



Workforce Survey

2025

**Leadership in Scotland's
Voluntary Sector**

FULL REPORT

March 2026

TABLE OF CONTENTS



1	INTRODUCTION	
	Executive Summary	5
	Introduction	6
	1.1 Purpose of the Report	6
	1.2 Sector Context	6
	1.3 Partnership Approach	6
2	METHODOLOGY	7
	2.1 Survey Design	7
	2.2 Leadership Sample	7
	2.3 Data Limitations	7
3	LEADERSHIP ACCESSIBILITY AND CULTURE	8
	3.1 Perceived Approachability of Senior Leadership	8
	3.2 Managers, Trust, and Day-to-Day Leadership	9
	3.3 Leadership, Culture, and Employee Voice	9
4	LEADERSHIP PROGRESSION AND CAREER PATHWAYS	11
	4.1 Limited Progression Opportunities	11
	4.2 Development Without Pathways	11
	4.3 Leadership Pipeline Risk	12

5	WORKLOAD, PRESSURE, AND SUSTAINABILITY	12
	5.1 Escalating Workloads	12
	5.2 Stress and Burnout at Senior Levels	13
	5.3 Sustainability of Leadership Roles	15
6	LIVED EXPERIENCE OF LEADERSHIP: QUALITATIVE INSIGHTS	15
	6.1 Commitment, Purpose, and Moral Pressure	16
	6.2 Burnout and the Question of Sustainability	17
	6.3 Impact on Organisational Delivery	18
7	EQUITY, INCLUSION, AND LEADERSHIP	18
	Equity, Inclusion, and Leadership	18
8	IMPLICATIONS FOR BOARDS AND GOVERNANCE	19
	8.1 Boards and Leadership Tipping Point	19
	8.2 Setting Boundaries and Priorities	19
	8.3 Visibility, Support, and Shared Responsibility	20
9	POLICY AND FUNDING IMPLICATIONS	20
	9.1 Public Service Reform and Systemic Pressure	21
	9.2 The Imperative for Multi-Year and Flexible Funding	21
	9.3 Shared Responsibility for Leadership Sustainability	21

10

REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

22

Reflections and Recommendations

22

11

CONCLUSION

28

Conclusion

28



Executive Summary

This report presents leadership-related findings from the Workforce Survey 2025, delivered in partnership by Charity Leadership Scotland, [SCVO](#), and [Volunteer Scotland](#). Drawing on responses from **1,021 eligible respondents**, including **11% CEOs** and **14% senior managers**, the report provides a detailed examination of leadership culture, pressure, sustainability, and future leadership capacity across Scotland's voluntary sector.

The findings present a paradox at the heart of voluntary sector leadership. Leadership is widely experienced as values-driven, accessible, and purpose-led: **two-thirds of respondents describe senior leaders as very or fairly accessible**, and **87% of the workforce believe their work is useful to society**. Leaders themselves speak strongly about impact, autonomy, and commitment to mission.

However, this strength is increasingly undermined by structural pressures that sit often outside of organisational control. **86% of CEOs and 78% of senior managers feel under pressure at work, 69% of CEOs regularly experience high stress, and four in five senior leaders report difficulty switching off from work**. Job insecurity, funding precarity, workload growth, and limited progression pathways are creating serious risks to leadership sustainability and succession.

The leadership pipeline is fragile. **41% of respondents identify poor career progression as one of the worst aspects of sector work, while 39% of all respondents – rising to 44% of those on fixed-term contracts – say they are likely to leave their job voluntarily within the next 12 months**. This was more pronounced at smaller organisations and suggests there is a limitation in opportunities available because of the sector makeup. Better pay, improved management, and development opportunities are the most commonly cited reasons for potential exit.

Taken together, the evidence suggests a sector that is held together by commitment and values, but increasingly strained by funding models that externalise risk onto leaders and staff. Without systemic change – particularly around fair funding, leadership development, and Board responsibility for sustainability – the voluntary sector faces a growing leadership retention and succession challenge.

1 Introduction

1.1 Purpose of the Report

This report focuses specifically on leadership findings emerging from the Workforce Survey 2025. Its purpose is to inform sector leaders, Boards, policymakers, and funders about the current state of leadership capacity, culture, and sustainability within Scotland's voluntary sector.

1.2 Sector Context

Leadership in the voluntary sector operates within a context of constrained funding, increasing demand, workforce shortages, and growing regulatory and governance responsibilities. Understanding leadership experiences is therefore critical to ensuring organisational resilience and long-term impact.

1.3 Partnership Approach

The survey was developed collaboratively by Charity Leadership Scotland, SCVO, and Volunteer Scotland, reflecting a shared commitment to evidence-led workforce and leadership development.



2

Methodology

2.1 Survey Design

The Workforce Survey 2025 was administered nationally to voluntary sector organisations and individuals. Leadership-related questions were embedded throughout the survey, covering senior leadership accessibility, management progression, workload pressures, and qualitative reflections on leadership roles.

2.2 Leadership Sample

This report draws on responses from:

- CEOs and senior leaders
- Senior and middle managers
- Staff reporting on their experience of leadership

2.3 Data Limitations

Findings are based on self-reported data and reflect perceptions at a single point in time. While the survey achieved a strong response rate, results should be interpreted in the context of organisational diversity across size, geography, and sub-sector.



