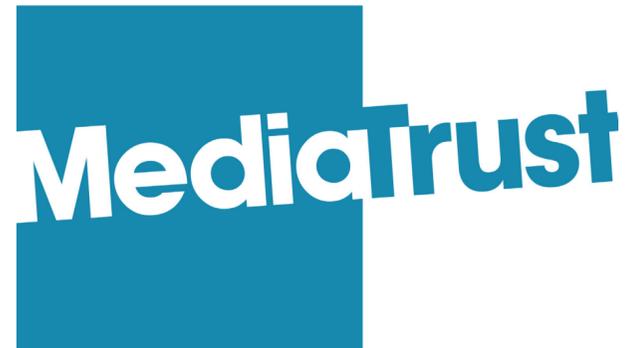
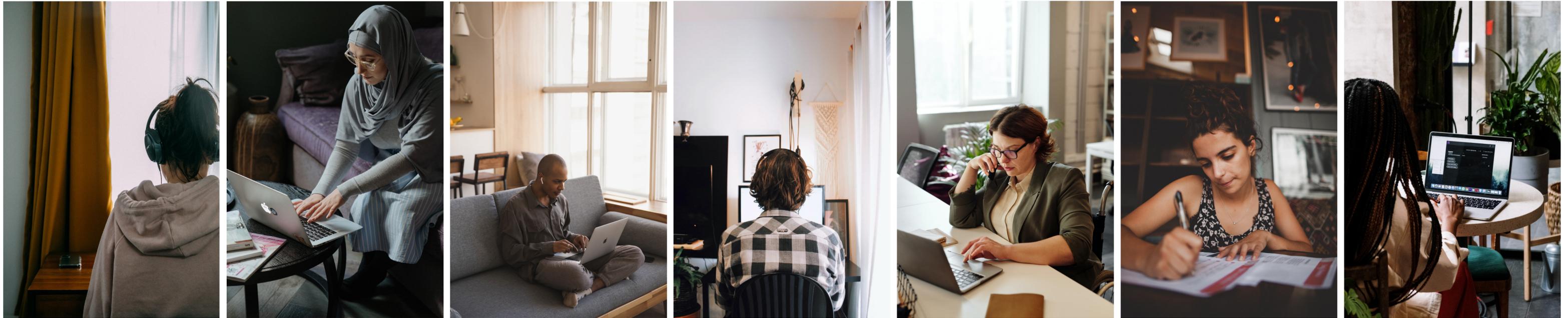


The Impact of COVID-19 on Charity Communications

April 2021



Thanks to funding support from City of London Corporation's charitable funder, City Bridge Trust who made this sector survey and report possible.



Introduction

2020 was an extraordinary year, full of uncertainty, challenge and change.

Looking back, it's really encouraging to reflect on how well charities adapted to the very challenging environment.

We've seen first-hand how quickly and effectively charities migrated to remote working, digital comms, virtual fundraising and online service delivery.

In 2021, many of the challenges and barriers are still there but which are the biggest and the most pressing?

In April 2020, [Media Trust](#) and [CharityComms](#) partnered on [a sector survey](#) to understand the key comms challenges that charities were facing as a result of COVID-19, and what support they might need.

The results of the 2020 survey allowed Media Trust and CharityComms to tailor their training and other activity to meet the urgent comms needs of the sector and, in particular, to help smaller charities with limited resources and budgets.

Fast forward almost a year later and we wanted to take a pulse check to see how things have changed since the start of lockdown in 2020, and to gauge what charities see as their key challenges, barriers and opportunities for 2021 — and the future. Once again, the findings will ensure that we deliver what charities most need in order to thrive.

Here are the findings of our latest survey and what we've learnt from what you've shared with us. We hope it helps you feel that you're not alone while also signposting you to some helpful resources.



Summary: what charities told us

We had **289** respondents for the 2021 survey, up **31.9%** from 219 in 2020.

With **66%** of the responses coming from small charities, the survey is therefore not representative of the sector as a whole, although **small and micro charities do make up 82% of the UK charity sector**. The answers, however were consistent across organisations of all sizes on the comms channels being used and challenges faced.

While comms and digital skills seem to be improving, **workload and work responsibilities have increased significantly** — inevitably putting more strain on the comms function within charities.

Comms teams are more stretched, services are more in demand and resources and budgets are tight, meaning comms is still a very challenging area for most charities.

The pressures of the pandemic are evident



Have felt overwhelmed at work



Said the lockdowns since November 2020 have been the hardest, from a comms perspective



Believe their work responsibilities have increased



Have been busier than ever at work

The top three comms challenges charities are currently facing

- 1. Producing digital content (films, vlogs, infographics).**
- 2. Digital exclusion (unequal access to technology or WIFI).**
- 3. Supporting users who would normally have access to face-to-face services.**

Encouragingly **more than 50%** of respondents said their ability to communicate effectively with stakeholders has improved since March 2020 and **over 60%** have improved confidence in their organisation's digital skills.

What we know

People are working longer hours

45% of respondents to the recent [Salary and organisational culture report 2020 | CharityComms](#) said they are now working longer hours because of the pandemic.

15.5% said this was due to needing to cover the work of furloughed team-mates while **12.3%** pointed to team reductions due to redundancies.



75%

This chimes with the findings of this survey where 75% of respondents said their workload has increased since the start of lockdown.

Boundaries between life and work are blurring

“People are finding it more challenging to switch off when working from home and are finding themselves working longer days as personal and professional boundaries have blurred. Many have also faced additional pressure, trying to juggle work with childcare while schools are closed, or coping with redundancies and large parts of the sector being furloughed.”

— **Laura Andre, Health in Mind**

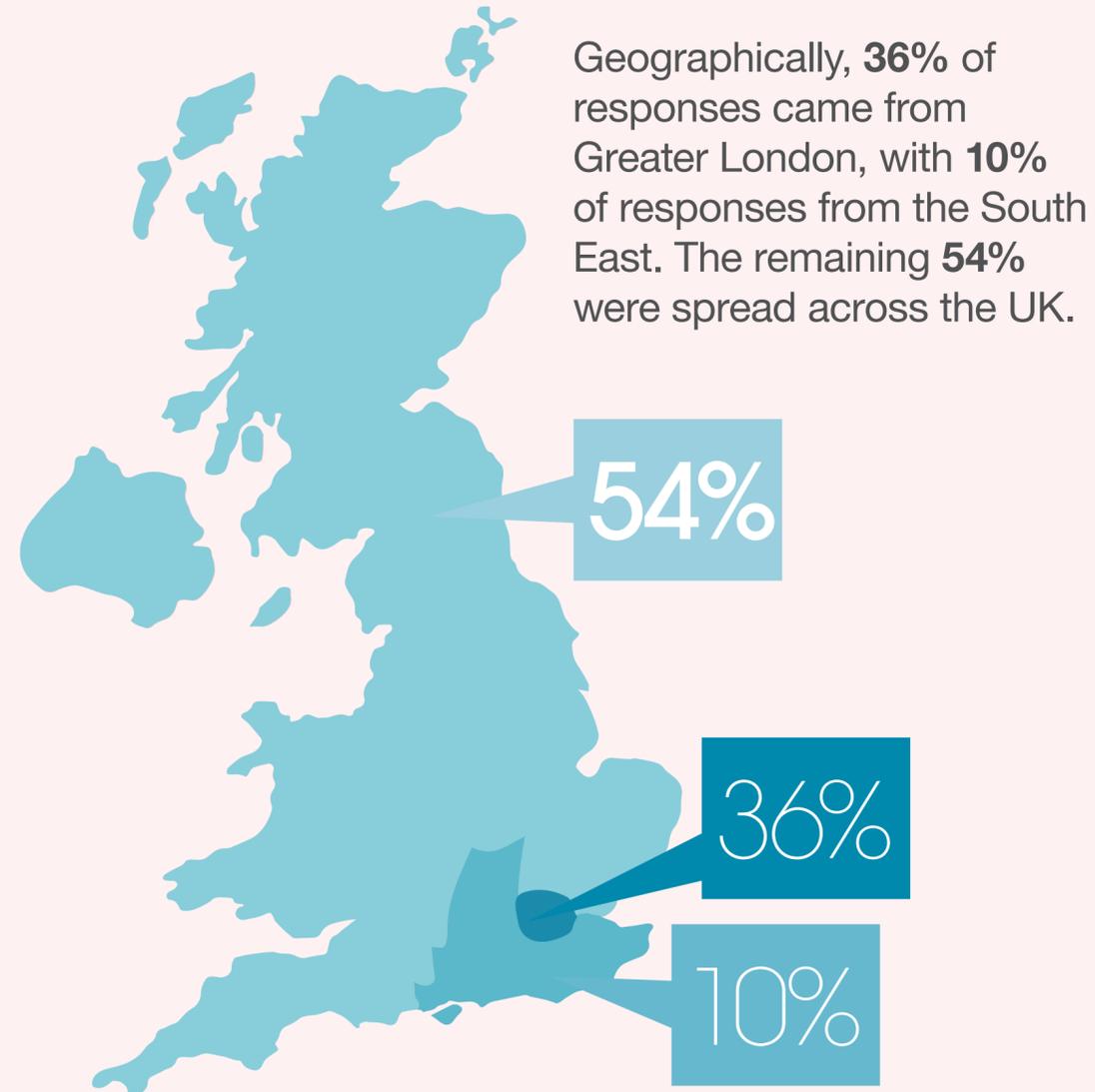
Adapting to deliver services online has become more urgent

