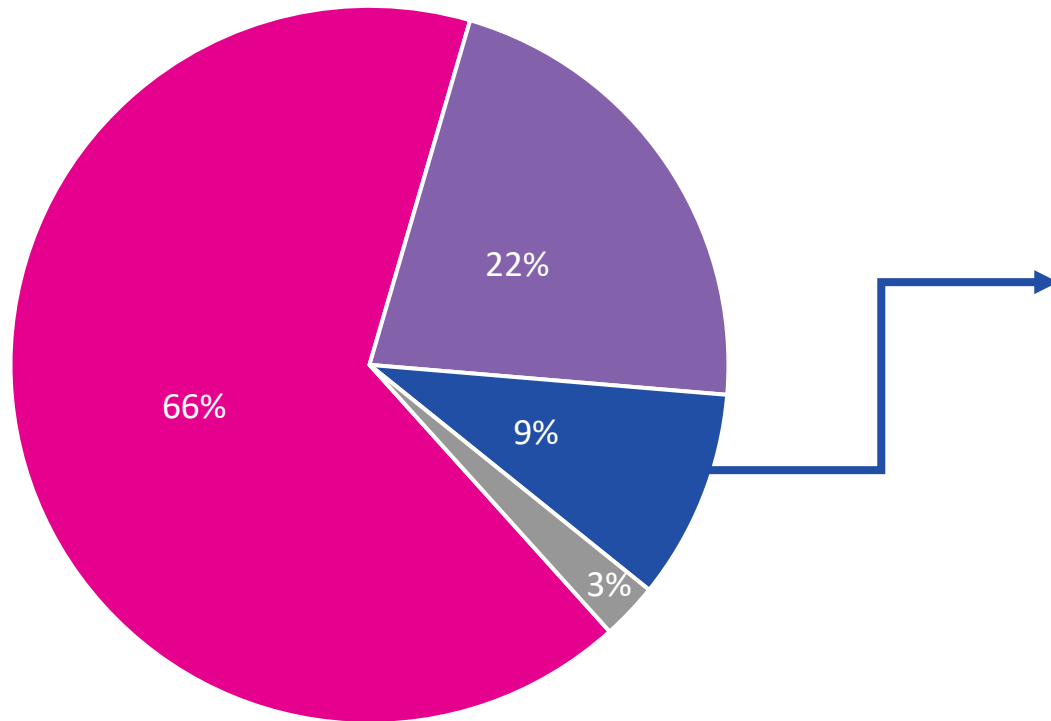
Some felt it could be useful to have resources for new trustees sent out specifically to them – so charities can ensure new trustees automatically gain a baseline knowledge of what it means to be a trustee.

"They could be a bit more proactive about support, when you can find guidance it's good, but it is hard to find."

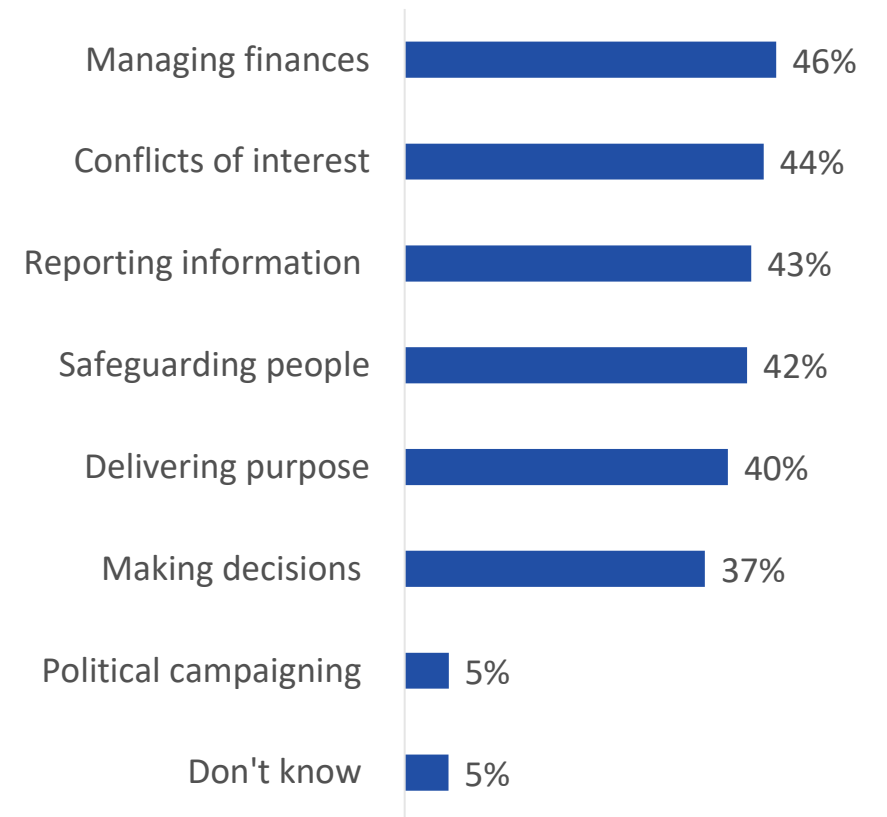
Around one in ten trustees have used a 5-minute guide in the past year. The most frequently used guides are the ones on managing finances and conflicts of interest