3

Leadership Accessibility and Culture

3.1 Perceived Approachability of Senior Leadership

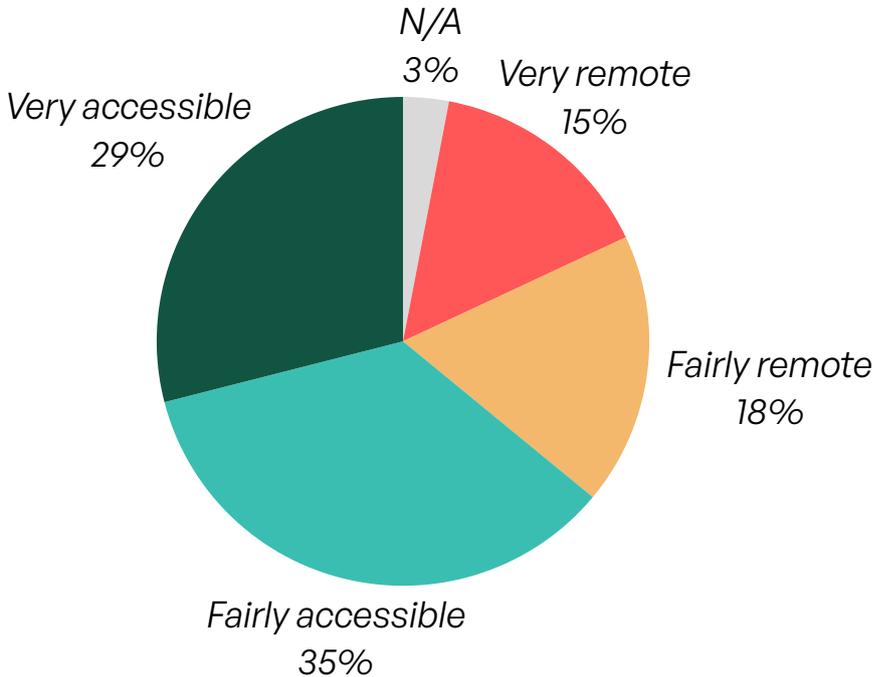
Leadership accessibility is a notable strength across much of the sector. Around **two-thirds of respondents reported that senior leadership is very or fairly accessible**, reflecting generally open organisational cultures and relatively flat hierarchies.

However, **one-third of respondents described senior leadership as fairly or very remote**. Qualitative comments suggest this is often less about physical access and more about psychological and relational distance – particularly where Boards are perceived as invisible or disconnected from staff experience.

“CEO and management team are accessible, the Board tend to be more remote – staff are not always aware of who the board members are.”

“Senior management are physically accessible but I don’t find them approachable.”

‘How approachable is your senior leadership, e.g. senior managers, CEO, board etc.?’



3.2 Managers, Trust, and Day-to-Day Leadership

Trust in immediate line management remains relatively high. **79% of respondents agree their manager respects them, 77% feel they are treated fairly, and 74% feel supported if they have a problem.** These findings reinforce the importance of management as a stabilising force within pressured organisations.

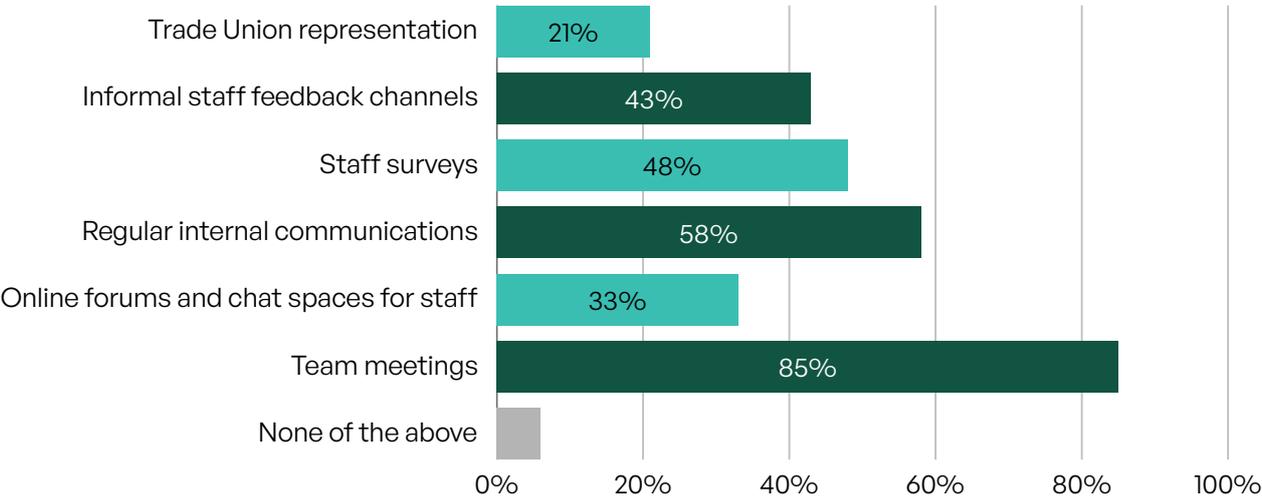
However, gaps remain: **25% of respondents do not feel their manager provides useful feedback, and 17% do not feel supported with learning and development.** These gaps have implications for leadership confidence, development, and readiness for progression.

3.3 Leadership, Culture, and Employee Voice

Strong leadership cultures in the voluntary sector are closely linked to the availability and effective use of employee voice channels. The Workforce Survey 2025 shows that **94% of respondents have access to at least one form of employee voice**, such as team meetings, staff forums, or trade union representation. This is significantly higher than the wider Scottish workforce, where 19% of employees report having no voice channel at all (from CIPD Working Lives Scotland 2025).

The most common form of employee voice in the voluntary sector is **team meetings, available to 85% of respondents** – almost double the proportion reported in the wider Scottish workforce. This reflects the sector’s employee engagement and relatively flat organisational structures, where dialogue and informal communication also play a central role.

‘Do you have access to the following employee voice channels?’



However, access to voice does not automatically equate to influence. Qualitative responses suggest that while staff often feel able to raise concerns with line managers, they are less confident that their voices reach senior leadership or Boards, or that feedback consistently informs decision-making. This distinction between having a voice and being heard is particularly important in the context of leadership accessibility.

“We have lots of opportunities to talk in teams, but it doesn’t always feel like concerns go any further up.”

Leadership that actively listens and responds to employee voice can mitigate some of the pressures associated with funding insecurity and high workloads. Where leaders are visible, responsive, and transparent about constraints, staff report higher trust and psychological safety, even in difficult circumstances.

Conversely, where senior leaders or Boards are perceived as remote, employee voice can feel performative rather than meaningful. Several respondents highlighted a desire for greater Board visibility, clearer feedback loops, and more honest communication about organisational challenges.

Effective use of voice channels is therefore a critical leadership competency. It supports:

- **Early identification of workload and wellbeing risks**
- **More inclusive and informed decision-making**
- **Stronger alignment between organisational values and lived experience**
- **Increased staff trust during periods of uncertainty**

For Boards and senior leaders, the findings point to the importance of not only providing voice mechanisms but also closing the feedback loop – demonstrating how staff input shapes strategy, priorities, and responses to external pressures.



