Determining the Funding Requirements of the Voluntary, Community and Cultural Sectors of the City of Milton Keynes

FINAL REPORT

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Introduction

On behalf of the Milton Keynes Community Foundation (MKCF), the Open University was asked to undertake an independent study to understand the needs, experiences and opinions of the community, voluntary and cultural sectors in Milton Keynes. The study aimed specifically to gather inputs from local groups and organisations on:

- The current challenges that they face and their future funding requirements over the next 2-3 years;
- How the MKCF can better improve its grant-giving processes to facilitate funding at different levels;
- Their overall perceptions of the MKCF and which areas it needs to improve on.

The study was conducted in two stages:

(1) A survey distributed online and in paper format to community, voluntary and cultural groups and organisations in Milton Keynes;

(2) Interviews/focus groups (delivered both online and in-person) with a cross-section of individuals from Stage 1 who expressed their willingness to participate.

The study's findings seek to contribute to a better understanding of how the MKCF operates, which has the potential to help determine the funding requirements of the voluntary, community and cultural sectors of the borough of Milton Keynes for the next 2-3 years.

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Overview

Background

MKCF tasked the Open University with undertaking independent research to establish:

- The current challenges that voluntary and charity sector organisations face and their future funding requirements over the next 2-3 years

- How the MKCF can better improve its grant-giving processes to facilitate funding at different levels

- The organisations' overall perceptions of the MKCF and which areas it needs to improve on

Methods

The research team consisted of two Principal Investigators (Fidele Mutwarasibo and Wendy Turner), two Research Associates (Lauren O'Hagan and Mari Greenfield), a Research Placement intern (Claire Horn) and an administrator (Adwowa Larbi-Ntim). Using a variety of sources we identified 1,750 potential voluntary and charitable sector organisations who covered Milton Keynes to take part in the research. After compiling a contact list, emails were sent to all organisations inviting them to take part in an online survey. 142 organisations completed the survey. At the end of the survey, participants were asked if they would be willing to take part in further interviews or focus groups. Those who indicated they would were contacted. Interviews were carried out with 22 people, and four focus groups were held. Interviews and focus groups were recorded, transcribed, and analysed thematically.

Findings

The survey found (key findings)

Interviews and focus groups found (key findings)

Recommendations

Which are MKCF happy for us to share?

Outline of report

This report is split into two parts. The first part will assess the feedback of those who completed the survey, which ran for four weeks from 26 June 2023 to 24 July 2023. The survey aimed to gain a better understanding of the current challenges facing the voluntary, community and cultural sectors in Milton Keynes, with a particular focus on MKCF and its grant-giving service. The second part will assess the main findings to emerge from the interviews and focus groups, based on a comprehensive thematic analysis. These interviews/focus groups gave participants an opportunity to elaborate on their survey responses and, thus, broaden discussions of key findings identified in the survey data.

Survey Methodology

In order to carry out a comprehensive assessment of the funding requirements of the voluntary, community and cultural sectors in Milton Keynes, MKCF wanted to reach a broad range of groups and organisations, including those who had been funded previously by MKCF and those who had not.

With this in mind, MKCF ran a report on their database covering all contacts they have made over the last five years. This gave a total of just over 2,000 organisations/groups. Additionally, Claire Horn of the Open University carried out a scoping task using the Companies House, Charity Commission and TNL Community Fund websites to identify other organisations/groups in the Milton Keynes area. This process identified 70 viable entries at Companies House, 506 at Charity Commission and 13 at TNL Community Fund, totalling 589. This information was then shared with MKCF, who added it to their database and ran a "dedupe" query to remove any duplicate entries. This left 1,750 contactable organisations/groups.

The survey was put together by Dr Lauren Alex O'Hagan of the Open University in an iterative process with members of MKCF. It received ethical approval on 22 June 2023 by the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC/4711/Turner) and was launched on the Jisc online survey platform on 26 June 2023. Following its launch, all 1,750 organisations/groups were contacted by MKCF with a survey link. As a thank you for taking part, participants were given the opportunity to enter into a prize draw to win a £100 Amazon voucher for their organisation/group.

The survey was initially open for two weeks, but due to a limited response, it was decided to extend it by another two weeks until 24 July 2023. MKCF sent a reminder email to the 1,750 organisations/groups on 10 July 2023, as well as follow-up targeted emails to organisations/groups that had previously received large grants from them. Additionally, the survey was promoted by both the Open University and MKCF via the following channels:

- Milton Keynes community Facebook groups
- Personal Twitter accounts of research team and Open University Comms team
- Personal LinkedIn accounts of research team and Open University Comms team
- Open University Noticeboard platform
- Open University Ask the Community platform
- Open University Yammer platform
- Internal Open University mailing list for researchers (403 members)
- Personal Milton Keynes networks of the principal investigators, Dr Wendy Turner and Dr Fidele Mutwarasibo, including Community Action: MK

These promotional strategies were successful and, by the time of survey closure on 24 July 2023, there were 142 responses.[1]

All survey questions and responses were benchmarked through a comprehensive scoping activity carried out by Dr Mari Greenfield. This process identified 7 suitable reports, which feed into the subsequent presentation of survey findings:

- [Tyne & Wear and Northumberland Community Foundation 2022 Independent Survey](#)

- [Wavehill 14 Programme Evaluation of Community Foundation Trusts](#)

- [Liverpool Community Foundation Grants Evaluation Report](#)

- [YMCA Changing Futures Evaluation 2021](#)

- [Sussex Community Foundation Unrestricted Funding Study 2017](#)

- [Pro Bono Economics and Nottingham Trent University Analysis of VCSE Sector Barometer 2012](#)

- [Pro Bono Economics and Nottingham Trent University Analysis of VCSE Sector Barometer 2023](#)

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[1] The survey had, in fact, received 441 responses. However, filtering through the responses revealed that 299 were spam, thereby leaving 142 legitimate responses. The high number of spam responses was likely due to sharing the link across social media with the offer of a £100 Amazon voucher. Feedback on these spam responses was shared with Jisc and, as a direct result, they are now planning to add reCAPTCHA to their survey platform.

Results of Survey

The survey had four core sections, all of which will be discussed in turn below:
- Part 1: Understanding Your Organisation
- Part 2: Knowledge of the Milton Keynes Community Foundation
- Part 3a: The Milton Keynes Community Foundation Grant Application Process
- Part 3b: The Milton Keynes Community Foundation Decision-Making Process
- Part 4: Your Perception of the Milton Keynes Community Foundation

Before completing the survey, participants were asked to read a participant information sheet and sign a consent form. The survey also had an initial screening question: *Are you aware of the Milton Keynes Community Foundation?* Those who were not aware were then screened out of the survey, seeing as its main purpose was to gather opinions on MKCF. As **Figure 1** shows, 88.7% (126 participants) were aware of MKCF, while just 11.3% (16 participants) were unaware. This suggests that MKCF has a strong presence in the Milton Keynes area and its work is recognised by local organisations and groups. Based on the responses to this question, 126 participants went forward to continue with the rest of the survey.
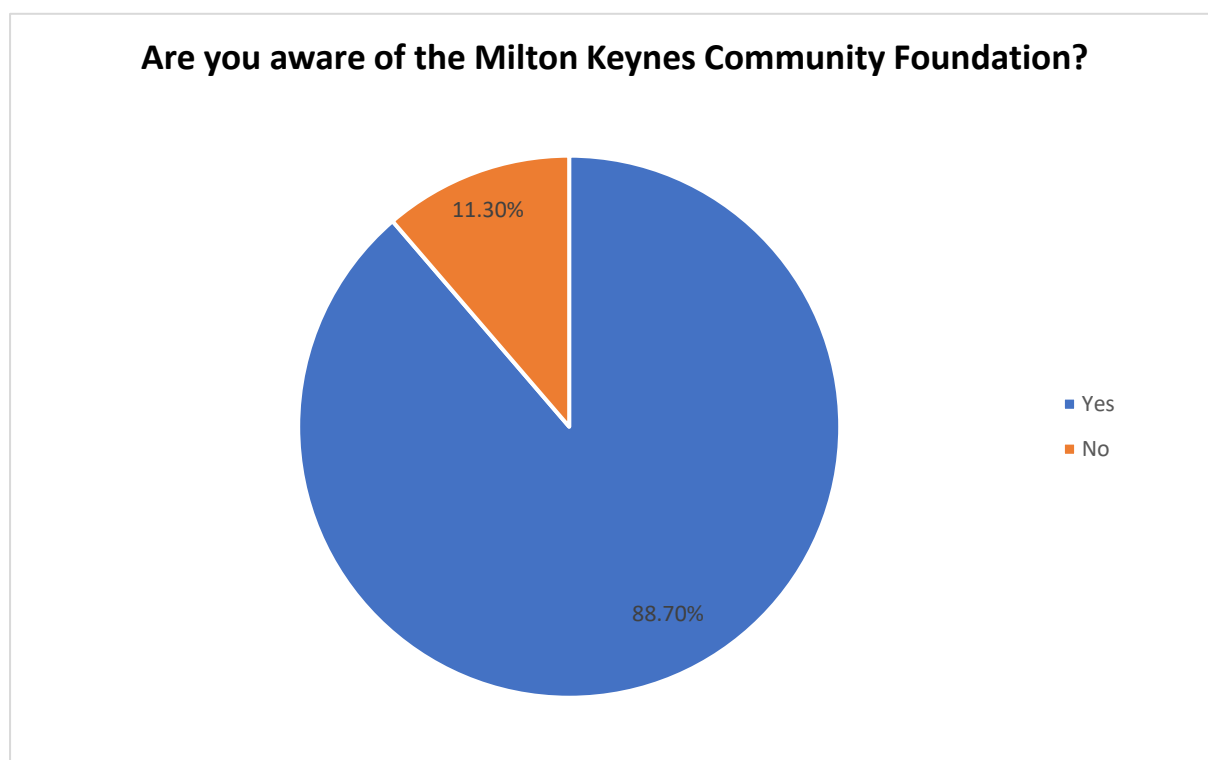
Figure 1 - Are you aware of the Milton Keynes Community Foundation?

Part 1: Understanding Your Organisation

This section aimed to understand more about the specific organisations and groups that operate in the Milton Keynes area.

The first question asked *what type of organisation are you?* **Figure 2** (overleaf) shows that almost half of respondents were registered charities (48.4%), while almost one fifth were not-for-profit community groups or clubs (19%). There was a fairly even spread of other types of organisations, albeit on a far lesser scale: community interest companies (7.1%), sports clubs (5.6%), charitable incorporated organisations (4.8%), voluntary sector organisations (4%), faith groups (2.4%) and social enterprises (0.8%). 7.9% of respondents marked "Other". These types of organisations were stated as follows: voluntary legal group; individual person; community gardening group, Baptist Church; dance club; freelance creative producer; Citizens Advice Bureau; uniformed youth organisation; community benefit society; and parish council. The wide variety of responses indicates the broad range of organisations that operate in Milton Keynes and who may require support from MKCF. Nonetheless, it also highlights that registered charities are particularly active in Milton Keynes society.

Building upon this, the second question asked *in what sector does your charity/group/ organisation primarily operate*? The options were based specifically on MKCF's Vital Signs report – an annual publication designed to identify and spotlight issues facing the communities of Milton Keynes. As **Figure 3** (overleaf) indicates, all 10 Vital Signs areas were represented in the survey, with the exception of Transport. However, of all the Vital Signs areas, there were three that clearly predominated: Health and Wellbeing (22.2%), Education (18.3%) and Arts and Heritage (15.9%). Of the remaining areas, Stronger Communities and Diversity received 9.5%, Disadvantage and Poverty 6.3%, Environmental 3.2%, Crime and Safety 2.4%, Housing 1.6% and Work/Local Economy 0.8%.

Interestingly, the second largest percentage was, in fact, "Other", representing 19.8% (25 respondents) of total responses. This suggests that many respondents were either unsure of where their organisation fit into Vital Signs or did not identify with any of the 10 areas. Given the opportunity with free text to elaborate on their sector, many organisations can be said to fit into specific Vital Signs areas, indicating that MKCF's Vital Signs report may need to outline more clearly what each area entails so that respondents have a better understanding of where they fit. Of the 25 respondents who selected "Other", 5 wrote "religious organisation or church", 2 "sport", 6 "young people" and 3 "disability", while others stated "social care", "animal welfare", "food growing", "parish priorities", "community centre", "services to others," "small businesses and artists", "legal issues" and "bereavement". These responses suggest that MKCF could also look to revise their 10 Vital Signs or develop more categories to take into account those who do not currently feel that their organisation fits into the preestablished ones.

What type of organisation are you?