Awareness of the 5-minute guides

- I had not heard of them
- I had heard of them, but have not used them in the past year
- I had heard of them, and have used them in the past year
- Don't know

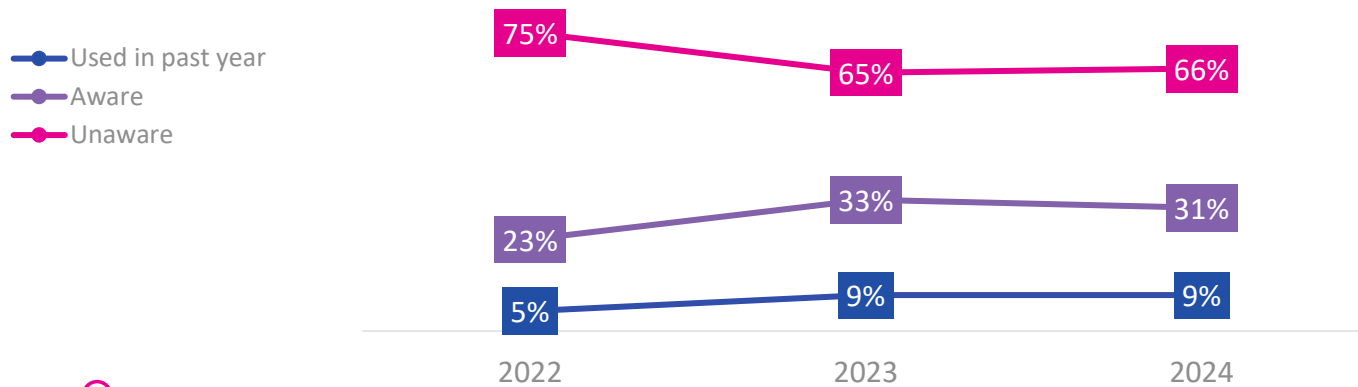


Use of the 5-minute guides



Awareness and use of the 5-minute guides have been maintained since increases seen in 2023

Awareness and use of the 5-minute guides



Use of the 5-minute guides

Analysis

The proportion of those who have used a 5-minute guide has remained stable since 2023 at 9%

The trustees more likely to have used a 5-minute guide in the past year compared to the total (9%):

- Trustees of charities with an income of over £500,000 (20%)
- Trustees who have interacted with the Commission (15%)
- Those who interact with the Commission several times a year (38%), or at least once a year (25%)
- Those whose charities provide advocacy, advice or information (13%)

Focus Groups

In two focus groups there was a general mix of those who had and had not used the 5-minute guides, and in one group no participants had used them. Where trustees had used them, they agreed that they were succinct and helpful.

“They popped up on social media, and I thought they were interesting as they didn’t require a huge commitment.”

“Good for learning about the role or reminding about responsibilities.”

