



2026

State of the Northern Rivers Community and Not for Profit Sector



Photo: RiverTracks / Supplied

Acknowledgements

Northern Rivers Community Foundation (NRCF) would like to thank...

The Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters across the Northern Rivers region, including the Bundjalung, Yaegl and Gumbaynggirr peoples, and pay our respects to their Elders past and present.

We honour the enduring connection of First Nations peoples to Country and recognise the deep knowledge, wisdom and care they have shared across generations. We are grateful for the opportunity to learn from this knowledge as we work together to strengthen communities, care for the environment, and build a more connected and inclusive future.

119 community and not-for-profit organisations across the region participated in the Northern Rivers 2026 State of the Sector Survey. By sharing their experiences, challenges and aspirations, these organisations have contributed to a richer understanding of the strengths and needs of the Northern Rivers community sector.

The members of the State of the Sector Survey Reference Group who generously contributed their time and expertise to support the design of the survey framework and questionnaire, and

whose insights helped ensure the survey reflected the realities, strengths and challenges facing community organisations across the Northern Rivers.

- Julie Williams, Mullumbimby District Neighbourhood Centre
- Joel Orchard, Wardell CORE
- Bec McNaught, University Centre for Rural Health
- Aneika Kapeen, Mudyala Aboriginal Corporation

The many community leaders, staff, volunteers and board members whose work sustains the social fabric of the Northern Rivers. This research has reinforced the extraordinary commitment, resilience and optimism that exists across the community sector, despite the significant challenges many organisations face. We acknowledge your leadership, your willingness to collaborate, and your unwavering commitment to creating stronger, more connected and more resilient communities for everyone.



Cover Photo: Together She Thrives / Supplied

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Message from the CEO

For more than 20 years, our grantmaking, partnerships and community engagement have taught us first-hand the vital role that small, place-based organisations play in supporting people and our natural environment.

Whether responding to disasters, supporting vulnerable community members, protecting the environment, fostering connection and inclusion, building together for the future, or creating opportunities for people to thrive, these organisations are at the heart of community wellbeing across the Northern Rivers.

This report provides a snapshot of the strengths, challenges and opportunities facing the community sector in 2026. It reflects the voices of 119 organisations from across the region and builds on several years of research into community resilience and recovery.

The findings paint a picture of a Northern Rivers community sector that is deeply committed, highly collaborative and optimistic about the future. At the same time, organisations are responding to growing demand while continuing to navigate the long-term impacts of repeated natural disasters, housing affordability pressures, workforce shortages and the rising cost of living.

One of the strongest messages emerging from this survey is that community organisations have the expertise, relationships and local knowledge needed to create meaningful change, but many are operating with limited capacity. The report also highlights the critical role community organisations play in strengthening disaster resilience, supporting communities before, during and after disasters.

At NRCF, we believe that strong communities are built through local leadership, collaboration and investment in the people and organisations working closest to the community. These findings will help inform our grantmaking, capacity-building initiatives and advocacy efforts, while contributing to conversations with government, philanthropy and other partners about how we can collectively strengthen the resilience of the Northern Rivers.

We are grateful to every organisation that took the time to participate in this survey and share their experiences. By listening to and learning from one another, we can continue building a more resilient, connected and thriving region.

Sam Henderson
CEO
Northern Rivers Community Foundation



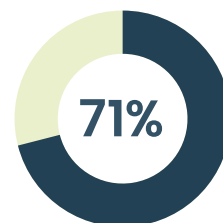
Key Takeaways

1. Demand for services continues to grow across the Northern Rivers

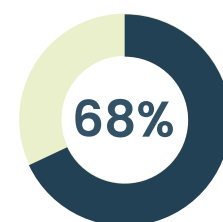
Community organisations across the Northern Rivers are experiencing growing pressure as more people seek support, connection and services.

Seventy-one percent (71%) of respondents reported high or very high current demand for their programs, services or activities, and more than two-thirds of organisations (68%) reported that demand for their programs, services or activities had increased during the past 12 months. Despite this, only 19% of organisations reported fully meeting current demand.

Many organisations are responding to growing need by operating at or beyond existing capacity, resulting in waiting lists, service gaps and increased pressure on staff and volunteers. This reflects the cumulative impacts of housing affordability, cost-of-living pressures and ongoing disaster recovery that continue to shape communities across the region.



of respondents reported high or very high current demand



of respondents reported an increase in demand

2. Organisations have the expertise but need greater support to meet community need

Across the survey, organisations demonstrated strong governance, extensive collaboration, deep community knowledge and a clear commitment to their mission. The challenge facing many organisations is not a lack of expertise or commitment, but limited capacity.

Most organisations (81%) reported operating at stretched capacity, experiencing service gaps, or being unable to fully meet community need.

Organisations have the expertise, local knowledge and trusted community relationships needed to create meaningful change, but many lack the resources required to keep pace with growing demand.



reported operating at stretched capacity

3. Recruiting and retaining volunteers is becoming increasingly challenging

Volunteers remain the backbone of many community organisations across the Northern Rivers.

Nearly half of respondents (45%) were volunteer-led organisations with no paid staff. Organisations also reported increasing difficulty recruiting and retaining volunteers, particularly people with the time and availability to take on ongoing leadership and governance roles.

Many respondents highlighted concerns about volunteer fatigue, ageing volunteer cohorts and succession planning, suggesting that volunteer sustainability remains a critical issue for the long-term resilience of the sector.



Organisations reported increasing difficulty recruiting and retaining volunteers



4. Small organisations represent a particularly vulnerable cohort

Several findings pointed to unique challenges facing organisations employing between one and five staff.

Compared with both volunteer-led organisations and larger organisations, this cohort was more likely to report governance and succession challenges and less likely to express confidence about the future.

These organisations often occupy a difficult middle ground. They have moved beyond a purely volunteer model and carry the responsibilities associated with employing staff, but may not yet have the scale, resources or funding diversity of larger organisations. This finding suggests there may be value in targeted support for organisations during this stage of organisational development.

5. Disaster resilience is increasingly becoming a core function of community organisations

Community organisations are playing an increasingly important role in helping communities prepare for, respond to and recover from natural disasters.

Nearly two-thirds of organisations (62%) reported supporting communities to respond to or recover from natural disasters during the previous 12 months, while more than half (55%) reported supporting disaster preparedness or resilience-building activities.

Importantly, much of this work is being undertaken by organisations whose primary purpose is not disaster management, including 75% of housing and homelessness organisations and 67% of youth services.

The findings reinforce the critical role community organisations play in supporting communities before, during and after disasters.



6. Despite significant challenges, the sector remains optimistic

The strongest message emerging from the survey is one of resilience and optimism. More than three-quarters of organisations (76%) reported feeling somewhat or very optimistic about their future over the next three years.

This optimism persisted despite growing demand, workforce pressures, funding uncertainty and governance challenges. The finding reflects a sector that remains deeply committed to the communities it serves and confident in its ability to adapt, collaborate and continue creating positive change across the Northern Rivers.



Photo: Positive Change for Marine Life / Supplied

Introduction

For more than 20 years, Northern Rivers Community Foundation (NRCF) has worked alongside community organisations across the region, supporting grassroots initiatives that strengthen communities, build resilience and create lasting local impact.

Through our grantmaking, partnerships and community engagement, we have developed relationships with hundreds of organisations working across diverse areas including community development, health and wellbeing, disaster resilience, environmental sustainability, arts and culture, housing, youth services and social inclusion. These organisations play a vital role in supporting the social and environmental wellbeing of the Northern Rivers. Their importance has become increasingly evident through successive floods, bushfires and severe weather events, where local organisations have consistently been among the first to respond and among the last to leave.

While not a formal representative body for the community organisations, NRCF plays an important role as a place-based funder, network convenor and advocate for the sector. Understanding the experiences, strengths and challenges of community organisations helps us ensure our grantmaking, capacity-building and advocacy efforts remain responsive to community needs.



Photo: Lower Clarence Community Garden / Supplied

Objectives

The 2026 State of the Sector Survey builds on NRCF's previous research, including the Flood Impact Studies completed between 2022-2025, while broadening the focus beyond disaster recovery. The survey seeks to better understand the overall sustainability of community organisations across the Northern Rivers and the factors that enable them to thrive in an increasingly challenging environment.

The survey was designed to explore five interconnected domains of organisational sustainability:

1. Financial Sustainability
2. Workforce Capacity and Wellbeing
3. Governance and Leadership
4. Collaboration and Influence
5. Service Delivery and Demand

Together, these domains provide a picture of the strengths, challenges and opportunities facing the Northern Rivers community sector.

The findings will help NRCF better understand the changing needs of the community sector and inform our future grantmaking, capacity-building initiatives and advocacy efforts. We also hope the report will support conversations between community organisations, government, philanthropy and other stakeholders about how best to strengthen the resilience of the Northern Rivers community sector.

Methodology

To better understand the strengths, challenges and opportunities facing the sector, Northern Rivers Community Foundation (NRCF) conducted the 2026 State of the Sector Survey. The survey was conducted between February and March 2026 using SurveyMonkey. A unique survey link was distributed by email to 276 organisations within NRCF's network. A total of 119 responses were received by the closing date, representing a response rate of 43%. Responses were received from organisations of a diverse range of sizes and impact areas across all seven Northern Rivers local government areas (see Annex A&B).