“Supporting young people through online service delivery was always part of our vision for the future, but lockdown prompted us to implement this immediately. We knew young people would be needing our support more than ever so we made sure we did everything we could to deliver. We adapted face-to-face services to a digital equivalent, using Zoom and WhatsApp, and regularly sought feedback from the young people we were supporting about how they felt about these different ways of doing things and used that feedback to refine our offer.”

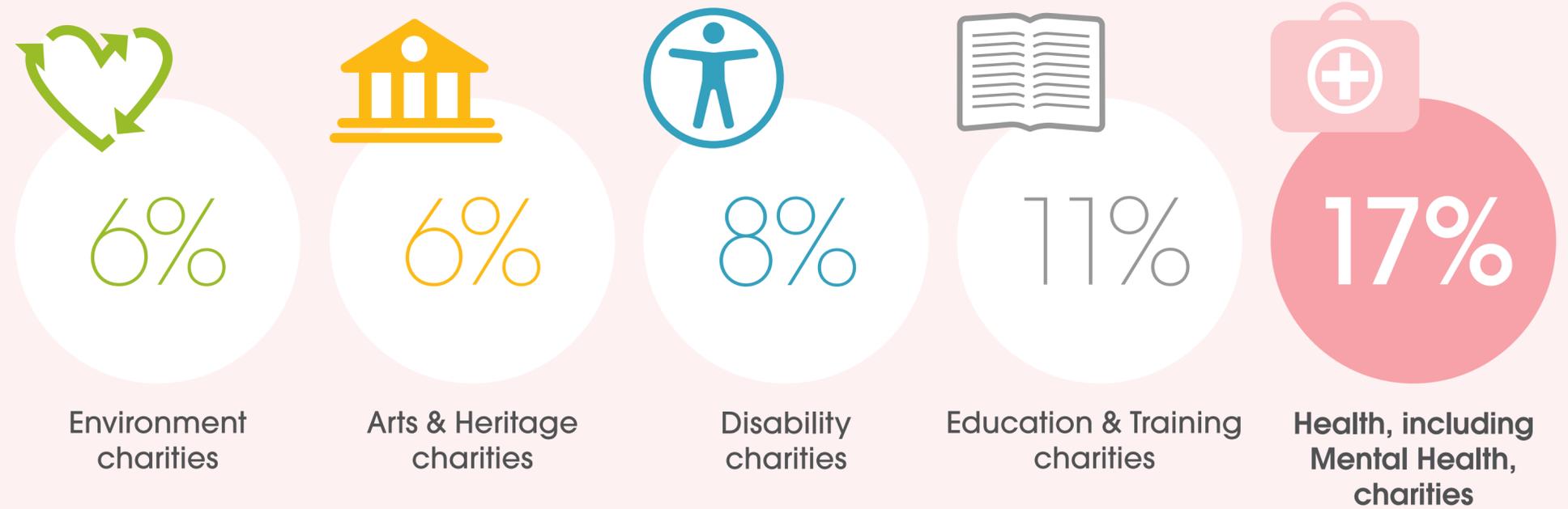
— **Katherine Sacks-Jones, Chief Executive of Become**

Who participated

Overview

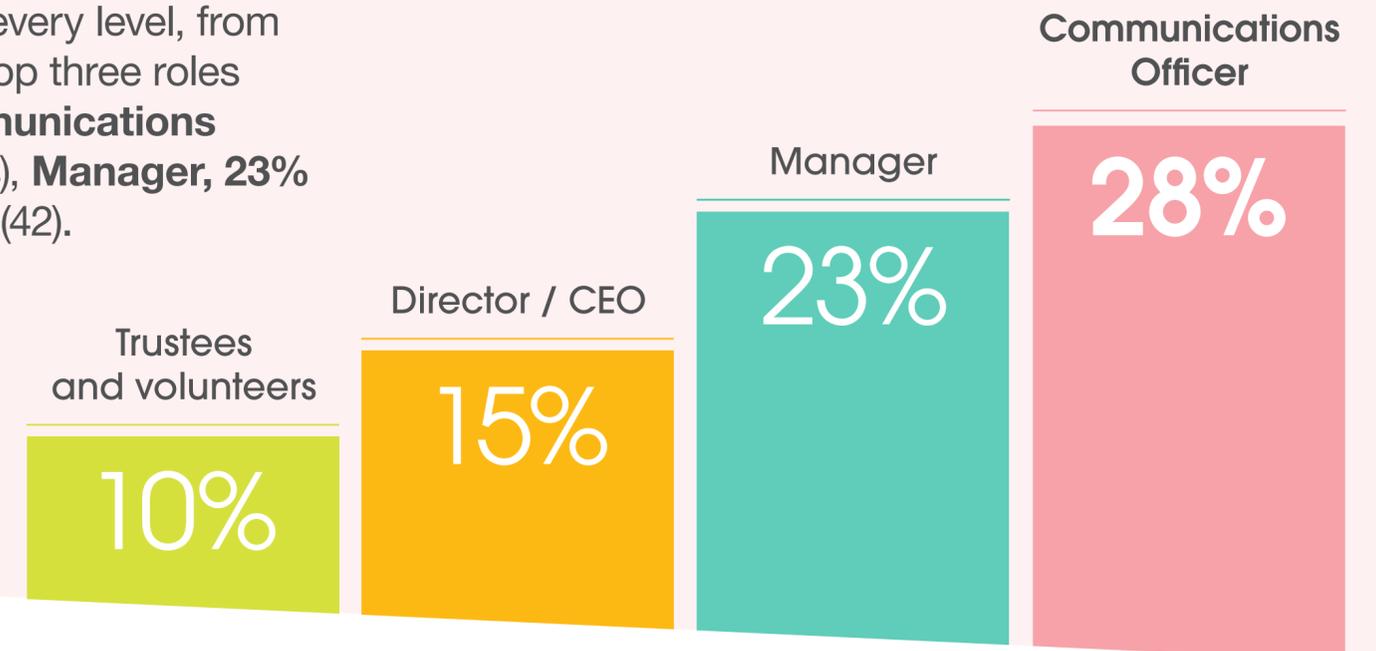


Top sectors



Top roles

We received responses from every level, from CEOs to administrators. The top three roles respondents held were **Communications Officer, 28%** (80 respondents), **Manager, 23%** (66), and **Director/CEO, 15%** (42).