Trustees would also like to see support in recruitment and more collaboration



Focus Groups

In discussing the Charity Commission's role and resources, trustees explored other areas where they'd like support, and the avenues by which these could be implemented.

Recruitment

- Trustees reflect that they are often keen to recruit new trustees but that those who would be appropriate or relevant to their charities' purpose are often not those most eager to take the role.
- They would appreciate assistance in encouraging new people to take on a trustee role and facilitate getting charities to appoint a more diverse range of people as trustees e.g. younger people, different backgrounds, those with lived experience.

Collaboration

- Trustees would like to see opportunities to connect with other charities, for example in regional forums where they can speak not only to Commission representatives, but also those in similar charities or roles.
- This would enable knowledge sharing and allow trustees to learn from each other and problem solve together.
- Other bodies such as Citizens Advice or local authorities could also be a part of forums to establish local networks supporting each other in goals.

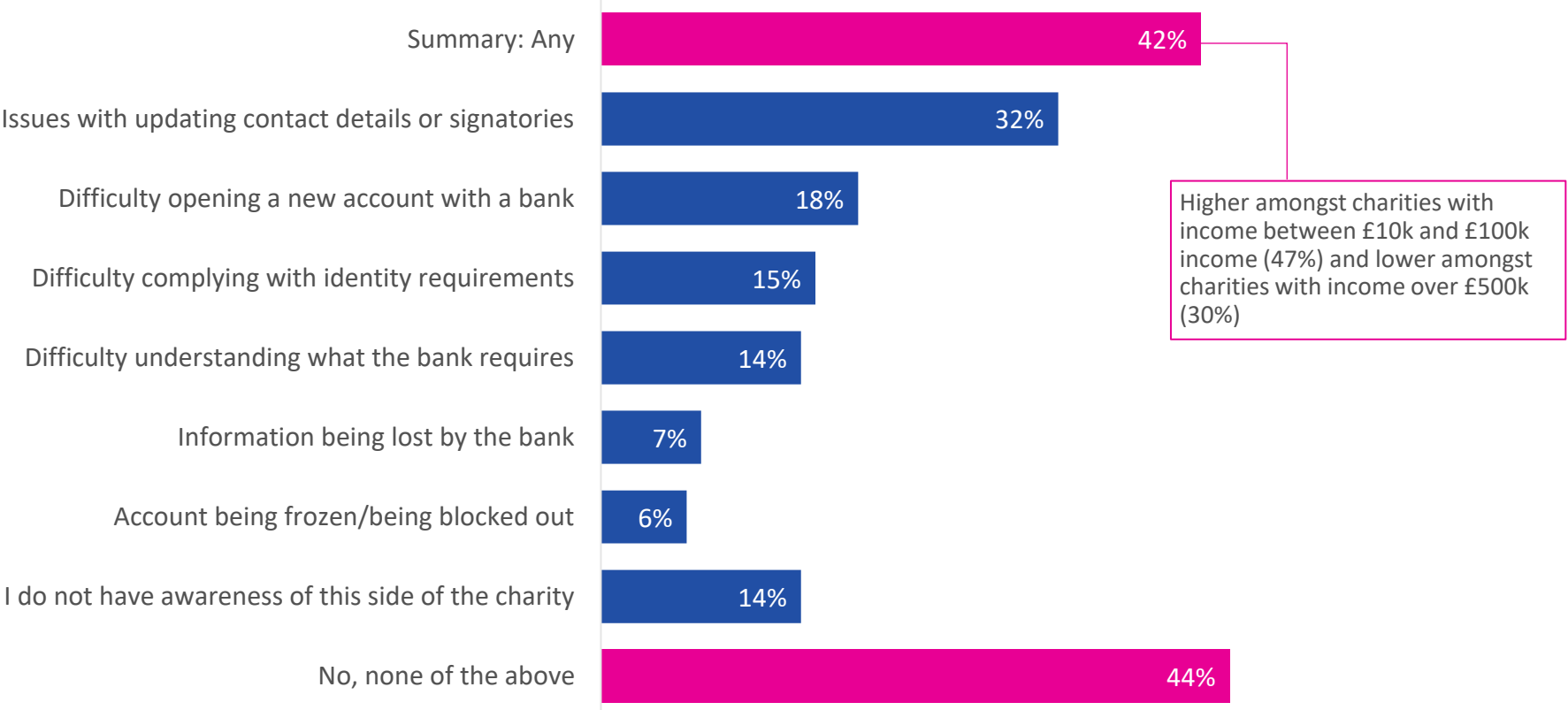
Positive partnership

- Trustees think the Commission should become more of a partner to trustees, being more visible and working with charities to help them improve.
- It should be more proactive about its support and ensure that its signpost assistance to all trustees.
- Trustees also want to see more evidence of the good that the Commission does, rather than just the enforcement side of it. This could include what it does day to day and case studies of how it has helped charities.