To support survey design and ensure the questionnaire reflected the experiences and priorities of community organisations, NRCF convened a reference group of sector representatives who provided advice on the survey framework and questionnaire design.

Quantitative responses were analysed using descriptive statistical techniques to identify trends and patterns across the dataset. Qualitative responses were reviewed and coded into key themes to identify common experiences, challenges and priorities. Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools were used to assist with data analysis and thematic coding. All findings were reviewed and validated by NRCF staff.

The survey used a non-representative sampling approach and was distributed primarily through NRCF's existing community sector networks. As a result, the findings should not be interpreted as statistically representative of all community organisations across the Northern Rivers. Instead, they provide valuable insight into the experiences, perspectives and priorities of participating organisations.



Photos: Riding for the Disabled Ballina / Fletcher Street Cottage / Supplied

Respondent Profile

A total of 119 organisations participated in the Northern Rivers Community Sector State of the Sector Survey.

Respondents represented a diverse cross-section of community organisations operating across the Northern Rivers region, including volunteer-led groups,

registered charities, incorporated associations, social enterprises and Aboriginal-led organisations.

The survey captured organisations of varying sizes, operating across a broad range of community impact areas and geographic locations.

Geographic Distribution

Responses were received from organisations located across all seven Northern Rivers local government areas, as well as organisations operating across multiple locations within the region. The largest number of respondents were based in Lismore (25%), Byron (24%) and Ballina (13%).

Figure 25. Respondents by Local Government Area

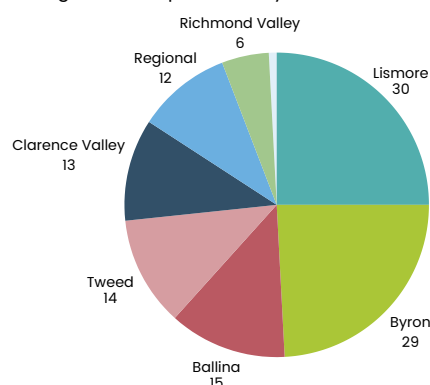
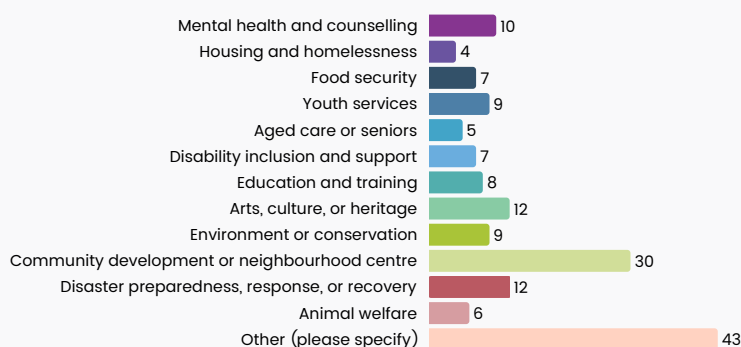


Figure 26. Respondents by Impact Area



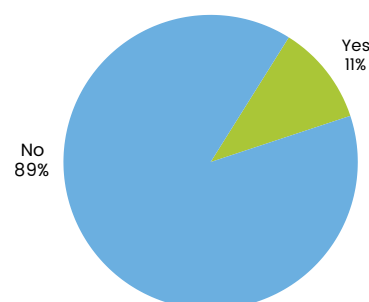
Impact Area

Respondents represented a wide range of community impact areas. The largest group identified community development or neighbourhood centres as their primary focus (25%), followed by arts, culture and heritage (10%) and disaster preparedness, response and recovery (10%). The diversity of respondents reflects the broad range of services, activities and supports delivered by community organisations across the Northern Rivers.

First Nations-led Organisations

Thirteen organisations (11%) identified as First Nations-led, including Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), Local Aboriginal Land Councils and other Indigenous-led organisations.

Figure 30. Respondents by First Nations-led status



Organisation Size and Structure

The survey included organisations ranging from entirely volunteer-led groups through to large organisations employing more than fifty staff.

Almost half of respondents (45%) were volunteer-led organisations with no paid staff, while 20% employed between one and five staff. Around one-third (35%) employed six or more staff.

More than nine in ten respondents (91%) were either registered charities or incorporated associations, reflecting the predominance of formal not-for-profit organisations within the survey sample.

Figure 27. Respondents by number of paid staff

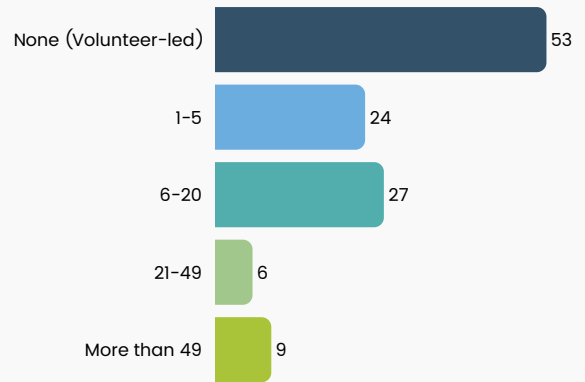
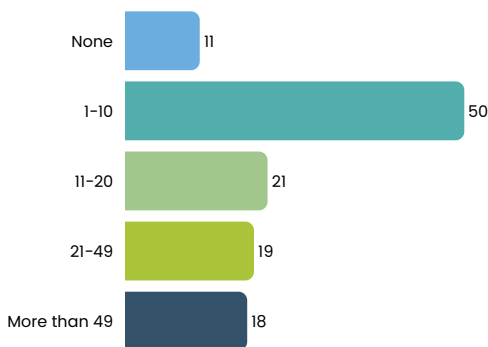


Figure 28. Respondents by number of active volunteers



Volunteers

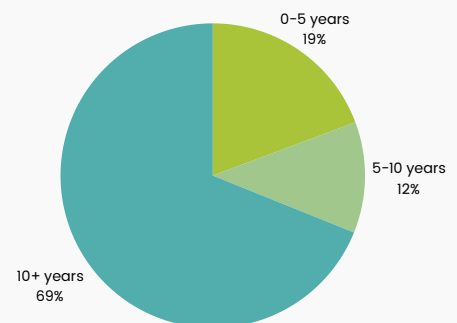
Volunteers continue to play a critical role in the Northern Rivers community sector. More than nine in ten organisations (92%) reported engaging volunteers, with 42% reporting between one and ten active volunteers and almost one-third (31%) reporting more than twenty volunteers.

These findings highlight the significant contribution volunteers make to community organisations across the region and reinforce the importance of volunteer recruitment, retention and succession planning.

Organisational Longevity

The survey captured both long-established organisations and newer community groups. More than two-thirds of respondents (69%) represented organisations that had been operating for more than ten years and almost one in five organisations (19%) had been operating for five years or less, highlighting the continued emergence of new community-led organisations.

Figure 29. Respondents by years in operation



DOMAIN 1:

Financial Sustainability

Financial sustainability is a foundational component of organisational sustainability. Community organisations require sufficient financial resources not only to deliver programs and services, but also to plan for the future, respond to emerging needs and withstand periods of uncertainty and funding shifts.

The survey findings suggest that while some organisations have developed diverse funding models and strong financial foundations, others continue to operate with limited reserves

and significant funding uncertainty. This leaves many organisations attempting to respond to growing community need while simultaneously managing the ongoing impacts of disasters and rising operating costs.

The findings suggest that funding approaches which support organisational sustainability, including core operational funding, multi-year grants and long-term funding relationships, may play an important role in strengthening the capacity of community organisations to respond to growing community need.

Key Findings

Financial buffers vary considerably across the sector

The amount of funding held in reserve varied significantly between organisations. When asked how long they could continue operating using existing funds if no new income was received, the most common response was a financial buffer of between six and twelve months (30%).

Approximately one-third of organisations (31%) reported a financial buffer of less than six months, while a similar proportion (34%) reported a financial buffer of more than twelve months. These findings suggest considerable variation in financial sustainability across the sector.

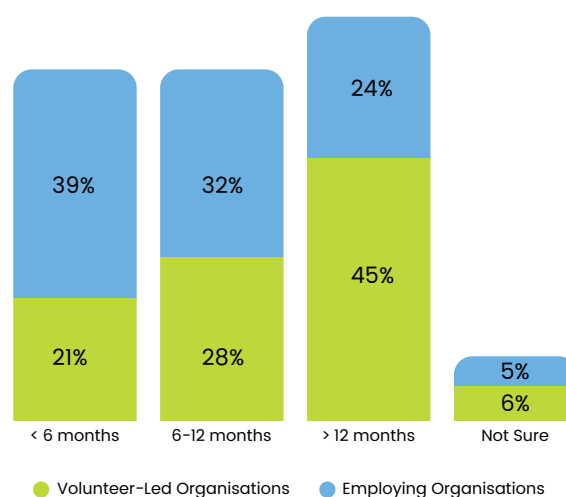
Given the increasing demand identified elsewhere in this report, limited financial reserves may reduce an organisation's ability to respond to emerging community needs or invest in future growth.

Volunteer-led organisations reported substantially larger financial buffers than organisations with paid staff.