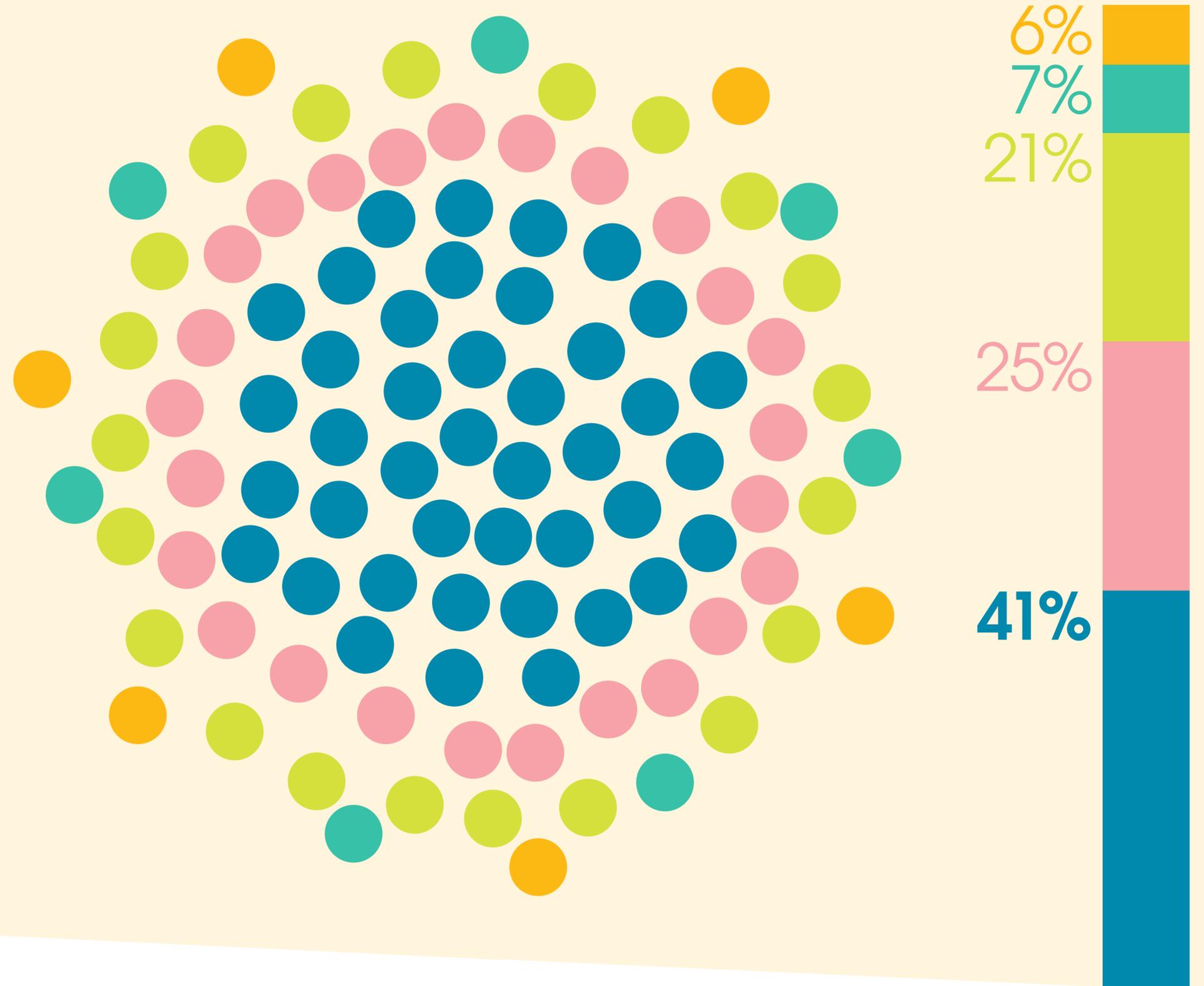


Charity size of participants

66% of respondents were from small charities with an annual income below £1m.

This year saw an increase in responses from large and super-sized charities.

- Micro: less than £0.5m (119 responses)
- Small: between £0.5 to £1m (72)
- Medium: between £1 to £5m (61)
- Large: between £5 to £10m (20)
- Super: £10m+ (17)



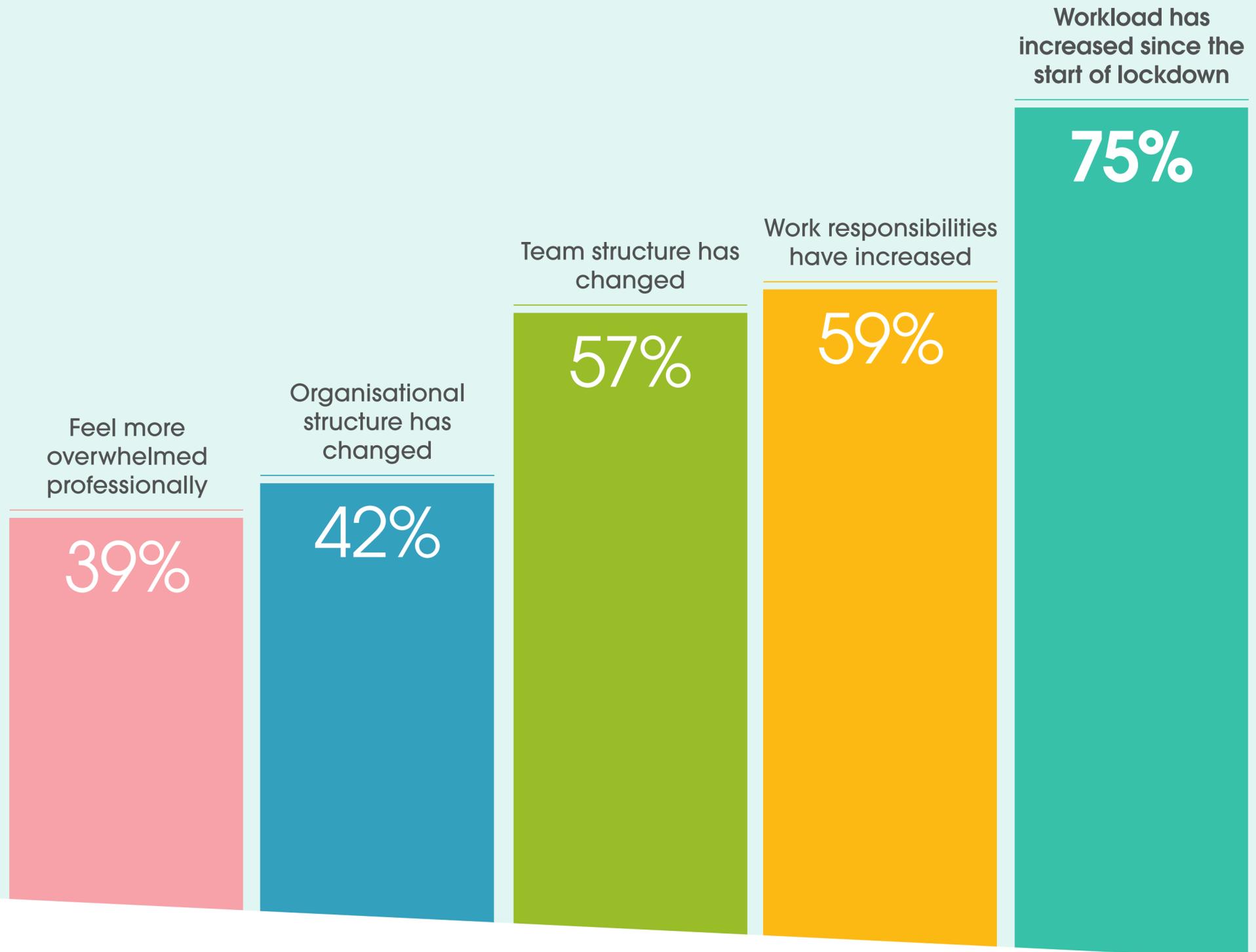
Changes to workload and responsibilities

Wellbeing and mental health needs to be addressed urgently to avoid burnout.

An overwhelming majority, **75%**, told us that their **workload has increased** since the start of lockdown with **59%** saying their **responsibilities at work have increased**.

There are many factors behind this, including needing to cover for furloughed staff as well as the sheer amount of information and other content to be assessed, analysed and communicated.

Worryingly, 39% said they felt more overwhelmed at work.



