National Youth Agency



National Youth Sector Census

Snapshot Report, Summer 2026

Youth Sector Census NYA

nya.org.uk



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Key findings

This 2026 National Youth Sector Census, produced by the National Youth Agency (NYA) and funded by the UK Government's Department of Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS), received 797 responses. This represented more than 1,500 unique locations across every region of England. The Census continues to provide the most comprehensive picture of youth work across the nation.

Findings closely mirror those from last year, highlighting the sector's continued shift towards targeted youth provision, a strong focus on supporting young people's mental and physical wellbeing, and the importance of providing access to trusted adults who can offer information, advice and guidance. The Census will continue to play an important role in supporting the sector by providing robust evidence to inform policy, practice and investment, helping organisations to better understand trends, identify emerging needs, and advocate for the value and impact of youth work.

Coverage and engagement

- Youth work provision is delivered across all regions of England with the highest number of responses coming from the South East, the North West and the South West.
- Youth work provision is available to young people aged 8 to 24 years, with most activities aimed at 13 to 19-year-olds.
- Most youth work provision is provided by the voluntary and community sector (VCS). Around three quarters of all provision is through the VCS, compared with about one in ten delivered by local authority (LA) youth services.
- Over half of provision is based in an area of relatively high deprivation.[1] Organisations in deprived areas are slightly more likely to reach higher numbers of young people than organisations in less deprived areas.

1 The National Youth Agency (NYA) defines areas of high deprivation as those in the top-3 deciles of the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD). Further details can be found here.

— Cross-sector working is evident in almost all organisations, most commonly with other providers in the youth sector as well as the education sector. LA youth services are much more likely than VCS organisations to work alongside other statutory services, such as social care and youth justice services.

Delivery and activities

— Organisations are more likely to deliver targeted weekly provision than any other type of provision.[2] Over half of organisations still deliver open-access youth clubs or provision with up to a third of organisations also delivering detached street-based youth work.[3,4]

— Mental health and wellbeing remains the focus area for targeted support, followed by physical health and providing information, advice and guidance from a trusted adult. Demand for mental health and wellbeing support continues to rise across the sector as well as youth employment, training and skills support.

— LA youth services are much more likely to be offering employment support, support for care experienced children or young people, or services that respond to violence, abuse and crime, or support those facing exploitation.

— The direct delivery of youth work activities is the main role of almost all organisations, with LA youth services more likely to have responsibility for commissioning and infrastructural support.



Delivery of safeguarding provision

— Roughly two in five organisations have direct involvement in safeguarding children and young people from serious violence, violence against women and girls (VAWG), and crime.

— Two in five organisations are providing some form of referred service for young people at risk of antisocial behaviour, knife crime or VAWG.

— LAs are more likely to provide a referred service for young people at risk of antisocial behaviour, knife crime or VAWG than VCS organisations.

— Organisations based in areas with high deprivation are also more likely to be involved in safeguarding children and young people than organisations in areas of low deprivation.

2 Targeted youth work is an intentional type of support designed to meet young people's range of needs. This may include mental wellbeing, employment, training and skills, and physical health. It is linked to the National Youth Work Curriculum.

3 Open-access youth clubs are community-based settings that provide safe and inclusive environments for children and young people to socialise and learn outside of home and school. They are open access, meaning all can attend voluntarily at little or no cost, and without needing a referral or meeting eligibility criteria. See Youth Endowment Fund for more information.

4 Detached youth work is a community-based approach that supports children and young people in public places where they are known to spend time. Engagement with detached youth workers is voluntary, meaning children and young people are free to choose whether and how to engage. See Youth Endowment Fund for more information.

Financial health of the sector

— Operating costs have increased for a large proportion of the youth sector, alongside a decline in operating budgets for many, reflecting similar findings from last year.

— Nearly two in five VCS organisations say they could not fully operate for more than six months based on their current reserves without other sources of funding.

— Organisations in more deprived areas continue to have smaller financial reserves than organisations in less deprived areas, yet they also face higher demand from young people.

Staffing and workforce

— On average (median), organisations have three full-time equivalent (FTE) and four part-time (PTE) staff in place (like last year's findings). There are considerable differences between VCS organisations (two FTE and four PTE) and LA youth services (12 FTE and 10 PTE).

— Respondents report good confidence in essential skills among their staff, although there is room for improvement in areas of 'managing risk' and 'recording and storing information.'

— Staff recruitment continues to remain a significant challenge for the sector, particularly for LAs, which require certain qualifications in place before hiring.

National Youth Strategy

— Understanding and awareness of the UK Government's Youth Matters: Your National Youth Strategy remains positive with just over half of organisations saying they are 'very aware' or 'quite aware' of the main components of the strategy.[5]

— LA youth services are much more likely to report they are either 'very aware' or 'quite aware' of the main components of the strategy.

— Respondents see the greatest benefits of the strategy coming from providing long-term funding stability, direct support for youth organisations, stronger integration of the youth voice into decision-making, and continued investment in workforce development.



5 Department of Culture, Media & Sport, 'Youth matters: your national youth strategy', 2025. Published on GOV.UK.



What the findings mean for policy

This year's census highlights the increasingly important role youth organisations play in supporting young people facing complex challenges. The sector is responding to growing demand for mental health support, trusted adult relationships, and employment, training and skills provision, while continuing to work alongside education, health, youth justice and other services. The findings reinforce the contribution youth work makes to national priorities to develop opportunities for young people and improve outcomes[6], while highlighting the need for policy and investment that enables the sector to meet rising demand.

1. The youth sector is a key partner in supporting positive transitions into education, training and employment.

Growing demand for employment, training and skills support demonstrates youth work's role in helping young people make positive transitions into education and employment. Through trusted relationships, personalised support and a focus on the whole young person, organisations help address the wider barriers to participation that can lead to disengagement. The findings reinforce the need for youth work to be recognised and embedded within national and local approaches to reducing the numbers of children not in education, employment or training (known as NEET) and improving opportunities.

6 Please see the government's Youth Futures Hubs and Transformation Programme



2. Youth work should be recognised as part of the wider mental health prevention and early intervention system.

Demand for this type of support remains higher than any other area of provision, highlighting the role youth organisations play in promoting resilience, providing trusted relationships and supporting young people before issues escalate.

3. The findings reinforce the case for a strengthened statutory duty for youth services.

Youth organisations are increasingly supporting young people with mental health, employability, safeguarding and other complex needs.
A stronger statutory duty to provide local youth services, underpinned by clear national sufficiency benchmarks, would help ensure all young people have access to appropriate youth work provision, reduce geographical inequalities in access, and strengthen local accountability for meeting young people's needs.

4. Long-term financial sustainability remains critical.

Rising operating costs and funding pressures continue to affect many organisations, reinforcing the need for sustainable investment and strong local partnerships if the sector is to meet growing demand and deliver the ambitions of the government's national youth strategy.

5. Workforce development should be recognised as a strategic priority

As youth workers take on an increasingly important role in supporting government priorities, youth work should be recognised as a priority skills sector. Investment in recruitment, training and professional development, alongside greater flexibilities in Growth and Skills Levy funding, would help expand the workforce and ensure organisations have the skilled youth work practitioners needed to meet growing demand and deliver positive outcomes for young people.[7]



7 The Growth and Skills Levy is the government's reformed apprenticeship funding system, introduced in 2026 to replace and overhaul the Apprenticeship Levy. Department for Work & Pensions, Department for Education, 'Growth and Skills Levy – accessible version of employer factsheet', 2026. Published on GOV.UK.



Introduction

The fifth National Youth Sector Census by the NYA and funded by DCMS, presents an analysis of data provided by organisations across all parts of the youth sector. It aims to build on findings from previous census reports published annually since 2022.

This year the census is delivered via an online survey hosted on the NYA's website. This gives respondents more control over how much of the census they complete. An interactive digital map is available to accompany this report and is available here: nya.org.uk/census/#Interactive-census-map

Summary of approach

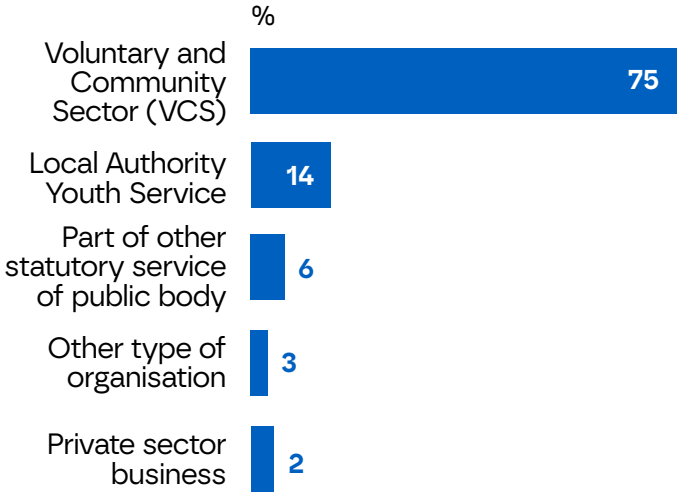
The National Youth Sector Census is an annual survey of youth sector provision across England. It was first launched in 2022 to further understanding of where youth work takes place and how it is delivered and funded. This year, to complete the census, respondents are asked to complete an online survey via the NYA website. Organisations that have previously completed the census are also directly invited to complete it. A range of further promotional activity on social media encouraged all youth sector providers to complete the census. It is a live survey that organisations can complete at any time, but this report uses data collected between February and July 2026 and outlines key findings, notable trends or significant changes in the youth sector. Cross analysis of data against a range of measures is also included such as organisation type, region and deprivation measures.

All figures provided in this report are expressed as a percentage (%) of total responses unless otherwise indicated.

Census coverage

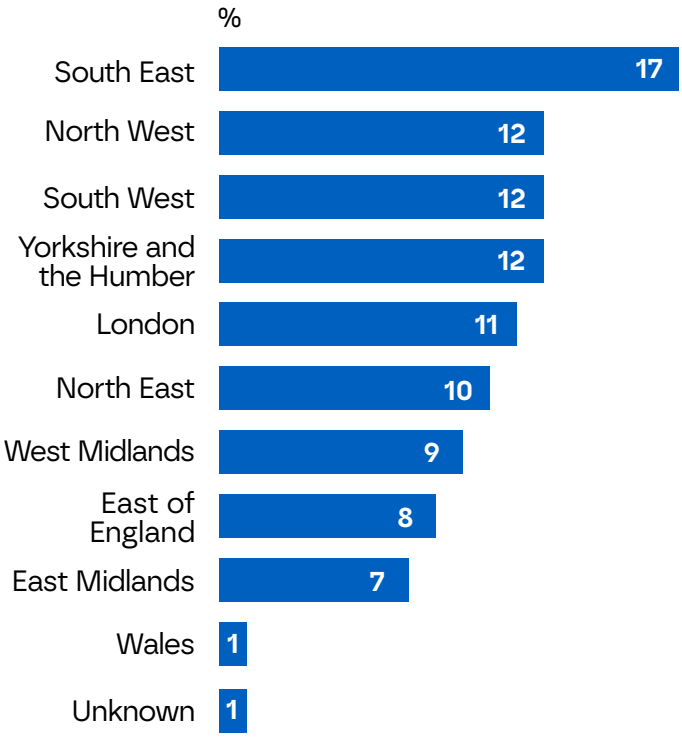
Since the census was launched in 2022, the NYA has received over 4,500 responses from over 3,500 organisations across 28,000 locations. The 2026 census received 797 responses up until the end of July when the sample of data was taken for this snapshot report. Most of the sample (75%) are VCS organisations with 110 LA youth services, 46 'other' statutory services or public bodies and 18 private sector organisations also submitting responses. Figure 1 provides an overview of survey responses, broken down by organisation type.