Nearly half of volunteer-led organisations (45%) reported a financial buffer of more than twelve months, compared with one-quarter of employing organisations (24%).

This likely reflects the fact that volunteer-led organisations generally operate with lower fixed costs and fewer staffing commitments than organisations with paid staff, allowing them to maintain operations for longer periods without new income.

Figure 1. Financial Buffer if no new income was received

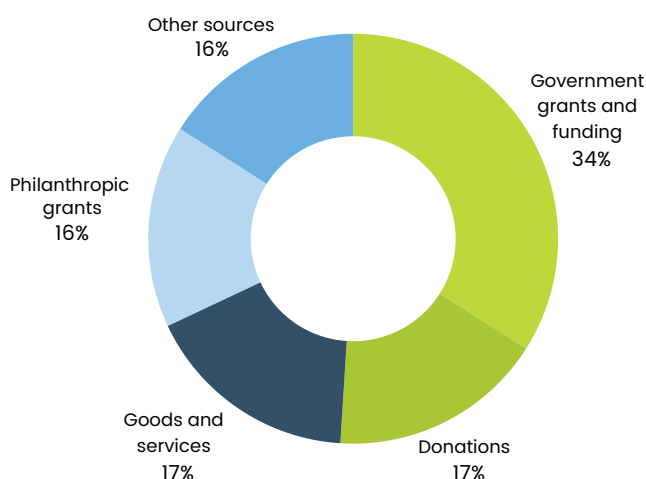


Organisations lack diversity in funding sources

Government grants and funding were the largest source of revenue across the sector, accounting for approximately one-third of total organisational revenue (34%). Donations (17%), goods and services (17%) and philanthropic grants (16%) also made significant contributions.

At a sector level, these findings suggest a relatively diverse funding landscape. However, funding sources were not evenly distributed across organisations. While two-thirds of organisations received government funding (67%) and donations (66%), fewer than half generated income through goods and services (45%), and only around one-third reported income from events and sponsorship (36%).

Figure 2. Average funding mix across the sector



Although the sector appears relatively diversified when viewed as a whole, individual organisations often relied heavily on a single source of income. Nearly nine in ten organisations (89%) received at least half of their annual revenue from a single revenue source category, while more than half (55%) received three-quarters or more of their revenue from a single source category.

“We are in a relatively stable position compared to many grassroots organisations, with a mix of government funding, philanthropy, and emerging community-led income streams. However, like much of the sector, we are still navigating reliance on project-based funding, which can limit long-term planning and investment in core capacity.”

- Survey respondent

This finding suggests financial sustainability is influenced not only by the amount of funding available, but also by the concentration and predictability of revenue streams. Organisations with a high reliance on a single source of income may be more vulnerable to changes in government priorities, grant availability or economic conditions.

89% of organisations received at least half of their income from a single revenue source category.



Structural funding challenges remain a significant barrier to sustainability

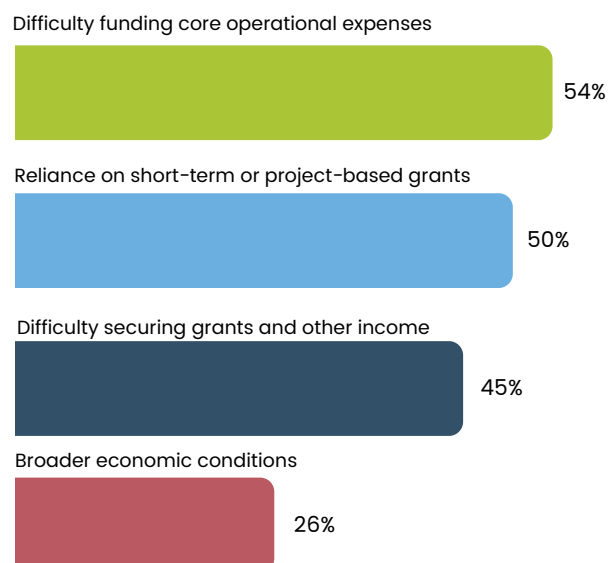
When asked about the main barriers limiting financial sustainability, organisations most commonly identified difficulty funding core operational expenses (54%), reliance on short-term or project-based grants (50%), and difficulty securing grants and other sources of income (45%).

“While all identified barriers are relevant, a key challenge is the significant time and effort required to secure funding, which reduces our capacity to deliver essential services.”

- Survey respondent

These findings suggest the challenge facing many organisations is not simply accessing funding but securing the type of funding that enables long-term planning, organisational development and sustainable impact.

Figure 3. Main barriers to financial sustainability



DOMAIN 2:

Workforce Capacity and Wellbeing

People are at the heart of the Northern Rivers community sector. Staff, volunteers and board members contribute thousands of hours each year delivering programs, responding to community needs, advocating for change and supporting community wellbeing.

The survey findings highlight the extraordinary contribution made by staff and volunteers across the region. At the same time, organisations reported increasing challenges attracting and retaining volunteers, recruiting staff and managing workforce wellbeing. These challenges are amplified by the Northern Rivers housing crisis and the difficulties of recruiting staff across a geographically dispersed region.

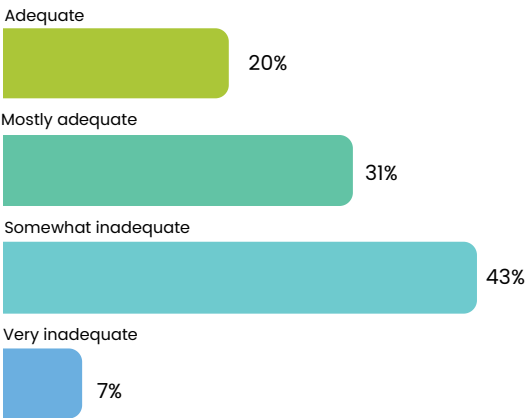
Key Findings

Many organisations do not have the staff they need to meet current demand.

Organisations were asked to assess whether their current staffing levels were adequate to meet organisational needs. Responses suggest that workforce capacity is under considerable pressure across the sector.

Only one in five organisations that assessed their staffing levels reported having enough staff (20%). A further 31% reported that staffing levels were mostly adequate, but capacity was stretched, while almost half (49%) reported having fewer staff than they needed or experiencing staff shortages. This finding is particularly significant when considered alongside the growing demand for services identified elsewhere in this report. Many organisations are attempting to meet increasing community need without sufficient workforce capacity.

Figure 4. Adequacy of paid staffing levels

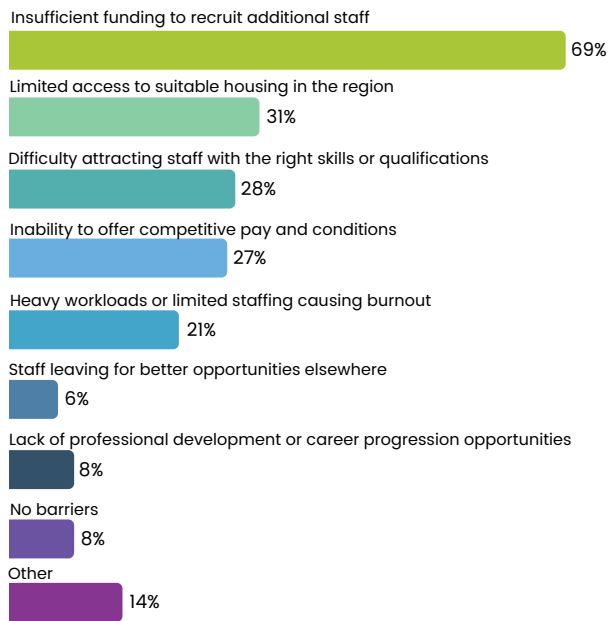


Organisations identified a range of barriers affecting their ability to recruit and retain paid staff. Funding constraints emerged as the dominant challenge. More than two-thirds of organisations (69%) reported insufficient funding to recruit additional staff, making it the most selected barrier by a substantial margin.

Housing availability also emerged as a significant workforce issue. Nearly one-third of organisations (31%) reported limited access to suitable housing as a barrier to recruitment and retention. Difficulties attracting staff with the right skills or qualifications (28%) and the inability to offer competitive pay and conditions (27%) were also commonly reported.

Together, these findings suggest that workforce challenges are driven primarily by structural and economic factors rather than staff turnover. Only 6% of organisations reported staff leaving for better opportunities elsewhere.

Figure 5. Barriers to recruitment and retention of paid staff



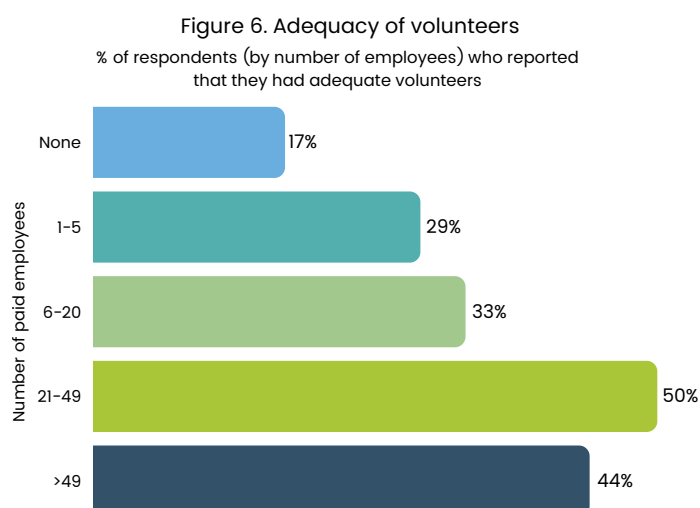
Volunteers are the backbone of the sector, but recruiting and retaining them is becoming increasingly difficult

Over 90% of respondents relied on volunteers, while nearly half (45%) were entirely volunteer-led organisations with no paid staff, highlighting the critical role volunteers continue to play across the Northern Rivers community sector. Of organisations who engaged volunteers, most (71%) reported some degree of volunteer capacity pressure, with many reporting that they are increasingly reliant on a relatively small number of highly committed individuals.