Banking

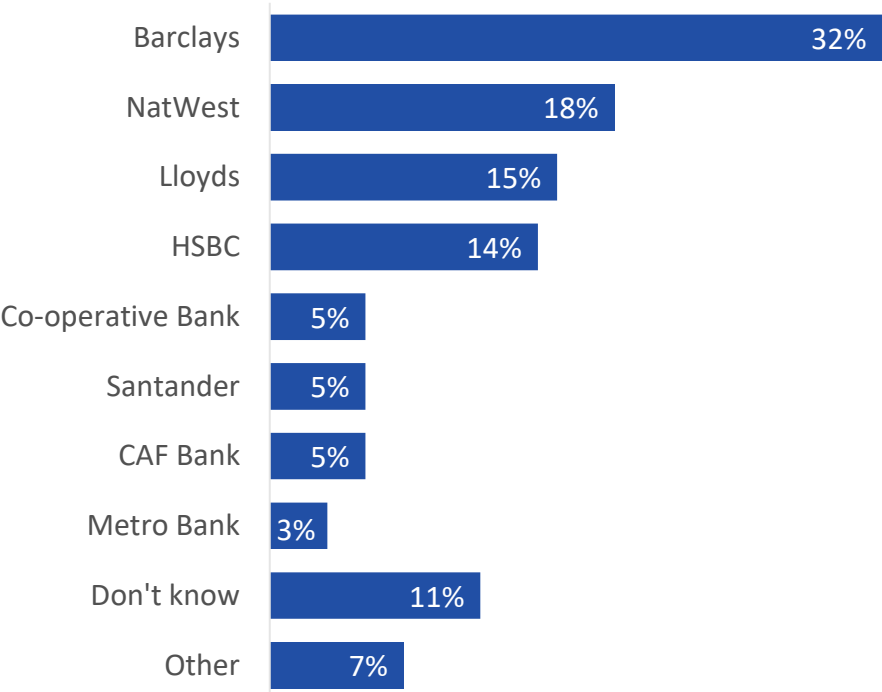
Two out of five trustees say their charity has encountered a banking issue in the past year, with updating contact details or signatories the most common problem

Charity has encountered any of these banking issues in past year



A range of banking providers are involved in issues, but comparisons to annual returns data suggests some may be more prevalent than others

Banking provider involved*



*Banking provider was not a variable that was used for either sampling or weighting for the trustee survey. This means we cannot be sure that the survey data is representative by banking provider. Therefore, the comparison to Annual Returns data below should be treated as indicative only.

	Banking provider involved with issue Source: survey data	Proportion of charities that use provider Source: the Commission Annual Returns 2022
Barclays	32%	20%
NatWest	18%	17%
Lloyds	15%	19%
HSBC	14%	15%
Co-operative Bank	5%	5%
Santander	5%	4%
CAF Bank	5%	6%
Metro Bank	3%	1%
Other/don't know	18%	14%

Trustees had suggestions for how they hope the Commission could support them



Suggestions for improvement

Trustees were keen for the Commission to act quickly and prioritise this issue.

They were **aware of the political implications** if the Commission were to start recommending banks but suggested it could **work with the FCA** to encourage or enforce banks to behave in a more responsible way with charities of all sizes.

Furthermore, there was a need for **more immediate support on financial management** and banking so that trustees can have support from the Commission in all steps of resolving their issues when they arise.