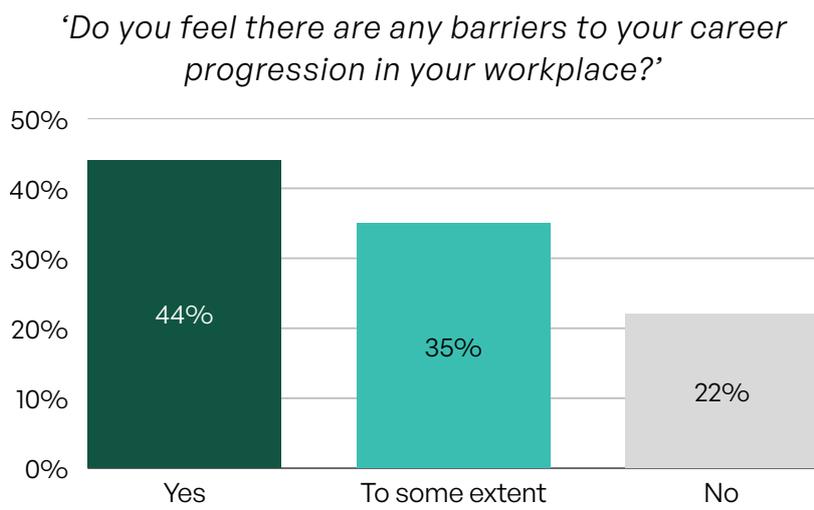
4

Leadership Progression and Career Pathways

4.1 Limited Progression Opportunities

Career progression remains one of the sector’s most persistent leadership challenges. **41% of respondents identified poor career progression as one of the worst aspects of working in the voluntary sector**, reflecting flat organisational structures and limited senior posts, often due to organisational size.

Only a minority of respondents reported internal promotion opportunities, reinforcing a pattern where leadership advancement often requires moving between organisations rather than progressing within them.



4.2 Development Without Pathways

While many leaders value the autonomy and breadth of experience their roles provide, this often occurs without formal training, mentoring, or structured development. **Among managers, 30% report they only ‘to some extent’ have the skills and support they need**, frequently citing lack of leadership training.

“Had zero training for moving into management. Have had to learn in the role.”

4.3 Leadership Pipeline Risk

The absence of clear pathways, combined with high pressure, creates a fragile leadership pipeline. This is further exacerbated by many believing that the increased responsibilities of senior posts are often not adequately reflected in pay increases.

“Salary is not worth extra responsibilities”

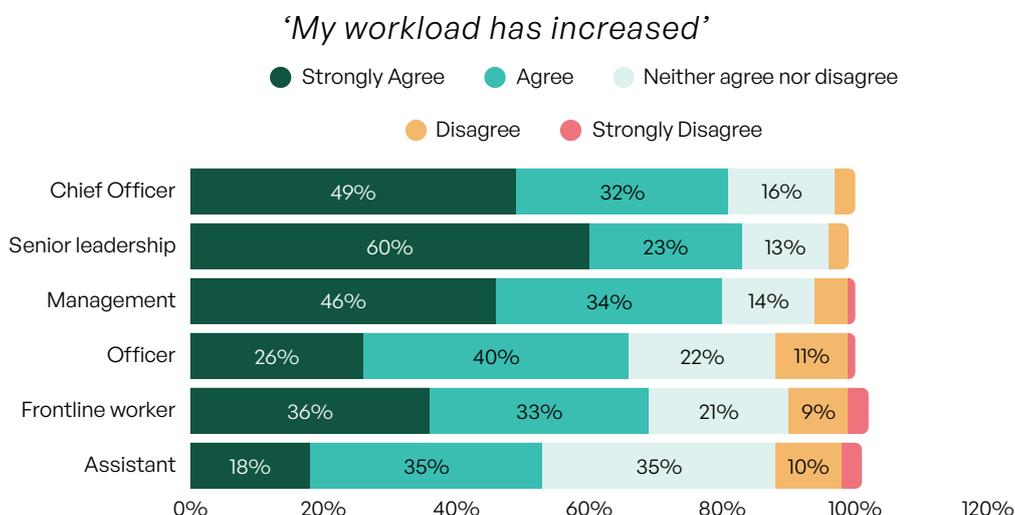
46% of senior leaders are currently looking for, or planning to look for, a new job, and more than a third of survey respondents are considering leaving the sector altogether for public or private sector roles.

This presents a strategic risk: future leaders are being developed through experience, but not retained or supported in the long term.

5 Workload, Pressure, and Sustainability

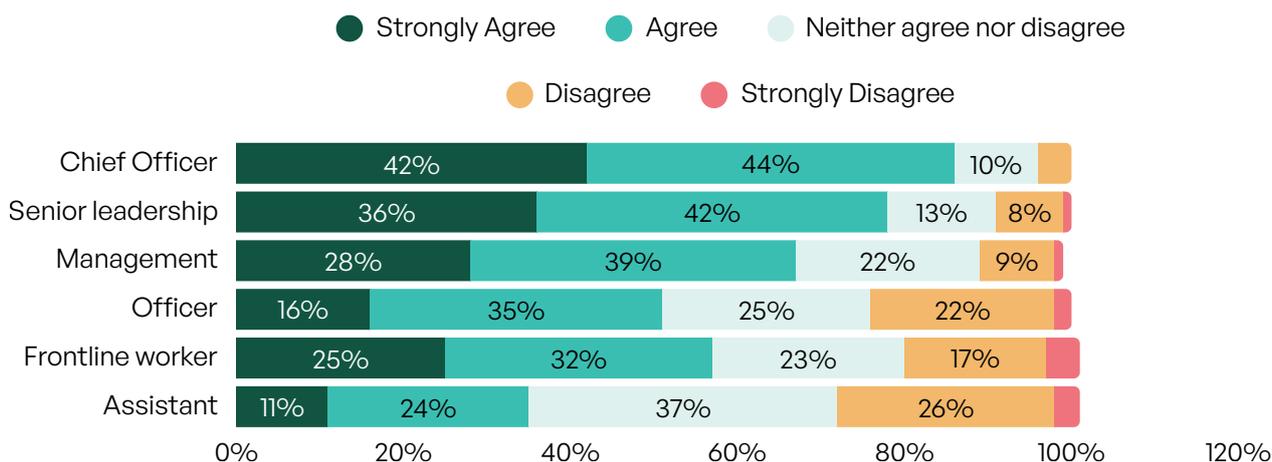
5.1 Escalating Workloads

Workload pressure is one of the defining features of leadership experience in 2025. **73% of respondents believe their workload has increased over the last year, up from 62% in 2015.**