- Registered charity
- Not-for-profit community group/club
- Voluntary sector organisation
- Charitable incorporated organisation
- Social enterprise
- Community interest company
- Sports club
- Faith group
- Other

Pie chart values: 48.40%, 19%, 4%, 4.80%, 0.80%, 7.10%, 5.60%, 2.40%, 7.90%
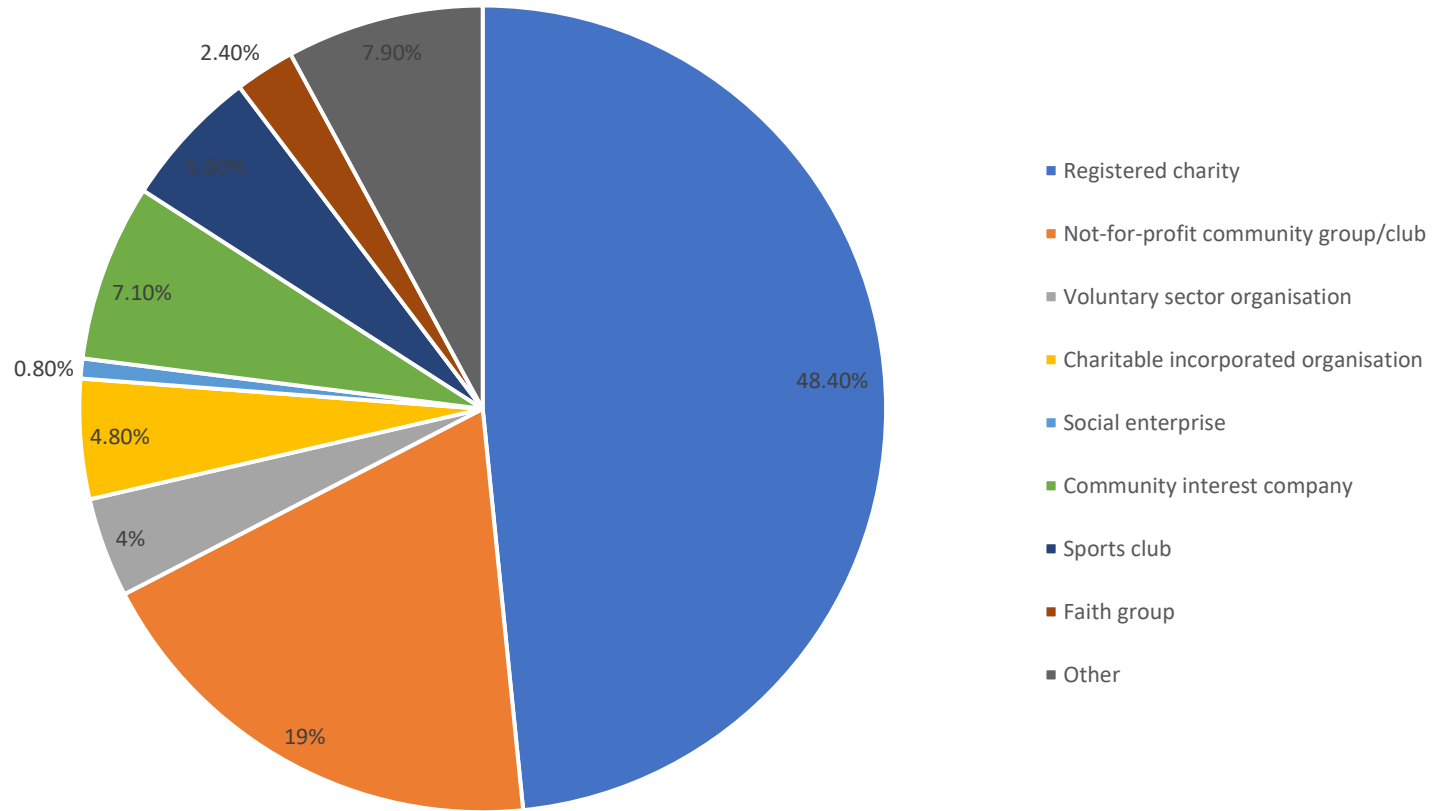
Figure 2 - What type of organisation are you?

In what sector does your charity/group/organisation primarily operate?

- Health and Wellbeing
- Arts and Heritage
- Education
- Work/Local Economy
- Strong Communities and Diversity
- Crime and Safety
- Enviromental
- Housing
- Disadvantage and Poverty
- Other

22.20%
15.90%
18.30%
0.80%
9.50%
2.40%
3.20%
1.60%
6.30%
19.80%
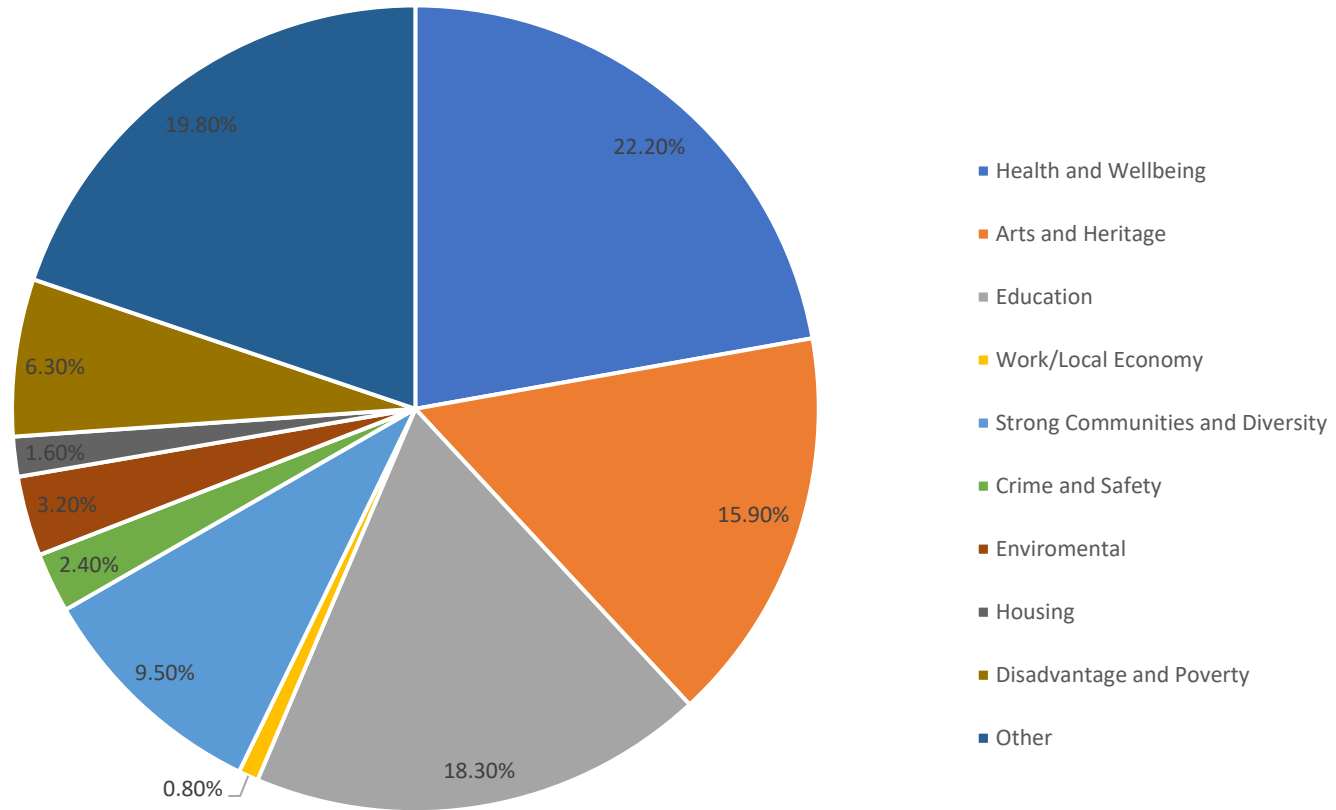
Figure 3 - In what sector does your charity/group/organisation primarily operate?

Respondents were then asked to specify (using free text) the main communities that they support. The responses were extremely varied and difficult to quantify because they covered such diverse areas and often incorporated multiple types of groups or even the community at large. This made it challenging to map them onto MKCF's Vital Signs areas. From the responses, it is clear that many organisations pride themselves on being open to *all* residents of Milton Keynes, regardless of people's backgrounds or personal circumstances. Similarly, others are aimed specifically at *all* residents in a certain area of Milton Keynes, such as Walton, Hanslop, Wolverton, Stony Stratford and Bletchley.

When looking at more targeted communities, words such as "vulnerable", "disadvantaged" and "marginalised" were frequently used by respondents. This operated on a broad spectrum, however, including homeless people, prison leavers, the elderly, asylum seekers, refugees and victims of domestic or sexual abuse. BAME groups were often mentioned as being at particular risk of economic disadvantage and requiring support. Contrastingly, other groups were more associated with Arts and were aimed at enriching the cultural heritage of Milton Keynes by connecting with entrepreneurs, amateur performers and craft workers.

While many organisations stated that they offered support to young people, this support overlapped into different areas of Vital Signs, incorporating education, sport, poverty and disability in particular. Several youth organisations also had a specific focus on girls, while others supported local primary schools or home-schooled children. There were also various organisations aimed specifically at women (particularly in terms of education) and men (particularly in terms of mental health). There is also a growing Ukrainian community in Milton Keynes that require support.

In terms of Health, the communities that organisations support can be primarily grouped into six categories: anybody with a physical disability, anybody with a learning disability, anybody with a mental health problem, anybody affected by cancer, anybody affected by bereavement and anybody in a hospice.

These findings show the considerable diversity of Milton Keynes and the range of organisations that operate and support members of the local community according to specific needs. However, this diversity poses a clear challenge for MKCF as they have to navigate a wide field and cover a broad remit in terms of the support that they offer.

Respondents were also asked to select the approximate annual income of their charity/group/organisation. **Figure 4** (overleaf) reveals that 36.5% fall into the lowest category, only turning over up to £10,000 per annum, which suggests that they may be in need of greater support from MKCF than other larger organisations. While 17.5% did fall into the largest category of more than £500,000, the vast majority instead were in the middle tiers: 14.3% stated £10,000 - £25,000; 10.3% £25,000 - £50,000; and 12.7% £50,000 - £100,000. On a far lesser scale, 5.6% said £150,000 - £250,000 and 3.2% said £250,000 - £500,000. These figures indicate that MKCF can provide a vital source of support for small-to-medium size organisations in particular who may have challenges in raising the necessary funds to operate.

What is the approximate annual income of your charity/group/organisation?

- Up to £10,000
- £10,000 - £25,000
- £25,000 - £50,000
- £50,000 - £100,000
- £150,000 - £250,000
- £250,000 - £500,000
- More than £500,000

36.50%
14.30%
10.30%
12.70%
5.60%
3.20%
17.50%
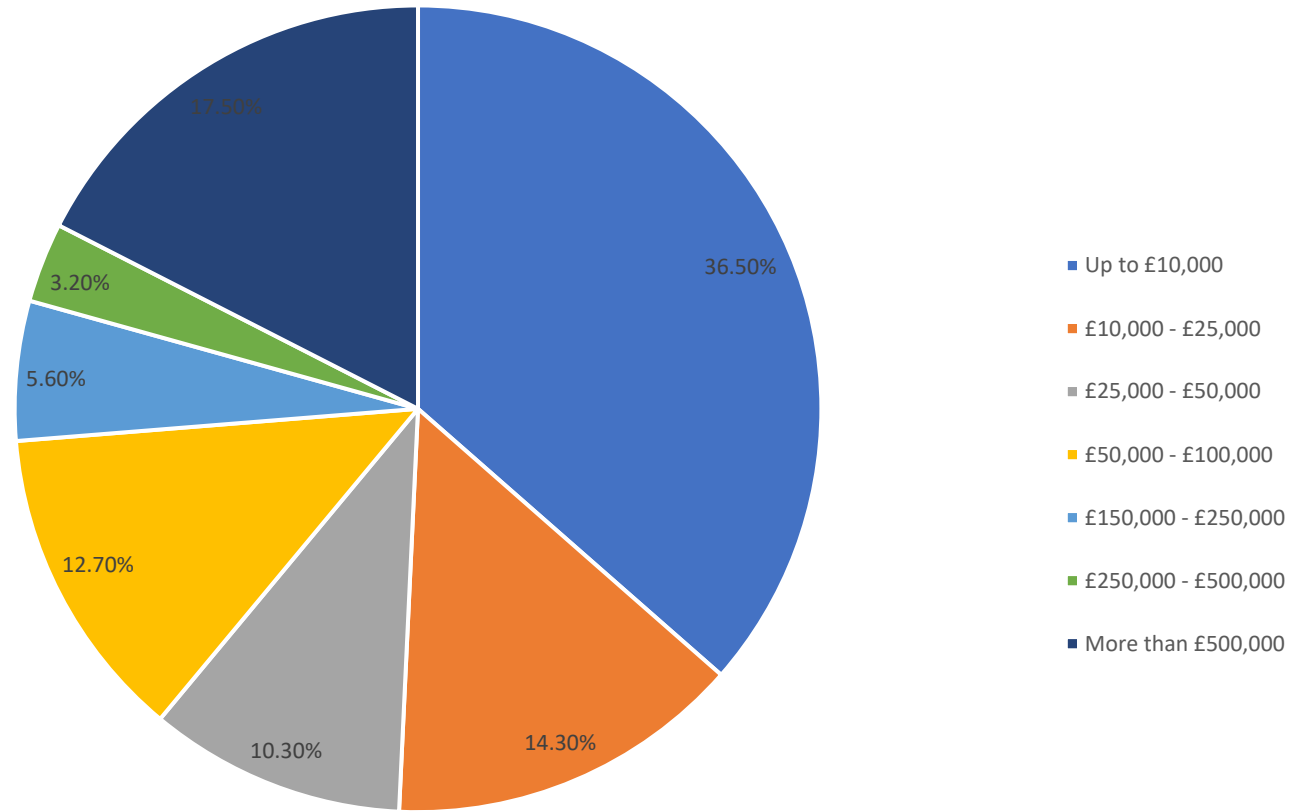
Figure 4 - What is the approximate annual income of your charity/group/organisation?

