Sandwell Voluntary and Community Sector Leaders Survey - Autumn 2009

1. Introduction

Sandwell Council of Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) is a key local infrastructure organisation, providing representation, development support and capacity-building for Sandwell's Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS). In October 2009 it invited all voluntary organisations and community groups in Sandwell to share information and views on the current and future state of Sandwell's VCS.

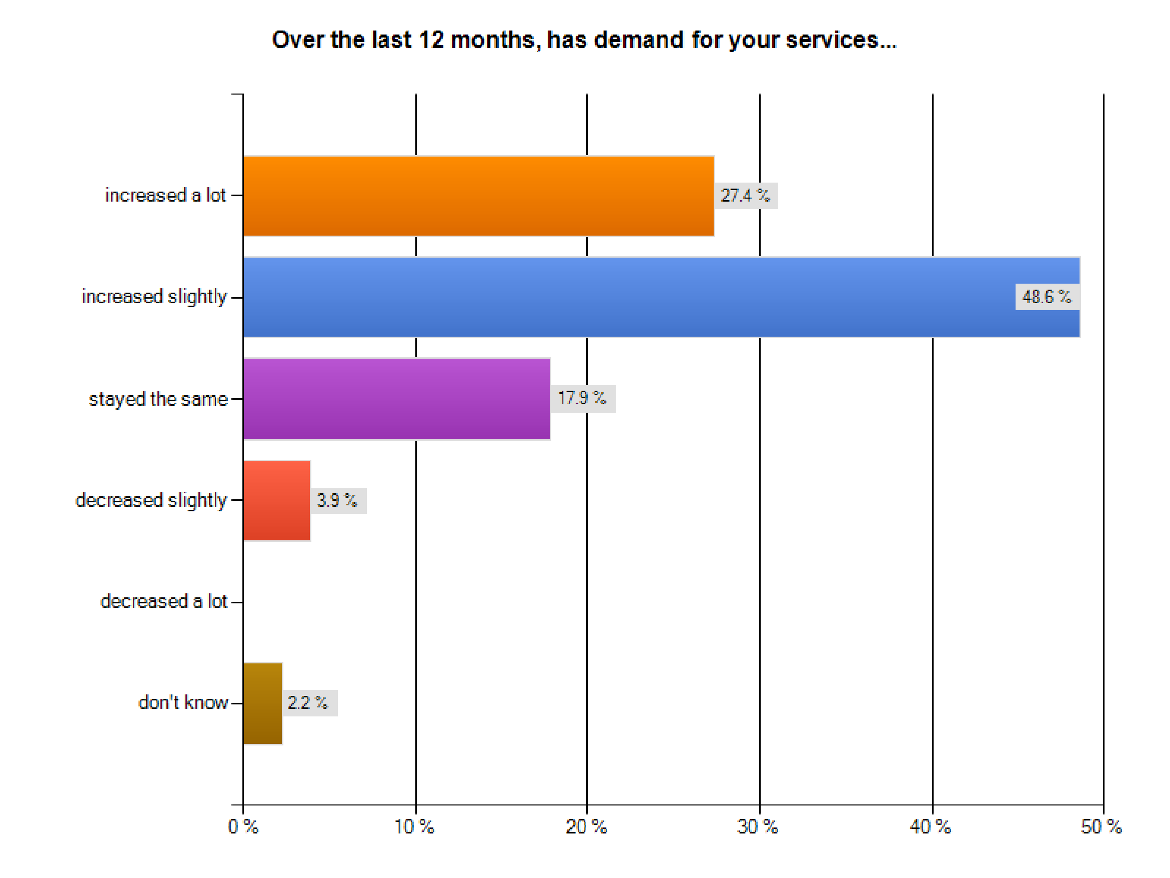
The response rate to the survey was very high: in total 196 VCS leaders completed the survey, almost a quarter of all known voluntary and community organisations in Sandwell.

The survey draws out information which can be focused on three key areas: the profile of the Voluntary and Community Sector, views on present and future prospects, and perceptions on engagement and partnership with the local public sector.

This report also draws on data about Sandwell's VCS held by SCVO on its web-based database www.sandwellvcs.info.