Lastly, ongoing support such as improved guidance around financial matters, or perhaps a community where trustees could talk to each other and share experiences and solutions, would be beneficial.

“There could be a standard response of what to do when you have a problem – this would give charities some support when dealing with banks.”

“[the Commission] have a national voice, they could put pressure on the banks to behave responsibly.”

Appendices

Appendix 1: Background and Methodology

Qualitative Fieldwork

- Following the quantitative survey, three focus groups were conducted with trustees with the **aim of exploring further into topics touched on in the quantitative research.**
- Participants were recruited from the pool of those who had completed the survey, and who **had opted in to being contacted** about further research. From this selection of trustees, participants to invite to focus groups were contacted.
- These took place **virtually using Zoom**, between 22nd April and 1st May, and lasted 90 minutes each.
- Each group comprised of trustees of **different charity sizes, different lengths of trustee experience**, and each group contained at least three trustees whose charity had **experienced banking issues.**
- In total **23 trustees participated** in the qualitative research: 10 in the first group, 6 in the second group and 7 in the third.

Background and Methodology

- **Background:** For several years the Charity Commission has carried out research to monitor the progress of its impact measures, feeding into overarching strategic objectives. This year BMG Research were commissioned to be the research partner for the Commission for the next three years, and as part of this, conduct their annual survey of trustees. 2024 marks the final year of the current strategy.
- **Research Objectives:** To understand trustees' knowledge of their own role and duties as well as their attitudes to governance, and to establish how they view and engage with the work of the Commission
- **Methodology:** The Charity Commission sampled a selection of 24,000 trustees to invite, via email, to take part in the online survey. This sample was designed to be representative of the spread of registered charities in England and Wales by annual income.
- **Fieldwork dates:** Fieldwork took place between the 2nd February and 12th February 2024.
- **Completes:** The survey achieved 2,541 completes.
- **Weighting:** While the sample was originally chosen to reflect the spread of registered charities in England and Wales, weighting by income was applied to correct any imbalance.

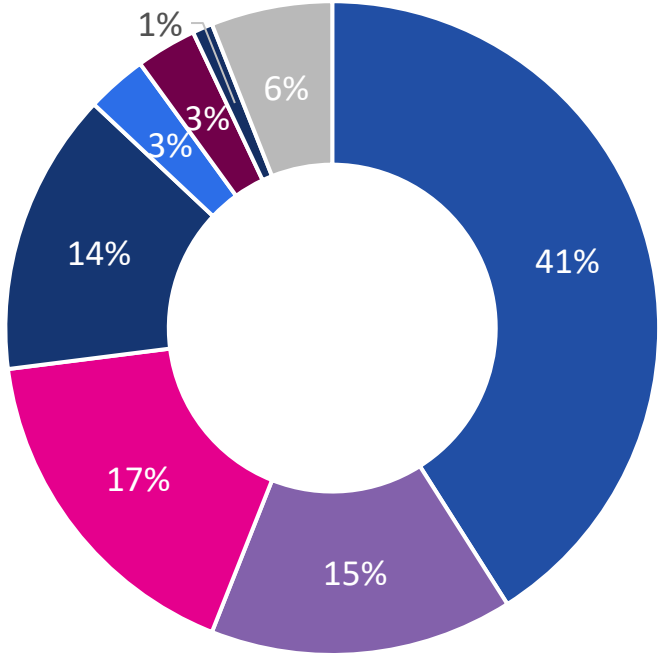
Comparability Over Time

- It is important to note that the survey contents, and its administration have undergone a number of changes compared to previous years. These changes were necessary to improve the relevance and robustness of the data collected, and to facilitate a new research partner.
- Throughout this report comparisons are made to previous waves where there have been no substantial changes to the question wording or routing. However, these comparisons should be treated as indicative only as there is likely to be some impact on the data from the changes detailed below. As such, statistical significance testing across waves has not been carried out.
- The changes include:
 - A number of new questions: These have been added to reflect the current needs of the Charity Commission. As new questions have been added at various points throughout the survey there is a risk that responses to existing questions could have been impacted by the presence of the new questions. Some questions from previous waves have also been removed from the survey.
 - Some small changes to existing questions: These changes have been made to improve the quality of the data collected and include changes such as adding in 'don't know' options to allow respondents to answer more accurately. Direct comparisons to previous years data for questions have not been made.
 - A change in research partner: BMG was commissioned as a new research partner in 2023. Sampling and weighting has been kept as consistent as possible based on Charity Commission's information.

