



2026

State of the Northern Rivers Community and Not for Profit Sector

KEY FINDINGS AND PRIORITY ACTIONS



About the Survey

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.

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.

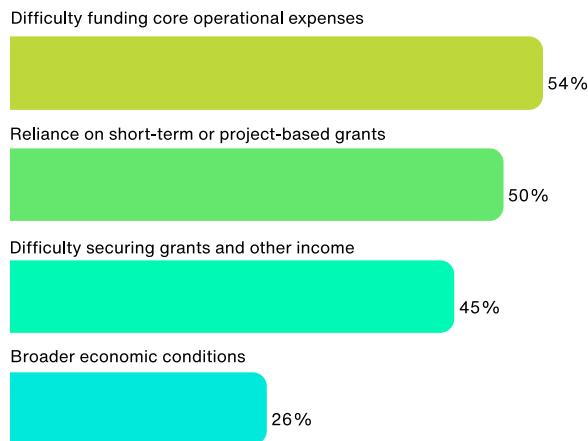
The findings will help NRCF better understand the changing needs of the community sector and inform our future grantmaking, capacity-building initiatives and advocacy efforts. We also hope the report will support conversations between community organisations, government, philanthropy and other stakeholders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

Key Research Findings

01.

Difficulty securing core funding is the biggest barrier to financial sustainability

Main barriers to financial sustainability.



Community organisations across the Northern Rivers are struggling to secure the flexible, reliable funding needed to sustain their operations. More than half of respondents (54%) identified difficulty funding core operational expenses as a barrier to financial sustainability, making it the most commonly reported challenge.

These findings suggest that the challenge is not simply the overall amount of funding available, but the limited availability of funding that can support essential organisational costs such as staffing, administration, governance, technology and planning.

This funding uncertainty is compounded by limited financial reserves and concentrated revenue streams. Almost one-third of organisations (31%) reported having less than six months of financial reserves, while 89% received at least half of their income from a single revenue source category.

02.

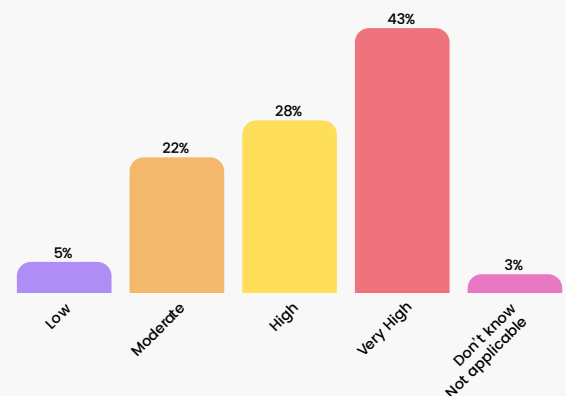
Demand for services continues to grow across the Northern Rivers

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

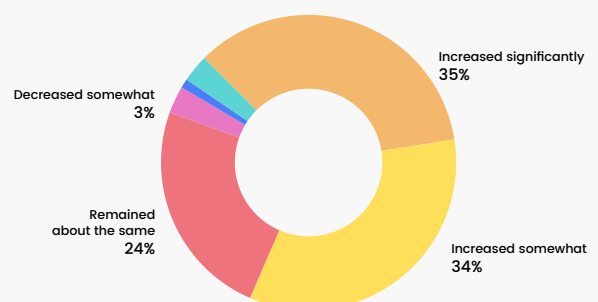
Seventy-one percent (71%) of respondents reported high or very high current demand for their programs, services or activities, and more than two-thirds of organisations (68%) reported that demand for their programs, services or activities had increased during the past 12 months. Despite this, only 19%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

Current demand for program, services & activities



Change in demand over the past 12 months



03.

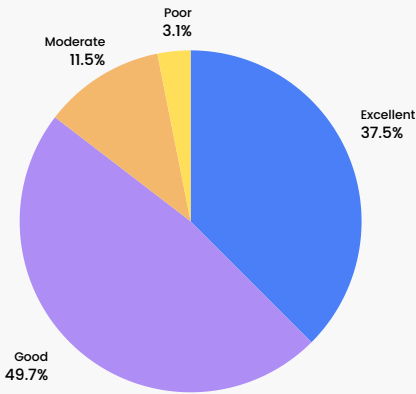
Organisations have the expertise but need greater support to meet community need

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.