Figure 1: Census responses by type of organisation (n=797)



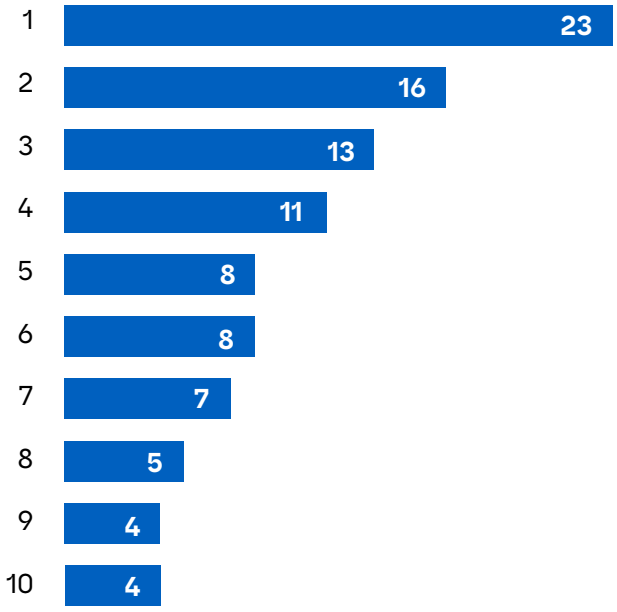
Some 89% of respondents primarily offer direct delivery, with 4% mainly offering infrastructural support, 2% contracting or commissioning others, and 1% providing grant funding. Figure 2 gives a breakdown of responses by region, with the South East (17%), North West (12%), South West (12%) and Yorkshire and the Humber (12%) showing the highest proportion of overall responses.

Figure 2: Census responses by region (n=797)



The majority of responses are from areas with high levels of deprivation: 52% of responses come from the top three deciles of deprived areas while 13% come from the bottom three deciles (see Figure 3).[8]

Figure 3: Census responses by the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) decile (n=797)



8 The Index of Multiple Deprivation is a way of showing how deprived an area is compared with all other areas in England. Each neighbourhood is ranked from 1 (most deprived) to 33,755 (least deprived), and these ranks are then split into 10 equal groups



Census Findings

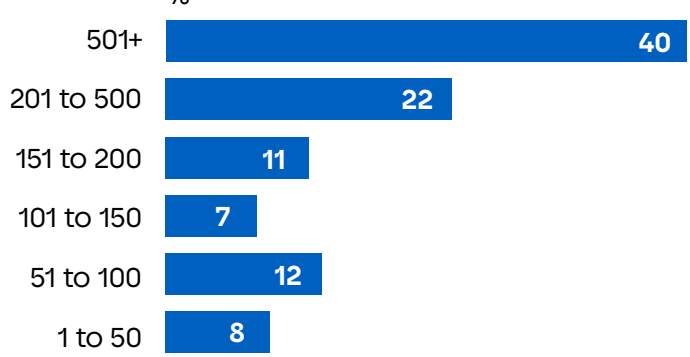
Youth sector audience

The youth sector continues to provide opportunities for engagement to a wide range of young people aged 8 to 21 years, and up to 24 years for young people with special educational needs and disabilities (known as SEND) or a recognised learning difference or disability in England. This engagement is delivered across multiple settings and reinforced through effective cross-sector partnerships with education, health, youth justice, social care and employment support services.

Number of young people engaged

Organisations report reaching high numbers of young people, with two in five (40%) supporting over 500 young people per year, and nearly three in four (around 73%) reaching 150+ young people (see Figure 4). By taking the mid-point of each category, 797 participating organisations support an estimated 219,852 young people per year.[9] This figure underestimates the total number of young people reached, as some will reach considerably more than 500.

Figure 4: Number of young people supported by each organisation (n=698)



called 'deciles'.

9 With '501+' for organisations indicating this reach.

Age range of audiences engaged

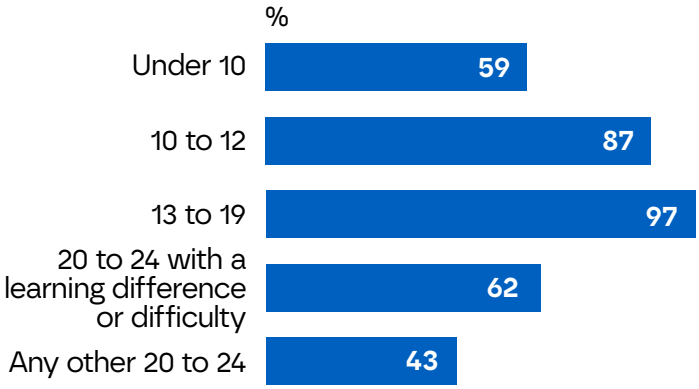
59%
of organisations offer support for under 10s.

87%
of organisations support 10 to 12-year-olds.

97%
of organisations support 13 to 19-year-olds.

62%
of organisations support 20 to 24-year-olds with SEND.

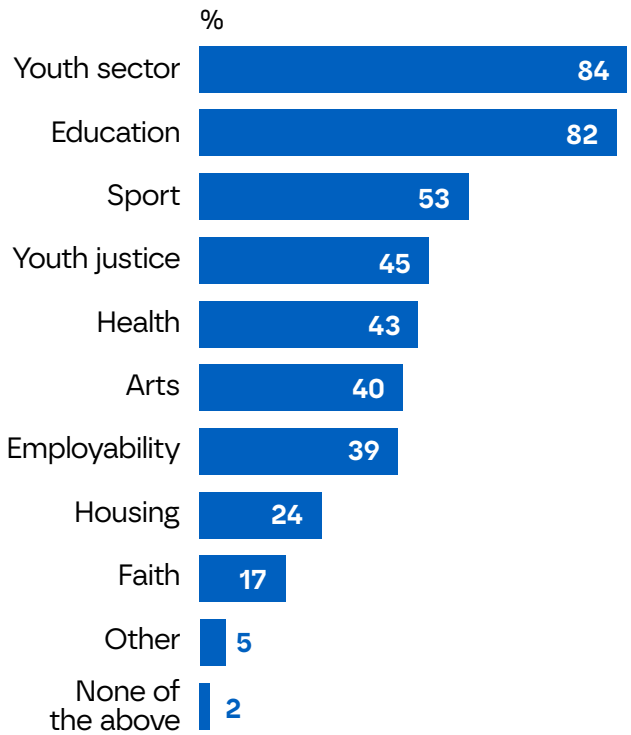
Figure 5: Age ranges supported by organisations (n=699)



Cross-sector working

Respondents are asked to provide information on any sectors they engage with when delivering or commissioning youth provision. Almost all organisations (98%) indicate working with other sectors in some way.[10] Other sectors frequently engaged with include the rest of the youth sector (84%), education (82%), sports organisations (53%) and youth justice (45%). Lower levels of cross-sector working are reported with the housing sector (24%) and faith organisations (17%). See Figure 6 for a detailed breakdown.

Figure 6: Other sectors engaging with the youth sector (n=690)



10 This may be through co-locating staff, cross-referrals of young people, working alongside other professionals in the community or sharing information.

Service delivery

The youth sector has seen a steady change in delivery in the last five years, with a greater focus on targeted support. Targeted support is now more commonly cited as the main type of provision over open-access provision – see Figure 7. Mental and physical health continue to be areas where there is considerable service delivery.

Organisations and types of service or support offered

65%

of organisations directly deliver or commission targeted support at least once a week.

58%

of organisations directly deliver or commission open-access provision at least once a week.

The provision of targeted support is roughly comparable with findings from 2025 and 2024 (65% and 60% respectively). However, this year has seen a notable decrease in organisations offering open-access provision from 2025 and 2024 (68% and 72% respectively). Other types of provision commonly cited include youth voice (50%), social action or volunteering (38%) and providing other leisure activities (33%).

Figure 7: Types of provision or service offered (n=655)

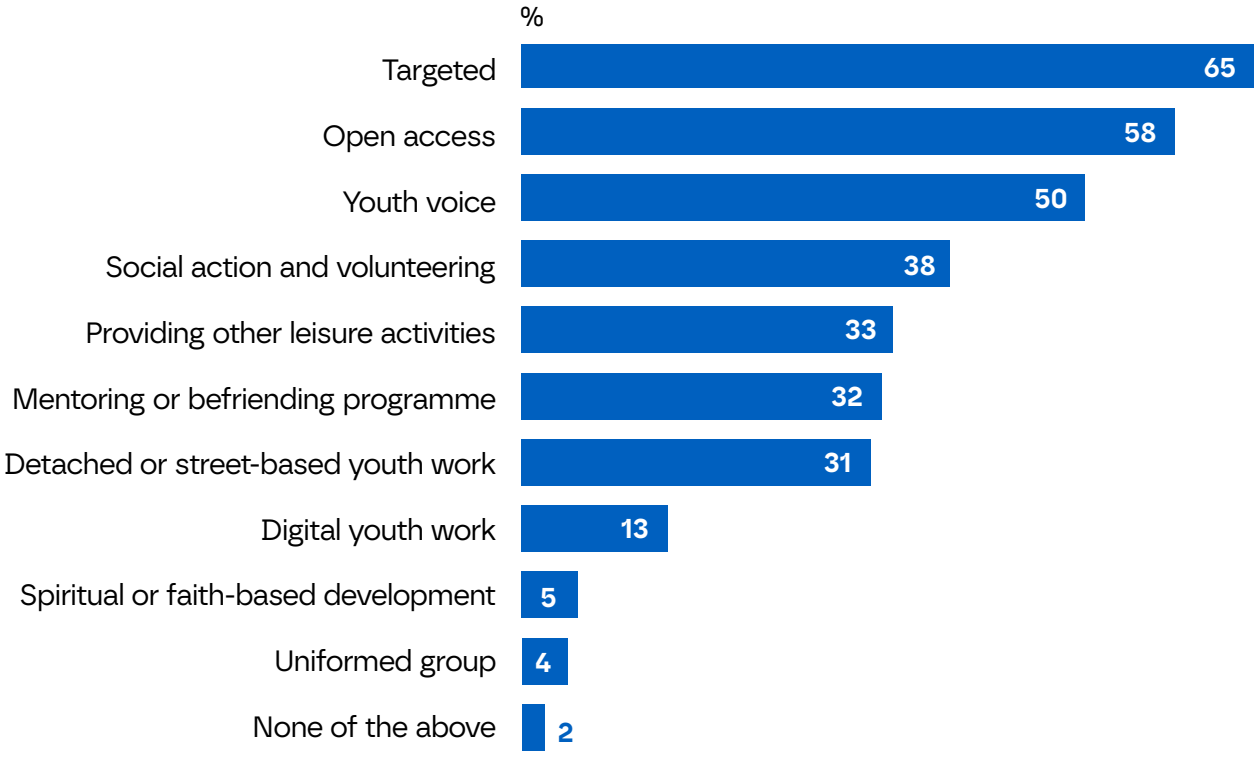
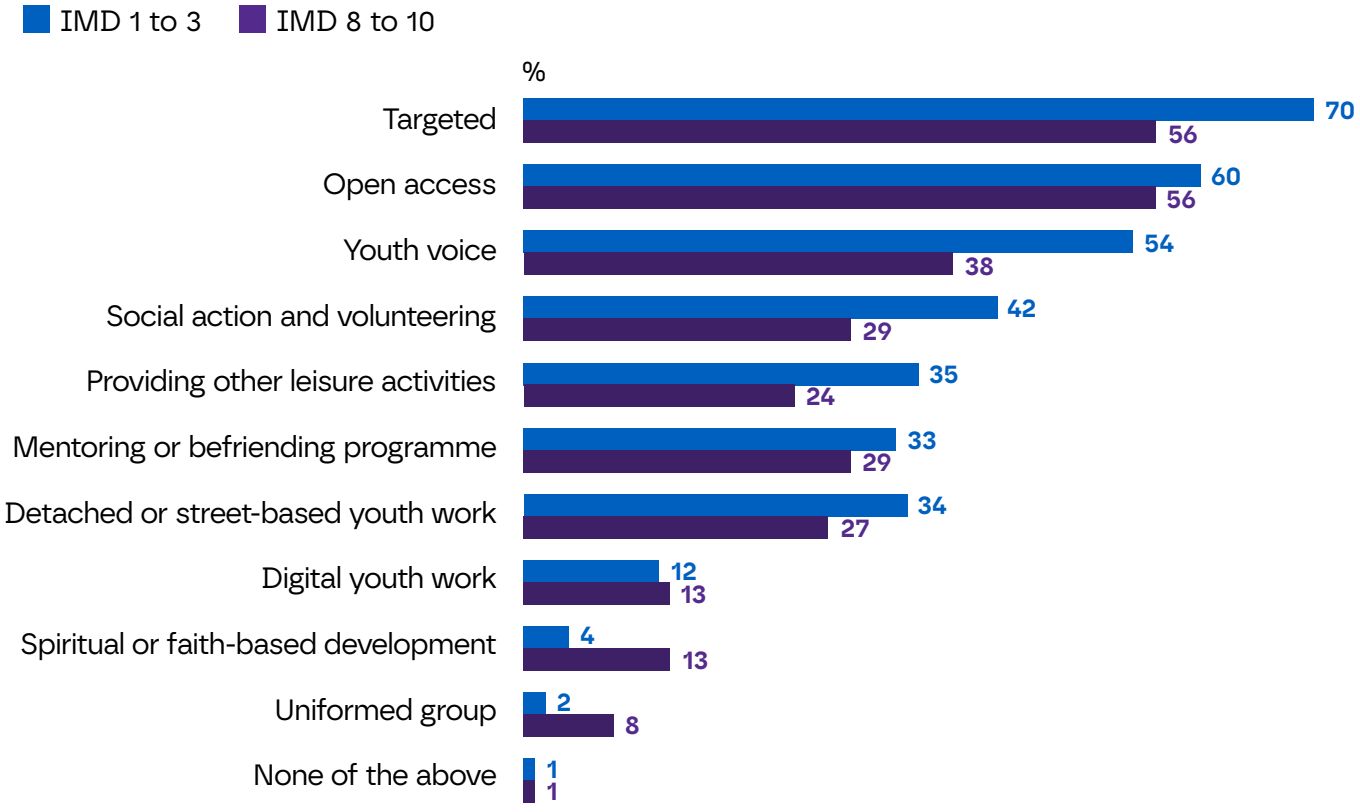