Appendix 2: Sample breakdown

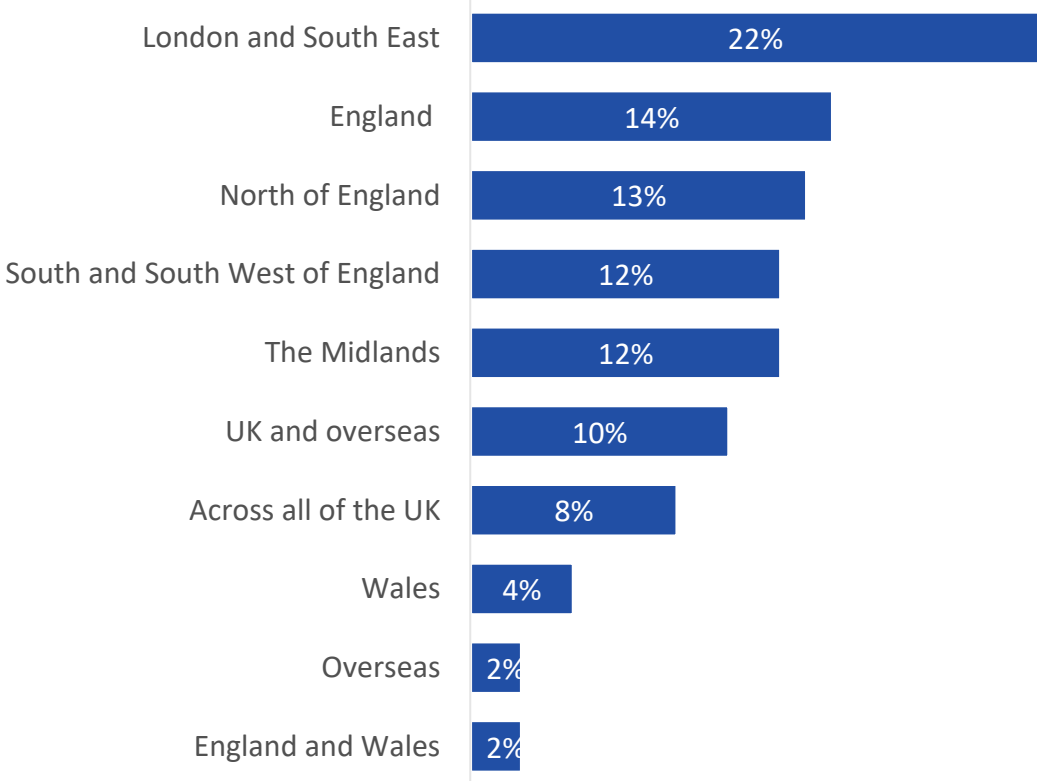
Sample breakdown

Annual income of charity (used for weighting)



- £0-£10,000
- £10,001-£25,000
- £25,001-£100,000
- £100,001-£500,000
- £500,001-£1,000,000
- £1,000,001-£5,000,000
- £5,000,000+
- Don't know/new charity