How Covid-19 has impacted communications

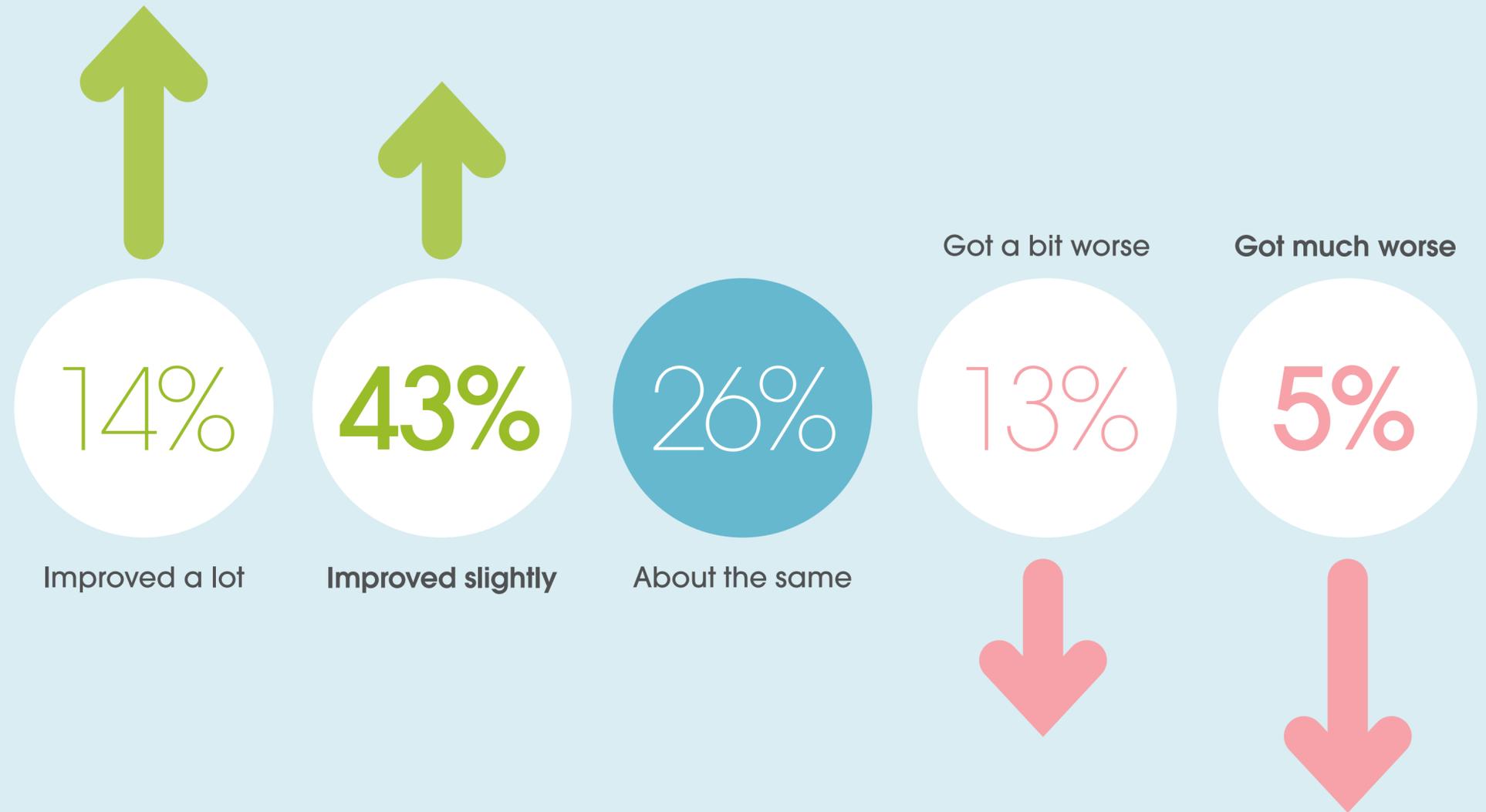
Overview

It's encouraging to see that **57%** of respondents felt their **ability to communicate effectively** with their audience **has improved** since the first lockdown in March 2020.

But it's also concerning that **18%** felt this has **got worse or much worse**. This could be down to a range of factors such as digital exclusion, stretched comms teams and staff on furlough.

Civil Society reported that more than 20,000 staff from the largest 20 charities were furloughed in 2020.

Do you feel your ability to communicate effectively with stakeholders has improved or got worse since March 2020?



Communications channels during COVID-19

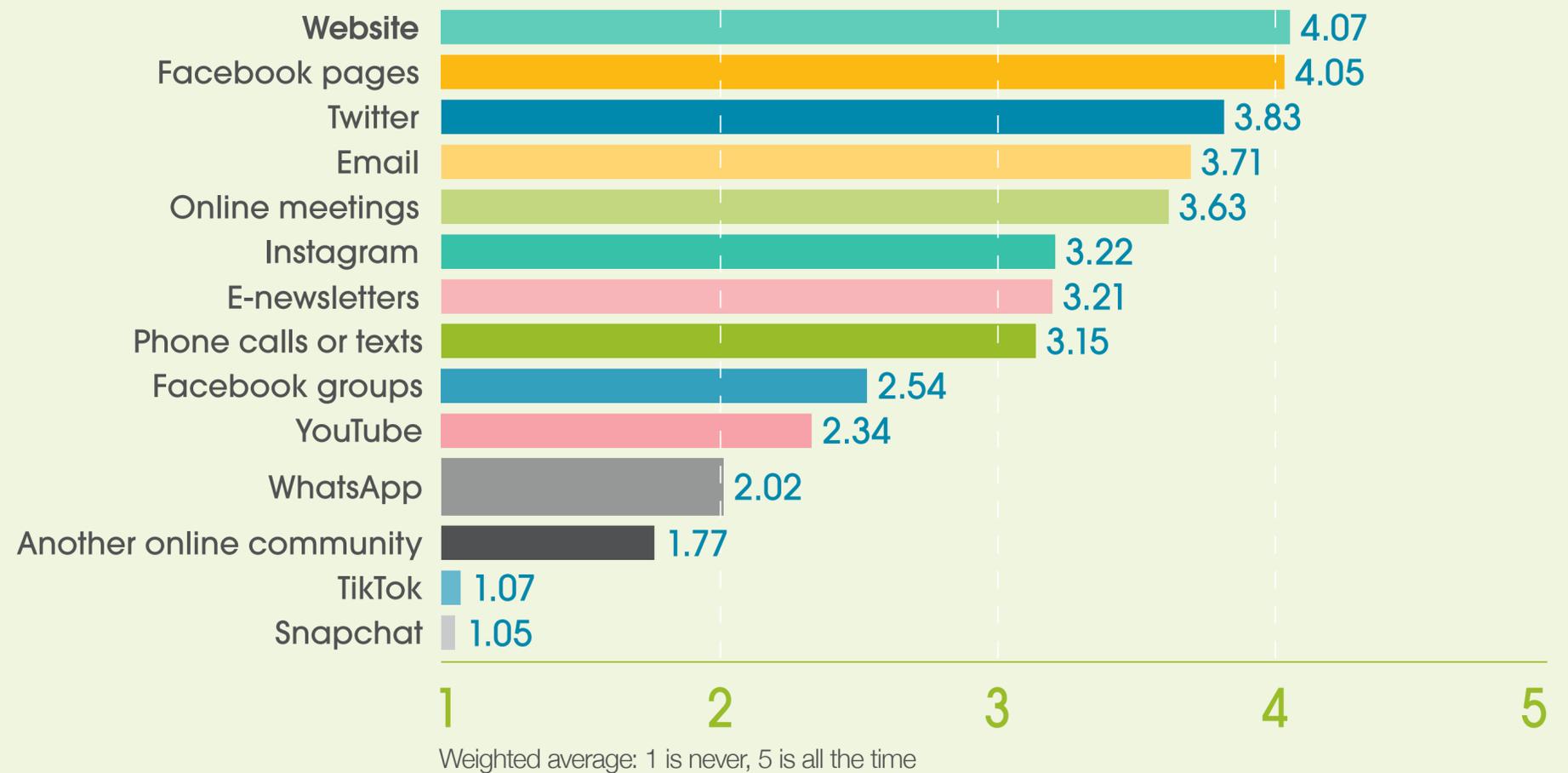
The communications channels charities are using the most have remained the same since the beginning of lockdown, with slight variances on usage.