Figure 8 shows the differences in delivery type of youth support between areas with high and low deprivation. A higher proportion of organisations in the three most deprived deciles (IMD one, two and three) deliver most activities on a weekly basis compared to those in the three least deprived deciles (IMD eight, nine and ten).

There is some noticeable difference in targeted provision, with organisations in the three most deprived deciles more likely to offer targeted support (70%) than those in the three least deprived deciles (56%). Over half of organisations in the most deprived areas deliver youth voice activities compared to 38% in the least deprived areas. Social action and volunteering is offered by 42% of organisations in the most deprived areas compared with just under a third (29%) in the least deprived areas.

Figure 8: Types of provision or support offered, by IMD decile (n=526)



Bradford Youth Service: putting youth voice in action

Bradford Youth Service has worked closely with the NYA Youth Ambassadors programme in promoting young people's voices to develop policy and services across the district.

Supported through a partnership between Bradford Health Determinants Research Collaborative, Bradford Council Public Health, and the Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Team, the Bradford Young Ambassador programme has 10 young people aged 16 to 25 years to act as peer researchers, co-producers and advocates for young people, ensuring decisions are informed by lived experience and local insight.

Key achievements include making a significant contribution to Bradford's safety of women and girls agenda and the development of the Just Don't campaign.

Working alongside council and partner agencies, they helped shape campaign messaging around consent, respect, gender-based violence and male allyship, ensuring it reflected young people's experiences and priorities. They also shared learning through conferences and workforce development activities.

They were also involved in the Shipley Youth Voice Project, commissioned by Shipley Area Committee, which delivered consultation activities that engaged 94 young people. They collected, analysed and presented findings, identifying barriers to participation including anxiety, fear of judgement and a lack of confidence that adults would act on young people's views. The project produced practical recommendations to strengthen local youth participation and accountability.

Through the NYA Youth Ambassadors programme, youth voice has significantly increased across Bradford, creating clear pathways for young people's insights to shape policy, service design and decision-making. By generating valuable evidence on young people's experiences and strengthening co-production across public health and community safety initiatives, the programme is developing young people's research, leadership and participation skills while ensuring decisions are shaped with young people, not simply for them.



Targeted support

86%

of organisations directly deliver or commission support for young people's mental health, repeating findings from last year.

65%

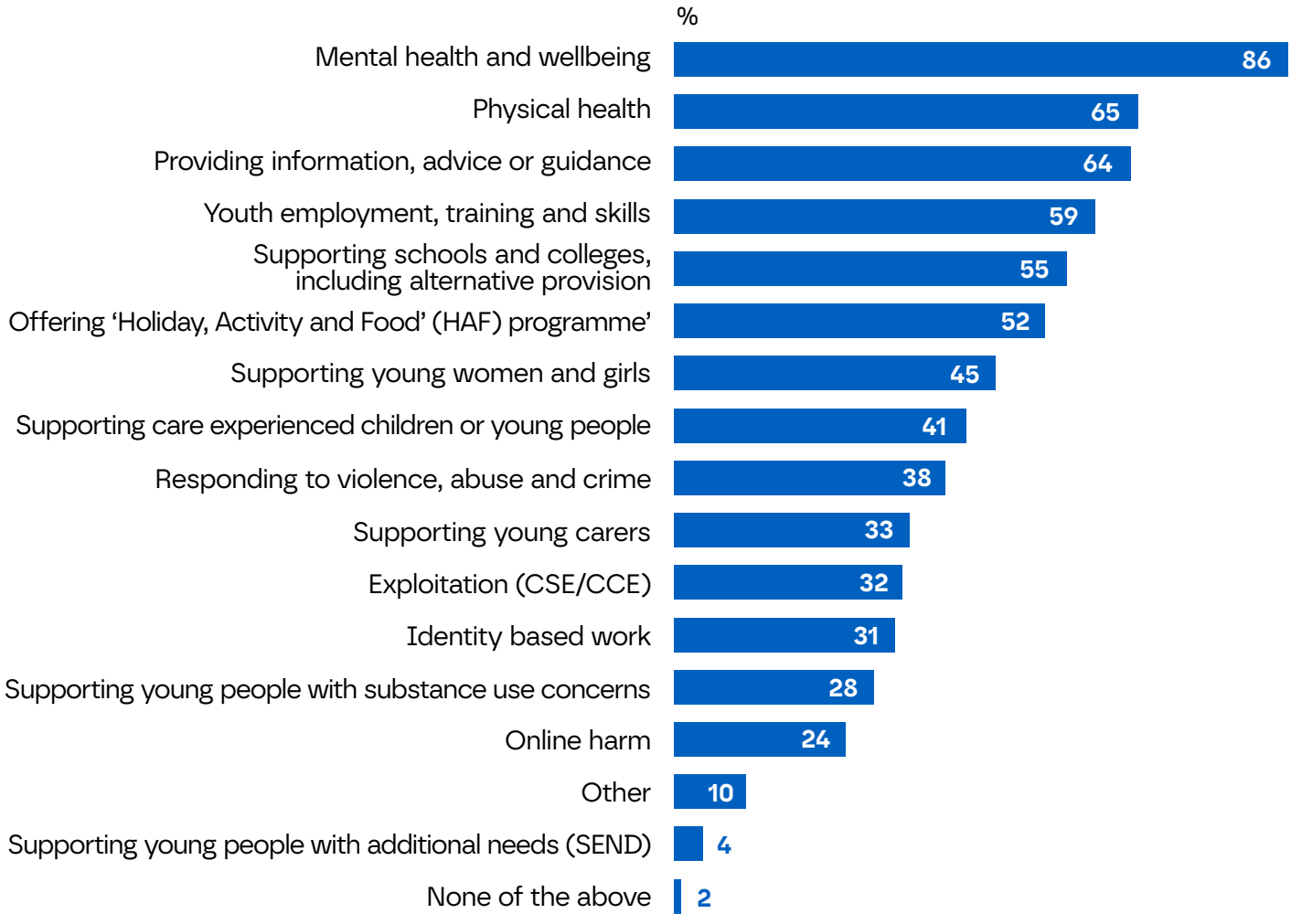
of organisations directly deliver or commission support for young people's physical health, down from last year at 74%.

64%

of organisations directly deliver or commission support to provide information, advice or guidance, down from last year at 71%.

Youth sector organisations can offer a range of targeted support designed and shaped by young people's needs and demands. The targeted support offered or commissioned is mostly for young people's mental health and wellbeing (86%), physical health (65%), providing information, advice or guidance (64%) and addressing youth employment (59%). Figure 9 gives a full breakdown of the types of targeted support currently offered or commissioned by organisations.[11]

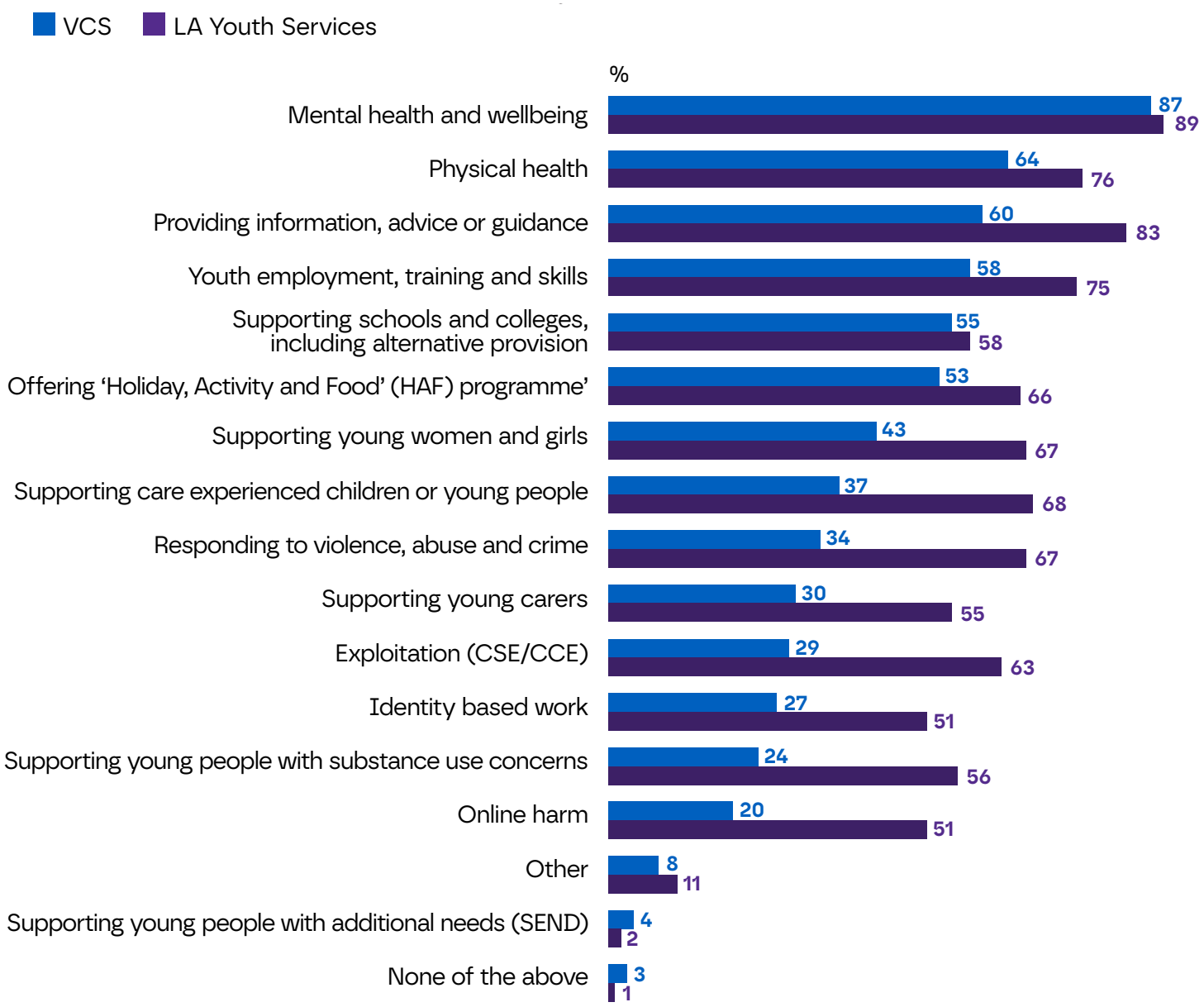
Figure 9: Proportion of organisations offering targeted support, by support type (n=655)



11 CSE refers to 'child sexual exploitation' and CCE refers to 'child criminal exploitation'.

There are notable differences between the proportion of VCS organisations and LA youth services delivering specific targeted activities.[12] Figure 10 shows that all types of targeted support are more frequently delivered by LA youth services. They are much more likely to deliver targeted support for care-experienced children and young people (68% to 37% respectively), responding to violence, abuse and crime (67% to 34%), supporting young carers (55% to 30%), responding to exploitation (63% to 29%) and supporting young people with substance-use concerns (56% to 24%). These differences may be related to the connection between LAs and other forms of statutory provision such as social care and the youth justice service.