2. Sandwell VCS Service Delivery

(i) Changing Demand for Services

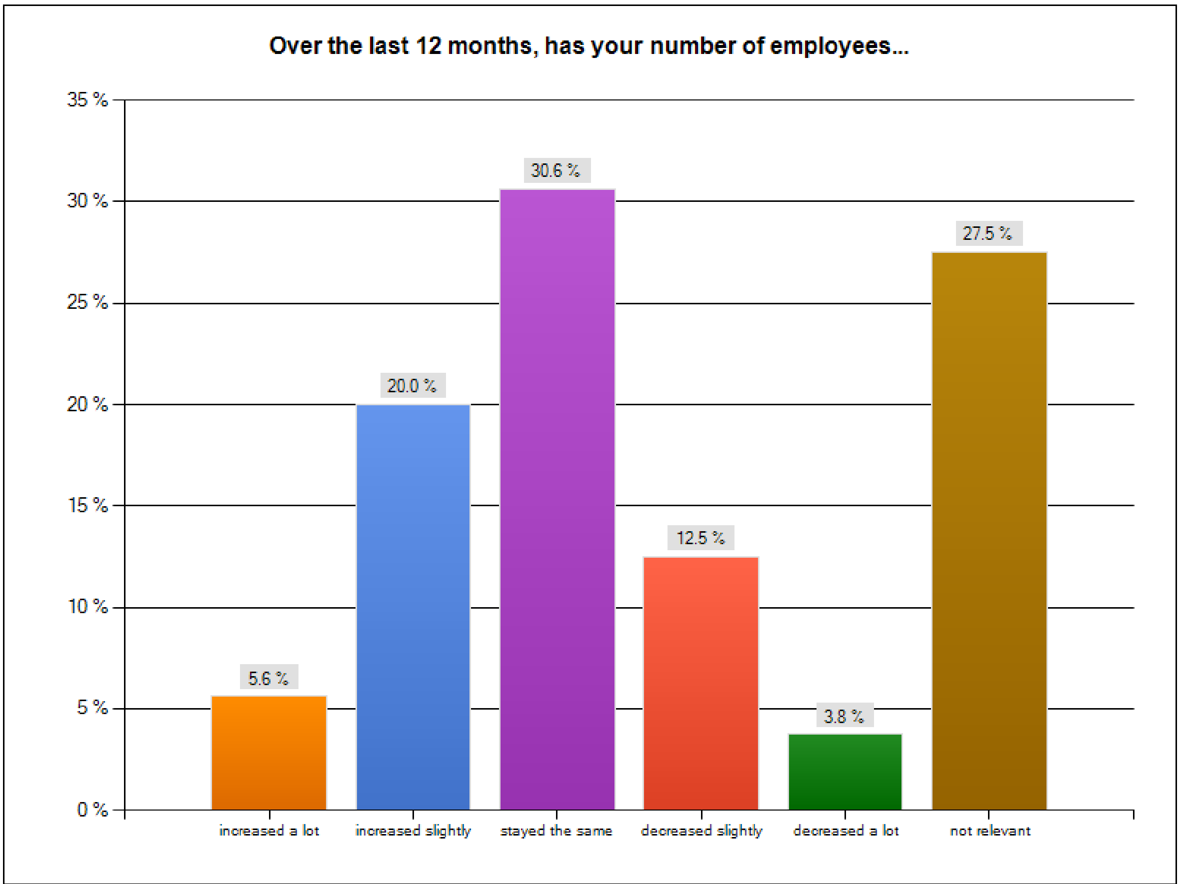


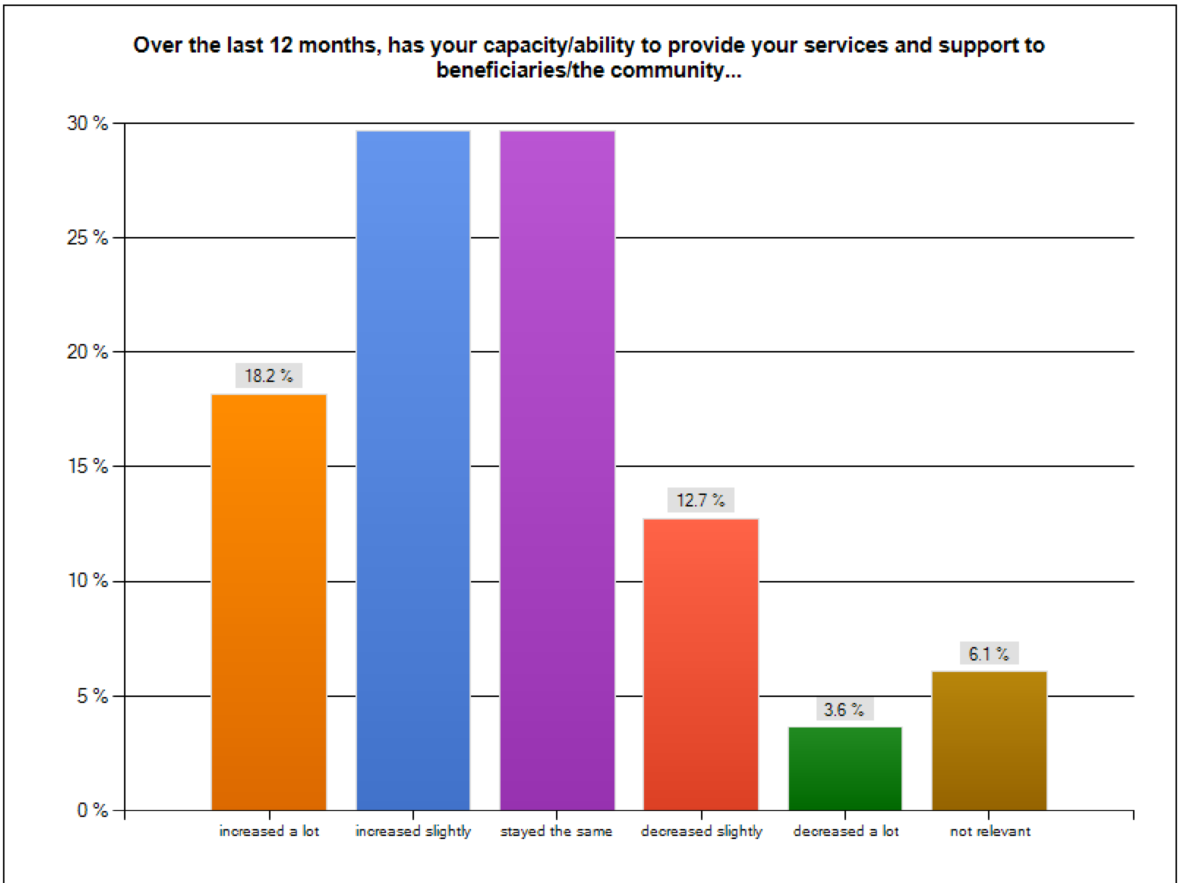
Times have been tough for Sandwell during the current economic downturn: challenging for many residents and also for the voluntary and community organisations which support them. Increasing pressures on individuals, families and communities has increased demand on service-delivery agencies and necessitated swift, flexible responses by those who offer help.