Pressure is particularly acute at senior levels: **86% of CEOs and 78% of senior leadership feel under pressure at work.**

'I feel under pressure at work'

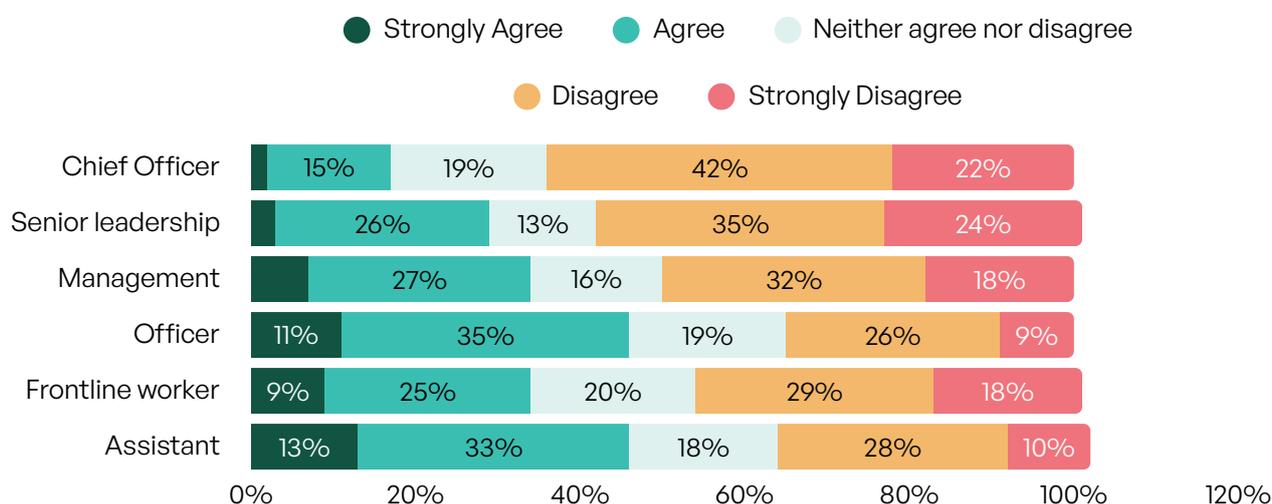


5.2 Stress and Burnout at Senior Levels

Stress and burnout are now also defining features of senior leadership experience in the voluntary sector. **51% of all respondents regularly experience high levels of stress, rising to 61% of senior leadership and 69% of CEOs.** For many leaders, this is not episodic pressure but a sustained condition shaped by funding insecurity, responsibility for staff wellbeing, and accountability for service continuity in the face of rising demand.

The survey evidence suggests the sector is approaching a tipping point. A substantial proportion of senior leaders report difficulty switching off from work, indicating that this is a widespread experience even when neutral responses are excluded. In fact, **one in five of all survey respondents has taken time off due to work-related stress in the last year**, double the rate reported in 2015. These trends point to roles (not only leadership) that are becoming increasingly difficult to sustain without personal cost.

'I find it easy to switch off after work'



Qualitative responses reveal a growing sense among leaders that they are being asked to carry an unmanageable burden of risk and responsibility. Many describe feeling morally compelled to continue delivering services despite shrinking resources, even where this stretches organisations and individuals beyond reasonable limits.

*“The pressures of the job are only growing.
I am exhausted.”*

At this stage, leadership is no longer simply about resilience or coping strategies. Instead, leaders are being forced to confront fundamental questions about what is realistically achievable within current funding and operating models to deliver organisational mission. Without clear boundaries and prioritisation, there is a real risk that organisations continue to overextend themselves – mitigating structural problems through unpaid labour, excessive hours, and personal sacrifice.

This potentially creates significant risks for organisational delivery. Sustained stress and burnout undermine strategic oversight, decision-making, and governance effectiveness. Leaders under extreme pressure have less capacity to reflect, innovate, or manage risk proactively- precipitating a need to ask the difficult question of whether organisations can still deliver their mission doing less? And what is the emotional burden left in the wake of these answers, by potentially deciding to provide less service to their communities?

The findings suggest that the sector has reached a point where leaders, Boards, and funders must collectively ask: *when is enough enough?* Continuing to do more with less may no longer be tenable without compromising the very values, care, and professionalism that define the voluntary sector.

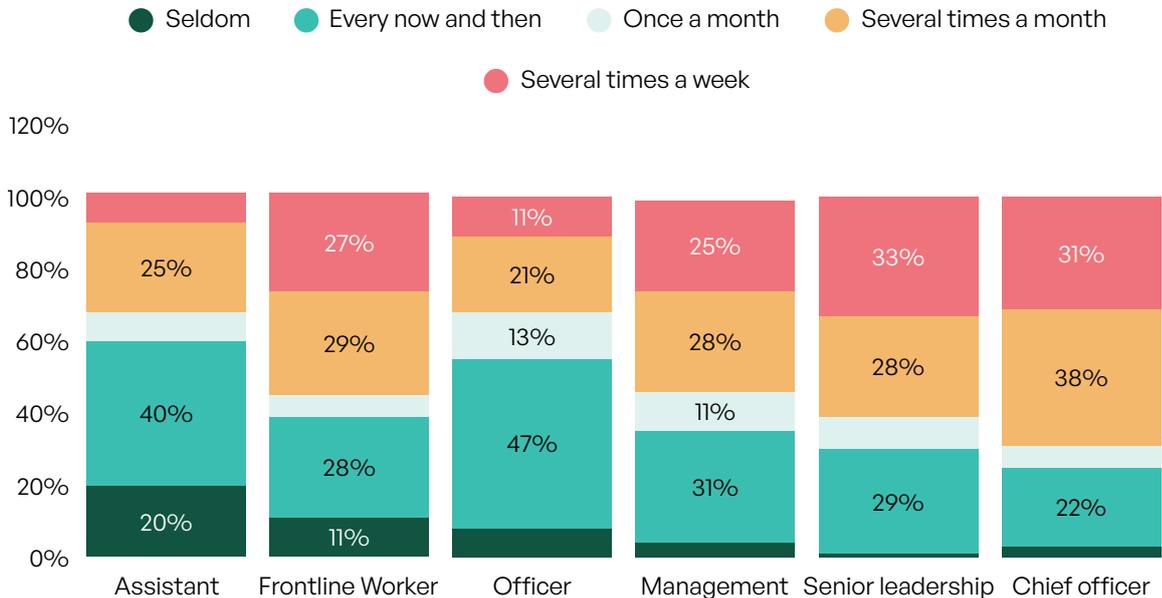
A shift towards realistic prioritisation is therefore essential. This includes honest conversations - about scaling back activity, ending unfunded or underfunded work, and aligning organisational ambition with available resources. Crucially, these decisions should not rest on individual leaders alone, but be shared across Boards, funders, and policymakers.