Websites are the **most used comms channel**, followed by Facebook, Twitter and Email. Online meetings are also very popular.

The four most effective comms methods



Most used communications channels

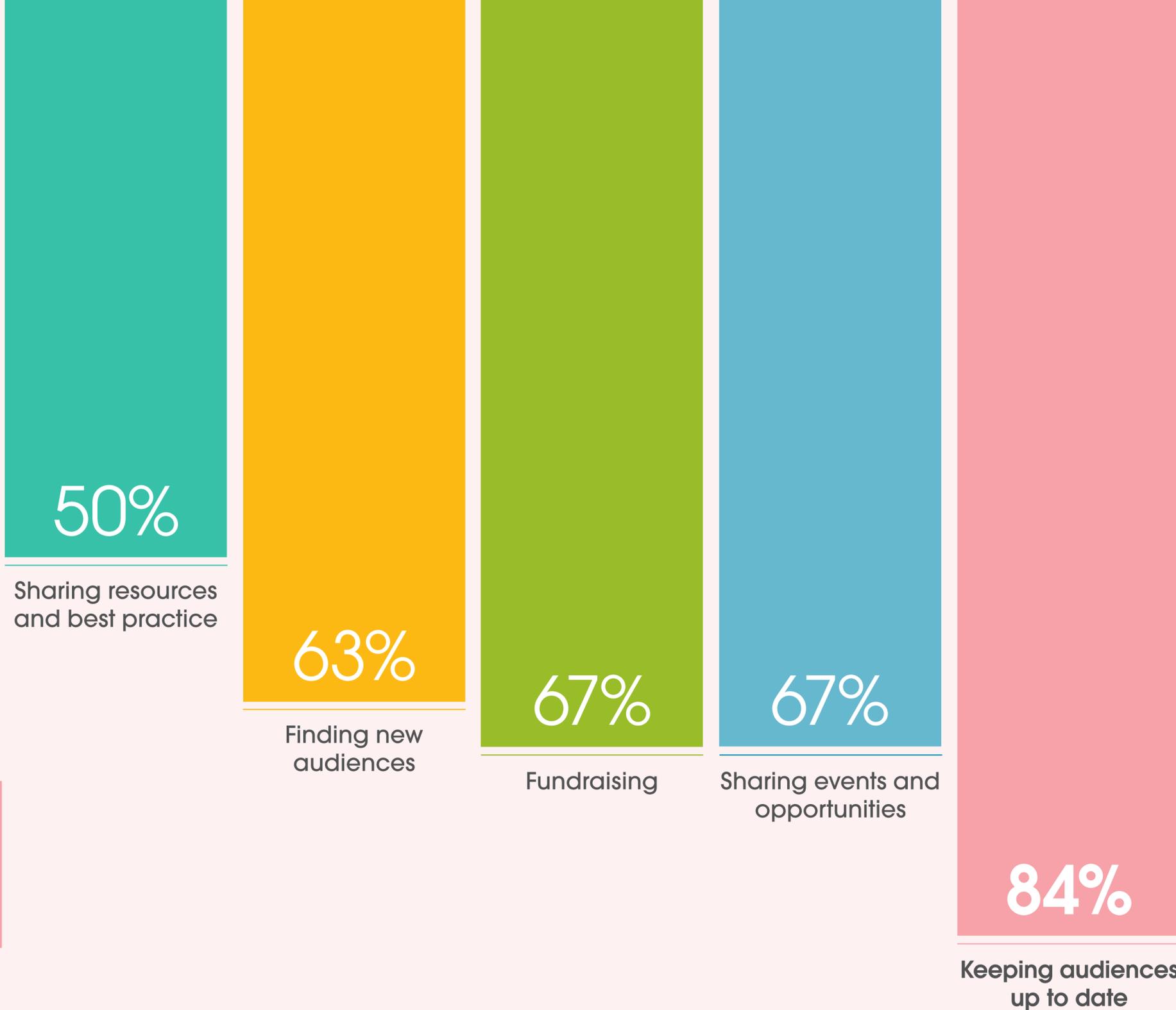


Communications Goals

We asked what respondents wanted to achieve through their communications.



Most important (243 responses) is keeping their audience up to date with their work.



“We’re starting our own podcast channel soon in the hopes of finding a new audience and engaging with our current audience (including every generation).”

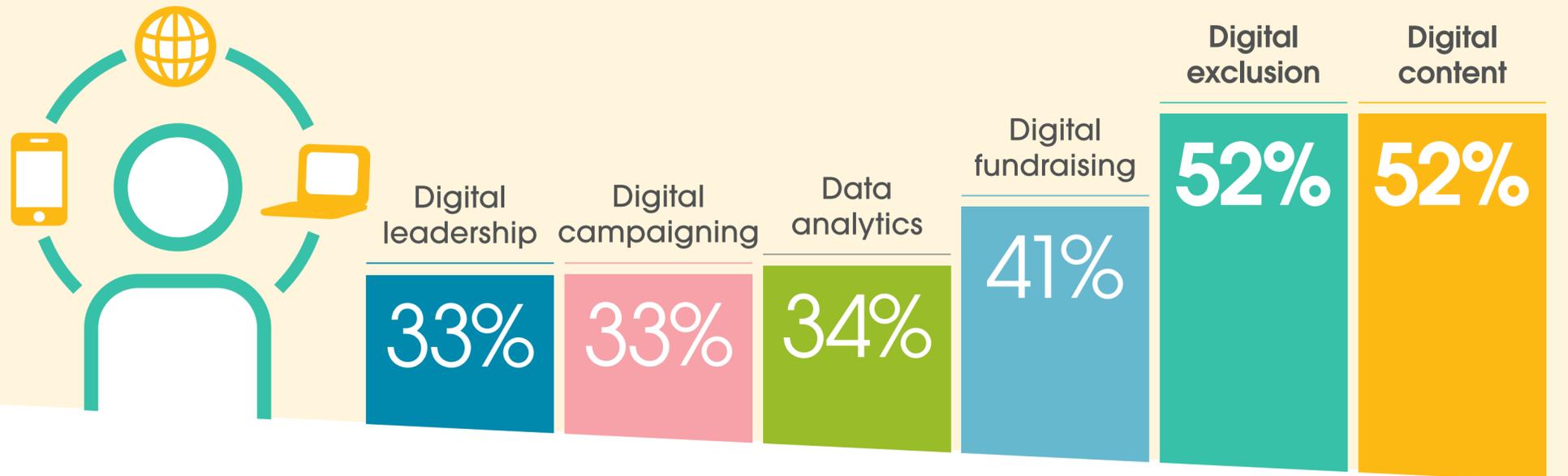
Communications challenges

We asked what communications challenges charities are currently facing as a result of COVID-19.