Figure 10: Targeted support offered by VCS Organisations and Local Authority youth services (n=605)

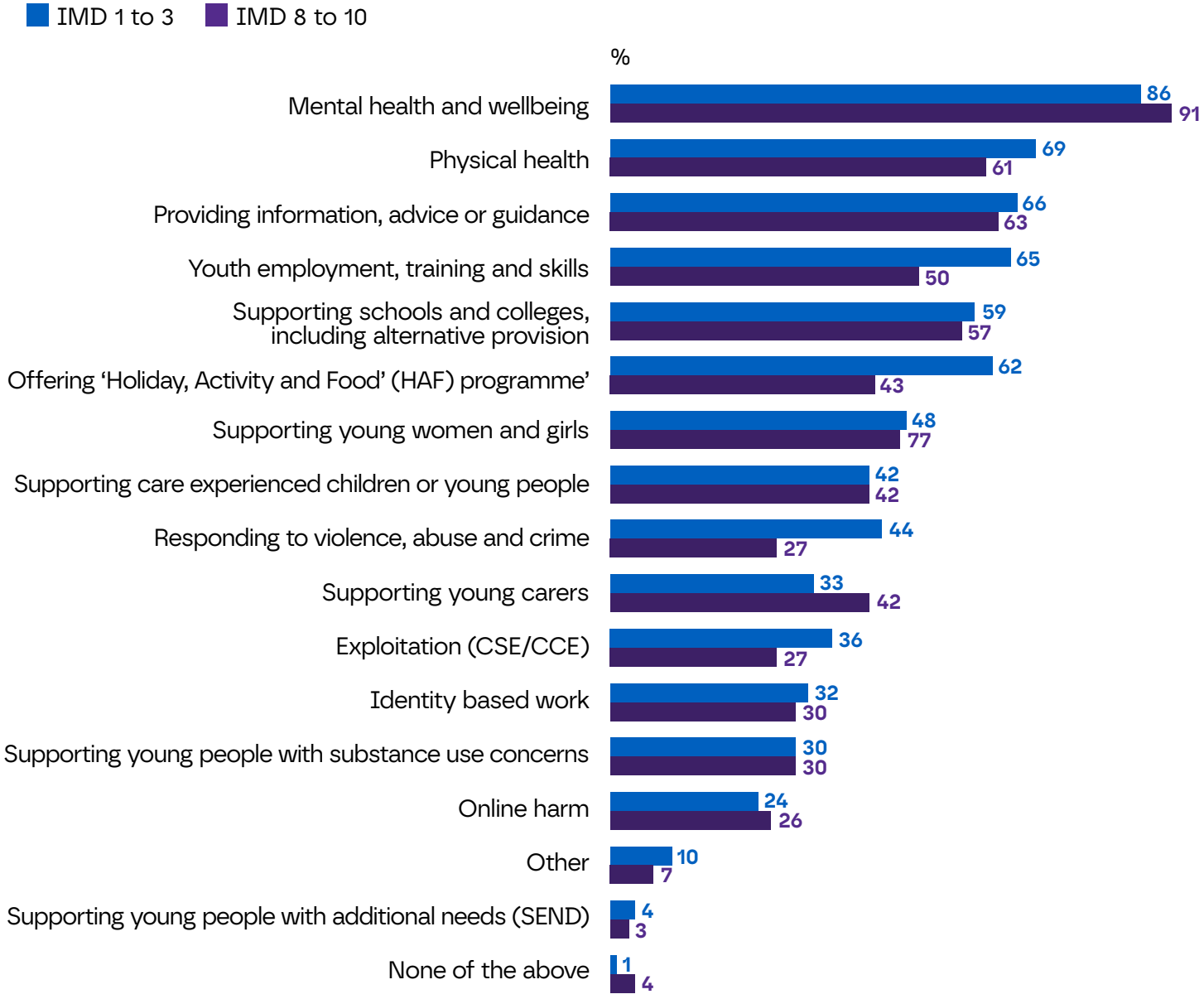


12 It is important to note that the sample ranges are different, with significantly more VCS organisations forming the census reporting sample.

There are also differences related to deprivation levels in the proportion of organisations delivering different types of targeted provision. Organisations located in the three highest IMD deciles are more likely to be offering holiday activities and food programmes (62% to 43% respectively) and responding to violence, abuse and crime (44% to 27%) than those in the lowest three IMD deciles – see Figure 11.[13]



Figure 11: Proportion of organisations in IMD quintile delivering targeted support (n=435)



13 Government-funded holiday activities and food programmes provide healthy meals, enriching activities and free childcare places to children from low-income families across the school holiday period.

Manchester Young Futures Hub: connecting young people to early help

Manchester's Young Future's Hub is demonstrating how a networked approach can make support more accessible for young people facing complex challenges.

Built around key delivery sites, including Manchester Youth Zone and Moss Side Millennium Powerhouse, and other outreach across the city, the hub brings together mental health and wellbeing support, employment advice, and positive activities for young people through a co-ordinated local offer. Young people can access youth workers and dedicated mental health support through services such as M Thrive, employability guidance and from the wider community support a single, co-ordinated pathway.

Youth workers described acting as a bridge between young people and specialist services. They work closely with other agencies such as schools, police and mental health practitioners to provide early intervention support for young people and their families or carers.

"You can put all the interventions in the world in place, but if you'd not got that wraparound support, it's not going to be impactful."
Danny Percival, Director of Operations, Manchester Youth Zone

The hubs are helping young people remain engaged with education, training and employment opportunities. From mentoring, CV support and employer engagement at Manchester Youth Zone to one-to-one support, vocational learning and alternative pathways at Powerhouse, young people are being supported to build confidence, explore future careers and overcome barriers to participation. Early impact includes improved school attendance, progression into college, and increased access to mental health support.





Waiting lists

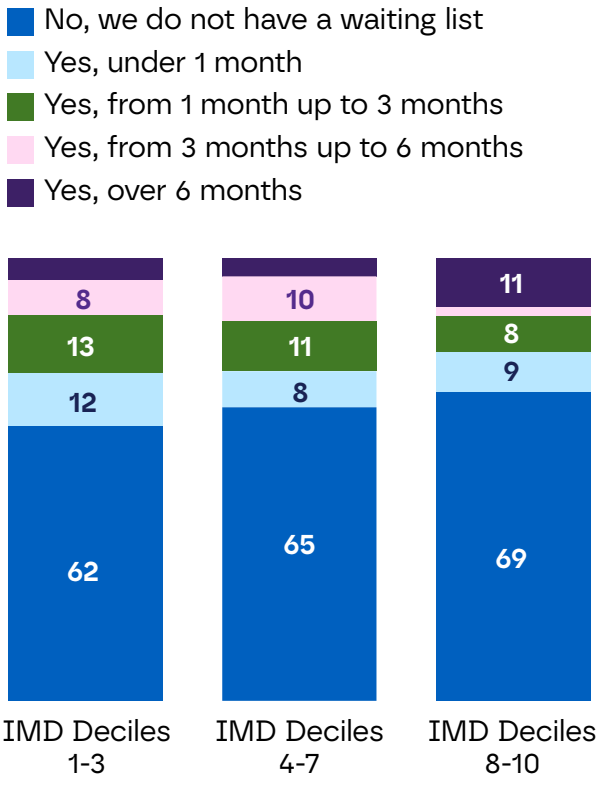
36%

of organisations operate a waiting list for their services

64% of organisations do not operate a waiting list for their services, an improvement from last year's figure of 56%. The remaining organisations report waiting lists ranging from under one month (10%), from one to three months (11%), from three to six months (8%) and over six months (6%).

Although there are no significant differences between IMD deciles, organisations in the highest deprived deciles are slightly more likely to operate a waiting list (38%) than those in the lowest deprived deciles (31%) – see Figure 12.

Figure 12: Waiting lists for organisations, by levels of deprivation (n=610)



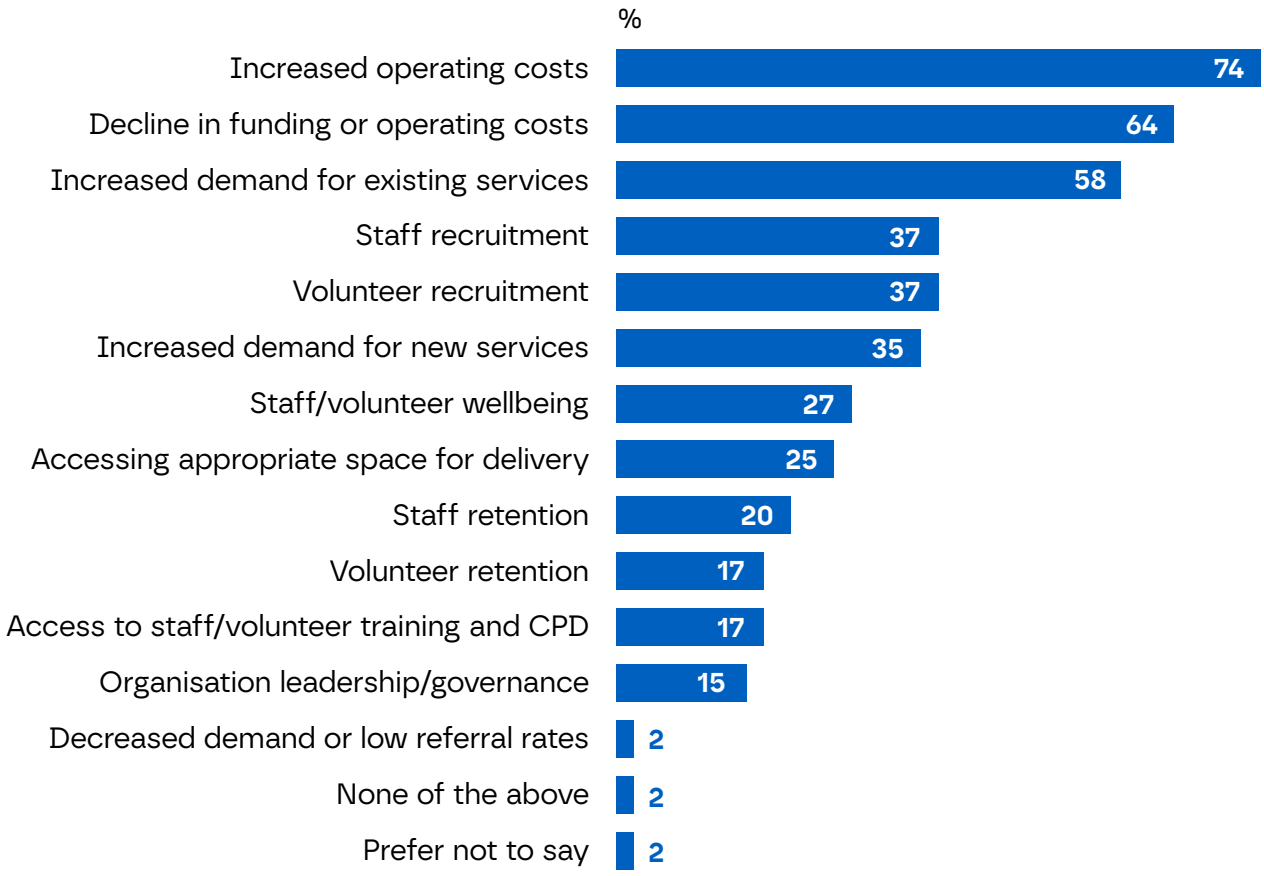
Challenges facing the sector

74%

of organisations report increased operating costs over the last year

Similar to the previous year's findings, the sector continues to face serious financial challenges (see also financial health of the sector). Nearly three in four organisations report increased operating costs (74%), slightly higher than last year's figure of 68%, while just under two-thirds report a decline in funding and operating costs (64%) – see Figure 13. Increased demand for existing services (58%), staff and volunteer recruitment (both 37%) are also significant challenges faced by the sector. These challenges are particularly significant for organisations in areas of high deprivation, with 77% of organisations based in IMD deciles one to three reporting increased operating costs and 65% a decline in funding and operating budgets.