VCS leaders responding to this survey emphatically endorsed the widely-held notion that the Sector has faced a widespread increase in demand: three quarters of all organisations surveyed registered an increase of some kind; one quarter said this was a large increase in demand. Size of organisation has been of no consequence: the Sector has been subject to change across the whole range of groups and organisations.

(ii) Changing Capacity to Deliver Services

Respondents were asked to share information on two questions concerning their capacity: one relating to the changing number of employees (if relevant); the other relating more generally to the organisations ability to deliver support services. The charts suggest a clear link between the two, and indeed the majority of organisations which have grown their employee numbers rightly report an increase in capacity. However, over half of those which report an increase in their capacity have not increased their employee numbers at all, which would suggest that additional funds or extended involvement of volunteers may be a key factor.



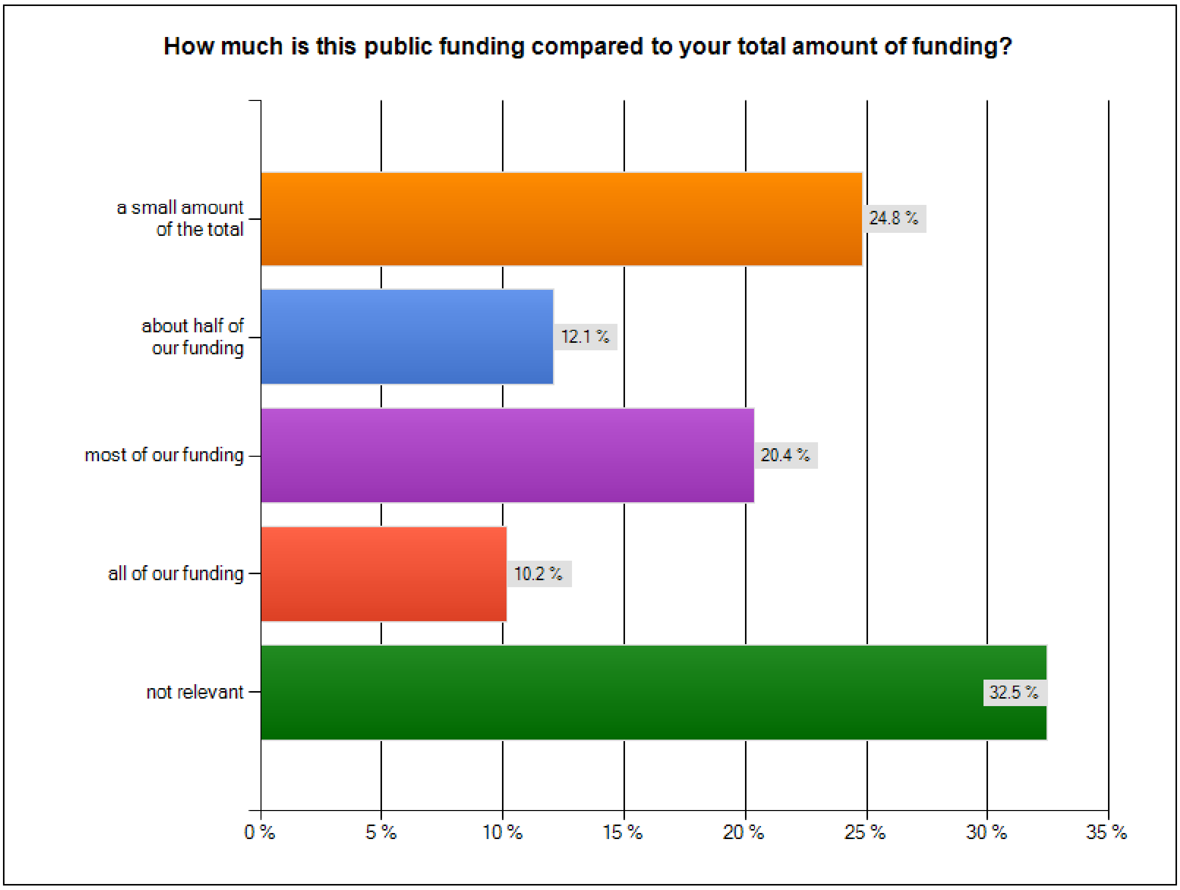


In light of the greatly increased demand, it is encouraging to see almost half of all surveyed leaders presenting that their organisations capacity has also increased. But how well is demand for a particular service (or in a specific location) being matched with organisations which have increased capacity?

The survey identifies that amongst those organisations which have been subject to increased demands, only slightly above half this number have seen an increase in capacity. This highlights the difficulty of community organisations in drawing in funding swiftly enough to respond to significant changes in demand. Data suggests that the smaller organisations in particular have struggled to increase their capacity over the last 12 months.