Respondents were then asked *how many members of staff and volunteers does your charity/group/organisation have?* This was a free text question, which received a wide range of responses. The figures were rounded up, organised into categories and grouped according to staff or volunteers. In terms of staff, **Figure 5** (overleaf) shows that a considerable number of organisations rely on a very small number of employees to operate: 32.7% have 0-5 staff, 24.1% have 6-10 staff and 18.45% have 11-20 staff. This indicates that these organisations are often financially stretched and have to limit their staffing expenditures in order to focus on their broader goals. This can also result in them relying heavily on volunteers, as was the case with 23 organisations. Of the 23 organisations that rely on volunteers to operate, most fall into three categories: 6-10 volunteers (22.7%), 11-20 volunteers (18.6%) or 21-50 volunteers (27.2%). Additionally, two organisations stated that they rely on volunteers entirely to operate, while nine have neither staff nor volunteers; they are a one-person led organisation with community values. Given the heavy dependence of most organisations on small numbers of staff and/or volunteers, the support of MKCF is essential to the Milton Keynes community.

The next question asked respondents to select the main issues that currently affect their charity/group/organisation (they could select as many as they felt were relevant). They were also offered a free text box to add any other issues that were not covered by the pre-selected choices. **Figure 6** (overleaf) shows the issues for respondents in order of significance from most to least. Of greatest importance (70 of 126 respondents) is financial sustainability. The four issues that followed were all fairly equally distributed in terms of significance: meeting demand for services (52 respondents), raising awareness of cause (48 respondents), volunteer retention (47 respondents) and cost of living crisis (45 respondents). Developing partner relationships, competition from larger charities or private sector organisations and skills shortages were all deemed of less significance, with 31, 29 and 20 respondents, respectively.

Also of note are the 20 respondents who selected "Other". Their responses brought up a wide range of additional issues, some of which may indicate areas where MKCF could offer targeted support. Recurring issues concerned shortage of venue availability in Milton Keynes, the cost of venue hire and reduced membership. To a lesser extent, running costs, the security of tenures, the cost of refitting new facilities, staff retention, the logistics of organising events, struggle for official recognition, volunteer capacity and succession difficulties were also seen as challenges.

How many members of staff and volunteers does your charity/group/organisation have?

Category	Volunteers	Staff
More than 1000+	0%	0.01%
501-1000	4.50%	0.02%
201-500	4.50%	0.02%
101-200	9%	5.80%
51-100	9%	6.50%
21-50	27.20%	12.50%
11-20	18.60%	18.45%
6-10	22.70%	24.10%
0-5	4.50%	32.70%
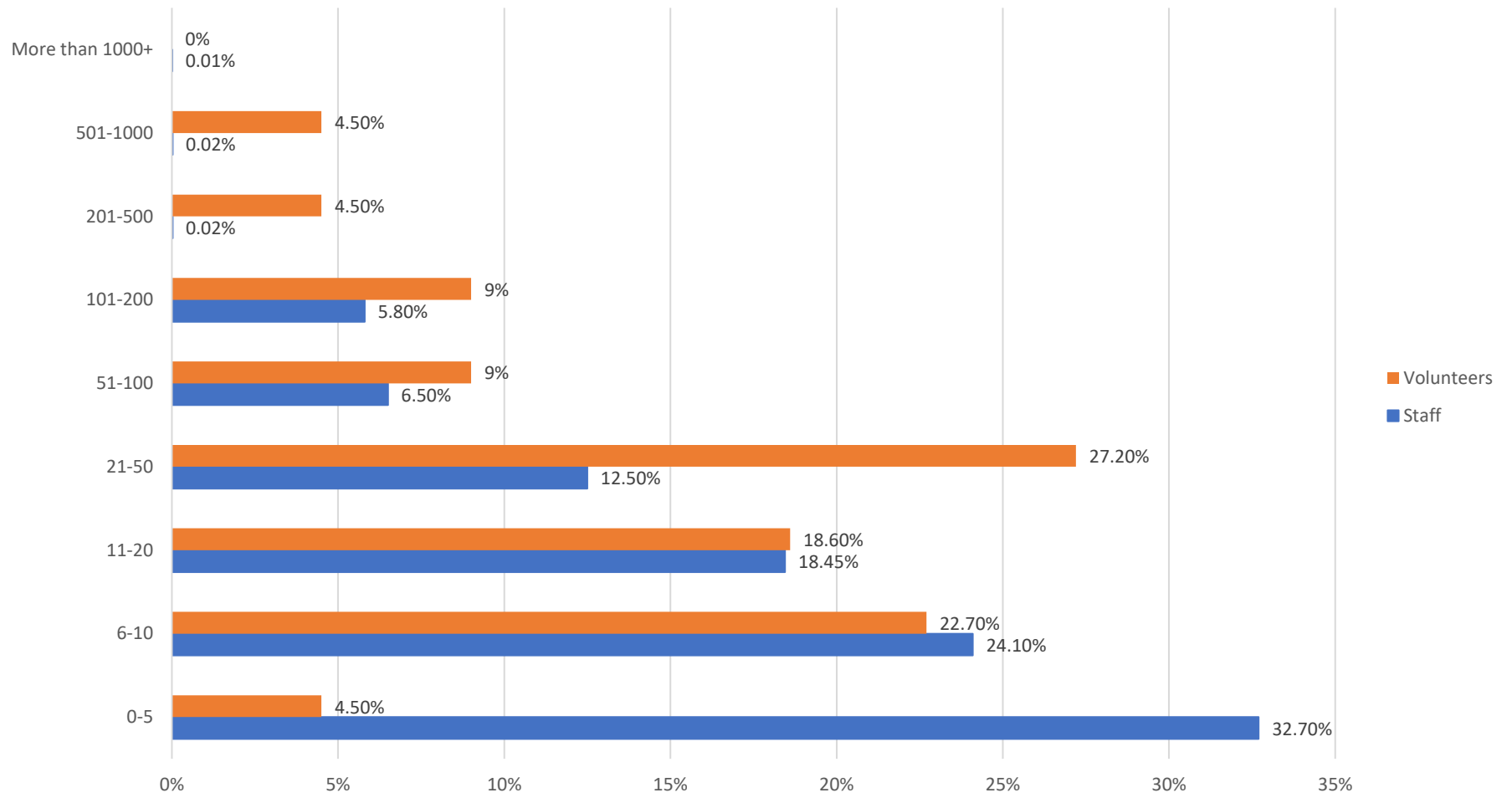
Figure 5 - How many members of staff and volunteers does your charity/group/organisation have?

What are the main issues currently affecting your charity/group/organisation?

Issue	Value
Financial sustainability	70
Meeting demand for services	52
Raising awareness of cause	48
Volunteer retention	47
Cost of living crisis	45
Developing partner relationships	31
Competition from larger charities or private sector...	29
Skills shortage	20
Other	20
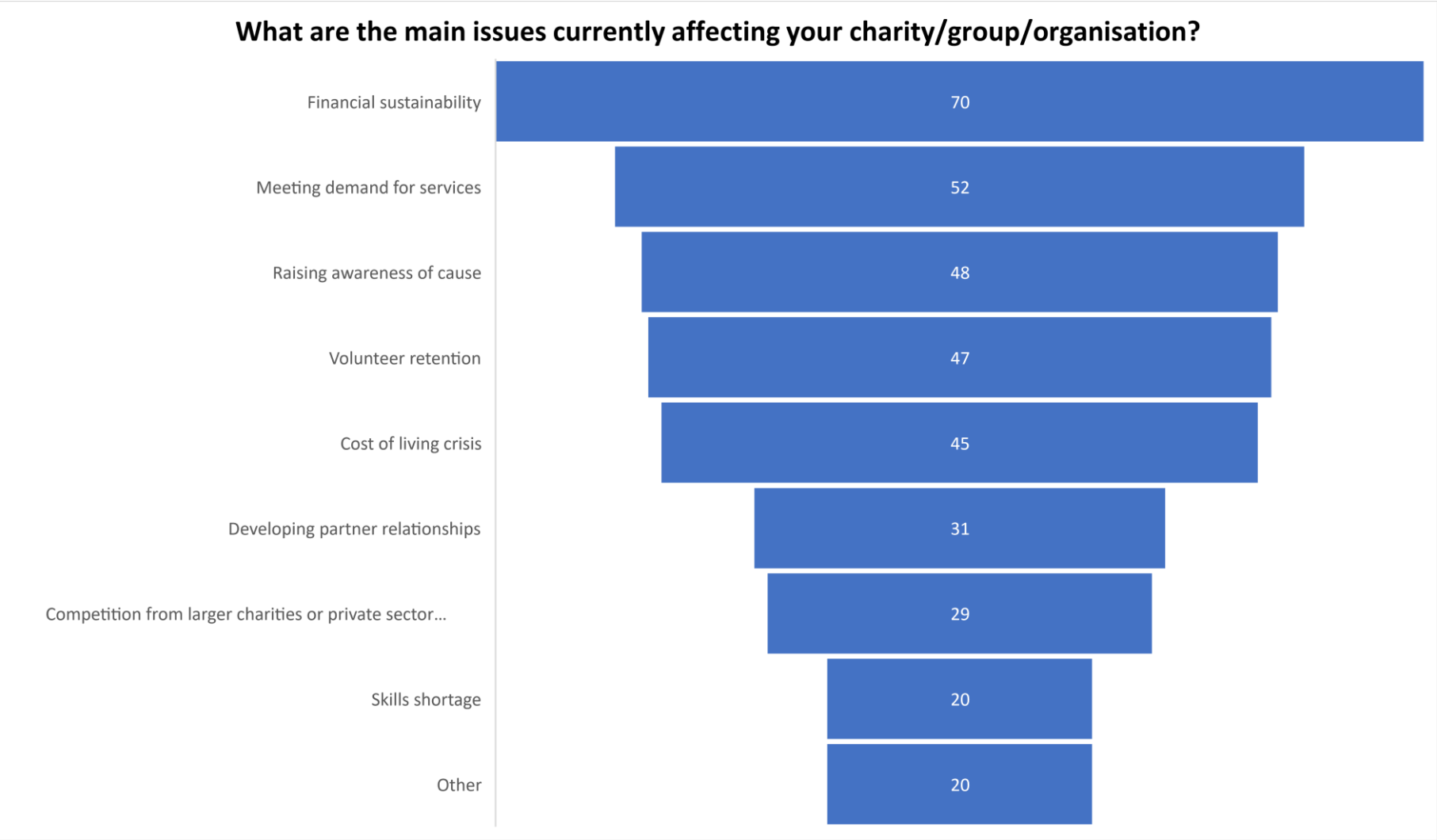
Figure 6 - What are the main issues currently affecting your charity/group/organisation?

Respondents were also asked whether they felt that there was currently sufficient infrastructure support for the voluntary and community sector in Milton Keynes. As **Figure 7** shows, rather concerningly, more than half (53.2%) felt that there was not, while only 29.4% said that there was. 17.5%, on the other hand, selected "Other". Of those who selected 'Other', many stated that they were not sure or did not have sufficient knowledge of the sector to comment. One respondent felt that there was generally sufficient support but not in the housing sector, while three felt that there was sufficient support but it was difficult to find out about it. They recommended that a register or directory be created that clearly indicated all the different types of support available. They also wanted to see further opportunities for VCSE to come together, as well as more funding for Community Action: MK.

Do you feel that there is currently sufficient infrastructure support for the voluntary and community sector in Milton Keynes?