Figure 13: Main challenges faced by organisations (n=684)



Demand for existing and new services

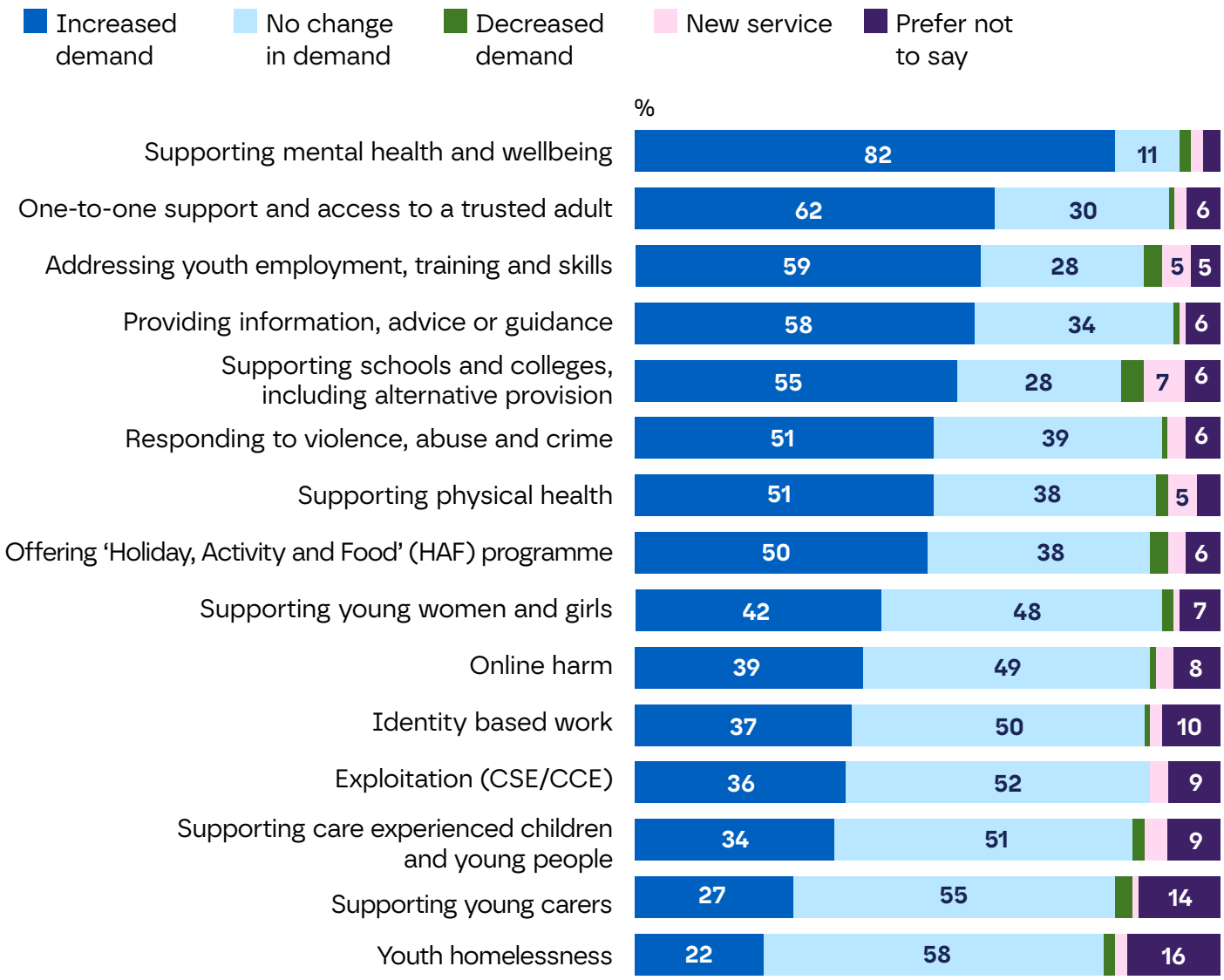
82%

of organisations report increased demand for mental health and wellbeing support

The majority of organisations report growing demand across a range of support services, particularly in relation to young people's mental health and wellbeing (82%). Significant increases are also reported in the need for one-to-one support and access to a trusted adult (62%), employment, training and skills support (59%), information, advice and guidance services (58%), support for schools and colleges (55%), and responses to violence, abuse and crime (51%) – see Figure 14.

This follows the increase in demand seen in previous years. Very few organisations are reporting a decrease in demand for services across any of the categories.

Figure 14: Demand for services in the last year (n=596)



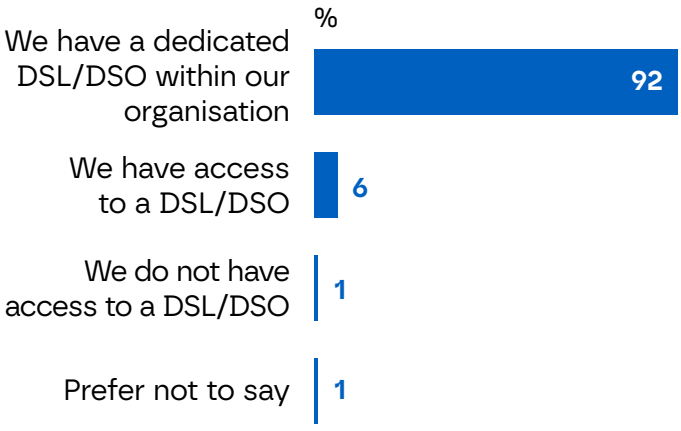
Delivery of safeguarding provision

The delivery of safeguarding provision remains critical to the youth sector. It plays a direct and important role in protecting young people from harm, including the risk of abuse and exploitation, and in creating safe environments in which they feel able to participate and thrive. Safeguarding is both proactive and preventative, enabling the early identification of risk and timely intervention. It also contributes to the prevention of serious violence, VAWG and crime more broadly including anti-social behaviour.

Access to a designated safeguarding lead

As may be expected, nearly all responding organisations (98%) report that they currently have either a designated safeguarding lead or officer (DSL/DSO) within their own organisation or have access to them (see Figure 15). Only a very small number of organisations report that they 'do not know' or that they 'do not have access to a DSL'.

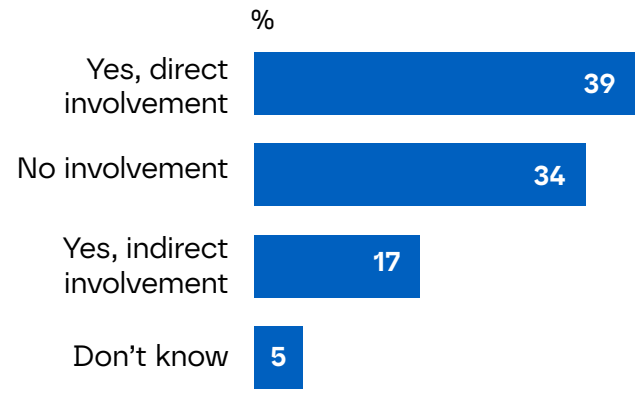
Figure 15: Access to a dedicated designated safeguarding lead or officer (DSL/DSO) among youth sector organisations (n=705)



Involvement in safeguarding children and young people

Some 39% of organisations report having direct involvement in safeguarding children and young people from violence, VAWG and crime (the same as last year's figure of 39%), with an additional 17% having indirect involvement. However, 34% report not being involved in this area of safeguarding – see Figure 16.[14]

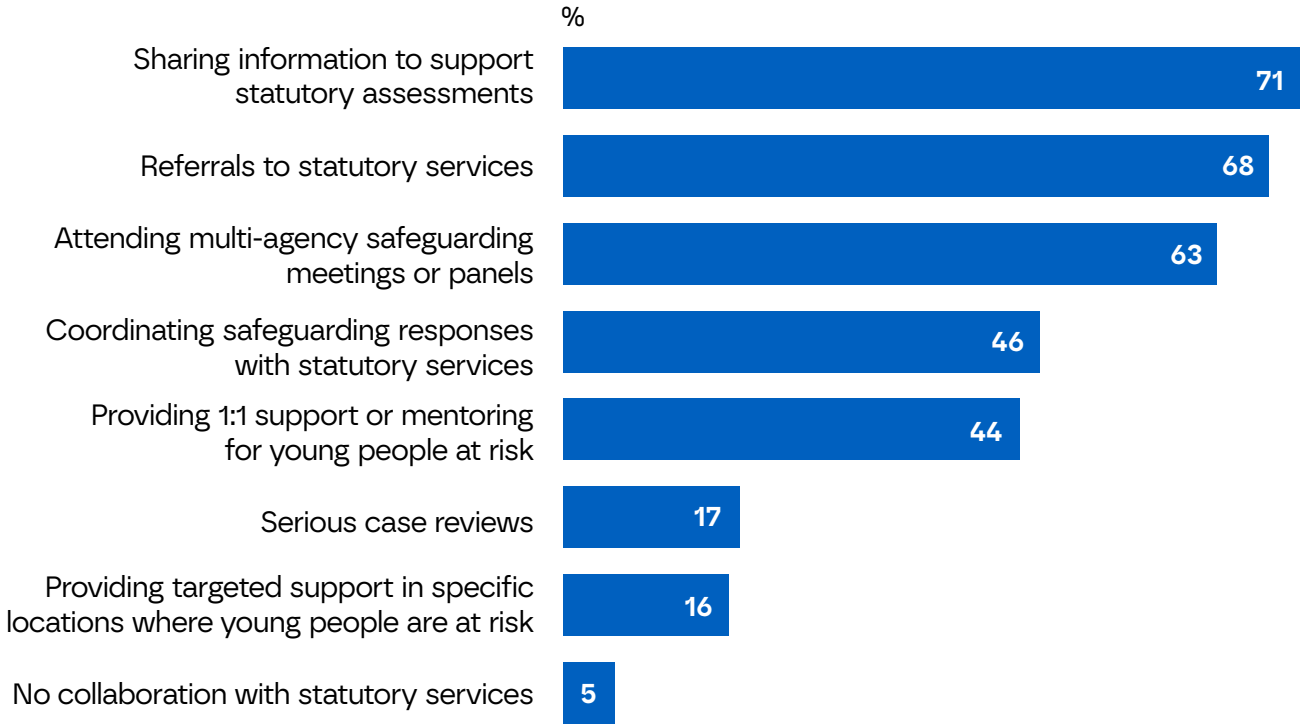
Figure 16: Involvement in supporting young people at risk of violence, violence against women and girls (VAWG), and crime among organisations (n=701)





14 This answer may be interpreted by organisations as providing direct targeted support for young people at risk of violence, VAWG and crime through a specific targeted service, and therefore we express some caution in this response.