3. Views on the Future

(i) Funding Environment

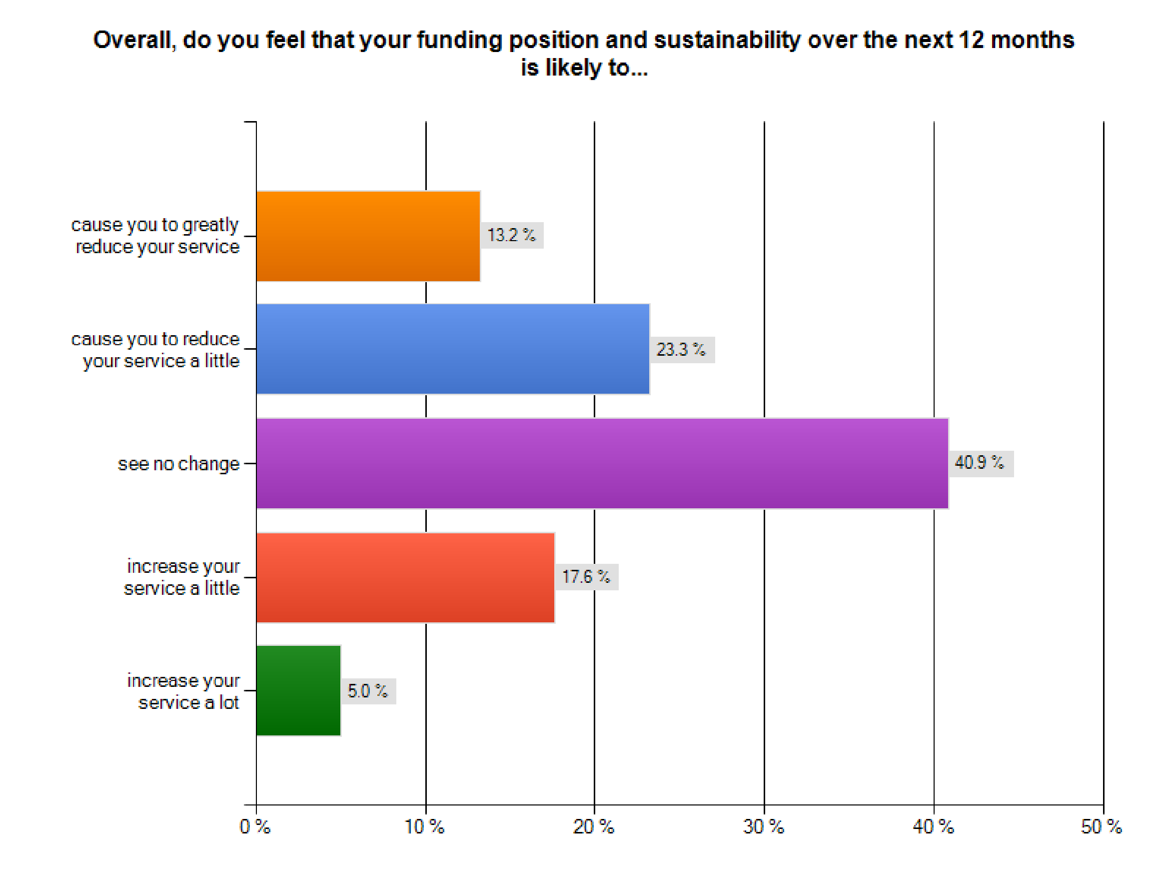


The recession-led squeeze on public finance that presents itself in the coming years is well-documented. Voluntary and Community Sector concerns focus naturally on the issue of how organisations will sustain themselves and continue to deliver vital services. Respondents to this survey were invited to share information on the extent to which public funding plays a part in their income mix.

One third of organisations surveyed receive no funding from the public sector, whilst one in ten rely solely on this funding – a group which contain, unsurprisingly, higher than average numbers of medium and large-sized organisations. The remainder – the majority of organisations – inhabit the middle ground where public funding provides a part of their income. What cannot be ascertained from this survey is the *significance* of these public funds - in other words, how those organisations would fare without this funding, which may often be counted on as the most reliable income stream in the budget each year.

It is possible, however, to gain a view on the potential leverage that these public funds afford VCS organisations by taking from the data a sample of 59 respondents who receive public sector funds and disclosed confident figures for both their annual expenditure and the amount of public funding they received.

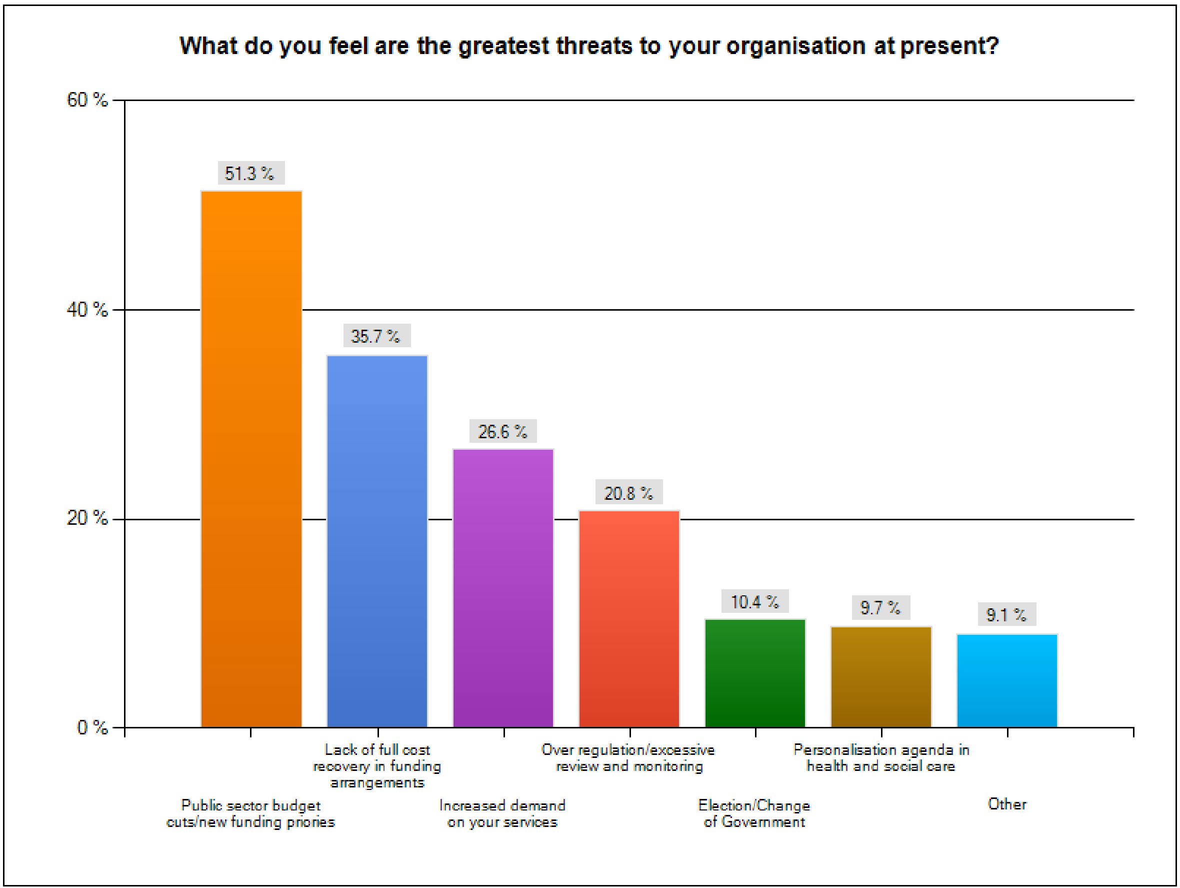
Of this sample, three-quarters of community organisations receiving public sector funding supplemented these funds by securing other funding for their activities, to an average of almost half as much funding again (forty-seven per cent).