- Yes
- No
- Other

17.50%

29.40%

53.20%
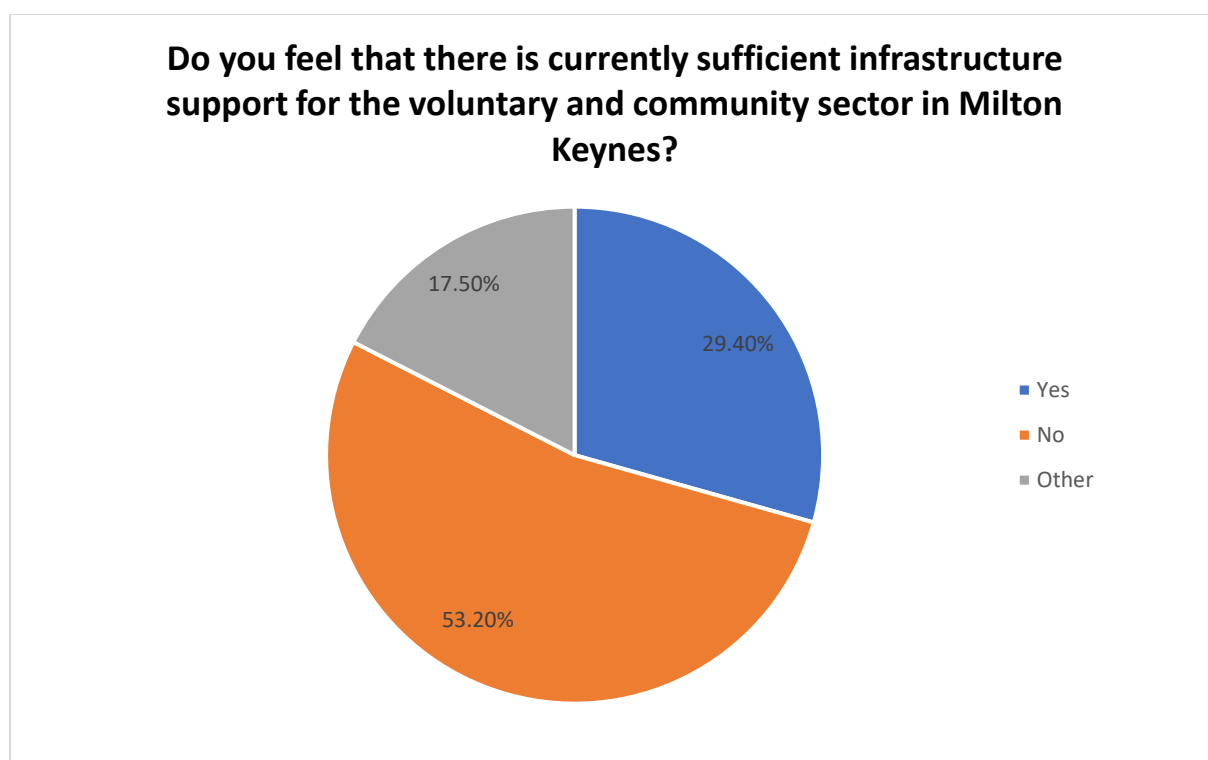
Figure 7 - Do you feel that there is currently sufficient infrastructure support for the voluntary and community sector in Milton Keynes?

Respondents were also given the opportunity to elaborate on why they feel that there is or is not sufficient support in Milton Keynes. For those who said no, the following reasons have been identified and reoccur throughout the responses given. They are listed below in order of priority for people:

- There is support available, yet there is a lack of visibility or poor structure/guidance, making it unclear where to find information or who to approach for help

"No one organisation is at the centre of things to signpost charities to the most appropriate support. It feels you're working in a big space with many others all vying for the same pot."

"The voluntary sector is quite fractured and not enough awareness exists of what organisations deliver."

- There is support available, but there is no support for core funding costs

"It would be helpful if there were more core funding opportunities to reduce the overreliance on new "projects" when we know what we have been doing for years is still needed and valued in the community"

"MK Community foundation does not help anymore with core cost no matter what, this is harsh in the current economic environment."

- Charities need to work together more and learn from successful practices in neighbouring areas

"I think that charity services could be more effective at working together. More development work should be done to partner with charities and create a network/model of services you can access at one point that each has its specialist and is funded under the same pot."

"Compared to neighbouring Buckinghamshire and the successes achieved through the VCSE Partnership Board, good practice can be shared"

- There are a limited number of organisations within Milton Keynes to apply to for funding

"There are not many organizations to apply to for funding our projects. We usually apply to MK Community Foundation fund, but they do not provide fund for the same project if we need to take our project to a second level. ACE grants are not always available for specific types of projects. Lottery Fund requirements are very complicated."

"We get far more financial support and funding from organisations outside of MK than from in MK even though there is growing need and requests for our services from within the city"

- The limited support options with Milton Keynes means that organisations remain small and cannot grow substantially

"There is limited support that can enable organisations to grow beyond a certain scale. There's often a ceiling whereby it becomes difficult to grow sustainability and support beyond a project by project and annual basis."

- The council is overstretched, meaning that charities are taking on additional work without necessary support

"Council funded services are under enormous pressure and more support is needed by the voluntary organisations to help pick up the shortfalls."

- There are specific gaps in current support offered within Milton Keynes:

- Autism support
- Amateur music making
- Animal welfare
- Sports (which focus overwhelmingly on football)

Other issues raised, albeit on a lesser scale, include:

- There is no adequate way to publicise to the general public, so local charities are restricted to those who already know about them
- There is too much focus on large grants for charities rather than small grants
- Corporates should contribute more to local voluntary services
- The views of small businesses should be taken more seriously
- There is a shortage of volunteers
- Venue hire costs are rising
- Lack of time to look for support options
- Logistical issues (e.g. internet connection, transport links)
- Smaller charities do not have access to the same level of support as bigger charities
- Support is often directed at small or large organisations, with middle-sized organisations feeling left out

Negative comments directed specifically at MKCF included their changed stance on funding CICs and social enterprises, as well as concerns that MKCF is "remote" and "unconnected with grassroots charities."

For those who said yes, their comments predominantly stated that they were happy with the options for local support in Milton Keynes (e.g. "I think there are enough funds available and many different organisations providing excellent and relevant services. Where we need improvement is coordination and organising"). Many also singled out MKCF for their help, strong presence and good levels of support (e.g. "MKCF is playing a vital role in this capacity, although there is always room to do more to support smaller groups"). Council of Faith and Community Action: MK were also identified as particularly supportive to local organisations. Finally, some organisations stated that they had their own growth and retention team, which helped them with support options.

Respondents were then asked to rate the extent to which their charity/group/organisation had seen a change in demand for their services over the last 12 months (1 = not at all, 10 = extremely). As **Figure 8** (overleaf) shows, perhaps unsurprisingly, given the cost-of-living crisis and the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of organisations have seen a dramatic increase in demand for their services, with a huge number of responses falling into the 7 (18.3%), 8 (15.1%), 9 (14.3%) and 10 (16.7%) categories. These figures imply that such organisations are likely to require greater funding support in order to continue helping those in need of their services.

To what extent has your charity/group/organisation seen a change in demand for their services over the last 12 months?
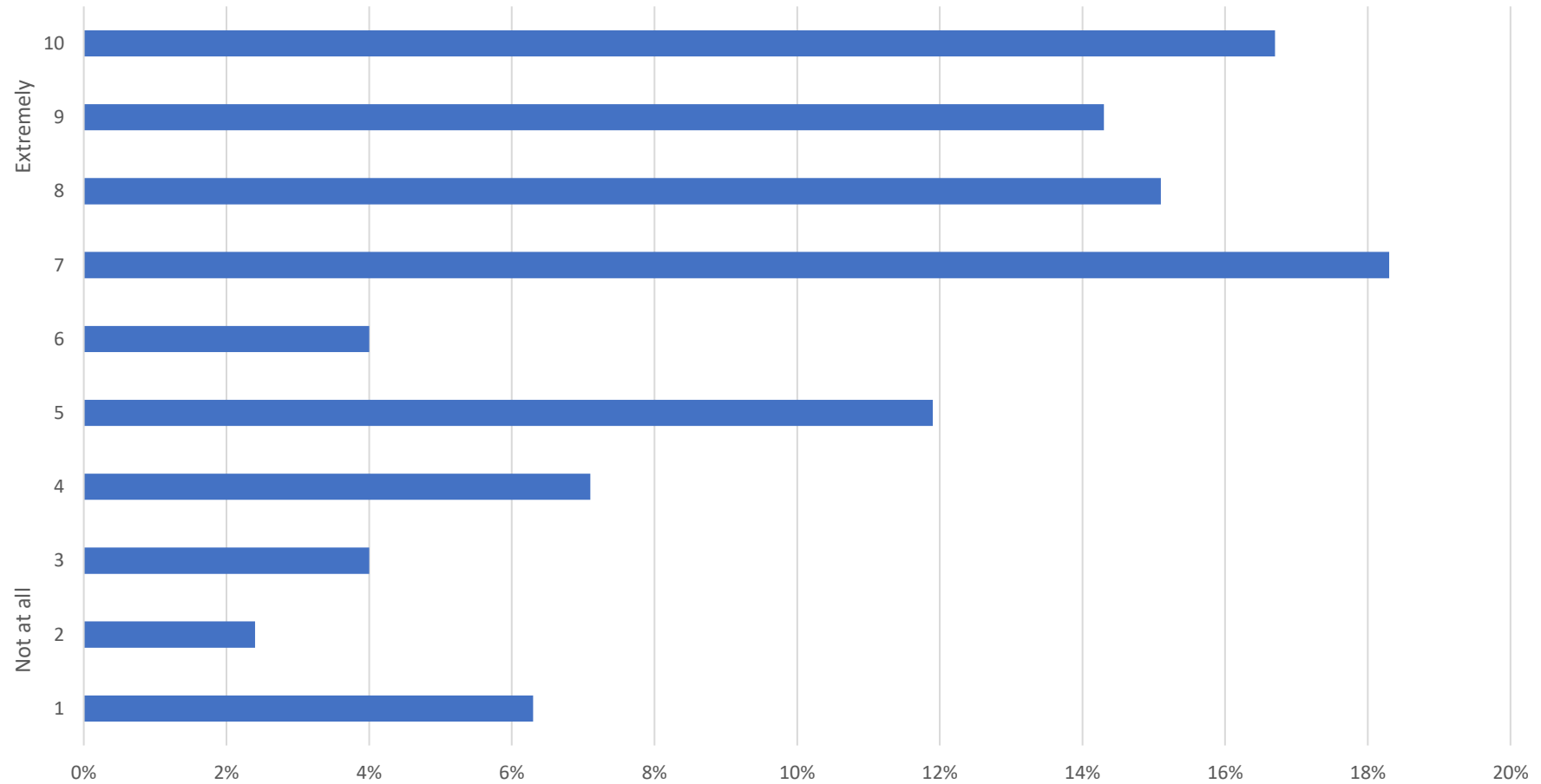
Figure 8 - To what extent has your charity/group/organisation seen a change in demand for their services over the last 12 months?

On a related point, respondents were also asked to state the extent to which they had seen an increase in need for funding over the last 12 months. Again, as **Figure 9** (overleaf) shows, the findings indicate a dramatic increase, with 35.7% of respondents selecting 10 (extremely). Equally, 13.5% stated 9, 16.7% 8 and 9.5% 7, demonstrating that most organisations in Milton Keynes feel financially stretched and require more funding than previously in order to operate effectively.

Respondents were also asked about whether they had to use their reserves over the last 12 months in order to continue operating. As **Figure 10** (overleaf) shows, this response was far more mixed than the previous two responses, with fairly even figures running from the "not at all" (11.1%) to "extremely" (17.5%) portions of the scale. Responses tended to be concentrated around 5-7, each scoring 11.1% respectively. These variations show the importance of considering individual circumstances when looking at how organisations are impacted by issues affecting the charity sector. While some have the capacity to operate without tapping into their reserves, others have no other option available to them and, thus, may be in more urgent need of support from organisations, such as MKCF.