The top five communications challenges



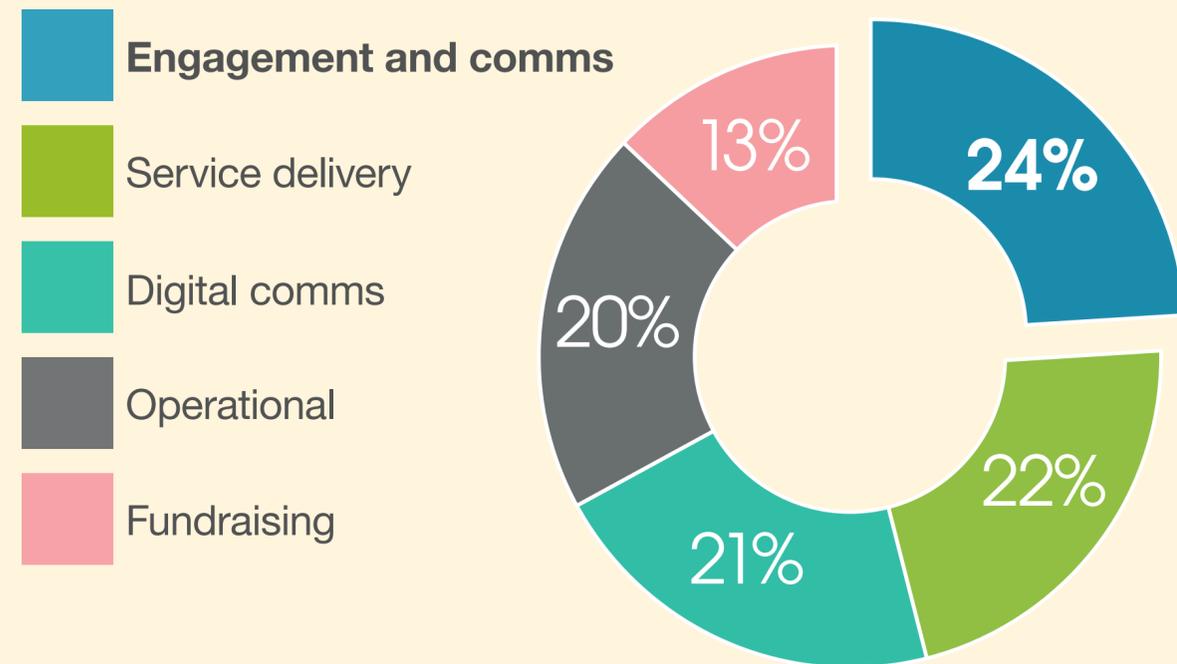
Digital is still a key challenge



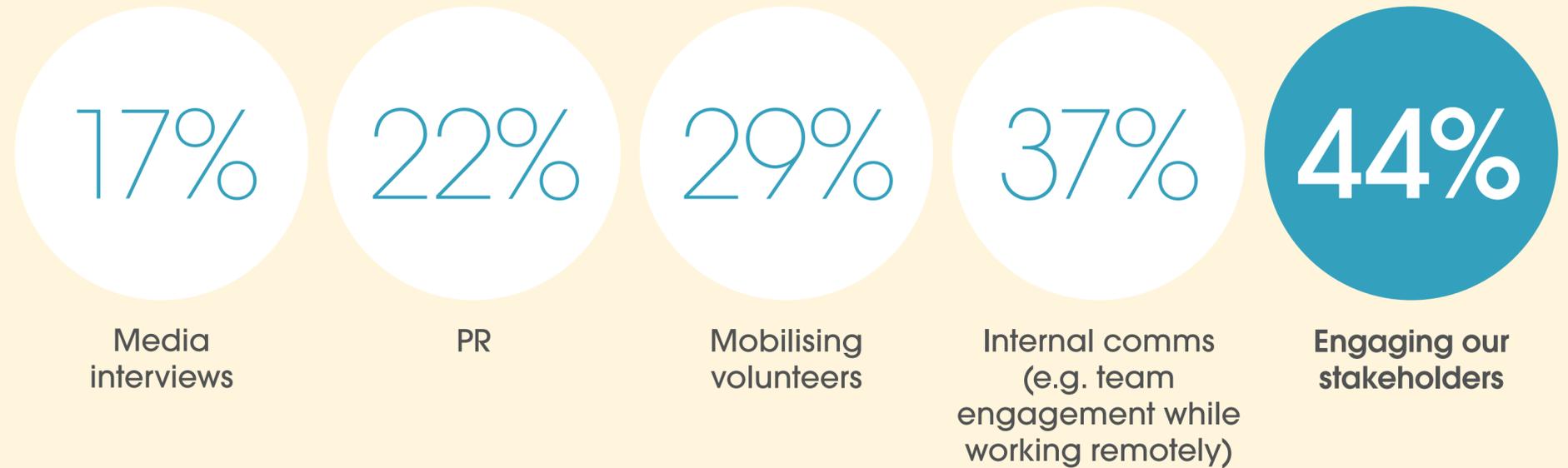
Communications challenges

Breakdown of themes

When grouped together in the following categories, **engagement and comms** has emerged as the main communications challenge charities are facing, closely followed by **service delivery** and **digital communications**.



Challenges within engagement and comms – 24%



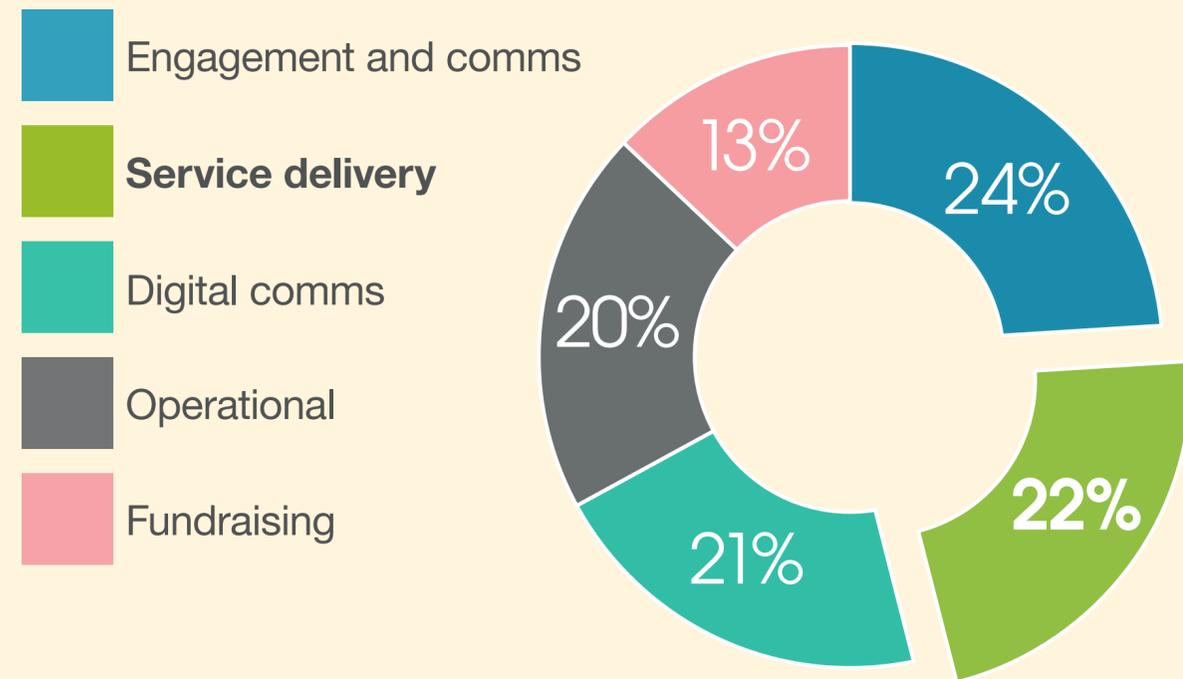
Communications challenges?

“Engaging digital audiences in something positive when world news is so compelling and negative, and while people are feeling ‘screen fatigue’.”

Communications challenges

Breakdown of themes, continued

When grouped together in the following categories, **engagement and comms** has emerged as the main communications challenge charities are facing, closely followed by **service delivery** and **digital communications**.



Challenges within service delivery – 22%



Moving our services online



Supporting users who would normally have access to face to face services



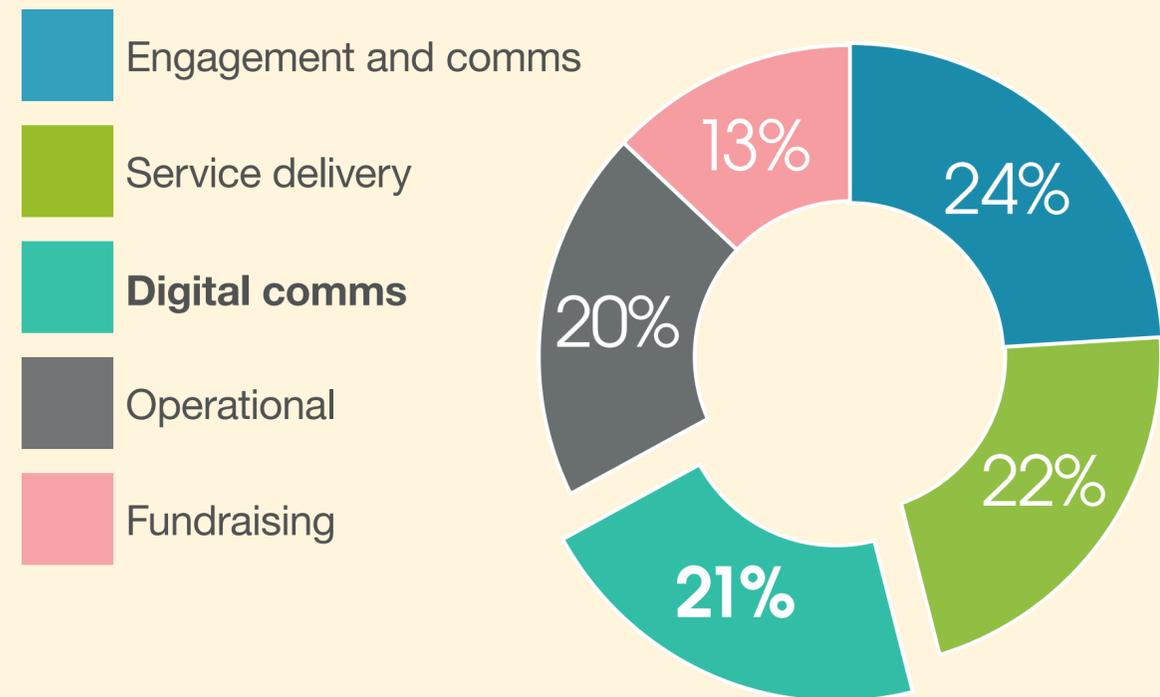
Digital exclusion (our audiences do not have access to technology or the internet)