Views given in response to questions on funding and sustainability over the next twelve months were consistent with the trends set in answer to previous questions. Just over one third of organisations anticipate some decrease in capacity to deliver services, and organisations which received most or all of their funds from public bodies were twice as likely to share this gloomy view.

Approaching half of all organisations anticipated no funding-led change in services for better or worse over the next twelve months, although a disproportionately high number of these receive no public sector funding, so may consider themselves shielded somewhat from the funding squeeze.

(ii) External Threats



Respondents to the survey were invited to share their views and perceptions on which external factors they considered pose the greatest threats to their organisation at present, choosing as many as they wished any from a list of options or adding their own.

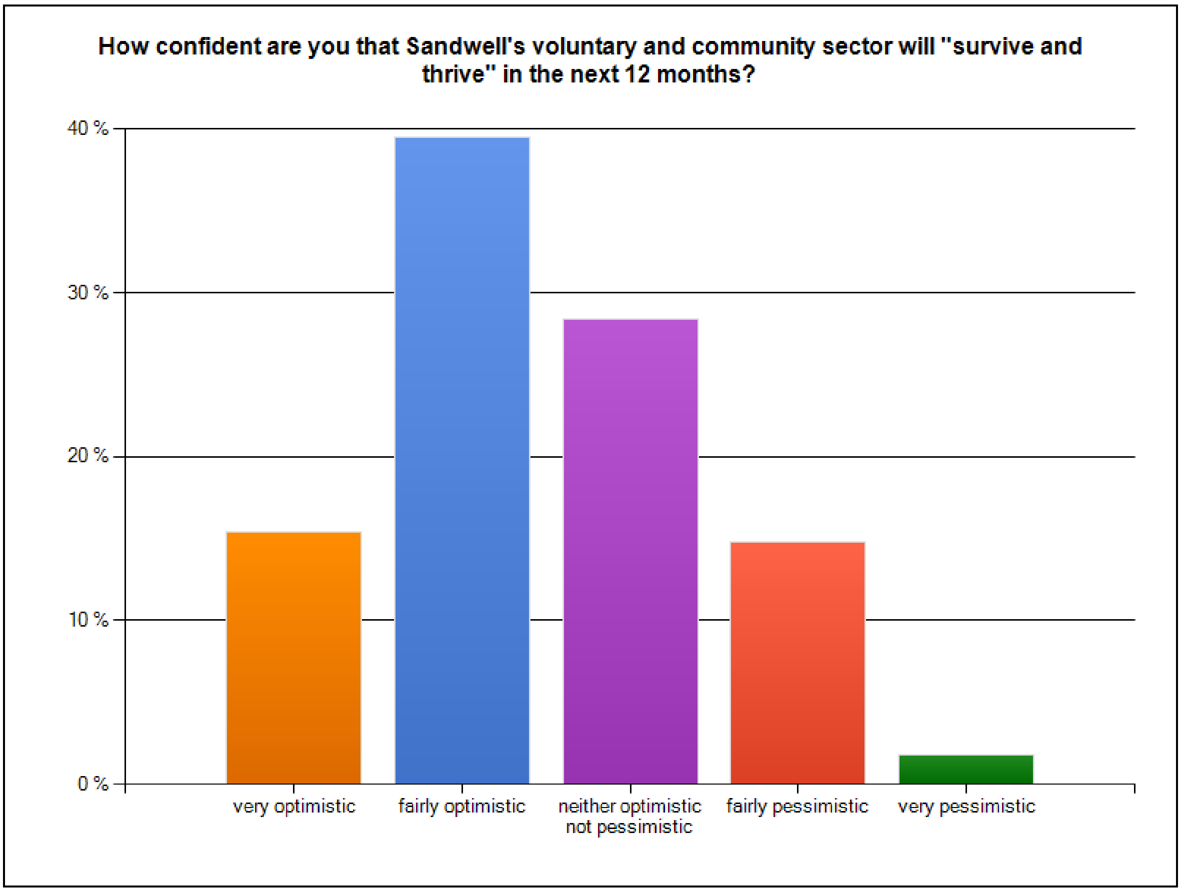
Perhaps unsurprisingly, the two threats which registered the most votes were funding-related: Half of leaders surveyed felt that reductions in public sector budgets and changes to priorities was a great concern, whilst over one third picked the perennial issue of Full Cost Recovery (funders meeting all organisational costs – overheads as well as frontline delivery). Whilst there was some degree of overlap with these issues (respondents voting for both), well over half of all respondents chose one or the other of these.