“Small grassroots groups such as ours rely on the strengths, energy and commitment from a very small representation of the community. This is a risk to sustainability due to burnout and being stretched beyond capacity.”

- Survey respondent

As the number of paid staff within an organisation increased, so did the perceived adequacy of volunteers. This could suggest that organisations with paid staff are simply less reliant on volunteers, or that paid staff increase an organisation's capacity to recruit, coordinate and support volunteers.



The barriers to volunteer recruitment also differed significantly depending on organisational size. Volunteer-led organisations were most likely to report difficulties attracting volunteers with sufficient time and availability (60%), limited interest in long-term or ongoing roles (36%), and volunteer burnout or fatigue (34%). Volunteer-led organisations were almost twice as likely to report volunteer burnout as organisations with paid staff (34% compared with 18%), suggesting that responsibility is often concentrated among a small number of highly committed individuals.

“Finding people to fill the more onerous roles such as president and secretary is really difficult. Both of the people currently in these roles would prefer not to be, but there is nobody to take their places.”

- Survey respondent

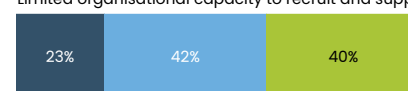
“Small grassroots groups such as ours rely on the strengths, energy and commitment from a very small representation of the community. This is a risk to sustainability due to burnout and being stretched beyond capacity.”

- Survey respondent

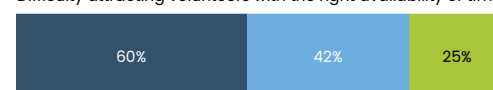
In contrast, organisations with paid staff were almost twice as likely to report limited organisational capacity to recruit and support volunteers (40-42% compared with 23%). This suggests that while employing organisations may have greater workforce capacity overall, they often lack the time, systems and resources needed to effectively recruit, coordinate and support volunteers.

and retention by organisation size

Limited organisational capacity to recruit and support volunteers



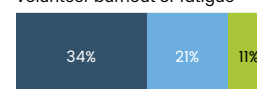
Difficulty attracting volunteers with the right availability or time commitment



Limited volunteer interest in long-term or ongoing roles



Volunteer burnout or fatigue



● Volunteer-led ● Small (1-5 staff) ● Medium/Large (6+ staff)

Qualitative comments revealed that several respondents also expressed concern about ageing volunteer cohorts and the difficulty attracting younger people into governance and leadership positions.

“Our volunteer workforce is predominantly made up of seniors and retirees, which presents challenges in managing physical workload, including lifting, transport and higher-energy tasks.”

- Survey respondent

DOMAIN 3:

Governance and Leadership

Effective governance and leadership are critical to organisational sustainability. Strong governance supports strategic decision-making, accountability, risk management and community trust, while effective leadership helps organisations adapt to changing circumstances and respond to emerging opportunities.

The survey findings suggest that governance capability across the Northern Rivers community sector is generally

strong. Most organisations reported confidence in the skills and experience of their board or management committee, particularly in core areas such as financial management, strategic planning and compliance.

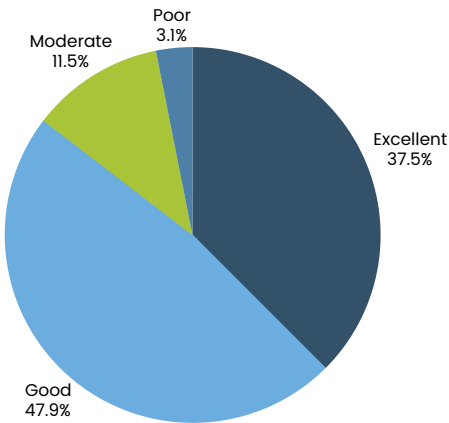
At the same time, leadership succession emerged as a significant challenge. Across many Northern Rivers communities, the same highly committed individuals often serve on multiple boards and committees, creating challenges for future leadership transitions, diversity of thinking and long-term sustainability.

Key Findings

Governance capability is generally strong across the sector, but capability gaps remain in specialist areas

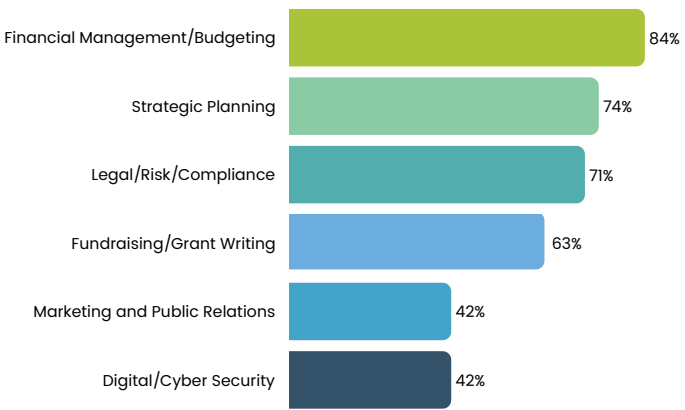
More than four in five organisations (82%) agreed that their board or management committee has the collective skills and experience required to effectively govern the organisation. This finding suggests that governance capability is a significant strength of the Northern Rivers community sector. Despite the resource constraints identified elsewhere in this report, most organisations reported confidence in their governance foundations.

Figure 8. Board and management committee capability



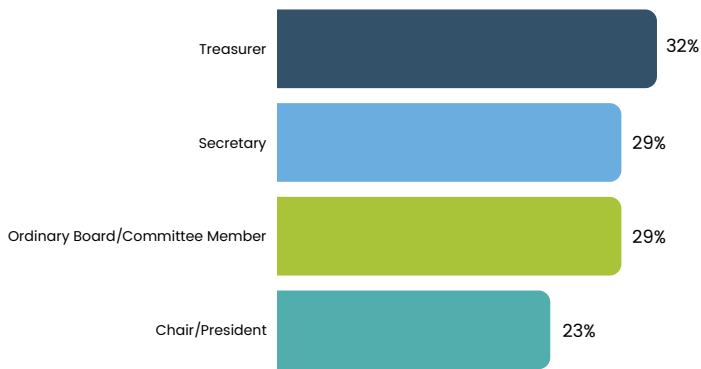
When asked to assess governance and management capability across a range of organisational functions, respondents reported the highest levels of confidence in financial management, strategic planning and legal/compliance responsibilities. In contrast, marketing and communications, digital capability and cyber security were more likely to be identified as areas requiring further development.

Figure 9. Governance and management capacity
% of organisations who reported good or very good capacity in the following areas



Organisations were asked how easy or difficult it had been to recruit qualified people into governance roles during the previous 12 months. Treasurer was identified as the most difficult governance role to recruit, with almost one-third of organisations (32%) reporting that recruitment had been difficult or very difficult. Secretary (29%) and Ordinary Board or Committee Member roles (29%) were similarly challenging, while Chair or President positions were reported as somewhat easier to fill (23%).

Figure 10. Difficulty recruiting key governance roles in the past 12 months
% of organisations who reported it was difficult or very difficult to recruit key roles

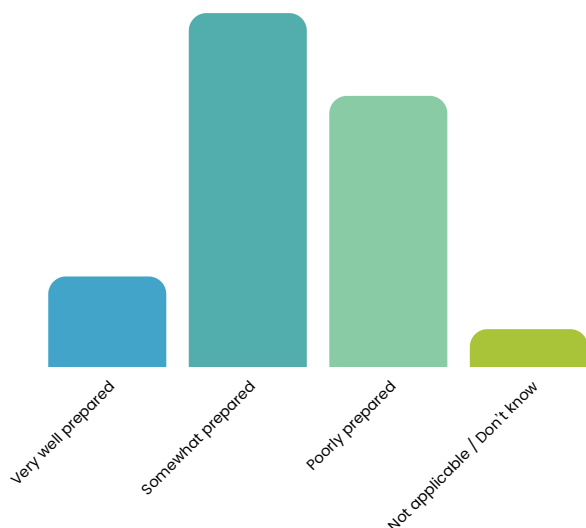


These findings suggest that many organisations face ongoing challenges attracting people into governance positions, particularly roles involving financial oversight and administrative responsibility. While governance capability across the sector is generally strong, difficulties recruiting new office bearers may contribute to the succession challenges identified elsewhere in this report.

Leadership succession presents a significant governance challenge, especially among small organisations

While governance capability was generally strong, many organisations reported concerns about leadership succession. More than one-third of organisations (36%) reported being poorly prepared for board or leadership succession and indicated they were reliant on a single person to perform key roles.