Charity's main area of operation

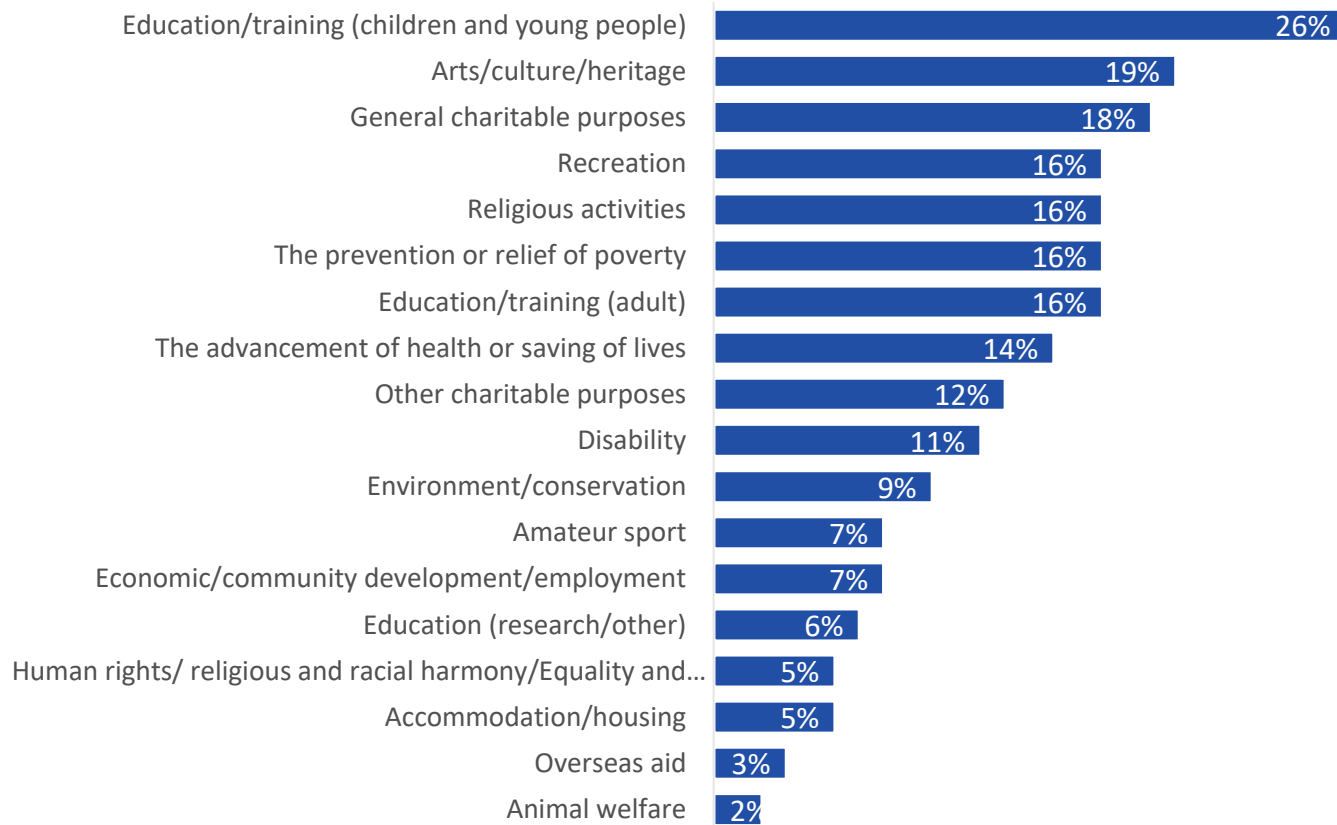


S01 - What is the approximate annual income of your charity? S02 - What is the main area where your charity operates?
 Base: all trustees (2541)