Communications challenges?
“Converting service users into followers and advocates.”

Communications challenges

Breakdown of themes, continued

When grouped together in the following categories, **engagement and comms** has emerged as the main communications challenge charities are facing, closely followed by **service delivery** and **digital communications**.



Challenges within digital comms – 21%



Digital campaigning



A lack of digital communications skills (e.g. social media and website literacy)



Producing digital content for example, films, vlogs, infographics

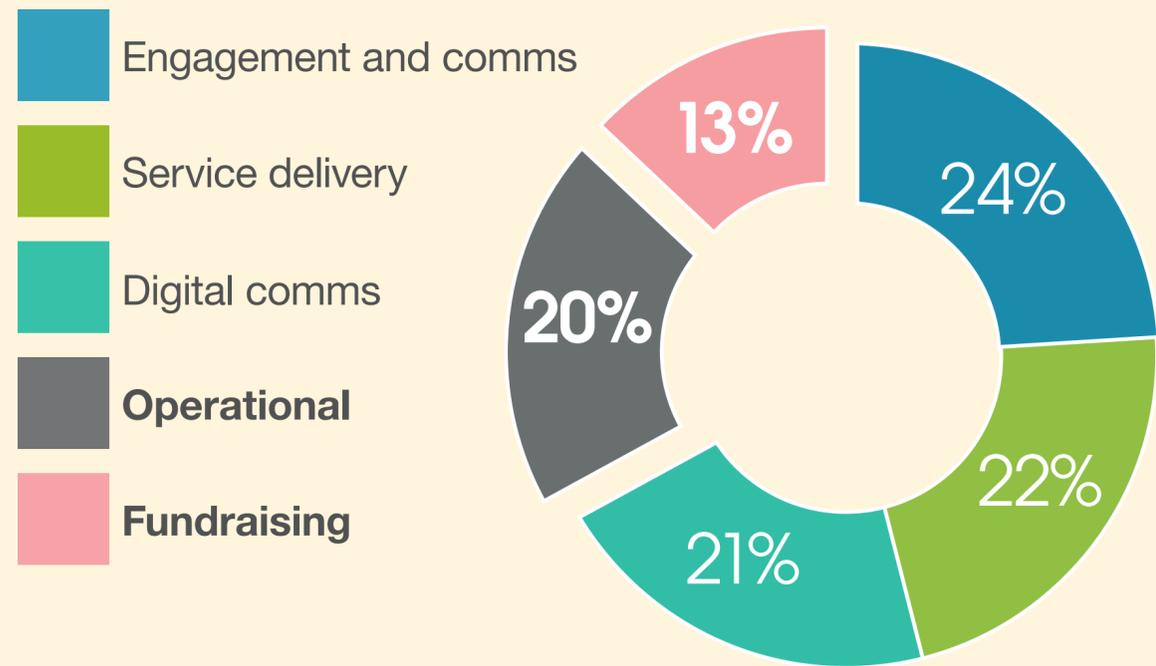
Communications challenges?

“Not enough budget or resources to develop a strategy, understand our audiences and produce appropriately targeted communications.”

Communications challenges

Breakdown of themes, continued

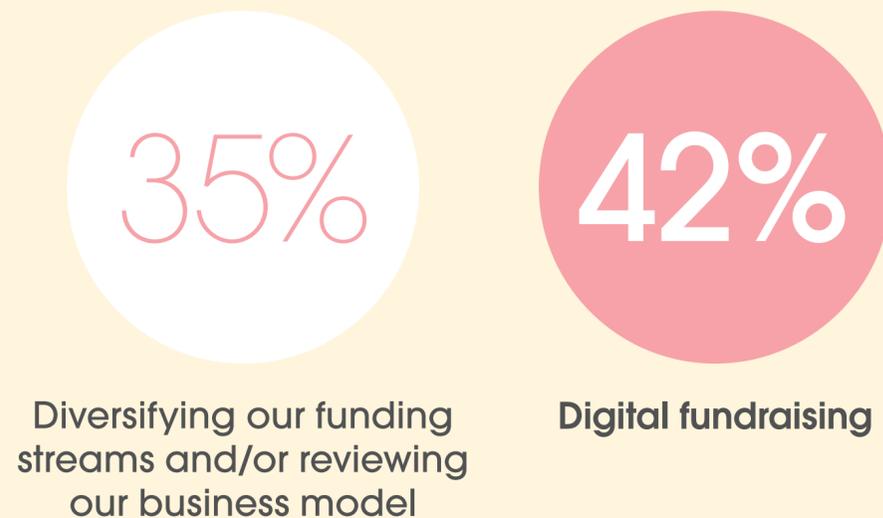
When grouped together in the following categories, **engagement and comms** has emerged as the main communications challenge charities are facing, closely followed by **service delivery** and **digital communications**.



Challenges within operational – 20%



Challenges within fundraising – 13%



Communications challenges?
 “Moving to and communicating the need for more fundraising when we have not had that in our communications plans before.”

Communications barriers

Other barriers to effective communications raised by respondents

“We have loads of ideas but we struggle to pick the right ones and focus on them.”

“Our audience is time poor.”

“Keeping content engaging and not repetitive. Lack of time makes sourcing new content difficult.”

Costs and lack of budget

66%



Lack of time

55%



Lack of skills within the charity

38%



Low engagement or following on social media

38%



Digital exclusion

36%



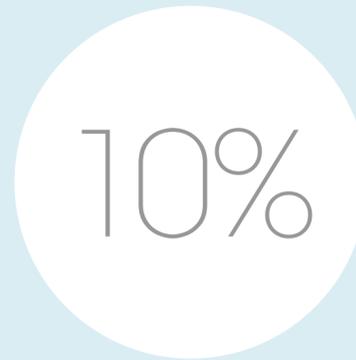
Pro bono comms support received since March 2020

It's great to see that charities have had access to a variety of communications support in the last year, but more pro bono support would be appreciated by the sector.

In 2020, 97% of respondents told us they **would like appropriate pro bono** or volunteer comms support.

But over the last 12 months, only 16% of respondents managed to access pro bono support.

Types of support accessed



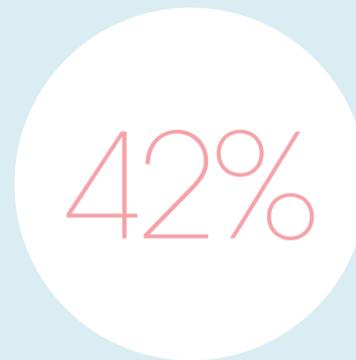
Online mentoring



Pro bono support



Emails which provide resources and opportunities



Asking questions and connecting with others in the sector



Access to online workshops



Training or webinars

“A lot of the available training has been brilliant and some of it has been free or low cost.”

“Webinars have been invaluable by providing training and reducing the feeling of isolation.”