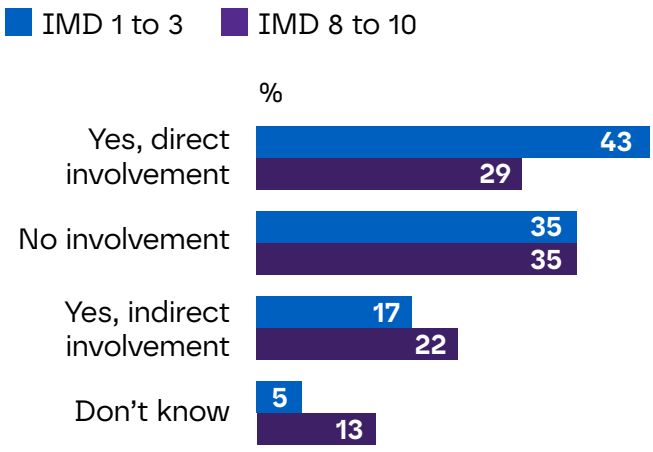
Figure 17: Collaboration with statutory services (n=406)



Organisations that support young people at risk of violence, VAWG, and crime are also asked how they work with statutory services to safeguard young people. The most common form of collaboration is sharing information to support statutory assessments (71%), followed by referrals to statutory services (68%) and attending multi-agency safeguarding meetings (63%) – see Figure 17.

Over 40% of respondents provide some form of referred service for young people at risk of antisocial behaviour, knife crime or VAWG, while 51% do not (over 10% of respondents do not know if they did provide referred services). LAs are more likely than VCS organisations to provide a referred service for young people at risk of antisocial behaviour, knife crime or VAWG (69% and 34% respectively).[15] Organisations based in areas of higher deprivation are more likely to be directly involved in safeguarding children and young people from violence, VAWG and crime than those in lower deprived areas – see Figure 18.

Figure 18: Involvement in supporting young people at risk of violence, VAWG and crime by IMD deciles (n=452)



15 Again, the sample ranges are different, with significantly more VCS organisations forming the reporting sample as part of the census.

Financial health of the sector

74%

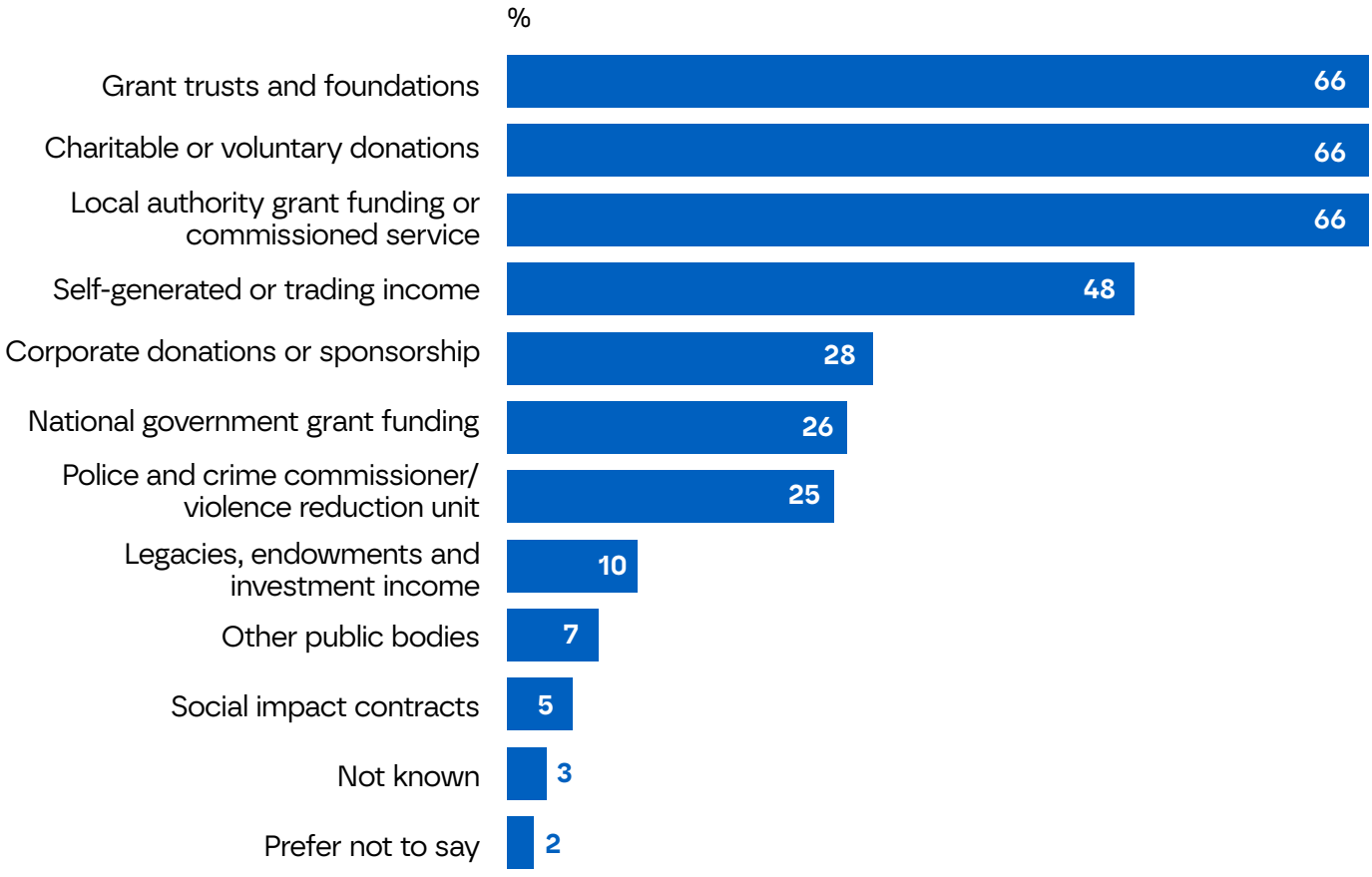
of organisations report increased operating costs over the last year.

This year's census does not collect information on expenditure or overall budgets. However, findings show that funding uncertainty and rising operating costs continue to create challenges for youth service providers, making the sector's financial sustainability an ongoing area of focus.

Sources of funding

Youth sector organisations continue to access funding from a broad range of sources, reflecting the sector's structural diversity and the varied nature of its service provision. The most common sources of income include LA grant funding or commissioned service (66%), grant trusts and foundations (66%), and charitable or voluntary donations (66%). See Figure 19.

Figure 19: Income sources for all youth sector organisations (n=597)



As would be expected, VCS organisations are much more likely than LA youth services to rely on charitable or voluntary donations, grant trusts and foundations, and corporate donations or sponsorship (Figure 20). VCS organisations are more likely to receive funding from LAs (66%) than national government (23%), while 46% of LA youth services report receiving funding from national government.

Figure 20: Income sources by organisation type (n=550)

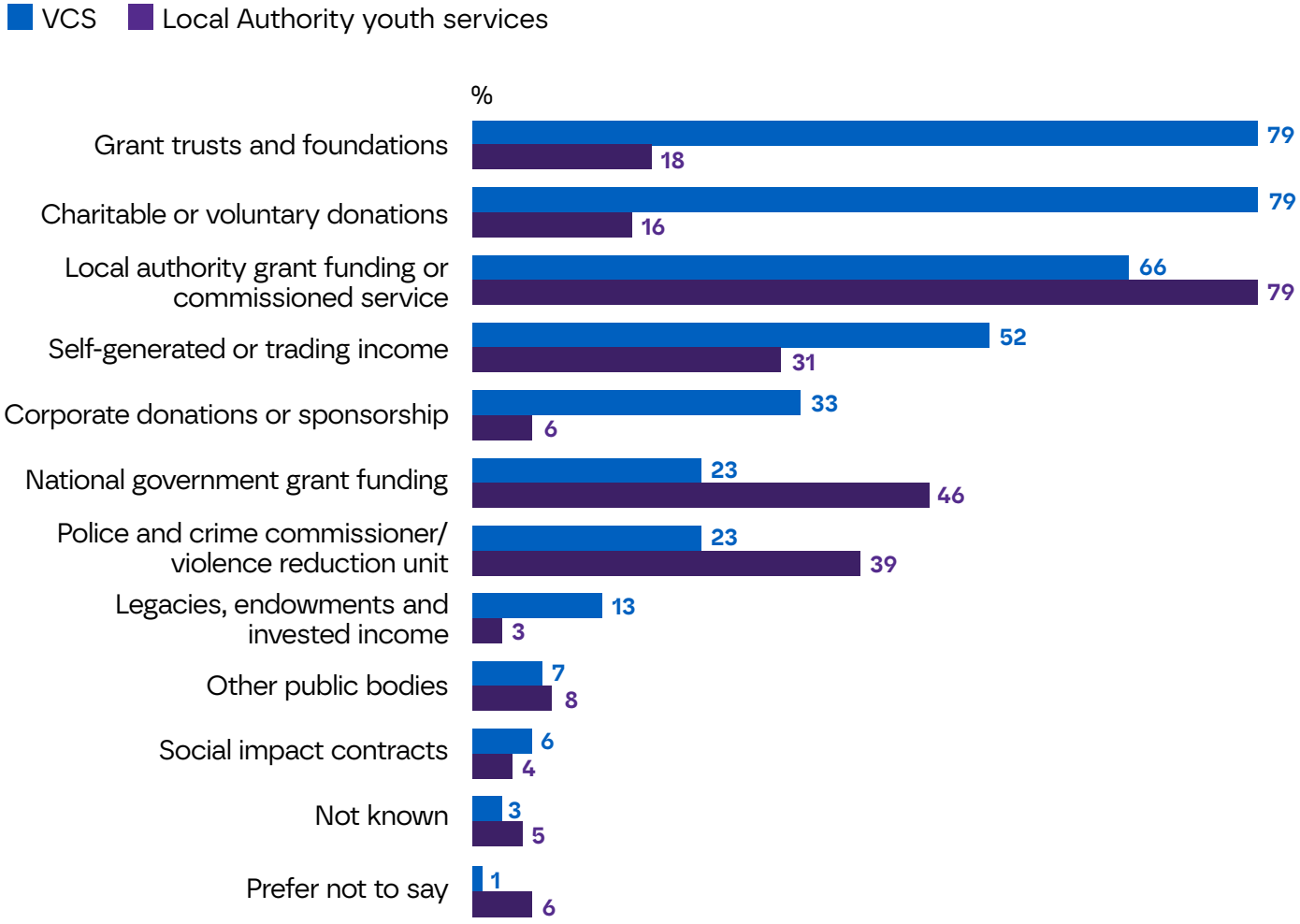
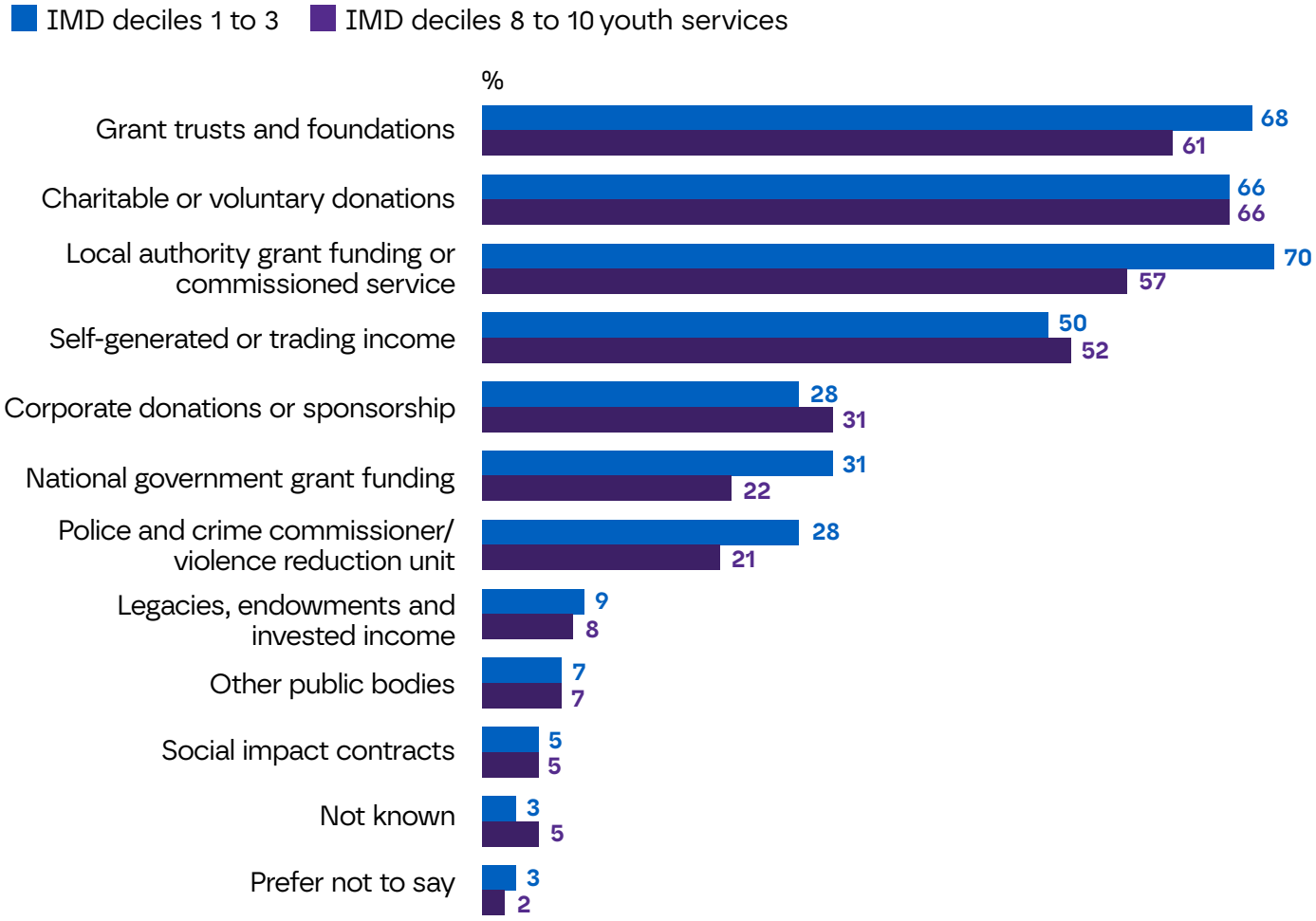