To what extent has your charity/group/organisation seen an increase in need for funding over the last 12 months?
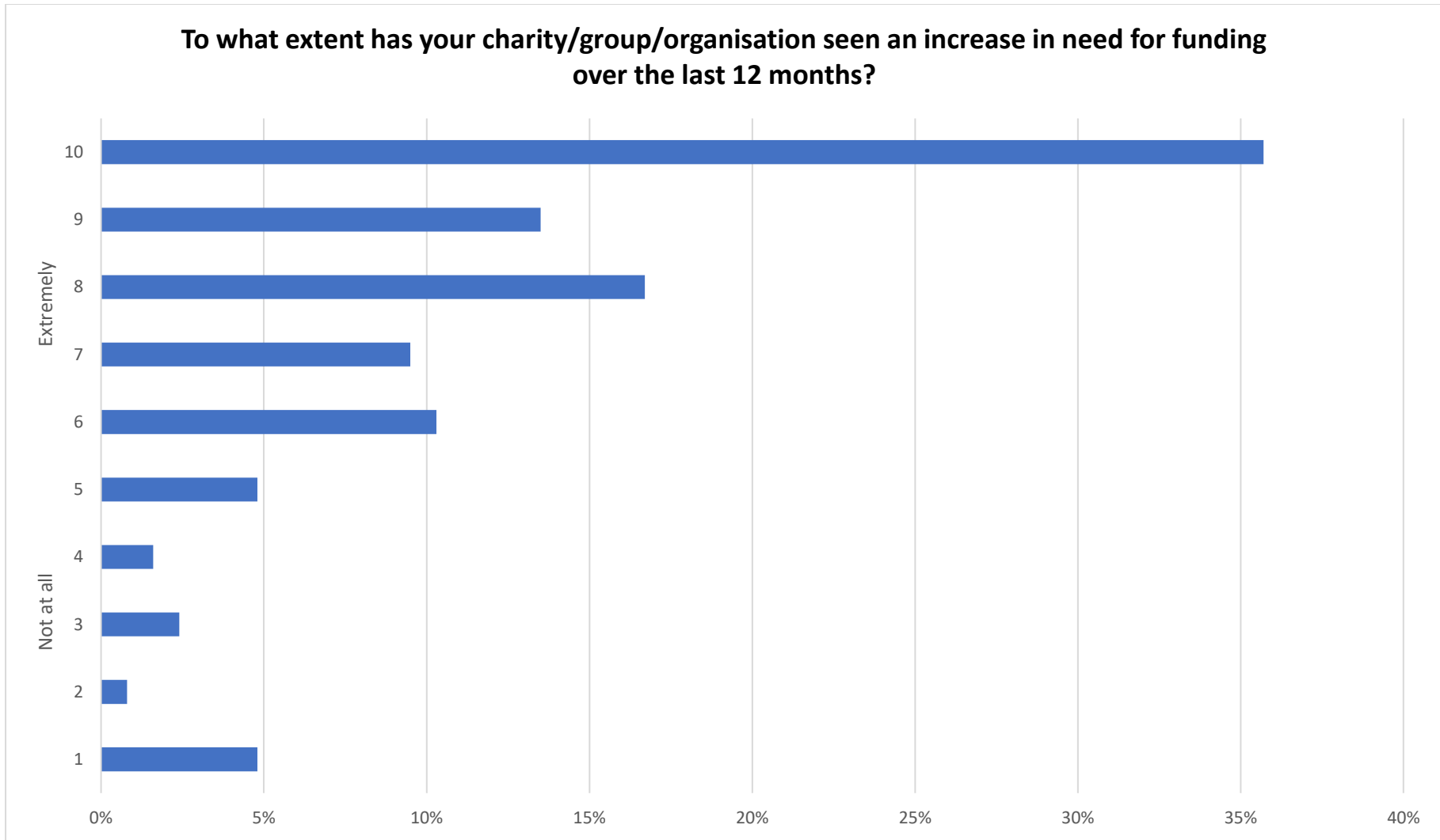
Figure 9 - To what extent has your charity/group/organisation seen an increase in need for funding over the last 12 months?

To what extent has your charity/group/organisation had to use its reserves to continue operating over the last 12 months?
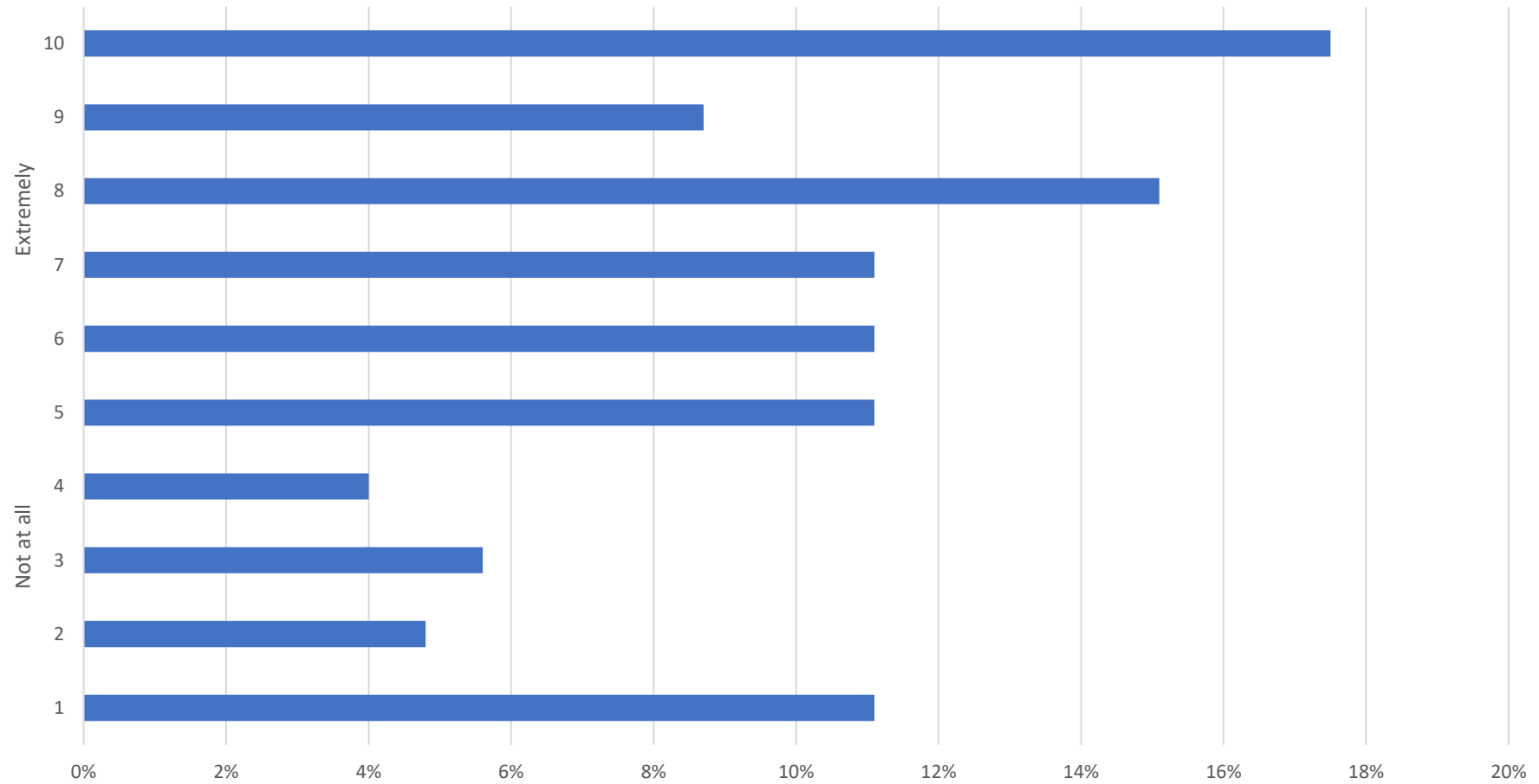
Figure 10 - To what extent has your charity/group/organisation had to use its reserves to continue operating over the last 12 months?

The final question in Part 1 asked respondents to look towards the next 2-3 years and state whether they expected their need for funding to increase, stay the same or go down. As **Figure 11** shows, 78.6% said that it would increase, 13.5% said that it would stay the same, while just 7.9% said that it would decrease.

Looking towards the next 2-3 years, are you expecting your need for funding to...

- Increase
- Stay the same
- Decrease

7.90%
13.50%
78.60%
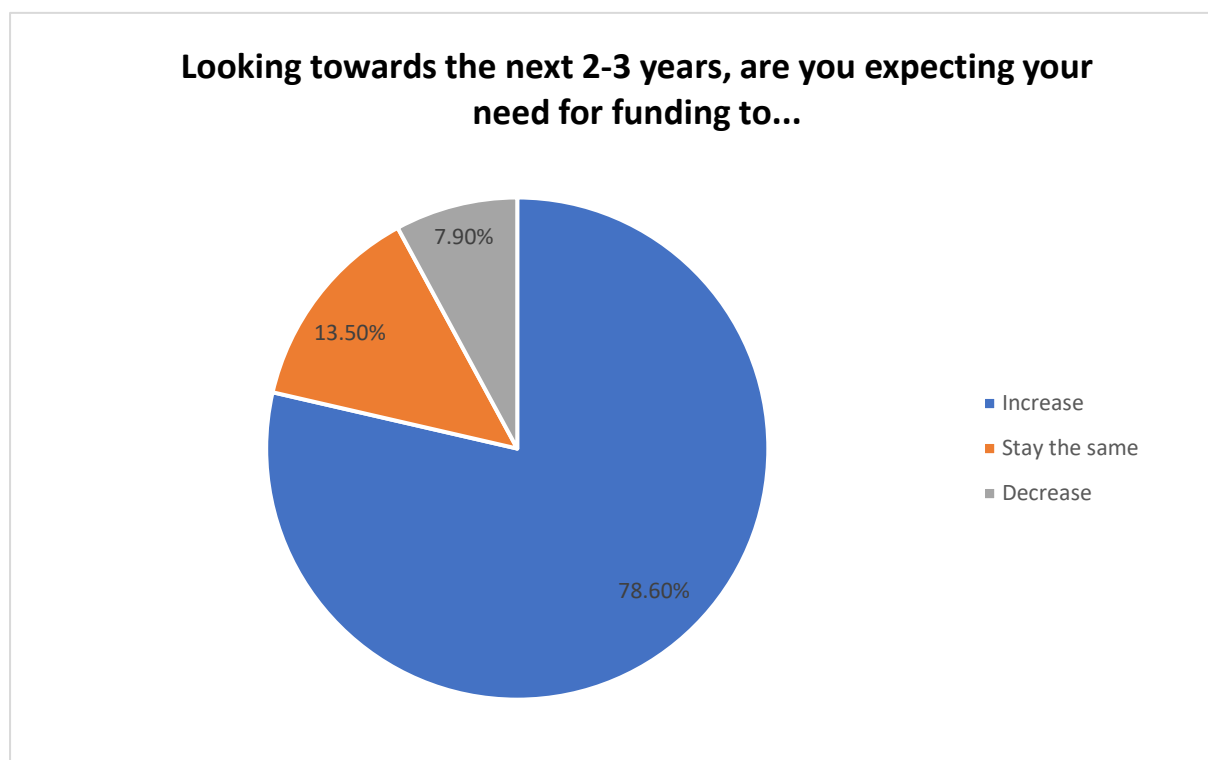
Figure 11 - Looking towards the next 2-3 years, are you expecting your need for funding to...

When asked to state or explain why they expect this, there were 9 responses that frequently reoccurred. They are ranked below in order of priority for respondents:

- Cost-of-living crisis and the increase in cost of utilities and rents
  "Due to rising costs of bills, rents and all other costs of running a business unit we see our reserves dwindling and not being able to sustain itself"

- Demand for services has increased as Milton Keynes expands and more people become in need
  "In a nutshell because Milton Keynes is growing rapidly, our community is growing rapidly too, many of the new commers are from refugee background or asylum and new to the country and in need of help, support and capacity building etc.

- Venue hire is too expensive
  "Basketball court hire is extremely expensive and difficult to find. Costs just keep going up with no consideration for affordability of the wider community."

- Less volunteers means that organisations are having to pay for staff instead
  "We would need to employ paid staff as volunteers are decreasing in numbers […] Also, if we are to develop as an organisation to meet the growing needs of the population,

we will need to expand the core staffing team as we don't have the capacity/resources to meet our ambitions or capitalise on innovation at the moment.

- Lack of funding is resulting in reserves being tapped into
"We have eaten into the free reserves we had due to lack of funding. If this continues we will not be able to hold the recommended reserves we need."

- Ongoing effects of COVID-19 pandemic
"There has been a significant loss of income over the past two years, since COVID, from which we need to recover before we can stabilise again."

- Government cuts, particularly to education services
"Schools are running at a deficit as the government continues to set payrises for teaching staff that are funded from existing school budgets. The same for free school meals universally up to year 3 etc.. There is no additional funding given to schools for these programmes and if a further well deserved but totally unfunded payrise is given to teaching staff this year the deficit for all schools will be enormous. We have moved from funding 'fun add ons' to funding almost exclusively essential resources like books."

- Less visitors to heritage sites, meaning that organisations are having to fundraise for projects previously covered by visitor fees
"We're receiving less visitors, who are spending less. We're now needing to fundraise for projects that previously covered themselves."