There was also considerable unease over the increased demand for services, with a quarter of respondents identifying this concern – although this figure is more understandable given that almost all of these organisations had already registered an increase in demand for their services over the past 12 months.

Of the remaining issues upon which views were canvassed, a disproportionately high number of medium and large organisations considered over-monitoring and excessive review a threat; the Personalisation agenda in health and social care (movement towards individual care budgets) also registered as a concern for a small minority of respondents, of which almost all were service delivery organisations likely to be directly affected by the changes

Included within a wide range of 'other' threats identified by respondents were the difficulty in securing funding and resources, public apathy, issues with security and theft, lack of community cohesion in the locality, and declining numbers of members.

(iii) A "Thriving and Surviving" Voluntary and Community Sector



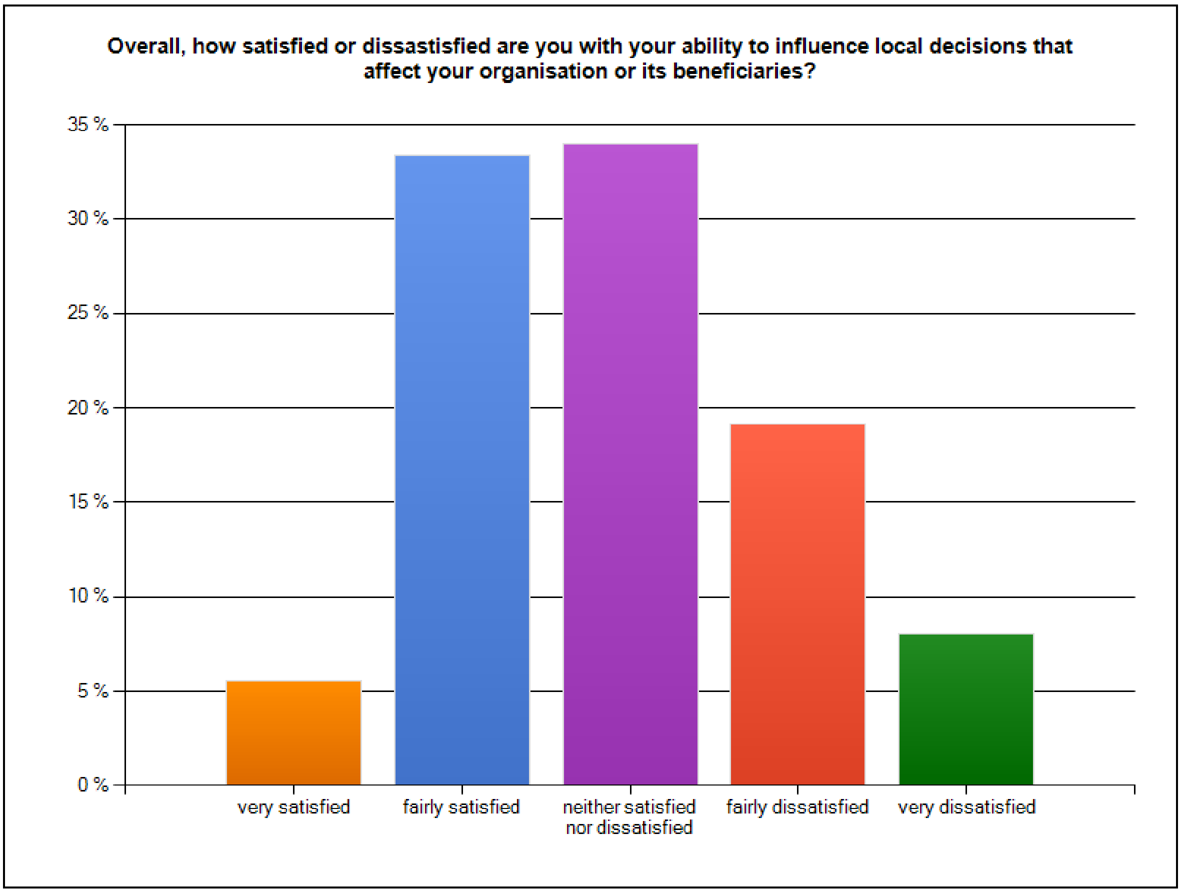
In response to the difficulties caused by the current economic downturn, much partnership energy has been focused on supporting local businesses in Sandwell to "survive and thrive". However, as an important part of the local business community, what do Sandwell's Voluntary and Community Sector leaders consider the prospects for their Sector?

Overall, the answer is refreshingly positive: over half of all respondents are optimistic, including one in six leaders 'very' optimistic about the future. However, a similar one in six remain fairly pessimistic, and one quarter are undecided.

Taking these figures, size of organisation would appear to be a clear indicator on confidence in the future, with a much greater proportion of larger organisations feeling pessimistic rather than optimistic, and a slightly increased proportion of smaller groups feeling optimistic rather than pessimistic. The closest link with other findings is a significantly higher satisfaction over involvement in local decision-making amongst leaders who consider themselves optimistic for the future.