Without such recalibration, the evidence suggests that leadership burnout will accelerate, succession challenges will deepen, and the delivery of organisations – and the services they provide – may inevitably suffer.

5.3 Sustainability of Leadership Roles

These findings raise serious questions about the sustainability of senior leadership roles under current funding and operating models. High workload, combined with accountability for funding risk and people management, places leaders at disproportionate risk of burnout – with limited structural protection.

Q34 'How often do you experience high levels of stress as part of your role?' - frequency of reported stress, by roles



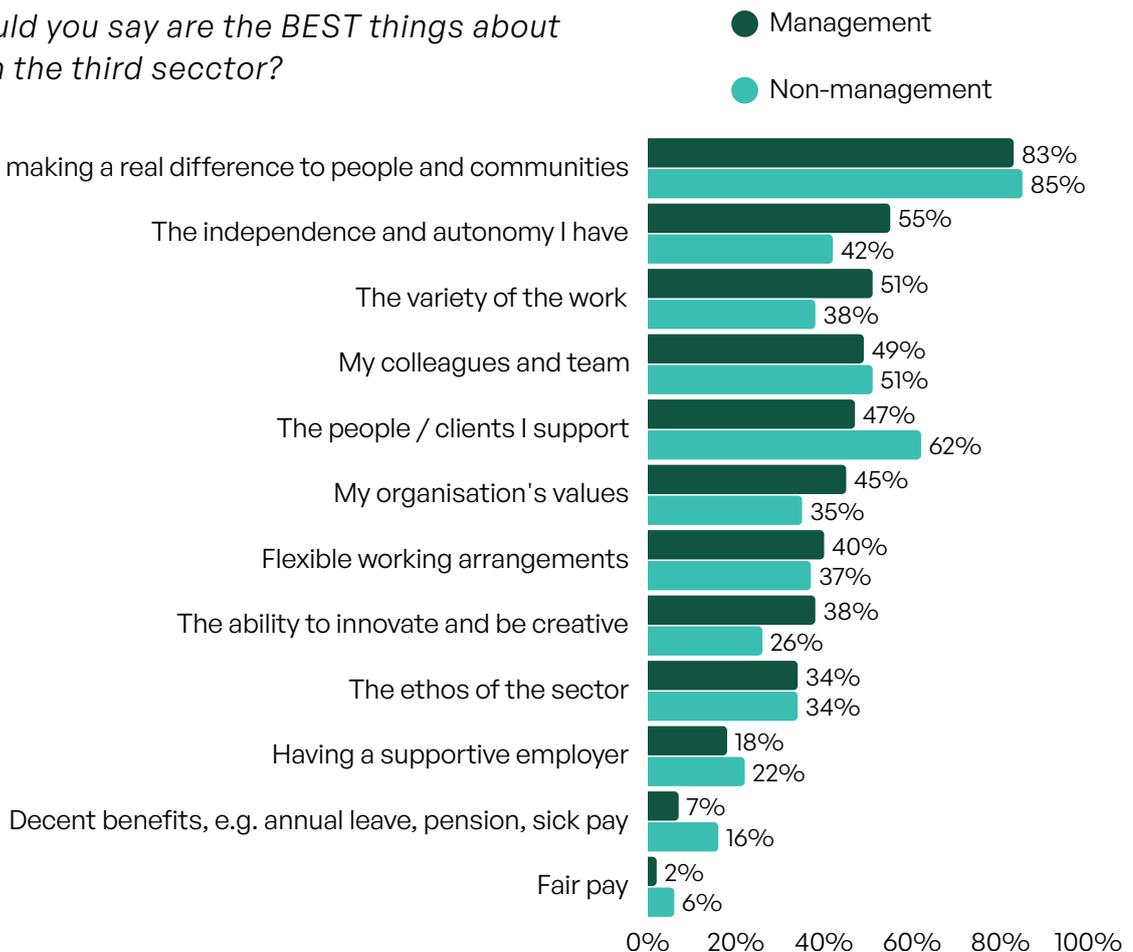
6 Lived Experience of Leadership: Qualitative Insights

This section brings together qualitative responses from across the survey to illustrate how leadership pressures are experienced in practice. These insights reinforce the quantitative evidence that the sector is approaching a tipping point, where leaders are increasingly questioning the sustainability of current expectations.

6.1 Commitment, Purpose, and Moral Pressure

Leaders repeatedly describe a deep commitment to their organisations, staff, and the people they support. Many feel a strong moral obligation to continue delivering services, even where resources are insufficient and site autonomy flexibility and the teams they work alongside as a leading benefit.

‘What would you say are the BEST things about working in the third sector?’



This sense of purpose is a defining strength and reward of voluntary sector leadership, but it also creates pressure to absorb risk and stretch capacity beyond reasonable limits.