Figure 21: Income source by IMD decile (n=401)



Organisations in higher deprived areas (IMD deciles 1,2 and 3) are considerably more likely to receive funding from LAs (70%) than organisations in lower deprived areas (IMD deciles 8,9 and 10 [57%]) – see Figure 21. They are also slightly more likely to receive national government funding (31% compared to 22%).

Organisations and financial reserves

The financial reserves of organisations remain precarious with 39% of VCS organisations saying they would be unable to fully operate after six months based on their current reserves if no other sources of income were available. This is slightly higher than last year's figure of 34%. Only 59% of VCS organisations could operate up to 12 months based on their current reserves (again this is slightly higher than last year's figure of 57%).

Respondents from less deprived areas (IMD decile 8, 9 and 10) report having slightly larger financial reserves (43% with reserves of six months or more) than those in more deprived areas (41% of organisations in IMD decile 1, 2 and 3).

The youth sector workforce

Youth sector organisations employ, on average (median):

Three

FTE staff, who are supported by two volunteers

One

paid employee with a Joint Negotiating Committee, (JNC) recognised youth work degree (per organisation)[16]

Four

paid employees with no youth work qualifications per organisation[17]

Staffing numbers

On average, youth sector organisations employ three paid staff. The average number of FTE per LA youth service is considerably higher than VCS organisations, although VCS organisations are more likely to be using volunteers (Table 1).[18]

There are, on average (median), five employees working in organisations based in less deprived areas (IMD deciles 8, 9 and 10), compared to seven employees working in organisations based in the most deprived areas (IMD deciles 1, 2 and 3). Organisations based in less deprived areas have a slightly higher (median) average of volunteers (3) than organisations based in more deprived areas (2).

Table 1: Average (median) number of staff and volunteers for VCS and LAs

Organisation type	Number of paid employees	Number of full-time employees	Number of part-time employees	Number of casual employees	Number of volunteers
VCS (n=434)	3	2	4	3	3
LAs (n=91)	14	12	10	9	1
Overall average (median) (n=525)	**3**	**3**	**4**	**3**	**2**

16 It is important to note that the youth sector census covers a range of organisations who provide diverse provision targeted for young people. Therefore, not all organisations will require a JNC-recognised youth work qualification from their employees to work with young people. JCN stands for Joint Negotiating Committee.

17 Both full-time and part-time members of staff.

18 Sample sizes for each are considerably different for this measure.

Youth worker qualification coverage

Table 2 shows that four out of nine paid staff members do not have a youth work qualification.[19] On average (median), the number of staff with a degree, giving professional youth worker status is much lower among VCS organisations than LAs. The median value of one for all VCS organisations appears low but is likely attributable to both lower staff numbers and a greater diversity in provision. Based on these figures, we can estimate that 66% of LA youth service staff will have a JNC-recognised youth work qualification compared to just 33% of VCS staff.[20]

As we can see from the 'Challenges facing the sector' section, 37% of organisations report challenges in recruiting staff and volunteers, while 20% report challenges in retaining staff. Staff recruitment is a greater challenge for LAs (61% reporting this as a challenge) than for VCS organisations (33%), as is staff retention (26% compared to 19%). This may be because LAs are more likely to require a JNC-recognised youth work qualification for successful applicants – see Table 2.

Skills and training

The NYA has been developing a framework called the 'seven essentials' that sets out the core knowledge and skills that everyone working with young people should demonstrate to support safe, effective and ethical practice. Sitting alongside the Standard Qualification Framework (SQF), the seven essentials will provide a common foundation for workforce development and continuing professional development (CPD), regardless of role, experience or qualification level. Supporting guidance and resources will be published later this year.

The 2026 Census asked respondents how confident they were that employees and volunteers had the knowledge and skills associated with the seven essential areas of practice. This provides a baseline for tracking future awareness and implementation of the framework.

The youth sector remains committed to supporting young people, with good access to relevant training and ongoing development. Figure 22 shows high levels of confidence across core youth work skills, particularly in building relationships, leading activities, safeguarding, and promoting equity, equality, diversity and inclusion.

Table 2: Average (median) number of JNC-recognised youth work qualified staff by organisation type.

Organisation type	JNC youth work degree	Youth work qualification (levels 2, 3 and 4)	No youth work qualification
VCS (n=381)	1	1	4
LAs (n=91)	5	9	7
Overall average (median) (n=472)	**1**	**4**	**4**

19 It is important to note that not every role within responding organisations would require or need a youth work qualification.
20 Again many VCS organisation will not necessarily require a JNC-recognised youth work qualification to deliver their provision.

Figure 22: Confidence in the core youth work skills among youth sector staff (n=548)

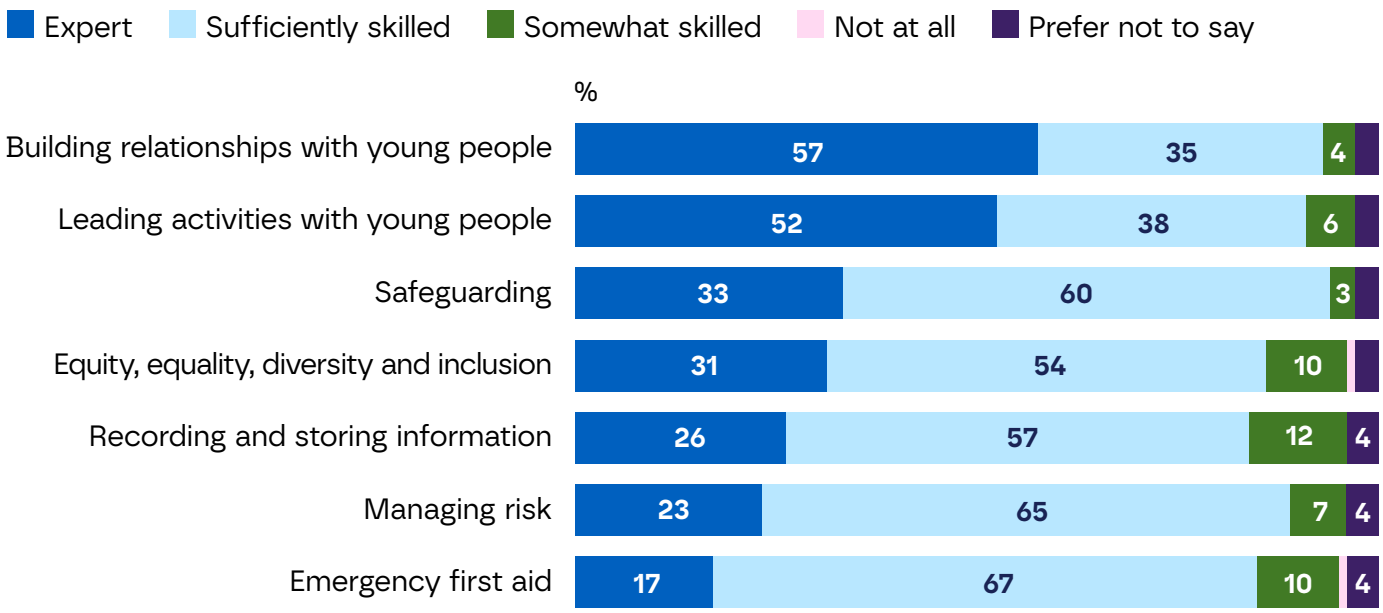
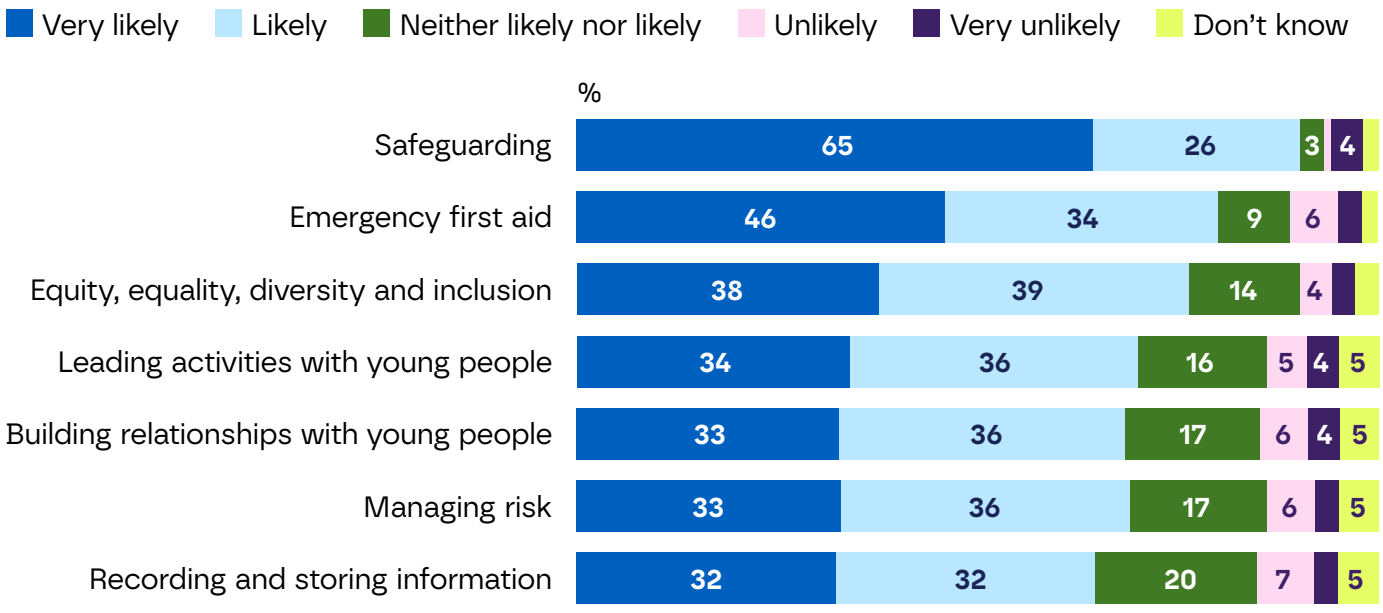


Figure 23: Core training to be offered over the next year (n=549)



A high number of organisations intend to deliver training for these essential skills during 2027 (Figure 23). Areas where there is a high commitment to delivering training include safeguarding (65%), emergency first aid (46%), and equity, equality, diversity and inclusion (38%).