4. Engaging Local Public Sector Partners

(i) Influencing Decisions

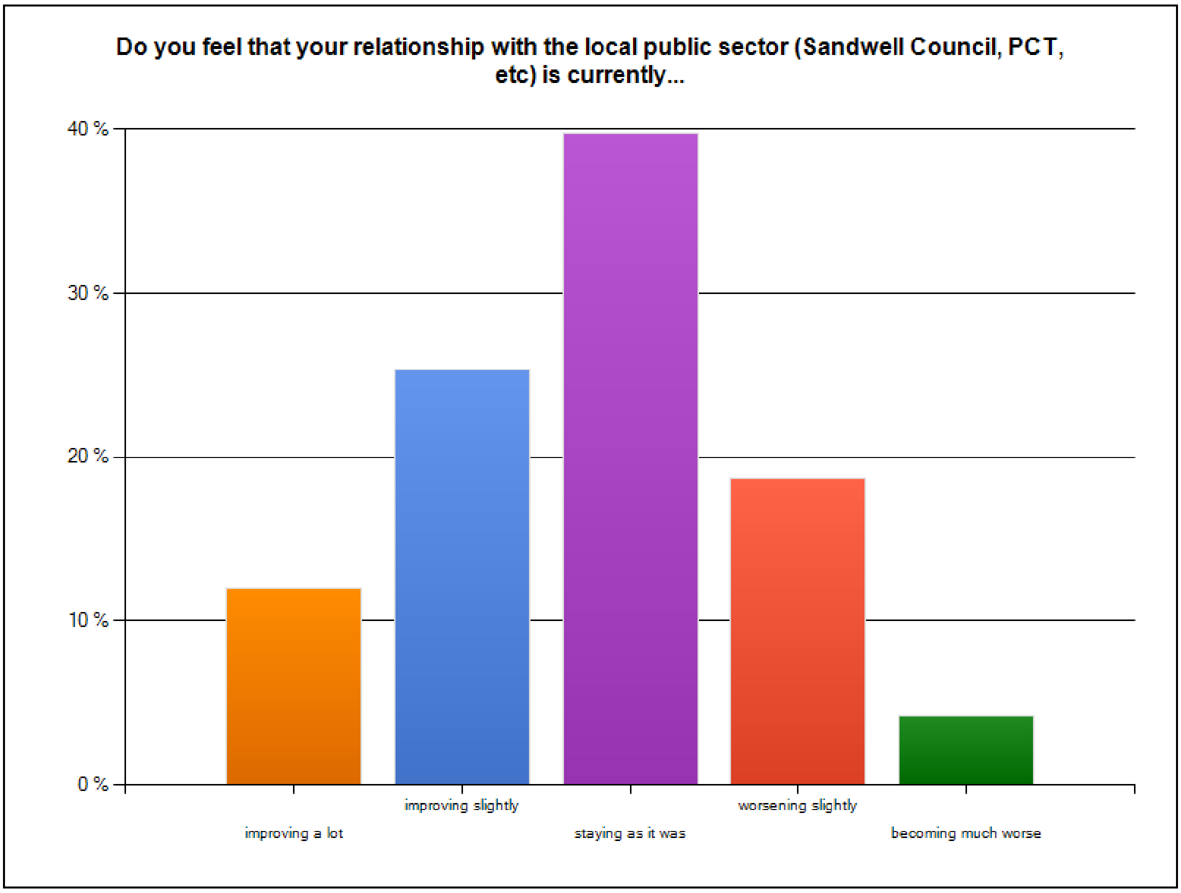


The Voluntary and Community Sector is rightly seen as a key partner in both delivering and shaping public services in Sandwell – with organisations and community groups often taking on a dual role of providing services and advocating on behalf of local residents and communities. But to what extent do leaders feel that the Sector is really being engaged in decision-making processes?

The headline figures look clear enough: one third of respondents declaring themselves 'fairly' satisfied, with yet more 'very' satisfied; another third remaining undecided and giving no clear view on their satisfaction. However, this is balanced against over one quarter (28%) of leaders feeling either 'fairly' or 'very' dissatisfied with this engagement.

Taking a closer look at these dissatisfied organisations it's clear that, once again, there is an unusually high number of large organisations in this grouping, and these leaders are twice more likely than average to be 'fairly' or 'very' pessimistic about a thriving future for the Sector. The most revealing insights into this group and possible reasons for dissatisfaction over public sector engagement are that this group predominantly consists of organisations which have experienced a large reduction in capacity to deliver over the last 12 months, and identified the greatest threat to their organisation as the lack of Full Cost Recovery funding.

(ii) Relationship with Local Public Sector



Survey respondents were invited to share their views on their relationship with public sector partners in Sandwell – in particular on its 'direction of travel', i.e. whether the relationship is improving, staying as it is, or becoming worse.

One third of VCS leaders surveyed consider their relationship with the public sector to be improving, with over one in ten feeling the relationship is improving a lot. Forty per cent of leaders feel there is little discernable change in relationships, whilst the remaining respondents – almost a quarter – consider that relationships are worsening.

The profile of organisations responding with the view that relationships are improving was mostly consistent with a cross-section of the survey as a whole, but did see slightly more medium –sized organisations than average taking this view. It is interesting, though perhaps not surprising, to note that this group were almost twice more likely than average to be optimistic about a thriving future for the Sector.

Grouping together those who consider relationships to be worsening, it could be seen that this group are very consistent in size-profile with a cross-section of the Sector as a whole. Interestingly the data suggests that these groups are more likely than average to receive most of their funding from other sources rather than from public sector partners.