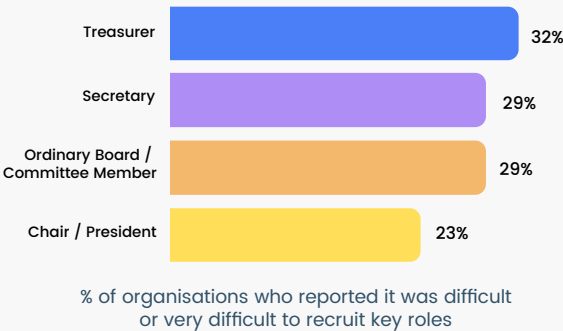
Most organisations (81%) reported operating at stretched capacity, experiencing service gaps, or being unable to fully meet community need.

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.

Board and management committee capability

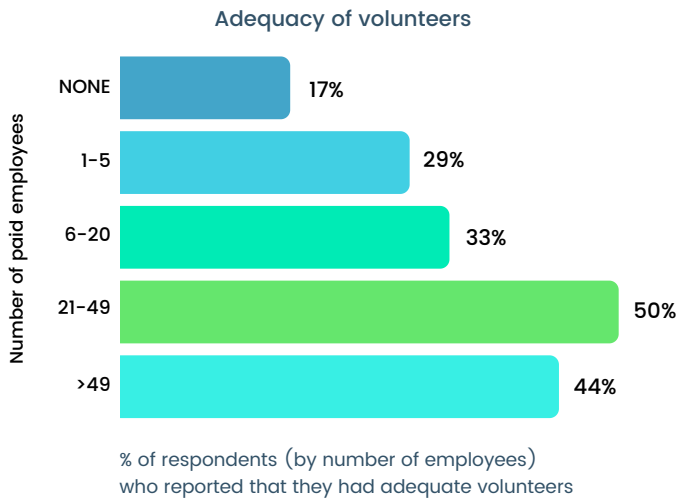


Difficulty recruiting key governance roles in the past 12 months



04.

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.

05.

Small organisations represent a particularly vulnerable cohort

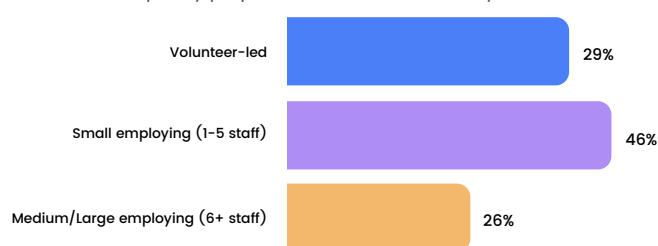
Several findings pointed to unique challenges facing organisations employing between one and five staff.

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.

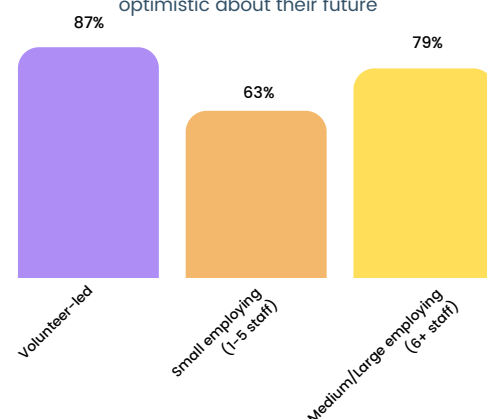
Succession preparedness by organisation size

% of organisations who reported that they were poorly prepared for succession of key roles



Optimism about the future by organisation type

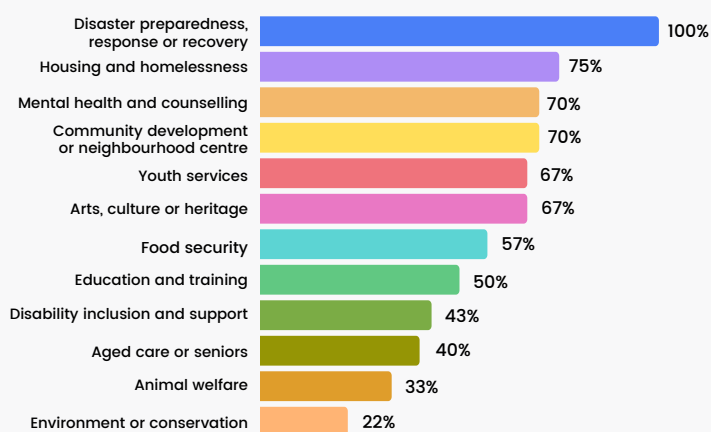
% of organisations who felt very or somewhat optimistic about their future



06.

Disaster resilience is increasingly becoming a core function of community organisations

Organisations supporting disaster response or recovery by impact area



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.



Regional Priorities for Action

Informed by the findings of the survey, NRCF developed the following priorities, which 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.



Northern Rivers Community Foundation

PO Box 304 CLUNES NSW 2480

 0499 862 886

 info@nrcf.org.au

 nrcf.org.au

supported by

PRF PAUL RAMSAY FOUNDATION



Download full report
From our website