Sample breakdown

Charity sector

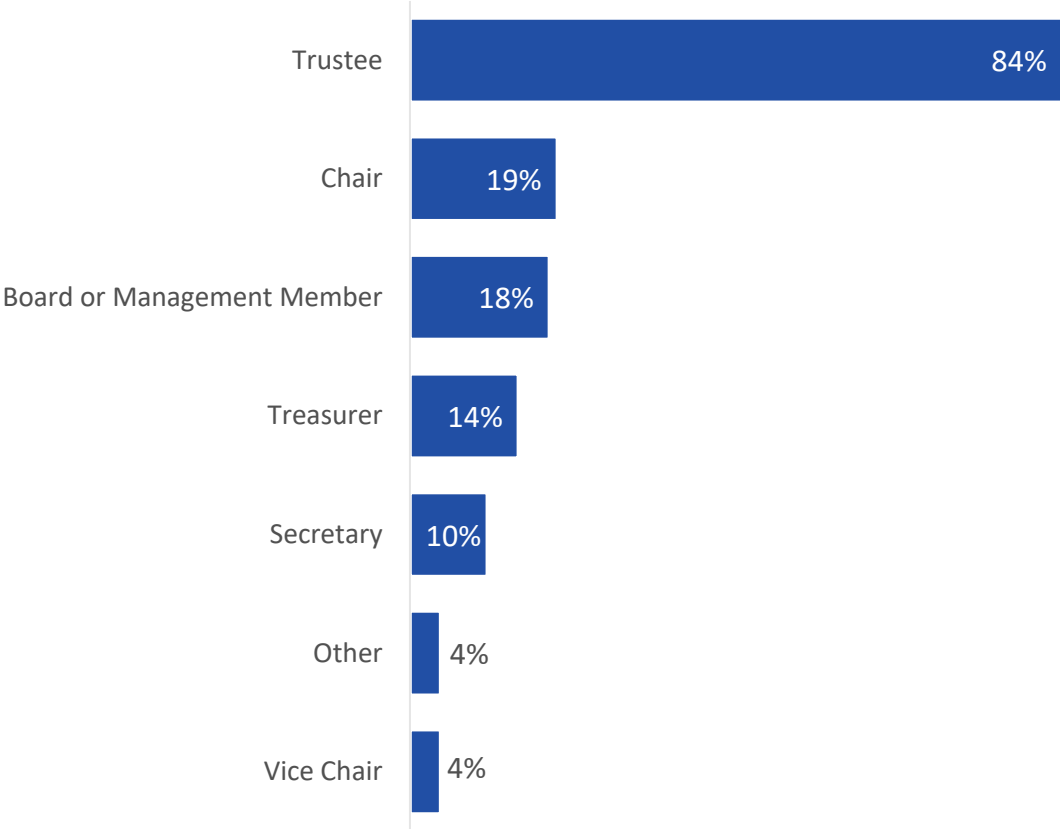


Charity activity

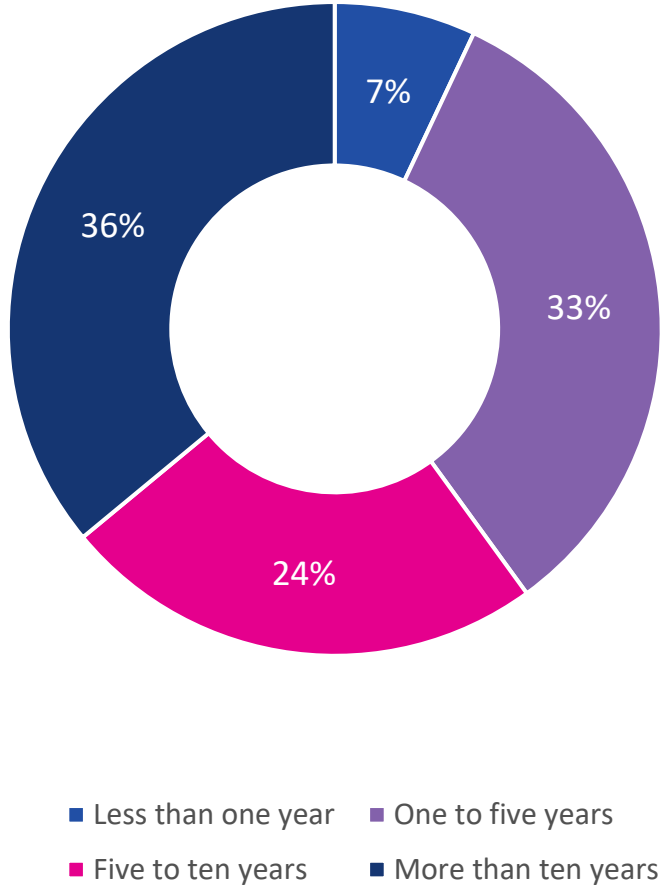


Sample breakdown

Role in charity



Length of time as trustee





BMG

success decoded