Again, perhaps not surprisingly, this group are twice more likely than average to take a pessimistic view of the future for the Sector, and are also three times more likely than average to be dissatisfied with their engagement in local decision-making processes.

5. Next Steps

SCVO will take forward the learning and insights from this survey to support its work promoting the value of Sandwell's Voluntary and Community Sector and the difference it makes in meeting the current and future needs of Sandwell's communities. In particular these findings will be shared with local public bodies to support and add to focus to efforts to create an environment for a thriving Voluntary and Community Sector.

Further information on this survey, intelligence on Sandwell's Voluntary and Community Sector, and information on SCVO's support role can be obtained from Mark Davis, SCVO's Chief Executive Officer, on 0121 565 8939, email mark@scvo.info

SCVO would like to thank all Voluntary and Community Sector leaders who participated in this survey.

6. Appendix

- Method
- Survey script

Method

The ‘5 Minute Leaders Survey’ was designed and undertaken using the web-based Survey Monkey tool. 725 VCS organisations received an email inviting them to participate and all 790 known groups and organisations were notified of the survey by letter and in the SCVO newsletter. Organisations could complete the survey on-line or submit their responses confidentially by post to SCVO; telephone support was also offered by SCVO to those who required it.

The survey received a total of 196 responses: almost one quarter of the total number of VCS organisations known.

The survey captured responses from a cross-section which was broadly representative of the VCS in Sandwell as a whole:

- 56% of those surveyed were small groups; this compares to an estimated 59% count of small groups across the whole VCS (based on SCVO’s database)
- 31% of those surveyed were small to medium organisations; this compares to an estimated count of 28% across the whole VCS
- 13% of those surveyed were large organisations – the same proportion of large groups found across the whole VCS

For the purposes of this report, definitions of ‘small’, ‘medium’ and ‘large’ are based on annual income; this is provided as a guide, whilst recognising the arbitrary nature and natural exceptions and limitations of this.

- ‘Small’ organisations have an income not exceeding £15k;
- medium organisations have an income not exceeding £250k;
- large organisations have an income in excess of £250k per annum.

Sandwell VCS Leaders 5 Minute Survey

SCVO is inviting you as a leader within the local Voluntary and Community Sector to share your views on the current health of our Sector in Sandwell. This information will be used to support our engagement with the local public sector and to evidence the huge worth of organisations like yours and its value to the people of Sandwell.

The information you give to us will be treated in the STRICTEST CONFIDENCE. Figures drawn from this survey will only be shared as a collection of data: no individual information/names of participants will be disclosed to any third party. Outcomes from this will be shared in the next SCVO.INFO newsletter and on our website www.scvo.info. Please complete as much as you can of this survey. If you have any questions relating to this survey, or you feel SCVO can help you in any way, please contact Leona Bird on 0121 558 7434, email leona@scvo.info

ABOUT YOU

Your Name:

Name of your organisation/group:

Your position (eg Chair, Manager):

Email or telephone:

SECTION 1: YOUR STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS

How many employees in Sandwell do you currently have?:

Over the last 12 months, has your number of employees….

☐ Increased a lot

☐ Increased slightly

☐ Stayed the same

☐ Decreased slightly

☐ Decreased a lot

☐ Not relevant

Over the last 12 months, has your capacity/ability to provide your services and support to beneficiaries/the community …..

☐ Increased a lot

☐ Increased slightly

☐ Stayed the same

☐ Decreased slightly

☐ Decreased a lot

- Not relevant

How many volunteers have supported you over the last 12 months (including committee members)?:

Approximately how many volunteer hours are given to your organisation per week?

SECTION 2: YOUR SERVICES

Approximately how many different people in Sandwell have benefited from your services over the last 12 months?

Over the last 12 months, has demand for your services…

- Increased a lot
- Increased slightly
- Stayed the same
- Decreased slightly
- Don't know

SECTION 3: YOUR SUSTAINABILITY

Approximately how much was your organisation's expenditure in Sandwell over the last 12 months??

What do you feel is the greatest threat to your organisation at present?

- Election/Change of G'ment
- Personalisation agenda in health and social care
- Public sector budget cuts/new funding priorities
- Increased demand on your services
- Over regulation/excessive review and monitoring
- Lack of full cost recovery in funding arrangements

Approximately how much funding have you received from local public sector (eg Sandwell Council, PCT, etc) in the last 12 months?

How much is this public funding compared to your total amount of funding?

- A small amount of the total
- About half of our funding
- Most of our funding
- All of our funding

- Not relevant

Overall, do you feel that your funding positive and sustainability over the next 12 months is likely to…

- Cause us to greatly reduce our services
- Cause us to reduce services a little
- See no change
- Increase our services a little
- Increase our service a lot

Overall, do you feel that your funding positive and sustainability over the next 12 months is likely to…

- Cause us to greatly reduce our services
- Cause us to reduce services a little
- See no change
- Increase our services a little
- Increase our service a lot

How confident are you that Sandwell's voluntary and community sector will "survive and thrive" in the next 12 months?

- Very optimistic
- Fairly optimistic
- Neither optimistic nor pessimistic
- Fairly Pessimistic
- Very pessimistic

SECTION 4: LOCAL PUBLIC BODIES

Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your ability to influence local decisions that affects your organisation or its beneficiaries?

- Very satisfied
- Fairly satisfied
- Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- Fairly dissatisfied

- Very dissatisfied

Do you feel that your relationship with the local public sector (Sandwell Council, PCT, etc…) is currently…?

- Improving a lot
- Improving slightly
- Staying as it was
- Worsening slightly
- Becoming much worse