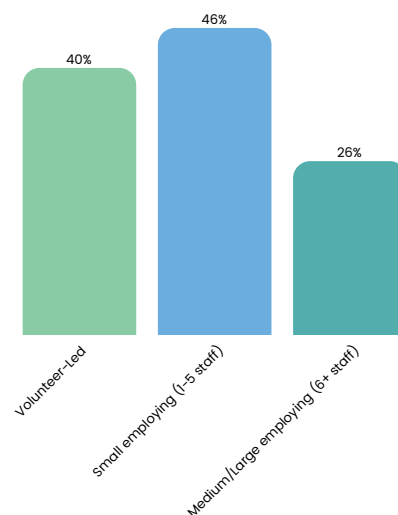
Figure 11. Succession preparedness



Succession challenges were reported across organisations of all sizes but were most pronounced among organisations employing between one and five staff. Almost half (46%) of small employing organisations reported being poorly prepared for succession and reliant on a single person to perform key roles. This compares with 40% of volunteer-led organisations and 26% of medium and larger organisations employing six or more staff.

This finding reinforces a broader theme emerging throughout the report: organisations employing between one and five staff often occupy a challenging middle ground. They have moved beyond a purely volunteer model but may not yet have the leadership depth, organisational systems or workforce capacity of larger organisations.

Figure 12. Succession preparedness by organisation size
% of organisations who reported that they were poorly prepared for succession of key roles



Many respondents described governance and leadership responsibilities being carried by a small number of highly committed individuals. Several organisations reported difficulties recruiting new board members, attracting younger leaders and encouraging people to take on governance responsibilities.

“

There is a large burden placed on our volunteer board. We are lucky we have a very skilled chair who is currently taking more than their fair share of the load.”

– Survey respondent

“

Ageing volunteer force. The coordinator is now 80 and getting a replacement is very difficult.”

– Survey respondent

DOMAIN 4:

Collaboration and Influence

One of the defining characteristics of the Northern Rivers community sector is its strong culture of collaboration. Through partnerships, networks and relationships, organisations contribute to community decision-making and help shape responses to local challenges.

The survey findings suggest that while organisations are highly connected and collaborative, many feel they have limited influence over government decisions affecting

their community. Capacity constraints, limited access to decision-makers and competing organisational priorities were identified as significant barriers to participation in advocacy and decision-making processes.

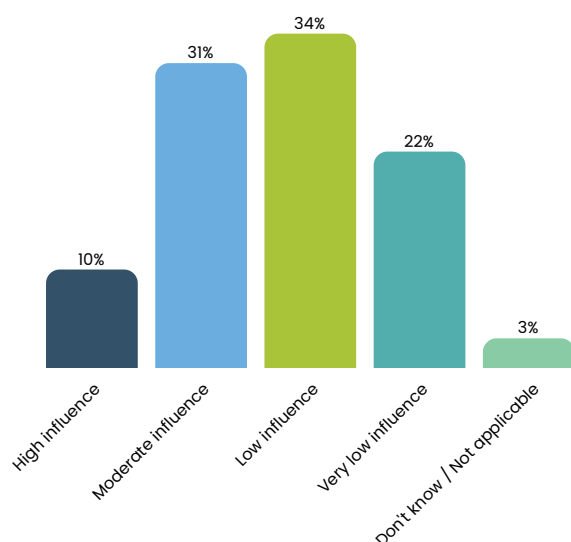
At the same time, organisations reported high levels of collaboration with other organisations and networks across the region. These findings suggest that the challenge facing many organisations is not a lack of willingness to engage, but limited capacity and opportunity to consistently participate in decision-making processes.

Key Findings

Most organisations report limited influence over government decision-making

Organisations were asked to assess the extent to which they feel able to influence government decisions affecting their community or impact area. Overall, perceptions of influence were relatively low. More than half of respondents (56%) reported low or very low influence over government decisions, while only one in ten (10%) reported high influence.

Figure 13. Perceived influence over government decisions



The dominant barrier that limited organisations ability to influence government decisions was lack of time or capacity for advocacy, selected by almost two-thirds of respondents (66%). This was substantially higher than any other barrier and suggests that many organisations face challenges engaging in advocacy and policy processes alongside the demands of service delivery, governance, fundraising and organisational management.

“We are a small organisation with very limited time or capacity to influence decision-makers.”

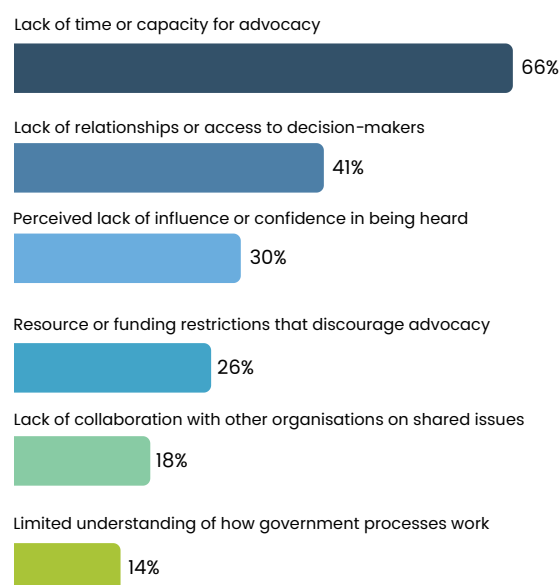
- Survey respondent

“Huge impact on time of Executive Director, with competing demand of managing the organisation.”

- Survey respondent

Limited access to decision-makers was the second most commonly reported barrier (41%), followed by a perceived lack of influence or confidence in being heard (30%). Resource and funding restrictions were also identified by one-quarter of organisations (26%).

Figure 14. Barriers to influencing government decisions



These findings suggest that many organisations possess valuable community knowledge, lived experience and local expertise but do not feel they are consistently able to shape decisions affecting the communities they serve.

Collaboration is a significant strength of the Northern Rivers community sector

Despite concerns about influence, organisations reported high levels of collaboration with other organisations and networks.

The most common forms of collaboration included participation in local or regional alliances and networks (68%), partnering with other organisations to deliver projects or services (66%), and co-hosting community events or campaigns (66%). More than half of respondents (54%) also reported sharing staff, volunteers, facilities or other resources with another organisation.

Figure 15. Collaborative activities undertaken in the past 12 months



Importantly, lack of collaboration was rarely identified as a barrier to influence, with fewer than one in five organisations (18%) selecting this option. This suggests that collaboration is not a weakness of the sector but rather one of its defining strengths.

While most respondents described strong collaborative relationships and active participation in networks, alliances and partnerships, some also highlighted structural barriers that can undermine collaboration, including competitive funding environments and unequal access to partnership opportunities.

“Competitive tendering conditions are brutal and create division.”

- Survey respondent

Disaster Resilience Spotlight

The Northern Rivers has experienced a series of significant disasters in recent years, including bushfires, floods, landslips, cyclones and severe storms. Community organisations have played a critical role in supporting communities through preparedness, response and recovery efforts.

The survey findings suggest that disaster resilience is no longer confined to specialist disaster organisations and is now embedded across much of the Northern Rivers

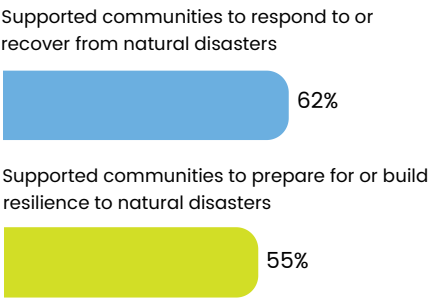
community sector. These organisations, including those working across community development, housing, mental health, youth services, environmental conservation, arts and culture and many other sectors, are performing this work without adequate (or in many cases any) funding, increasing financial pressure and contributing to and burn out among staff and volunteers.

Disaster recovery and resilience is now a significant part of community sector activity

Almost two-thirds of organisations (62%) reported contributing to disaster response or recovery activities in the last 12 months, while more than half (55%) reported supporting communities to prepare for or build resilience to future disasters.

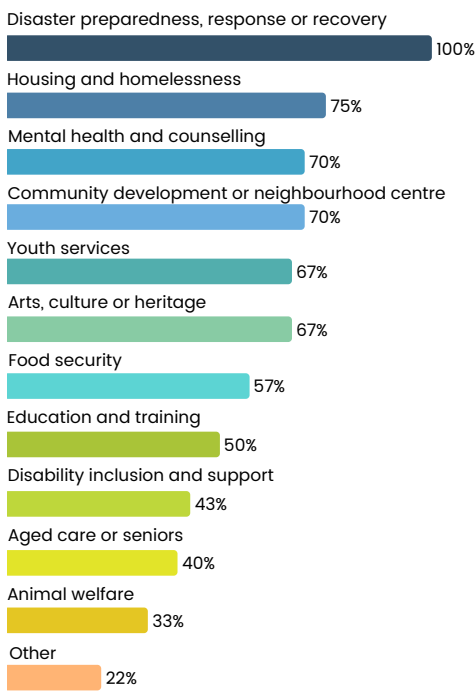
First Nations-led organisations were more likely than other respondents to report supporting both disaster response and recovery activities (77% compared with 60%) and disaster preparedness and resilience-building activities (69% compared with 53%).