- Some charities are growing quickly and need financial support to sustain this
"We are ramping up our programmes, so will need to find funding for key equipment and supplies"

Respondents also often mentioned the unprecedented competition for funding now, as well as the difficulties of looking for new sources of funding when a particular project or partnership comes to an end.

Finally, those who did foresee an increase in their need for funding were asked to estimate by what % they would have to grow their funding over the next 2-3 years to continue delivering their projects/supporting their beneficiaries. **Figure 12** (overleaf) shows that responses fell across all six categories, although the majority were concentrated in 25% (41.1%). At the two extremes, 10.3% felt that they needed a growth of 5%, while 12.1% felt that they needed a growth of 12.1%. These disparate figures once again demonstrate how the needs of organisations must be considered on an individual basis as each is affected differently by external issues, based on their size and remit.

Using 2022 as a basis, approximately by what % do you think you will need to grow your funding over the next 2-3 years to continue delivering your projects/supporting your beneficiaries?
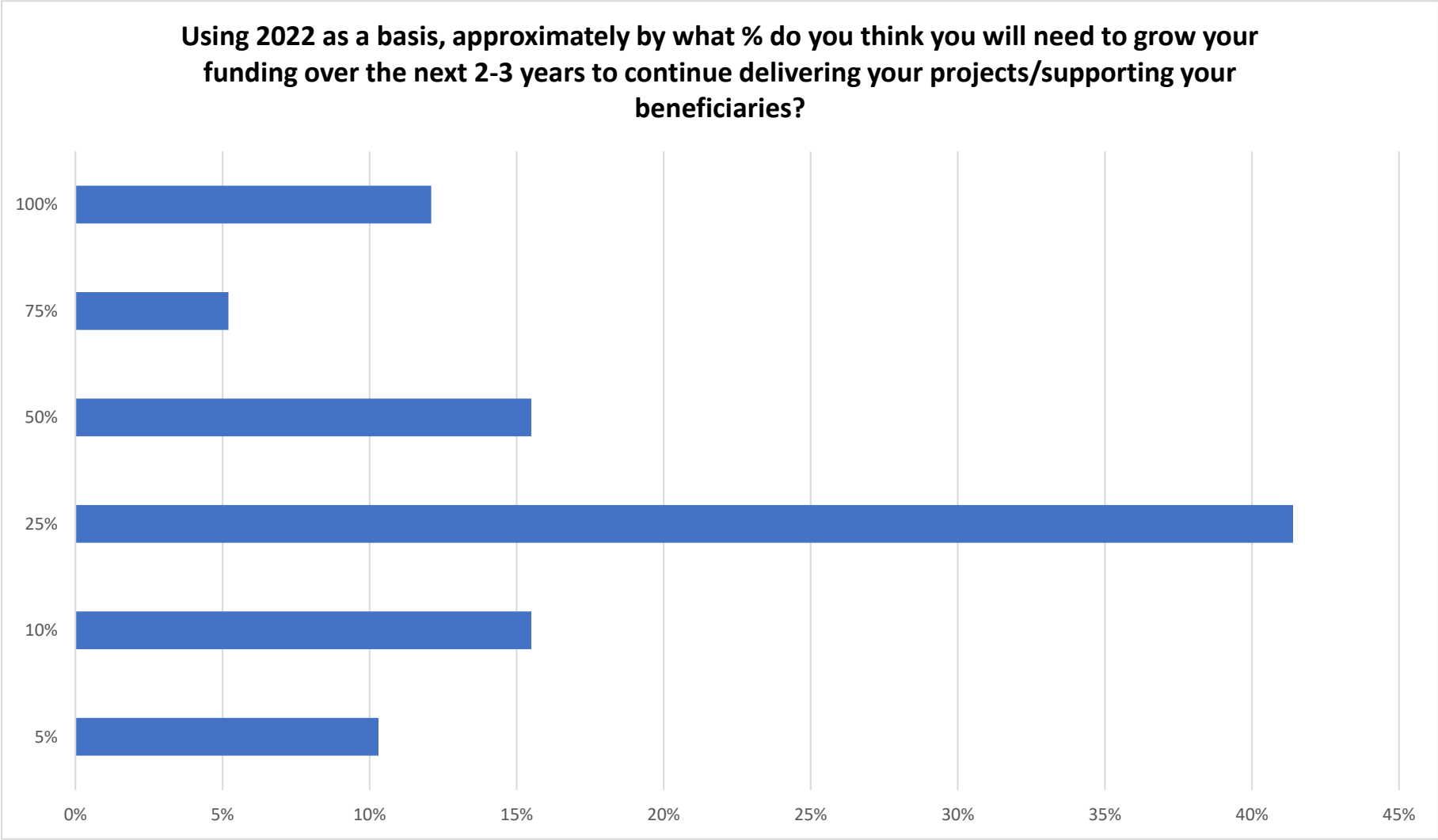
Figure 12 - Using 2022 as a basis, approximately by what % do you think you will need to grow your funding over the next 2-3 years to continue delivering your projects/supporting your beneficiaries?

Part 2: Knowledge of the Milton Keynes Community Foundation

This section aimed to assess respondents' knowledge of MKCF and their thoughts on MKCF's website.

With this in mind, the first question asked *how did you first become aware of the Milton Keynes Community Foundation?* **Figure 13** shows that almost half of respondents – 47.6% – learnt about MKCF from word of mouth. This is a significant number, particularly in the digital age, and indicates the importance of building relationships at a grassroots community level with the voluntary sector. It also suggests that if an organisation has had a previously positive experience of MKCF, they are more likely to share this with others. Although on a lesser scale with 21.4%, networking was also seen as an important means of learning about MKCF. Again, this highlights the importance of MKCF building a strong presence in the local community and holding physical events that enable members of the voluntary sector to come together. Interestingly, social media (7.9%), website (4.8%), Google or other search engine (2.4%) and press advertising (0.8%) scored significantly lower than expected, indicating that digital platforms are, in fact, a far less common means for organisations in Milton Keynes to learn about MKCF. 15.1% of respondents also selected "Other". Of these, 7 could not remember how they first became aware of MKCF (although 2 stated that they knew about MKCF since it was first set up), 6 learnt about MKCF through other groups in which they were involved applying for grants, 1 from a community organiser, 1 from a personal introduction, 1 from membership, 1 from a car raffle that MKCF organised, 1 because MKCF is their landlord and, rather interestingly, 1 from the survey invitation that was sent out. Again, these responses show the importance of MKCF having an active presence in Milton Keynes and being visible to relevant stakeholders.

How did you first become aware of the Milton Keynes Community Foundation?

- 4.80%
- 7.90%
- 0.80%
- 2.40%
- 21.40%
- 47.60%
- 15.10%

Legend:
- Website
- Social media
- Press advertising
- Google or other search engine
- Networking
- Word of mouth
- Other
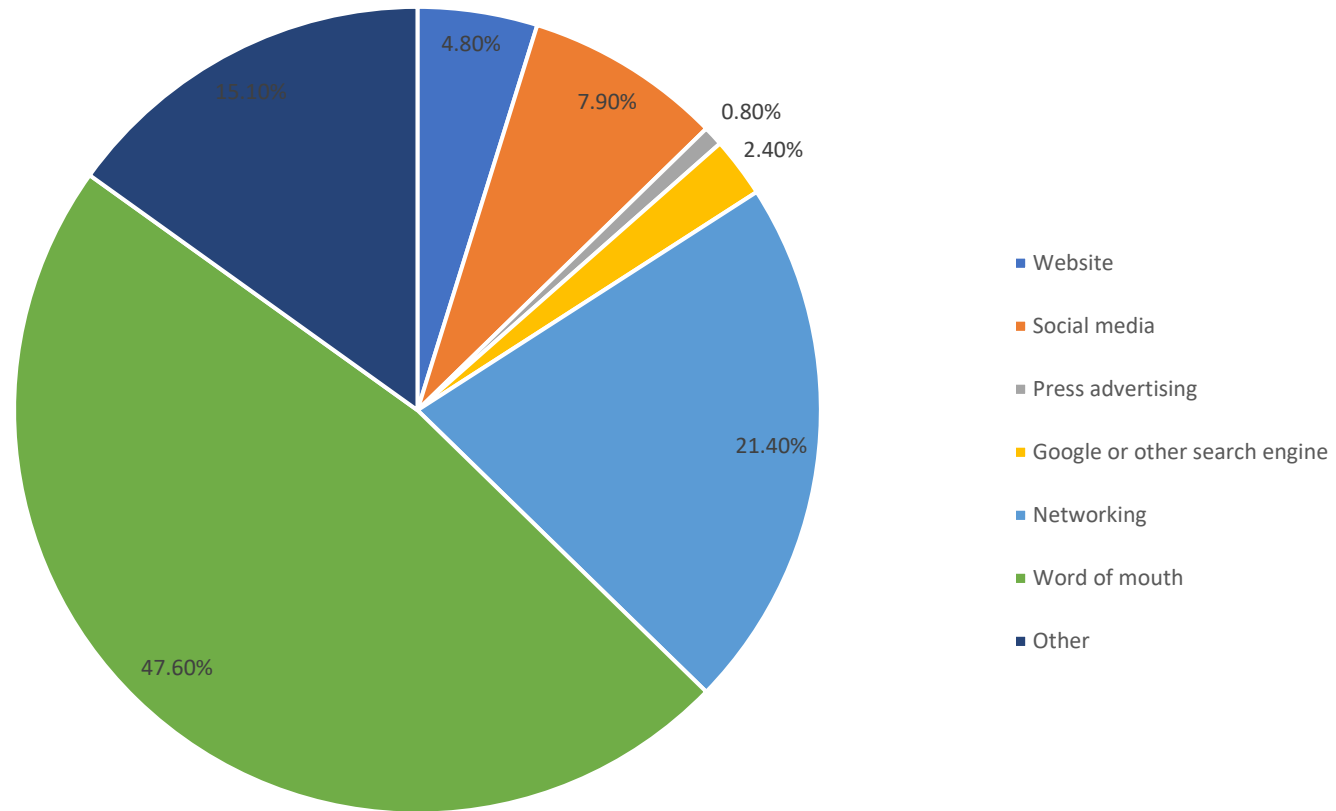
Figure 13 - How did you first become aware of the Milton Keynes Community Foundation?

Respondents were then asked whether they used the MKCF website as a first point for information on grants. **Figure 14** shows mixed results in this regard, with 54.8% saying yes and 41.3% saying no. 4%, on the other hand, selected "Other"; the reasons given were that they had not used MKCF before but plan to (2), they cannot remember (1), their fundraising manager did it (1) or that they contacted MKCF directly because they found the website difficult to navigate (1). The large percentage of people who said no suggests that MKCF may need to do more to encourage stakeholders to explore their website and make them aware of the information on grants available. Given that word of mouth and networking scored so highly in the previous question, local community events may present a useful opportunity for MKCF to do this.

Did you use the Milton Keynes Community Foundation website as a first point for information on grants?
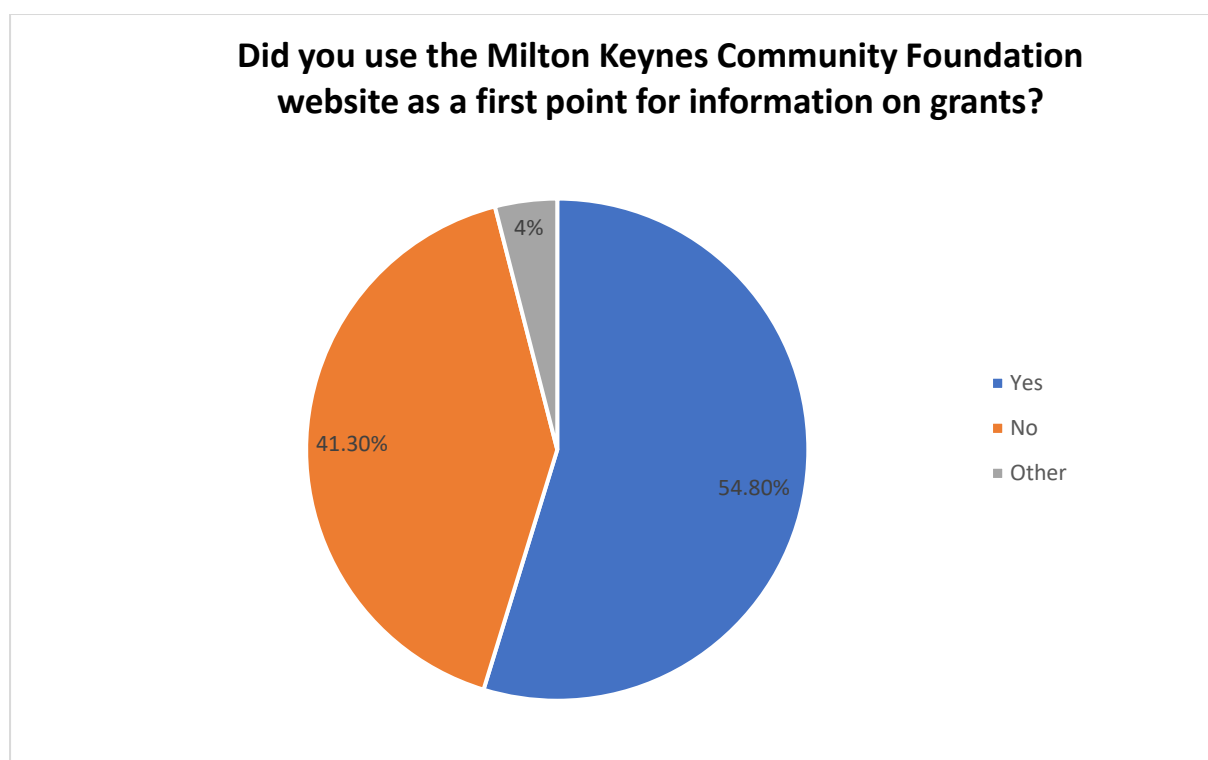
Figure 14 - Did you use the Milton Keynes Community Foundation website as a first point for information on grants?