The National Youth Agency's Workforce Transformation Plan

The NYA is leading a 10-year Workforce Transformation Plan to ensure that all young people who need support can access a skilled and trusted youth worker. The plan has been developed in response to growing challenges faced by young people, including poor mental health, social isolation, online harms and economic pressures, while also supporting the ambitions set out in the government's Youth Matters: Your National Youth Strategy. The **NYA believes that a strong youth sector workforce is essential to helping young people develop life skills, build resilience and feel connected to their communities.**

The plan is also a response to significant workforce challenges within the sector. Years of government funding reductions have led to the loss of thousands of youth work roles, difficulties recruiting qualified staff, an ageing workforce and a decline in training opportunities. The NYA's evidence shows that many youth workers do not hold recognised qualifications and that current training pathways are insufficient to meet future demand. At the same time, the government's National Youth Strategy aims to connect many more young people with trusted adults and embed 1,000 new youth workers within enhanced youth support services across England.

To address these issues, the Workforce Transformation Plan focuses on three priorities: **increasing the number of youth workers, ensuring they are better equipped through accessible and high-quality training and qualifications, and strengthening professional recognition for youth work.** This includes creating clearer career pathways, improving opportunities for professional development and enhancing the status of youth workers within both the youth sector and wider public services.

The **intended outcome is a larger, more skilled and more sustainable workforce that can meet the needs of young people over the next decade.** The NYA aims to more than double the number of qualified youth workers in England, increase the number of professionally qualified practitioners, and provide essential training for thousands of volunteers and trusted adults who support young people.

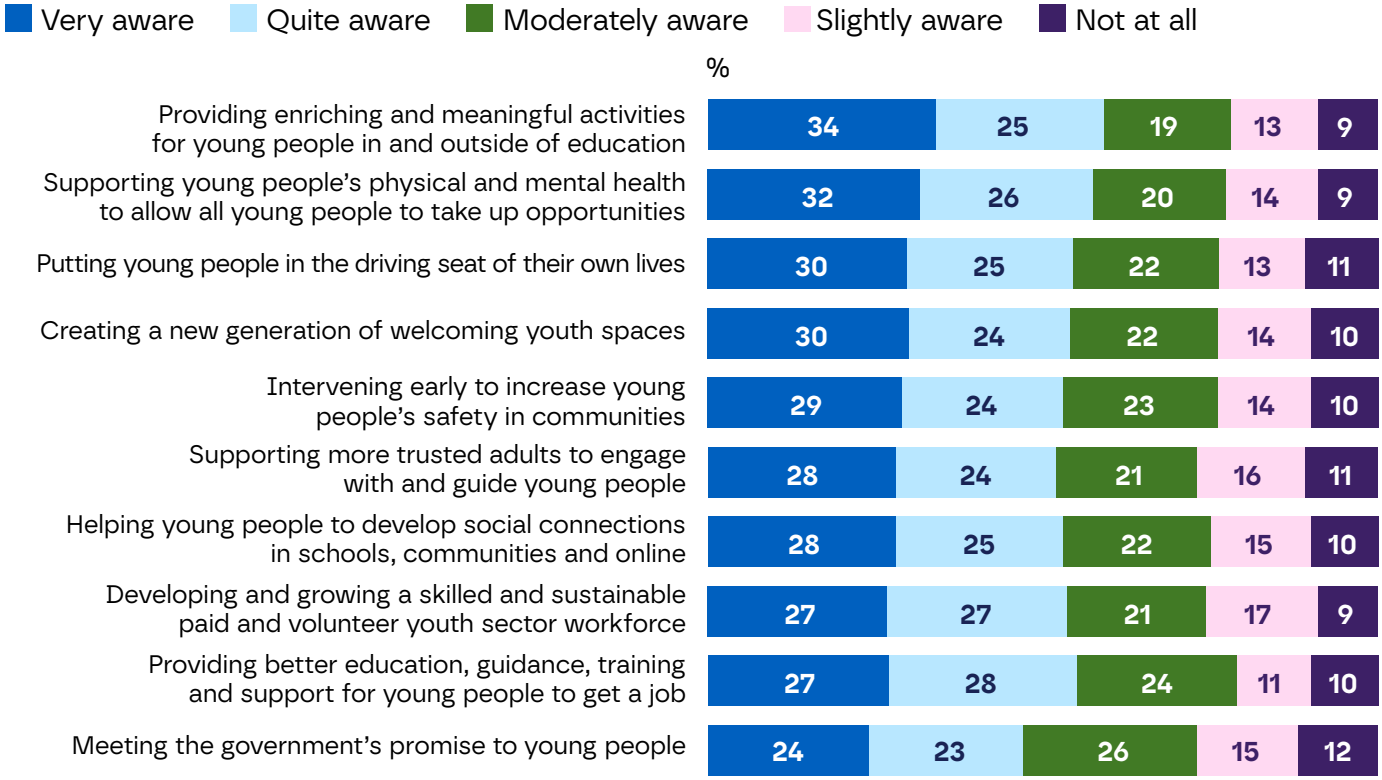
For further information visit
nya.org.uk/workforce-transformation

National Youth Strategy

The 2026 Census included additional questions this year, to explore the sector's understanding and awareness of the National Youth Strategy, consider its implementation and outline next steps. Overall, just over half of organisations said they are 'very aware' or 'quite aware' of the main components of the strategy, including its intention to provide enriching and meaningful activities for young people in and outside of education (59%), supporting young people's physical and mental health (58%), putting young people in the driving seat of their own lives (55%) and creating a new generation of welcoming youth spaces (54%) – see Figure 24.

LAs are much more likely to report they are either 'very aware' or 'quite aware' of the main components of the strategy. For example, 84% of responding LAs said they are 'very aware' or 'quite aware' of the strategy's aim to 'develop and grow a skilled and sustainable paid and volunteer youth sector workforce', 80% were aware of the aim to 'intervene early to increase young people's safety in communities', 80% of 'putting young people in the driving seat of their own lives' and 77% of 'providing enriching and meaningful activities for young people in and outside of education'.[21]

Figure 24: Awareness of the National Youth Strategy (n=471)



21 It's important to note that only 71 LA youth services responded to this question.

The potential impact of the National Youth Strategy

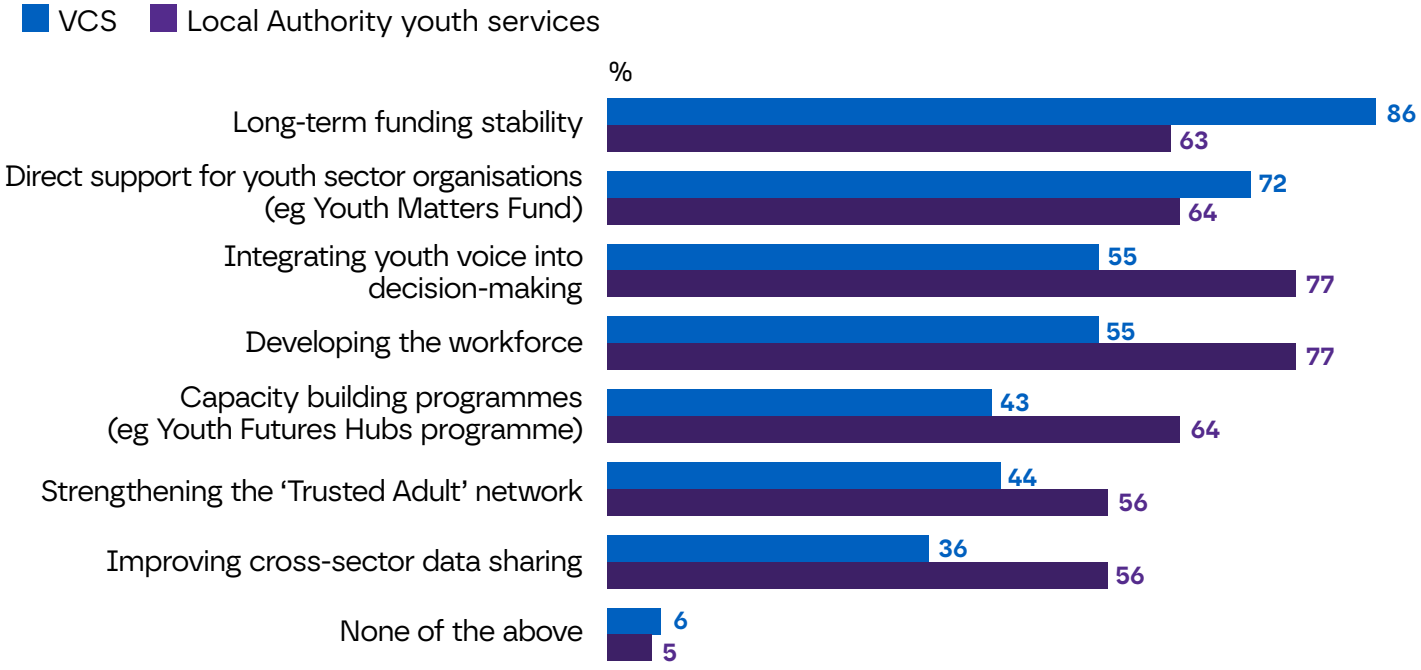
Further exploration of the impact of the National Youth Strategy revealed that the sector saw 'long-term funding stability' (81%), 'direct support for youth sector organisations' (70%), 'integrating youth voice into decision-making' (60%), and 'developing the workforce' (59%), as areas that are likely to the greatest benefit to the sector – see Figure 25.

There are some differences between VCS and LA youth services in their perceptions of which areas of the strategy are having the most beneficial impact for their services. VCS organisations are more likely to identify 'long-term funding stability' as a benefit for their service than LAs (86% and 63% respectively). LAs are more likely to identify 'integrating youth voice into decision-making' and 'developing the workforce' as a benefit – see Figure 26.

Figure 25: Youth sector's views on the benefits of the National Youth Strategy (n=479)



Figure 26: Youth sector's views on the benefits of the national youth strategy by organisation (n=441)



Next steps and future considerations

National Youth Agency plans for the Census for the upcoming year are focused on three priorities:

Using Census data to support and inform the continued roll-out of the National Youth Strategy

As the largest and most detailed dataset of its kind, the census is a cornerstone of understanding the youth sector and demonstrating the value of youth work. With the introduction of the National Youth Strategy, and initiatives such as Young Futures Hubs and the Youth Guarantee, having accurate and up-to-date evidence will be essential to monitor progress and inform delivery. The NYA remains committed to working alongside other research efforts and, wherever practical, sharing census data to support greater insight, learning, and sector-wide development.

Improve understanding of local youth offers

The NYA will continue to use census data to improve the knowledge base around the state of the sector (nationally and regionally), providing insights into where youth work is taking place, how it is funded, and the challenges facing those working young people in their communities.

Alongside other data sources, census findings will help to profile local youth services to support evidence-based policy and commissioning decisions, while ensuring services are better equipped to meet the needs of young people. This approach has already informed initiatives such as the Local Youth Transformation Pilots and Young Futures Hubs.

Continue to review the Census to ensure it is relevant to the sector

As development of the strategy moves forward, the NYA will continue to refine the census to ensure it remains relevant to the evolving youth sector, accessible to the wide range of organisations delivering youth services, and capable of providing timely, practical insights that support local decision-making across England.



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