Figure 16. Organisational involvement in disaster recovery and resilience



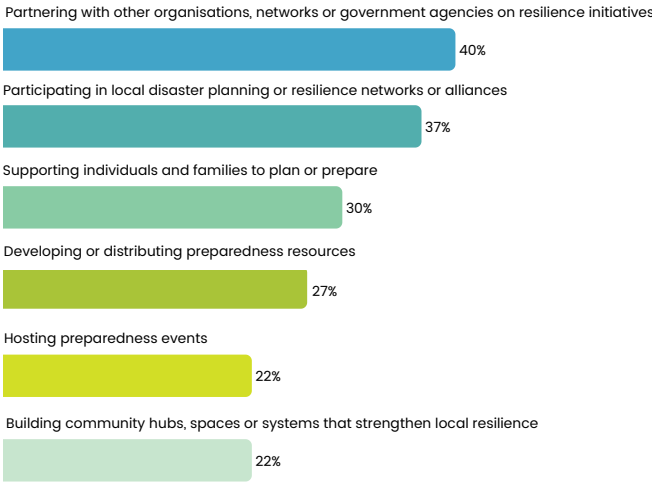
As expected, all organisations whose primary purpose was disaster preparedness, response or recovery reported supporting disaster-related activities (100%). However, high levels of participation were also reported by organisations working in housing and homelessness (75%), mental health and counselling (70%), community development and neighbourhood centres (70%), youth services (67%) and arts, culture and heritage (67%).

Figure 17. Organisations supporting disaster response or recovery by impact area



A similar pattern was evident for preparedness and resilience-building activities. Community development and neighbourhood centres (67%), arts and culture organisations (58%), environmental organisations (56%) and housing organisations (50%) all reported actively contributing to disaster preparedness and resilience.

Figure 18. Disaster preparedness and resilience-building activities



The most common response and recovery activities included providing direct support to affected individuals and communities (52%), providing information, referrals and advocacy (46%), partnering with other organisations or government agencies (46%) and delivering recovery programs and services (36%).

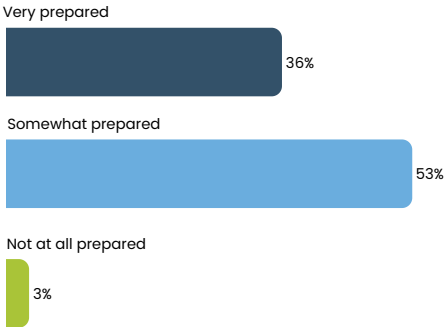
Preparedness and resilience-building activities were similarly diverse. Organisations reported supporting individuals and families to prepare for disasters (30%), developing preparedness resources (27%), hosting preparedness events (22%) and building community hubs, systems and infrastructure that strengthen local resilience (22%).

These findings are consistent with the NRCF Flood Impact Study conducted from 2022-2025, which also found that organisations performed these activities largely without additional or specialist funding (NRCF, 2025).

Disaster resilience is built through local relationships, networks and partnerships

Collaboration emerged as a defining feature of disaster resilience activity across the sector.

Figure 19. Organisational preparedness for future disasters



Among organisations undertaking preparedness and resilience-building activities, 40% reported partnering with other organisations, networks or government agencies on resilience initiatives, while 37% participated in local disaster planning or resilience networks and alliances.

These findings suggest that disaster resilience is fundamentally collaborative. Community resilience is strengthened through relationships, local networks and partnerships that connect organisations, communities and government agencies before, during and after disasters.

Increasing organisational preparedness is key to sustaining community contribution to disaster recovery and resilience. While disaster resilience activity was widespread, relatively few organisations considered themselves highly prepared to maintain business continuity during a future disaster. Only 36% of organisations reported being very prepared to continue operations during a future disaster. More than half (53%) reported being only somewhat prepared, while a small number reported being not at all prepared (3%).

These findings suggest that many organisations are simultaneously supporting community resilience while continuing to strengthen their own organisational preparedness. As disasters become more frequent and complex, supporting the sustainability and preparedness of community organisations will remain an important component of building community resilience across the Northern Rivers and must be resourced accordingly.

DOMAIN 5:

Program and Service Delivery

Community organisations play a critical role in responding to local needs across the Northern Rivers. They provide essential services, create opportunities for connection and participation, advocate for vulnerable communities and help address complex social and environmental challenges.

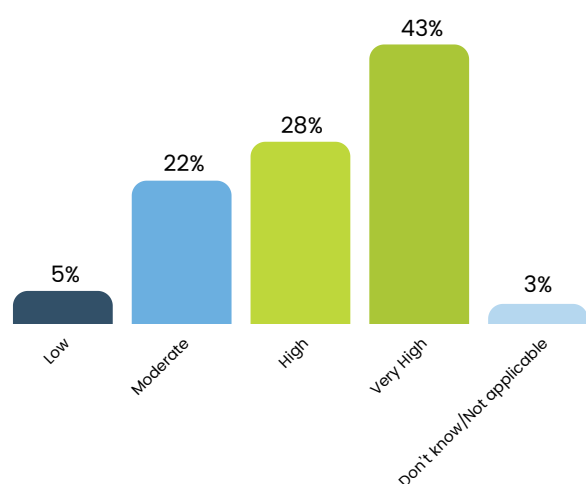
The survey findings suggest that demand for community services remains high and continues to increase across the region. At the same time, many organisations reported that they are struggling to keep pace with growing demand due to limitations in funding, workforce capacity and organisational resources.

Key Findings

Demand for community services remains high across the Northern Rivers.

More than seven in ten organisations (71%) reported high or very high demand for their programs, services or activities, while only a small proportion reported low demand. These findings suggest that community organisations across the Northern Rivers are operating in an environment of sustained and significant community need.

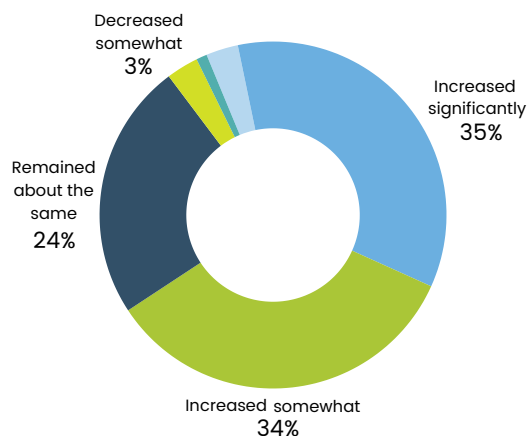
Figure 20. Current demand for programs, services and activities



More than two-thirds of organisations (68%) reported that demand had increased in the past 12 months, including one-third (35%) who reported that demand had increased significantly. In contrast, only 4% reported a decline in demand.

The high levels of demand reported by organisations are consistent with broader challenges facing the Northern Rivers, including housing affordability, cost-of-living pressures, workforce shortages, disaster recovery and increasing demand for social support services.

Figure 21. Change in demand over the past 12 months



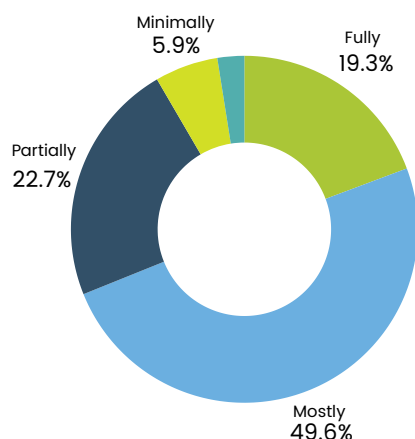
Several respondents described the challenge of responding to increasing demand while operating within existing resource constraints.

“Demand for our programs and support continues to grow, particularly in areas such as capacity-building, connection, and ecosystem coordination. While we are able to meet some of this demand, our capacity is often stretched, and we are not always able to respond to all opportunities or needs across the region.”

– Survey respondent

Only 19% of organisations reported that they were fully meeting demand for their programs and services. In contrast, almost four in five organisations (78%) reported stretched capacity, service gaps or limited ability to meet community needs.

Figure 22. Ability to meet demand for programs, services and activities



While demand pressures were reported across almost all organisations, those working in mental health and counselling reported particularly strong demand pressures. Four in five (80%) reported high or very high demand, 70% reported increasing demand over the previous 12 months, and 40% reported limited capacity to meet community need. Community development organisations and neighbourhood centres reported a similar pattern, with 70% reporting high or very high demand, 70% reporting increasing demand and one-third reporting service gaps.

“Our organisation requires additional staff and financial resources to be able to meet the demands for our programs.”

– Survey respondent

Several organisations also described the challenges associated with delivering services across large geographic areas, rising operational costs and difficulties recruiting suitably qualified staff and volunteers.

“Capacity to deliver programs, services and activities is constrained by a combination of limited staff capacity, a large service area, and finite funding. With a small team of part-time staff, there are practical limits to how much can be delivered, particularly when working across a geographically dispersed region.”

– Survey respondent

These finding connects strongly with themes identified elsewhere in this report, which demonstrated financial constraints, workforce shortages, volunteer recruitment challenges and leadership succession pressures, which all have implications for an organisation’s ability to respond to increasing demand.