Those who said yes were then asked how useful they found the website to navigate around to find out more information on grants. As **Figure 15** (overleaf) shows, on the whole, people found the website very useful (31.9%) or useful (44.9%). Only 1.4% and 10.1% found it not at all useful or somewhat useful, respectively, while 11.6% were neutral. When prompted to leave any comments to help MKCF improve its service, many respondents suggested that the possibility of face-to-face meetings with potential applicants would be extremely beneficial, particularly for those who are less savvy with technology. Another major issue for respondents was that the current website layout makes it difficult to find the section on how to apply for funding and that this should be more clearly signposted and made more prominent. Equally, many respondents felt that it would be useful to see guidance per grant scheme rather than overarching information and, furthermore, that this information should be shown before starting the eligibility form to save unnecessary time. In reference to

timesaving, respondents would also like to see a preload option for return applicants so that their contact and company details do not have to be re-entered again. Other suggestions to improve the website include clearer information on why the decision has been made to no longer support CICs and adding a selection of grant-giving bodies (similar to the Community Action website). Finally, MKCF offering more workshops was put forward by some as "good practice" to support new organisations.

If yes, how useful did you find the website to navigate around to find out more information on grants?
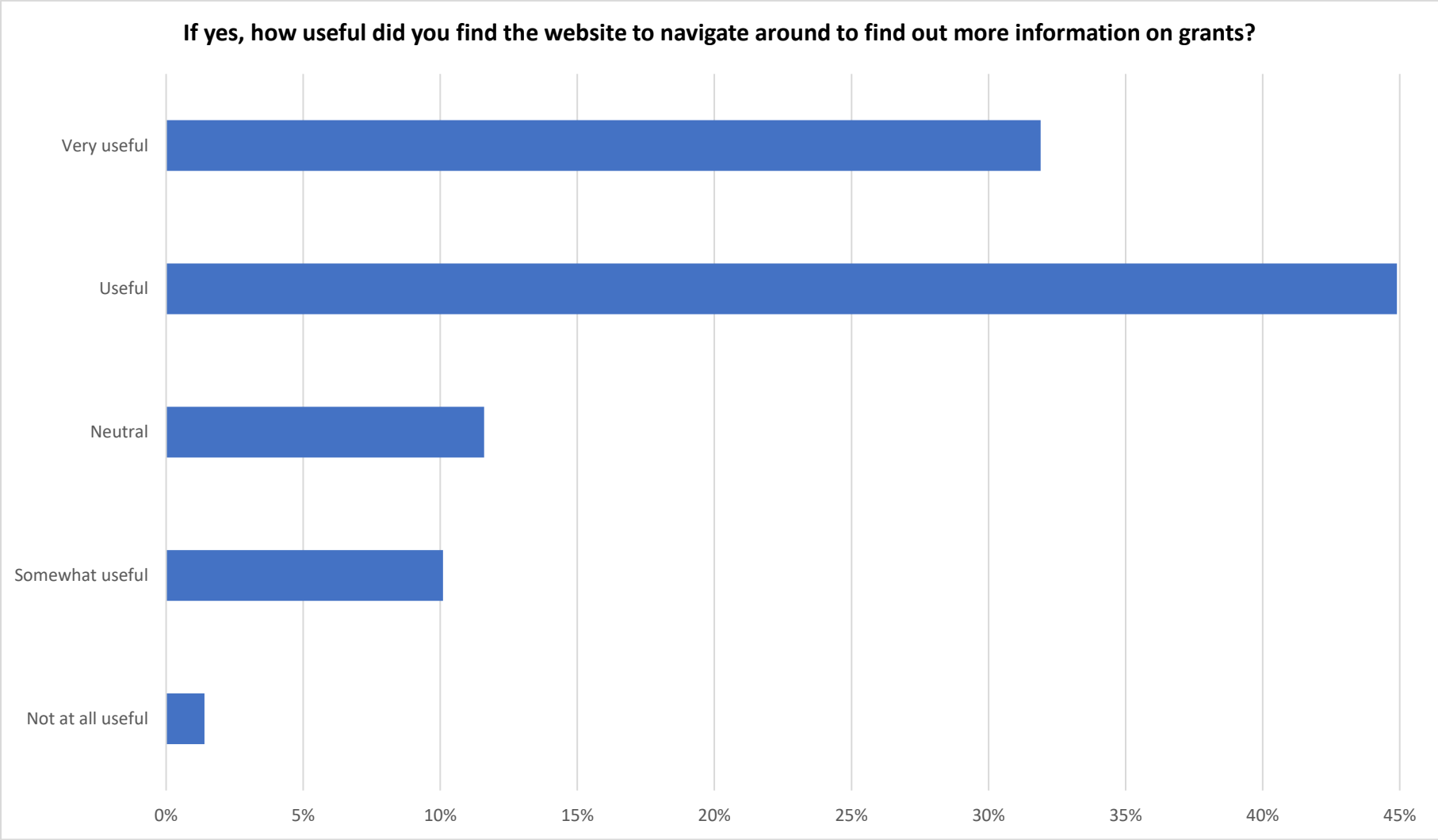
Figure 15 - If yes, how useful did you find the website to navigate around to find out more information on grants?

Respondents were then asked whether they understood the various grant-giving programmes on offer and easily knew which one was relevant to them. As **Figure 16** shows, responses were generally positive here, with 62.7% saying yes and just 21.4% saying no. Of the other responses, 7.9% selected "Not Applicable" and 7.9% selected "Other". When asked to elaborate, one respondent noted that there was "scope for them to be better explained on the website, with clearer info on guidelines and deadlines," while another equally agreed that they are "not easy to discern and criteria change," which makes it challenging to keep up. One person also stated that they had to phone MKCF for clarification, while another again emphasised the need for clearer information on the MKCF website about why they no longer fund CICs.
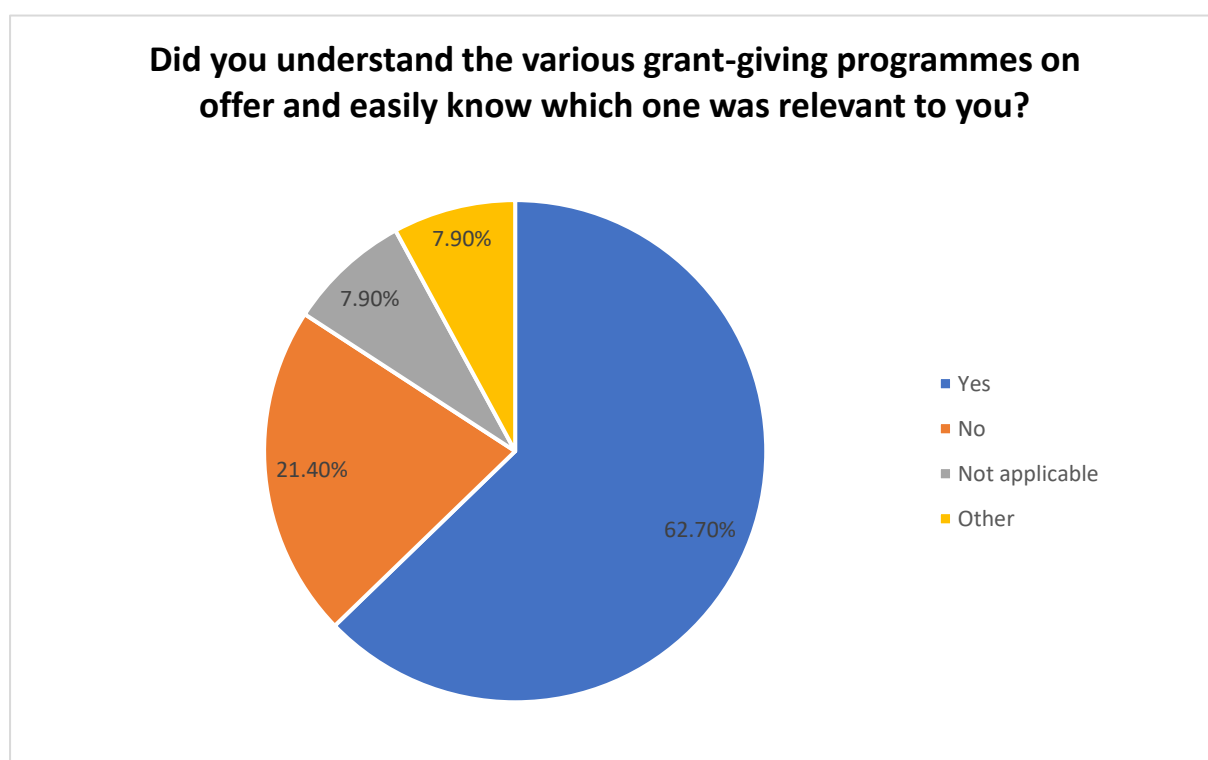
Figure 16 - Did you understand the various grant-giving programmes on offer and easily know which one was relevant to you?

Those who said that they did easily understand MKCF's grant-giving programmes were asked to state what they would like to have more information on to support applications. The most common responses are ranked below in order of frequency:

- A simple table that provides an overview of the different grant funding schemes with eligibility and timescales
- Examples of previously funded projects that fit each scheme/criteria
- Clearer guidance on the rolling processes
- Possibility of face-to-face meetings or telephone appointments to help with grant applications
- Regular emails communicating the different grant options available

- Details of other grants available in Milton Keynes, e.g. for education, for running courses in the community

To support the above points, one respondent stated how they had to obtain help from a previous applicant to understand the process, while another remarked that "on occasions I've thought we fit one programme and after discussing the project with a member of staff and submitting an application we've discovered it was incorrect." According to one respondent, MKCF also need to do more to "debunk the myth" that their support is "slanted towards charities."

The next question asked respondents how useful they found the FAQs, if they used them. As **Figure 17** (overleaf) shows, the largest percentage – 32.5% – was for "Not Applicable", suggesting that many visitors to the MKCF website, in fact, did not use the FAQs. Of those who did use the FAQs, 11.1% found them very useful, 23% found them useful, 19.8% were neutral, 10.3% found them somewhat useful and just 3.2% found them not useful at all.

Given a chance to elaborate on their responses, three respondents noted that they could not find an answer to their question in the FAQs, while three stated that they were unaware that the FAQs existed. One also noted that their application was "rejected on grounds not mentioned" in the FAQs. Respondents also made the following suggestions for improvement (ordered in frequency of occurrence):

- Make FAQs more visible on the MKCF website
- Make sure that FAQs are kept up to date (information on available lands for community buildings, for example, is no longer relevant)
- Limit number of FAQs so that they are more "productively beneficial and judiciously constructive"
- Provide clearer information on the restrictions of applying for a smaller grant
- Provide clearer information on the difference between being a "Member" and a "Friend"
- Provide more community meetings to raise awareness of MKCF and tell local organisations what they do and how they can help businesses
- Offer social entrepreneurship courses to help "rookie" applicants
- Reverse the decision on CICs and CBSs or at least provide clearer information on why they are no longer funded

If you used the FAQs, how useful did you find them?