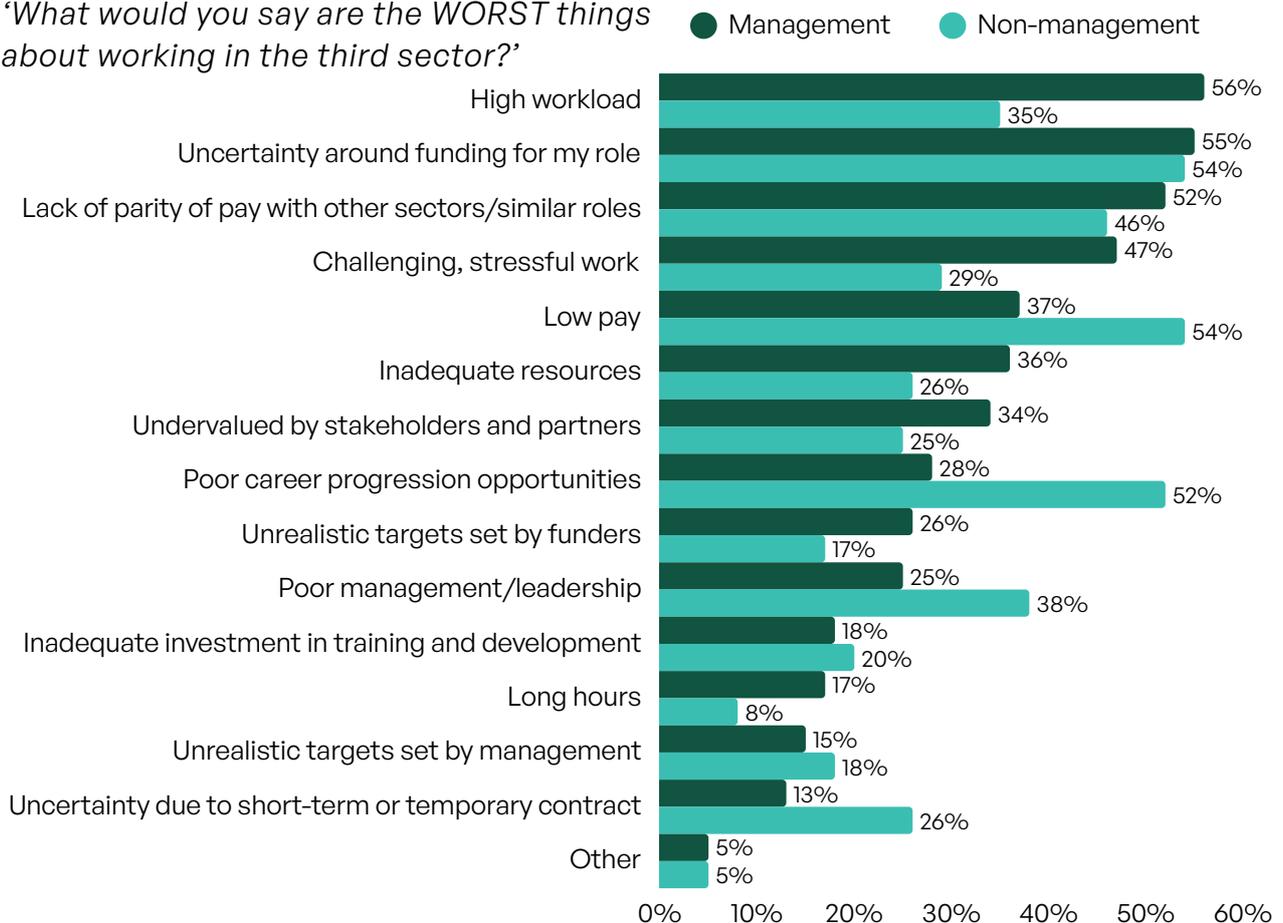
“The passion is there, but passion doesn’t pay the bills.”

“We are doing this for less funding and with more scrutiny, whilst we maintain high standards... This is not a level playing field and yet we still manage to support many families, children and young people.”

6.2 Burnout and the Question of Sustainability

Alongside commitment, many leaders express exhaustion and concern about how long they can continue. Respondents speak candidly about workload and burnout, sector parity and career progression, and the emotional toll of holding organisational risk.

‘What would you say are the WORST things about working in the third sector?’



“I am exhausted – I worked throughout COVID and feel I have not had any time to myself since then. The pressures of the job are only growing.”

“This sector is in crisis – people are tired and burnt out. Talent will leave this sector in droves if funding and recognition are not addressed.”

Several comments reflect a moment of critical change, where leaders are beginning to ask whether continuing under current conditions is viable.

“I used to love my job and would never have imagined leaving... for my own mental and physical health it has become an inevitability.”

6.3 Impact on Organisational Delivery

Leaders warn that sustained overextension is already affecting organisational delivery. High workloads, constant firefighting, and insufficient resources reduce capacity for strategic thinking, reflection, and risk management.

“Being undervalued by trustees, lack of management and staff wellbeing never prioritised. I am burned out after a year of trying to work within an impossible contract.”

“Not enough staff to deliver the work we’re funded to do – firefighting, taking on many tasks not in my job description.”

These accounts underscore that the leadership tipping point is not only about individual wellbeing, but about the future integrity of voluntary sector organisations.

7 Equity, Inclusion, and Leadership

While not a standalone focus of this dataset, leadership accessibility and progression findings have clear implications for equity and inclusion. Limited progression pathways and high workload expectations may disproportionately affect individuals with caring responsibilities or health conditions.

The workforce survey identified that 69% of respondents agreed that their organisation feels open, inclusive, and welcoming. 67% agreed that opportunities are provided equally regardless of background or identity. However, it also highlighted that whilst intentions were often good, the sector still has a way to go in relation to diversity.

“We’re not as diverse a group of staff as we could or should be. And despite good intentions I think there are still some faces/ types that ‘fit’ better than others... We are actively trying to address this though.”

In addition, staff with mental health conditions were far less likely to agree that their workplace has a culture that prioritises staff wellbeing and 24% of respondents said that they felt they had been unfairly treated or discriminated against in the last 2 years in their workplace.

In order to ensure progression to more consistent implementation, further attention must be paid by leadership.

8

Implications for Boards and Governance

The findings point to a critical governance challenge: leadership sustainability cannot be addressed without active and informed Board engagement. As organisations approach a tipping point, Boards have a central role in deciding what is realistic and sustainable.

8.1 Boards and Leadership Tipping Point

Many respondents highlighted that Boards are perceived as more remote than senior leaders. While this distance is often structural rather than intentional, it becomes particularly problematic during periods of heightened pressure and risk.

Boards are legally and ethically responsible for organisational sustainability, yet the survey evidence suggests that too much risk is currently being absorbed by individual leaders through unpaid labour, excessive hours, and personal sacrifice.

“The Board largely does not understand delineation of duties and segregation of strategic and operational responsibilities.”

At the tipping point identified in this report, Boards must actively support leaders to ask difficult questions about scope, scale, and pace of delivery.

8.2 Setting Boundaries and Priorities

Effective governance at this moment requires boards to:

- To proactively check in with their CEO, specifically their wellbeing- setting the tone for organisational culture and dialogue that listens and responds
- Support leaders to prioritise what is achievable within available resources
- Be willing to scale back, pause, or end activities that are underfunded or unsustainable
- Recognise that continuing to do more with less carries real risks to delivery and proactively managing risk

These decisions are challenging, particularly where unmet need is high. However, avoiding them places organisations at greater risk of leadership burnout, staff turnover, and service failure.