Photos: Zero Emissions Byron / Supplied & Resilient Uki / NRCF

Future Outlook

While the findings presented throughout this report highlight significant challenges relating to funding, workforce capacity, governance, leadership succession and increasing demand, many organisations remain optimistic about the future.

This optimism is particularly notable given the cumulative challenges the Northern Rivers has experienced over recent years, including repeated natural disasters, housing shortages and significant economic pressures.

Organisations were asked how confident they felt about their future in the next three years. Overall, the findings suggest a sector that remains resilient and committed despite operating in a challenging environment. Most organisations expressed optimism about their future, reflecting the dedication, adaptability and community support that characterises the Northern Rivers community sector.

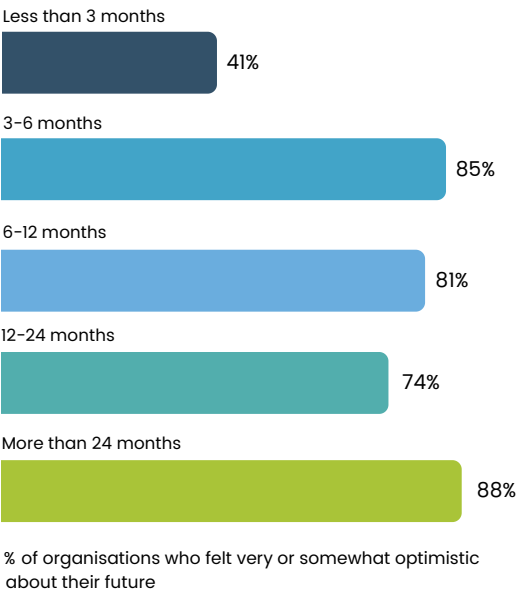
Key Findings

Most organisations remain optimistic about the future, despite significant challenges

Most organisations reported feeling either very optimistic (41%) or somewhat optimistic (34%) about their future over the next three years. Only a small proportion reported feeling somewhat pessimistic (1%) or very pessimistic (3%).

While confidence levels were generally high across the sector, optimism was not evenly distributed. Organisations with a lower financial buffer (see page 9) were considerably less optimistic about the future than those with larger financial buffers. Only 41% of organisations with less than three months of operating reserves reported feeling optimistic (very or somewhat) about the future, compared with between 74% and 88% of organisations with larger financial buffers.

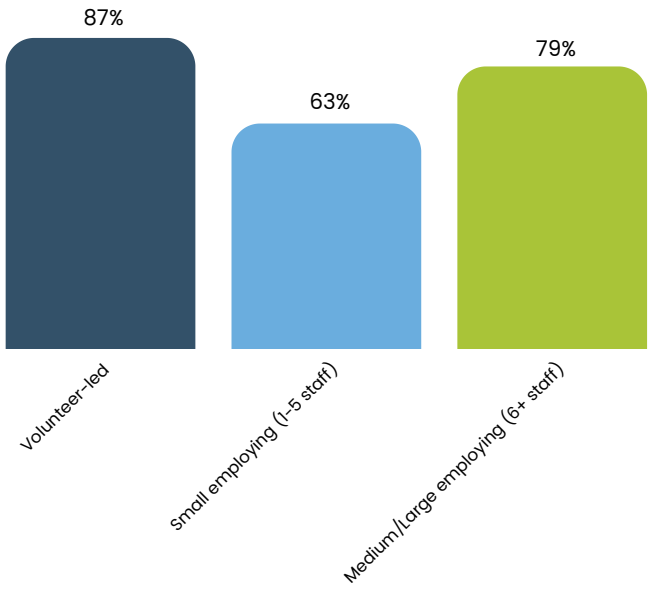
Figure 23. Optimism about the future by financial buffer



This finding reinforces the importance of financial sustainability as a foundation for organisational confidence and long-term planning. Organisations with limited reserves may be more vulnerable to funding disruptions, unexpected costs and changes in demand, making it more difficult to plan for the future with confidence.

Differences were also evident across organisation types. Volunteer-led organisations reported the highest levels of optimism (87%), while organisations employing between one and five staff reported the lowest levels (63%).

Figure 24. Optimism about the future by organisation type
% of organisations who felt very or somewhat optimistic about their future



This finding reinforces a recurring theme throughout the report. Small organisations employing between one and five staff often face a distinctive set of sustainability challenges. Compared with volunteer-led organisations, they typically have greater financial and workforce responsibilities. Compared with larger organisations, they often have fewer resources, less leadership depth and more limited organisational capacity.

Despite these challenges, the overall picture is one of cautious optimism. The findings suggest that community organisations across the Northern Rivers remain deeply committed to their mission and continue to play a critical role in supporting community wellbeing, resilience and social connection.

However, optimism alone is not enough to ensure long-term sustainability. The findings presented throughout this report highlight the importance of continued investment in organisational capacity, workforce development, leadership succession and financial sustainability. Without this investment, growing community need may increasingly outpace the capacity of organisations to respond.



Photo: NRCF State of the Sector Event / Value Imagery

Regional Priorities for Action

The findings of the 2026 State of the Sector Survey paint a picture of a Northern Rivers community sector that is highly capable, deeply collaborative and strongly committed to the communities it serves. The challenge facing the sector is not a lack of expertise or local leadership, but a lack of organisational capacity to meet growing and increasingly complex community need.

The following priorities reflect the most significant opportunities for strengthening the resilience and sustainability of the Northern Rivers community sector. Addressing these priorities will require coordinated action from community organisations, government, philanthropy, business and community leaders.

Priority 1: Invest in organisations, not just projects

Throughout the survey, organisations consistently identified the need for greater investment in organisational sustainability. While project funding remains important, organisations also require investment in leadership, governance, workforce development, technology, volunteer coordination and other core functions that enable them to deliver long-term community impact.

Regional action priorities

- Increase access to flexible and multi-year funding.
- Support the full cost of delivering community outcomes, including core operating costs.
- Continue investing in organisational capability alongside program delivery.

Priority 2: Strengthen the community sector workforce

People are the Northern Rivers community sector's greatest asset. Staff shortages, volunteer fatigue and leadership succession challenges emerged consistently across the survey, particularly among volunteer-led organisations and organisations employing between one and five staff.

Volunteers remain the backbone of the sector, but many organisations reported ageing volunteer cohorts, increasing burnout and growing difficulty attracting people into leadership and governance roles.

Regional action priorities

- Invest in volunteer recruitment, support and succession planning.
- Strengthen leadership development opportunities for emerging community leaders.
- Continue supporting workforce wellbeing and initiatives that reduce burnout.
- Recognise community sector workers as “essential workers” in the context of affordable housing.

Priority 3: Invest in small, place-based organisations

One of the strongest findings from the survey was the unique position of organisations employing between one and five staff. This cohort consistently reported lower preparedness for succession, lower optimism about the future and greater organisational pressures.

While small organisations may not always achieve the same scale or administrative efficiencies as larger organisations, they often possess deep local knowledge, strong community relationships and an ability to engage people who may not otherwise access support.

Where appropriate, funding programs should create pathways for smaller organisations to access resources directly, build organisational capability and lead place-based initiatives.

Regional action priorities

- Design funding and capacity-building initiatives specifically for organisations transitioning from volunteer-led to employing organisations.
- Support organisational development before capacity constraints become critical.
- Recognise that this stage of organisational development requires different forms of support from both small volunteer groups and larger organisations.

Priority 4: Recognise community organisations as essential disaster resilience infrastructure

Disaster resilience has become a core function of community organisations across the Northern Rivers. Organisations working in housing, community development, youth services, mental health, arts and culture and many other sectors are now routinely contributing to disaster preparedness, response and recovery, often without dedicated funding.

Strengthening community resilience therefore requires investment not only in emergency management, but also in the organisations that support communities before, during and after disasters.

Regional action priorities

- Continue investing in community-led disaster preparedness and resilience.
- Support organisations to strengthen their own business continuity and disaster preparedness.
- Recognise community organisations as essential partners within the region's disaster resilience system.
- Redistribute resources from formal disaster resilience organisations to community-based organisations to leverage higher returns.

Priority 5: Strengthen the sector's collective voice

The survey found that collaboration is one of the defining strengths of the Northern Rivers community sector. Organisations regularly share knowledge, resources and partnerships, yet many reported limited capacity to engage in advocacy or influence government decision-making.

This suggests the challenge is not willingness to collaborate, but having the time, resources and opportunities to ensure local knowledge informs policy and investment decisions.

Regional action priorities

- Strengthen opportunities for collective advocacy and regional leadership.
- Create more accessible pathways for community organisations to participate in government decision-making.
- Continue investing in regional networks, partnerships and collaborative initiatives that amplify local voices.



Photo: Byron Youth Theatre / Supplied

Next Steps

As a place-based philanthropic organisation and long-standing supporter of community organisations across the Northern Rivers, NRCF is committed to using the findings of this report to inform both its grant-making and advocacy activities.

The findings will help shape future NRCF funding priorities, capacity-building activities and engagement with donors, government and community partners.

Informing grant-making

NRCF will use the findings to strengthen its understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing community organisations across the region. In particular, the findings highlight the importance of investing in organisational sustainability alongside program delivery.

Future grant-making and capacity-building activities will continue to consider issues such as workforce capacity, leadership succession, organisational resilience, collaboration and long-term sustainability.