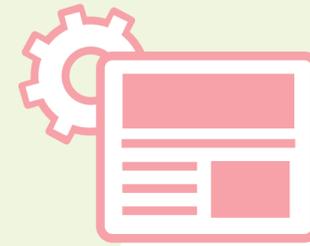
Most needed areas of pro bono communications support

Areas of pro bono comms support charities are most in need of right now.



31%

Data analytics



34%

Website design and management



39%

Communications strategy and planning



39%

Digital strategy



45%

Film and content production



46%

Social media and digital marketing

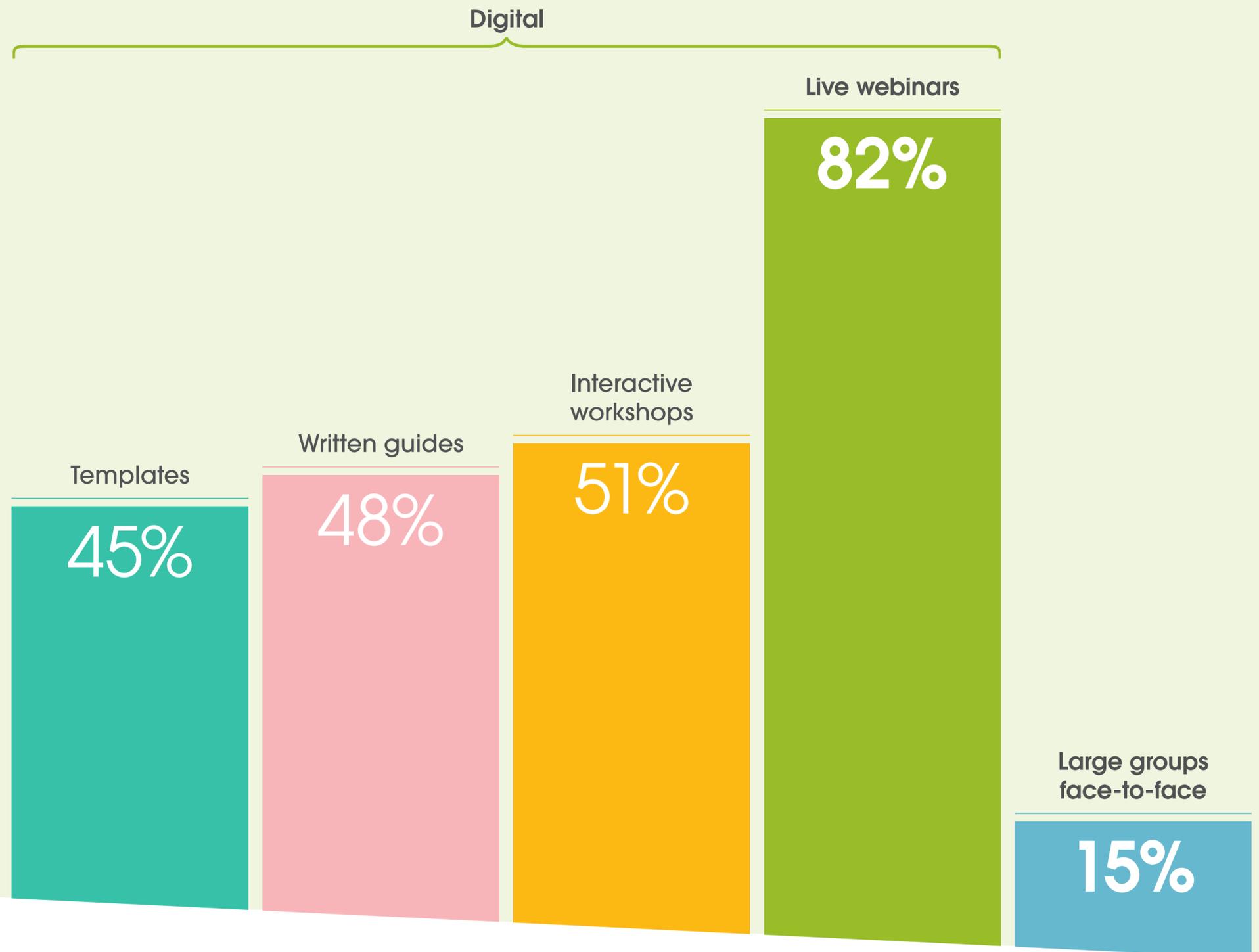
Most needed areas of pro bono communications support, continued

Training topics respondents want.

New training topics suggested by respondents include:

- **Working smart** — how to manage and prioritise media, digital, PR and internal comms.
- **Video and content creation** — skills for creating graphics or original content outside of using Canva.
- How to **improve social media** with tiny resources and limited time.
- How to **create compelling podcast content**.
- How to use **TikTok and LinkedIn** to reach new audiences.

Preferred methods for training delivery



Media Trust Communications Support

Media Trust amplifies charities' voices by developing their communication and digital skills, and connecting them with volunteers from the media and creative industry to help them reach and engage their audiences.

Media Trust's [Volunteer Platform](#) connects charities with professionals from across the media and creative industry who are looking to share their skills and expertise with charities. If you would like some **digital, marketing or comms support**, all you need to do is [register your charity](#) and post your volunteer request on our platform to get started.

Media Trust's [Training Programmes](#) provide tailored training for charities from **Media Interview training, Social Media and Writing for the Web to Digital Strategy**. We will be offering new online training sessions in the coming weeks and months.

Media Trust Resource Hub

Media Trust's [Resource Hub](#) is a comprehensive collection of **free guides, webinars, toolkits and tips** created by our media and creative industry and charity partners specifically for the charity sector.

Topics covered include **Digital Strategy, Social Media, Creative Campaigns and Digital Fundraising**.

We have listed a selection of available resources below:

- [🔗 Top tips for making charity films in 2020 and beyond](#)
- [🔗 Accessible technology and communications under Covid-19](#)
- [🔗 Facebook Fundamentals](#)
- [🔗 Get started with the Twitter content strategy playbook](#)
- [🔗 How to use the Donate sticker on Instagram](#)
- [🔗 Digital Marketing Strategy Webinar series](#)
- [🔗 Digital Fundraising is Now - fundraising guide](#)

CharityComms Communications Support

CharityComms flies the flag for communications as a vital strategic function at the heart of charities and connects communications professionals through sharing best practice.

The [CharityComms website](#) is packed full of **free guides, toolkits and tips** created by charity sector experts specifically for the sector.

Our [live](#) and [on-demand](#) events include conferences and seminars, specialist groups and workshops, while our [podcast](#) combines compelling subjects with riveting speakers to **share insight and best practice**.

[AskCharity](#) is a free service designed to help journalists and charities work together. Journalists can use it to find case studies, spokespeople and information from a wide range of charities, and charities can use it to **build media contacts and coverage**.

CharityComms resources

[Coronavirus and post-pandemic resources for charity communicators | CharityComms](#)

[Knowledge Hub | CharityComms](#)

[Reports and Guides | CharityComms](#)

[Events | CharityComms](#)

[On-demand events | CharityComms](#)

CharityComms services

[AskCharity | CharityComms](#)

[CharityComms Digital Benchmark | CharityComms](#)

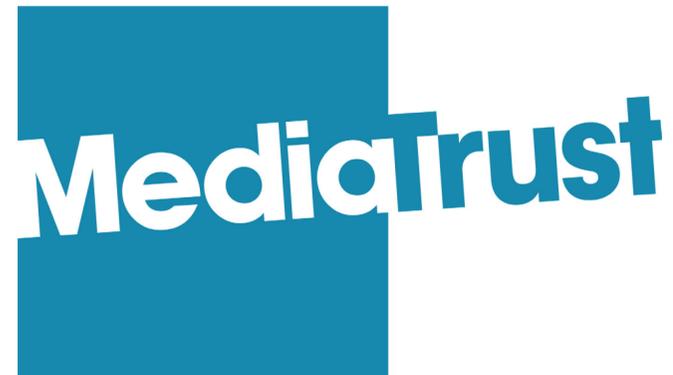
[Mentoring | CharityComms](#)

[Suppliers | CharityComms](#)

[Sector jobs | CharityComms](#)

We're here to help

Please get in touch if you have any questions about the survey findings or support we can offer.



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