8.3 Visibility, Support, and Shared Responsibility

Effective governance at this moment requires boards to have:

- Greater understanding of day-to-day pressures on leaders and staff
- Clearer communication about strategic constraints and trade-offs
- Shared ownership of risk, rather than risk being borne by individual leaders

“It would be nice if they got to know what our jobs actually entail, to ask us about the work that we do.”

At this tipping point, strong governance means protecting leadership capacity, not stretching it further. Boards that engage proactively with these realities are better placed to safeguard organisational quality, staff wellbeing, and long-term impact.

9 Policy and Funding Implications

Much of the pressure identified throughout this report does not sit primarily within the control of individual leaders or organisations. Instead, these pressures are shaped by external policy, funding, and commissioning environments that determine the conditions in which leadership operates. Addressing leadership sustainability therefore requires action well beyond organisational boundaries.



9.1 Public Service Reform and Systemic Pressure

A consistent message from the survey data is that voluntary sector leaders are operating within systems that transfer disproportionate risk onto organisations and individuals. Short-term funding cycles, commissioning approaches, and increasing reporting and compliance requirements intensify workload and uncertainty, regardless of leadership capability or commitment.

Public service reform that recognises the voluntary sector as a strategic partner, rather than a delivery mechanism of last resort, is imperative. Without changes to how services are designed, funded, and evaluated, leadership pressure will continue to escalate, undermining organisational stability and long-term impact.

9.2 The Imperative for Multi-Year and Flexible Funding

The evidence in this report reinforces what is already well understood across the sector: multi-year, flexible funding is critical to leadership sustainability. Short-term and restricted funding models:

- Limit leaders' ability to implement long-term strategic plans
- Drive workload growth and job insecurity
- Increase stress and reduce capacity for innovation

Multi-year funding enables leaders and Boards to make more realistic decisions about staffing, service delivery, and organisational development. It also supports healthier leadership behaviours, including prioritisation, delegation, and succession planning.

9.3 Shared Responsibility for Leadership Sustainability

While leadership development and good governance matter, they cannot compensate for systemic underinvestment. Funders, commissioners, and policymakers therefore have a shared responsibility to create conditions in which leadership can be exercised in a healthy and effective manner.

Without reform to funding and commissioning practices, the sector risks continuing to rely on goodwill, unpaid labour, and personal sacrifice- an approach that is neither fair nor sustainable.

Reflections and Recommendations

The findings of this report highlight both the immediate pressures facing voluntary sector leaders and the structural changes needed to sustain leadership in the longer term. At the same time, the survey also highlights important strengths across the voluntary sector workforce, including a strong sense of purpose, commitment to social impact, and pride in the work organisations deliver for communities across Scotland. These qualities remain a defining feature of voluntary sector leadership and an important foundation for future development.

The recommendations that follow identify considerations and actions for senior leaders and Board leadership (particularly Chairs and Vice-Chairs) within organisations, alongside areas where Charity Leadership Scotland can support leadership development across the sector. While many of the actions sit within individual organisations, the findings also demonstrate how leadership sustainability is shaped by a set of interconnected factors, including governance, organisational culture, workforce development, and funding environments.

This approach reflects the central insight of the report: sustaining voluntary sector leadership cannot rest on individual leaders alone. It requires coordinated action across organisations, leadership bodies, and the wider funding and policy environment to ensure that voluntary sector leadership remains both effective and sustainable in the years ahead.

RECOMMENDATION 1. Increase investment in structured leadership learning and development to maximise leadership performance, resilience, and organisational impact.

Leadership development cannot be deferred until funding conditions improve. The volatility facing the voluntary sector is unlikely to ease in the short term, and organisations cannot wait for stability before investing in their leaders. Instead, attention must turn to what is within our collective gift now: prioritising time, resources, and intentional development to strengthen leadership capability and resilience.

Investment in leadership development is not only about skills acquisition. It is also about retention, progression, culture, performance, and innovation. Organisations that actively invest in learning and development create environments where leaders feel valued and supported, while also opening space for new thinking and creative responses to sector challenges.

The survey data suggests that structured development is inconsistent across the sector. Many leaders report stepping into management roles without formal preparation or development pathways. This places significant pressure on individuals and limits opportunities to maximise leadership potential.

*“Had zero training for moving into management.
Have had to learn in the role.”*

Leadership development must therefore become a deliberate organisational priority despite financial challenges. This includes mentoring relationships, structured development programmes, peer learning opportunities, and reflective leadership practice.

An important part of this investment is ensuring that CEO development is not overlooked. The leadership role itself must be regularly reviewed and supported through appraisals, development plans, and pay reviews. Evidence from related surveys suggests that CEO appraisals and pay reviews are often inconsistent across the sector.

ACTIONS

1.1 Leadership to ensure that structured development for leaders is built into organisational culture, ensuring time and resource is invested to strengthen leadership capability across the organisation, maximising impact over the longer term.

1.2 Board leadership to prioritise CEO appraisal processes, development plans, and pay reviews as a regular governance responsibility, optimising retention, morale, and CEO performance to deliver organisational impact and workforce satisfaction.

1.3 Charity Leadership Scotland to continue to expand accessible leadership development, peer learning networks, and mentoring opportunities to increase effectiveness, reduce loneliness, and support career development.

RECOMMENDATION 2. Prioritise action on the creation of sustainable workloads and wellbeing, increasing effectiveness, retention, and performance.

The survey findings highlight significant pressure on leaders across the voluntary sector. As stated, many leaders report high levels of stress and difficulty switching off from work, indicating that current expectations are not sustainable and are impacting on wellbeing. Chairs in particular have an important role in supporting CEOs, ensuring that they have access to appropriate support mechanisms such as coaching, mentoring, and reflective supervision.

As the report states:

“The findings suggest that the sector has reached a point where leaders, Boards, and funders must collectively ask:

When is enough enough?”

Many of the pressures identified in this report could be reduced with better funding practices. Short-term funding arrangements and tightly restricted budgets limit leaders’ ability to plan strategically and respond effectively to changing circumstances which can lead to stress, short-term decision-making, and a disproportionate amount of leadership capacity being utilised.

Fair and sustainable funding for voluntary organisations, in line with [SCVO’s Fair Funding](#), asks, enables organisational leadership to make decisions into the future about staffing, service delivery, and organisational development. It also supports more effective and resilient leadership, strengthening organisational impact and performance.