Supporting sector capacity

The report reinforces the value of supporting community organisations beyond traditional grant funding. NRCF will continue to explore opportunities to provide training,

networking, peer learning and other forms of capacity-building that strengthen organisational sustainability and community impact. This includes through our Lunch and Learn series, free grant writing workshops, Empowering Women and Girls Leadership Retreat and other initiatives.

NRCF will also explore the feasibility of an online organisational sustainability assessment tool that will enable organisations to measure and track their sustainability over time and receive real time recommendations for strengthening performance in different domains.

Informing advocacy

NRCF will use the findings to advocate for the needs of the Northern Rivers community sector with government, philanthropic funders and other stakeholders. Building the sector's collective voice will increase the influence of the sector and enable the needs and realities of communities to shape policy and funding decisions.

In particular, NRCF will continue to advocate for:

- Increased access to core operational funding.
- Longer-term and more flexible funding models.
- Investment in workforce and leadership development.
- Support for collaboration and community-led approaches.
- Recognition of the critical role community organisations play in disaster resilience and community wellbeing.

Participating Organisations

Many thanks to the 199 community organisations and group across the Northern Rivers who completed the 2026 State of the Sector Survey

Arts Northern Rivers	Nimbin Rocks For Teens	CASPA
Bangalow Community Children's Centre	Brunswick Valley Woodchop Committee Inc	Tropical Fruits
Clarence Environment Centre	Byron Youth Theatre	Grafton Bowhunters
Burringbar District Sports Club	Surfers for Climate	Kyogle Netball Association
Dementia Inclusive Ballina Alliance	North Coast Community Housing Company	Nimbin Community Centre
Nimbin Neighbourhood Centre	Baby Give Back	Support for New Mums
Shaping Outcomes	It Takes a Town 2484 Thrive	Ngybu Gali First Nations Aboriginal Corporation
Gondwana Rainforest Trust	We Al-Li	The Good Pantry
Federal School of Arts	Kungher and Surrounds Community	Nimbin Aquarius Foundation
Lismore Preschool	Cawongla Community Centre	Nimbin Independent Media
Byron Bay Pickleball Club	Clarence Catchment Alliance	New Life Church
WIRES	Nimbin Neighbourhood Centre	Northern United RLFC
Nimbin Health & Welfare Committee	Lismore and District Financial Counselling	Nungera Co-Operative Society
Pottsville Beach Neighbourhood Centre	Friends of the Koala	Mudyala Aboriginal Corporation
Northern Rivers Conservatorium	Kyogle Family Support Services	North Coast Land Care
Connect Northern Rivers	Murwillumbah Community Centre	Nymboida Camping and Canoeing Incorporated
Byron Region Community College	Mullumbimby & District Neighbourhood Centre	Orange Sky Laundry
SHIFT Project	Women Up North	Our Timeless Threads
Riding for the Disabled Ballina & District	North Coast Scouts	Our Two Hands
Iluka Woombah Rotary	New School of Arts Neighbourhood House	Coolamon Community Incorporated
Lismore Region Refugee Settlement	Bangalow Resilience Network	Kyogle Readers and Writers
Ballina Hot Meal Centre	Nurtured Village Hampers	Blue Knob Hall
Bangalow Mens Shed	Mental Health Support Group	Burringbar Community Association
Our Neighbourhood	Tweed United Football Club	Ballina Masonic Centre
Bentley Community Preschool	Casino Netball Association	Clunes Old School Association
The Community Transport Company	Lismore Soup Kitchen	Northern Rivers Community Legal Centre
Rainbow Roos	Mullumbimby Organic Food Cooperative	Biala
Magpie Centre Indigenous Corporation		Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital
		Family Support Network

Jali Local Aboriginal Land Council	Dyraaba Community Hall	ICOPE
Lucy's Project	East Lismore Community Pre-School	Far North Coast Hockey
Muli Muli Local Aboriginal Land Council	Gummyaney Aboriginal Preschool	Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital
Ngulingah Local Aboriginal Land Council	One Vision Productions	Byron Writers Festival
Women's Health Northern Rivers	SEED Northern Rivers	Australian Trust for Conservation Volunteers
Northern Rivers Community Foundation	Jarjum Centre	Darling Muffs of May
Northern Rivers Community Gateway	Jagera Ecocommunity	Living School
Rekindling the Spirit	Evans Head Living Museum	Spaghetti Circus
Zero Emissions Byron	Bangalow Koalas	Casino Show Society
Community Disaster Action Group	Bay FM	Australian Seabird and Turtle Rescue
Chinderah Community Hub	Crabbes Creek Community Hall Committee	Evans River RSL Day Club
Rotary Club of Summerland Sunrise	Ballina Region for Refugees	Creative Mullum
Byron Youth Service	Resilient Uki	Tabulam Country Women's Association
Dorroughby Environmental Education Centre	Federal Landcare	Caldera SSP
Little Wings	Ace Community Colleges	Jugan Dandii
Christian Life Church Kyogle	Mullum Cares	Queer Family
Ballina on Richmond Rotary Club	The Friends of Lismore Rainforest Botanic Gardens	Clarence River U3A
Tweed Valley Wildlife Carers	Mid Richmond Neighbourhood Centre	88.9 FM
Tweed Chamber of Commerce & Industry	Riding for the Disabled Ballina	Resilient Lismore
The Lower Clarence Community Garden	Riding for the Disabled Tweed Valley	Equine Assisted Therapy at Bunyarra Farm
Byrill Creek Resilience Team	St Marks Anglican Church	Rotary Club of Murwillumbah Inc
Human Nature Adventure	Evans Area Resilience Network	Evans Head Preschool Association
Umbrella Theatrical Productions	Rock Valley Hall	LightnUp Incorporated
Coorabell Hall Association	Brunswick Valley Landcare	Clarence Valley Conservatorium of Music
Earth To Birth	Koori Mail	Kyogle Family Support Service
Creative Communities Connect	Northern NSW Helicopter Rescue Service	Ballina Branch of NSW Country Womens Association
Clarence Childhood Services Association	Richmond Riverkeeper	Bunjum Aboriginal Corporation
Glenreagh P&C Association	North Coast Community College	Githabul Rangers
Sprung!! Integrated Dance Theatre	The Rites of Passage Institute	RiverTracks
Raise the heART	Tyalgum Community Hall Association	Kyogle Together
Together She Thrives	Northern Rivers Community Healing Hub	Arakwal Aboriginal Corporation
Namatjira Haven	Bangalow Resilience Network	Grafton Community Shed
	Plan C	Volunteer Marine Rescue Point Danger
	Casino's Own Wireless Association	Byron Community Centre

Grounds for Growth	Marine Rescue NSW Brunswick	Stop Iron Gates
Happy Paws Haven	Ngunya Jarjum	Mukti-Task
Creative Caldera	Seaside Shelter	Richmond Valley Day Club
Hygieia Health	Creative Mullumbimby	RED Inc.
Broadwater and Rileys Hill Area Community Hall	Hub 2484	Country as Teacher
PBB Media	Main Arm Disaster Recovery	The Returning Indigenous Corporation
People of Byron	Wardell Community Organised Resilience Effort	Coutts Crossing Coronation Hall
Shedding Community Workshop	We Forest Earth	Bangalow Lions Club
CHESS Connect	Rotary Club of Banora-Tweed	The Brunswick Heads Breakfast Club
Lynchs Creek Community Hall	Whian Whian Memorial Hall	Northern Rivers Wildlife Hospital
West Ballina Resilience Hub	Wollongbar Community Action Network	Gidget Foundation Australia
Stokers Siding Dunbible Memorial Hall	St Vincent de Paul Society NSW	Wardell & District Progress Association
Iluka Emporium	RealArtWorks	Windara Communities Inc.
Katia Project	Zero Emissions Byron	Numulgi Memorial Hall
Container of Dreams	Bundjalung Tribal Society	Men and Family Centre
Coolamon Community	Lennox Head Lions Club	Border Ranges Richmond Valley Landcare Network
Dunoon Preschool	The Buttery	Richmond Landcare
Haus Of Armour	Anglicare North Coast	Burringbar School of Arts
Heart2Heart Project	Indigenous Futures Foundation	Heal.ed Tribe Ltd
Lucy's Project	Broken Head Society	Jumbunna Community Preschool and Early Intervention
NORPA	CWA Nimbin Branch	
Positive Change for Marine Life	Lions Club of Maclean	
ReForest Now	Lismore Environment Centre	
The Family Centre	YWCA Australia	
Northern Rivers Wildlife Carers	Lismore Men and Community Shed	
HART	Lismore Parish Centre Preschool	
The Channon Resilience	Lismore Toy Library	
Casino Senior Citizens Centre	The Men and Family Centre Inc	
Agape Outreach	Liberation Larder	
Together Pottsville	Vibe Care	
Social Futures	Plastic Collective Foundation	
Woodenbong Community Men's Shed	Little Dreamers	
Grafton U3A	Meerschaum Vale Hall	
Sanctuary Northern Rivers	Northern Rivers Children's Services	
Evans Head Touch Football Association	Grafton Rifle Club	
Goonellabah Tucki Landcare	Northern Rivers Wildlife Carers	



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