But we cannot wait for it to be realised to take the required action. There are choices to be made now, as continuing to do more with less is no longer tenable. A shift towards realistic prioritisation is therefore essential. Organisations must be prepared to have honest conversations about what can and cannot be delivered within available resources. This may include scaling back activity, ending unfunded or underfunded work, and aligning organisational ambition with financial reality.

Crucially, these decisions should not rest with CEOs alone. Boards and senior leaders must share responsibility for setting priorities and boundaries.

Reducing workload pressure also requires creative thinking about how organisations operate. Simply adding more staff is not always feasible. Instead, organisations need to explore new approaches, including: collaboration between organisations; shared services; fractional leadership roles; and digital approaches that improve operational efficiency.

Creating a culture where wellbeing can be discussed openly is essential. Leaders must feel able to raise concerns about workload, stress, and sustainability without fear that doing so could undermine their position.

This moment of challenge also presents an opportunity to innovate new approaches to further organisations' mission and impact.

ACTIONS

2.1 Organisational leadership, including Board leadership to initiate actions to foster cultures that enable honest discussions about organisational capacity, priorities, and wellbeing, to improve the current picture across the sector. This includes being prepared to scale back or pause activities that are underfunded or unsustainable.

2.2 Board leadership to prioritise resources to increase CEO support and collectively explore ways to understand workload pressures to maximise organisational resource planning.

2.3 Board leadership to ensure that trustee expectations are clear and reasonable, and trustees are equipped with the skills, knowledge, and support to undertake their role. This should reduce overwhelm and increase the overall performance of the Board.

2.4 Charity Leadership Scotland to further develop leader support and resources that help leaders operate effectively in volatile environments, promoting a culture that values leadership wellbeing and sustainable workloads.

RECOMMENDATION 3. Increase leadership resilience through effective succession planning.

Career progression within the voluntary sector is often unclear and limited, particularly within smaller organisations where structures may have been shaped around individuals rather than defined career pathways. The survey findings highlight that many staff perceive limited opportunities for advancement, which risks weakening the future leadership pipeline.

This challenge is particularly acute in a sector where many organisations operate with small teams and flat structures. While this can foster collaboration and flexibility, it can also make progression pathways less visible.

The Workforce Survey indicates that lack of career progression is a significant concern for many staff.

“There are very limited opportunities for progression within the organisation, which makes it difficult to see a long-term future here.”

“In a small organisation there simply isn’t a clear pathway to progress, even when people want to take on more responsibility.”

These findings raise important questions about how leadership pipelines are sustained and what can be optimised. If organisations are unable to provide clear progression routes, talented individuals may seek opportunities elsewhere, including outside the voluntary sector. Some sector transference due to sheer volume of leadership roles available must be tolerable, but career progression must be at the forefront of retention focused mindsets to foster vibrancy in the voluntary sector.

CEO succession planning is a particularly significant risk. Leadership transitions can be disruptive if they occur unexpectedly or without preparation. For this reason, succession planning should be recognised as a strategic governance priority.

Succession planning must also be considered alongside financial planning. Organisations may need to develop contingency funding strategies to support leadership transitions, recruitment, and development.

Further research may also be valuable in understanding whether progression challenges differ between smaller and larger voluntary sector organisations.

ACTIONS

3.1 Leadership, including Board leadership, to undertake suitable and sufficiently resourced succession planning to ensure disruption is minimised during leadership transitions and the risks of such transitions are identified and managed.

3.2 Charity Leadership Scotland to make consideration of how to support robust leadership succession planning to increase effectiveness, strengthening organisational resilience.

RECOMMENDATION 4. Accelerate Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion implementation and foster conducive cultures to maximise workforce experience, retention, and wellbeing.

Workplace culture is key to job satisfaction, retention, and wellbeing. Therefore, attention must be given to strengthen organisational culture. Leaders must be supported and have access to the required resources to step back from the day-to-day challenge, enabling the acceleration of implementation of equality, diversity, and inclusion.

Availability and effective use of employee voice channels is key. 94% of respondents identified that they had access to at least one form. However, respondents expressed that they were less confident that their voices reached senior leadership and Boards, or led to meaningful change.

As one respondent noted:

“Staff surveys are completed regularly but it is unclear what changes as a result.”

ACTIONS

4.1 Board leadership must ensure that the conditions are created for open and honest discussions to deepen understanding of the current culture and support the CEO to prioritise and implement change.

4.2 Leadership need to ensure that engagement data from voice mechanisms is collated, analysed, and acted upon to strengthen organisational culture and Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion implementation.

4.3 Charity Leadership Scotland to advocate for and support leaders to strengthen culture and Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion by ensuring learning and development opportunities and peer support progress to implementation.

11 Conclusion

Leadership in Scotland's voluntary sector is at a critical moment. This report has highlighted profound challenges: escalating workload and stress, fragile progression pathways, alongside mounting external pressures that sit largely outside leaders' control. Taken together, these factors place leadership sustainability – and organisational delivery – at real risk.

Yet the findings also reveal a powerful counter-narrative. Leadership in the voluntary sector continues to be deeply values-driven, purposeful, and impactful. Leaders speak with pride about the difference their organisations make, the people they work alongside, and the communities they serve. Accessibility, trust, and commitment remain defining strengths of the sector's leadership culture.

The sector must not lose sight of the profound positives.

This is the paradox at the heart of voluntary sector leadership in 2025: extraordinary dedication and benefit, paralleled by extraordinary strain. The challenge ahead is not to diminish ambition or impact, but to realign expectations with what is realistically achievable and reasonable.

With the recommendations outlined in the report, **a more hopeful future for leadership lies in focusing on the levers that can be influenced collectively.**

- Acting together to maximise public service reform and fair, multi-year funding
- Strengthening governance so that responsibility and risk are recognised and shared
- Supporting leaders to prioritise, innovate and streamline, set boundaries, and protect organisational integrity
- Addressing pay, salary progression, and career pathways so that leadership roles are attractive, accessible, and sustainable over the long term

Crucially, progress will depend on leaders, Boards, funders, and policymakers acting with the comfort and courage of a collective, rather than leaving individuals to shoulder systemic pressures alone.

If these shifts are made, the sector has every reason to be optimistic. With the right conditions in place, leadership in Scotland's voluntary sector can remain not only resilient, but sustainable and capable of delivering lasting positive change for years to come.





To learn more about the findings in
this report, please contact us at
events@charityleadership.scot

March 2026