Very useful	11.10%
Useful	23%
Neutral	19.80%
Somewhat useful	10.30%
Not at all useful	3.20%
Not applicable	32.50%
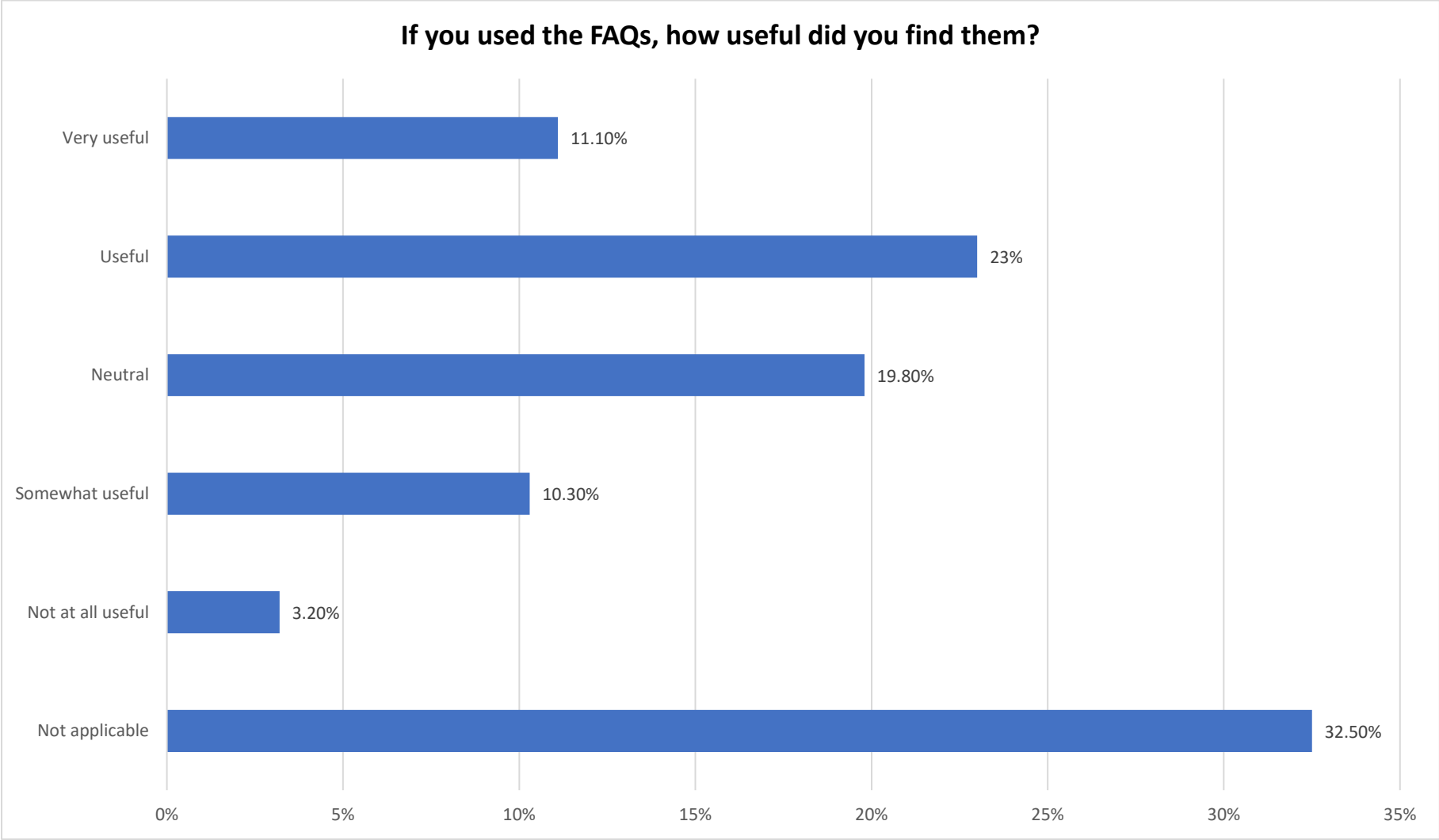
Figure 17 - If you used the FAQs, how useful did you find them?

Part 3a: The Milton Keynes Community Foundation Grant Application Process

Part 3a sought to understand more about organisations who had previously applied to MKCF for a grant.

With this in mind, the first question asked *has your charity/group/organisation ever applied for a grant with the Milton Keynes Community Foundation before?* As **Figure 18** shows, 71.4% said yes and 28.6% said no.

Has your charity/group/organisation ever applied for a grant with the Milton Keynes Community Foundation before?

28.60%

71.40%

- Yes
- No
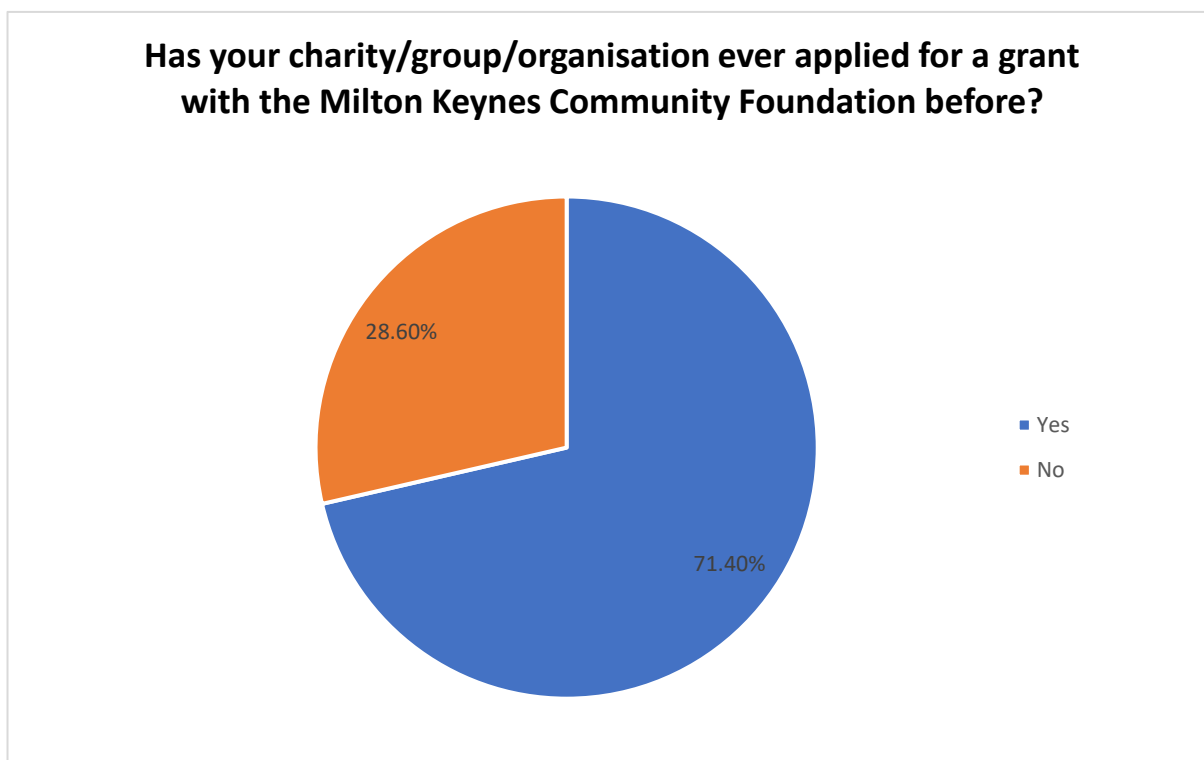
Figure 18 - Has your charity/group/organisation ever applied for a grant with the Milton Keynes Community Foundation before?

Those who said no (36 respondents) were then automatically directed to the end of the survey, but asked one final question about their main reasons for not previously applying for a grant from MKCF (they could select as many options as they deemed relevant). According to **Figure 19** (overleaf)**,** 19 out of 36 respondents stated that they were not confident that their organisation/group would be successful. To a lesser extent, 9 respondents stated that they were not aware of the grants that MKCF offer. Additionally, 6 stated that they found the application form confusing, while 6 also stated that they found the application process too time-consuming. 11 respondents selected "Other", their main reasons being:

- They are not yet ready to apply to MKCF
- They are currently applying to MKCF
- They have been able to self-fund to date
- MKCF does not help animal welfare concerns
- They have no time to prepare to meet MKCF's requirements
- They worry that they are not eligible because they are part of a national charity

- They worry that they are not eligible because they are based in Buckingham, although they cover the Milton Keynes area
- There have been admin/paperwork delays within their own organisation

With those who had not previously applied to MKCF for a grant filtered out, 90 respondents proceeded with the survey. The next question asked them to select what size of grant they applied for (they could select as many as they felt were relevant). **Figure 20** (overleaf) shows that 53 of the 90 respondents had previously applied for a small grant up to £3,000, while 42 respondents had previously applied for a community grant between £3,000 and £10,000. On a far lesser scale, 7 respondents had applied for a large strategic grant, while 6 had applied for a transformational grant.

What are your main reasons for not previously applying for a grant from the Milton Keynes Community Foundation?

Reason	Count
I wasn't confident that our organisation/group would be…	19
Other	11
I wasn't aware of the grants that they offer	9
I found the application form confusing	6
I found the application process too time-consuming	6
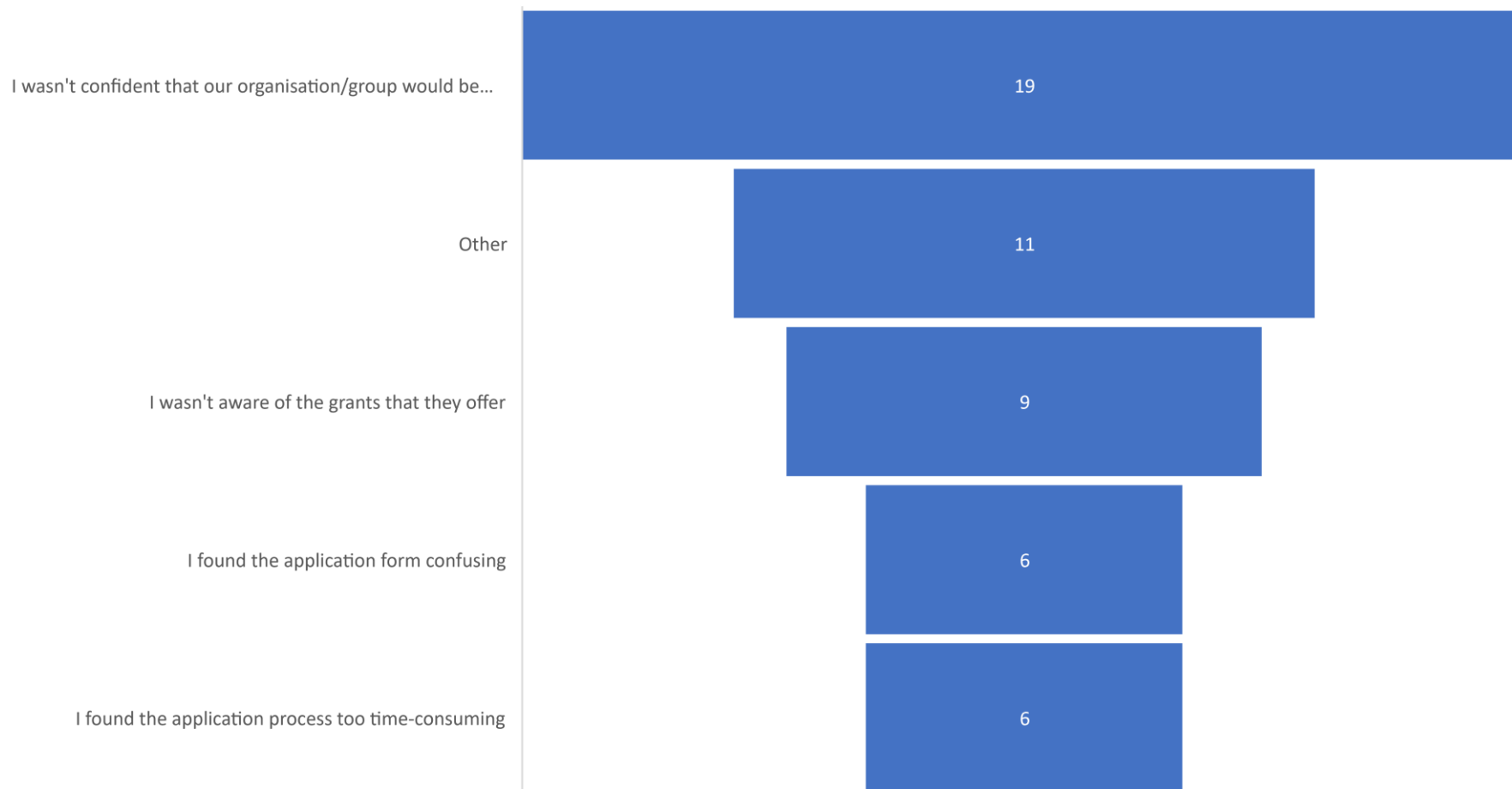
Figure 19 - What are your main reasons for not previously applying for a grant from the Milton Keynes Community Foundation?

What size of grant did you apply for?

Up to £3,000 (small grant)	53
£3,000 - £10,000 (community grant)	42
Large strategic grant	7
Transformational grant	6
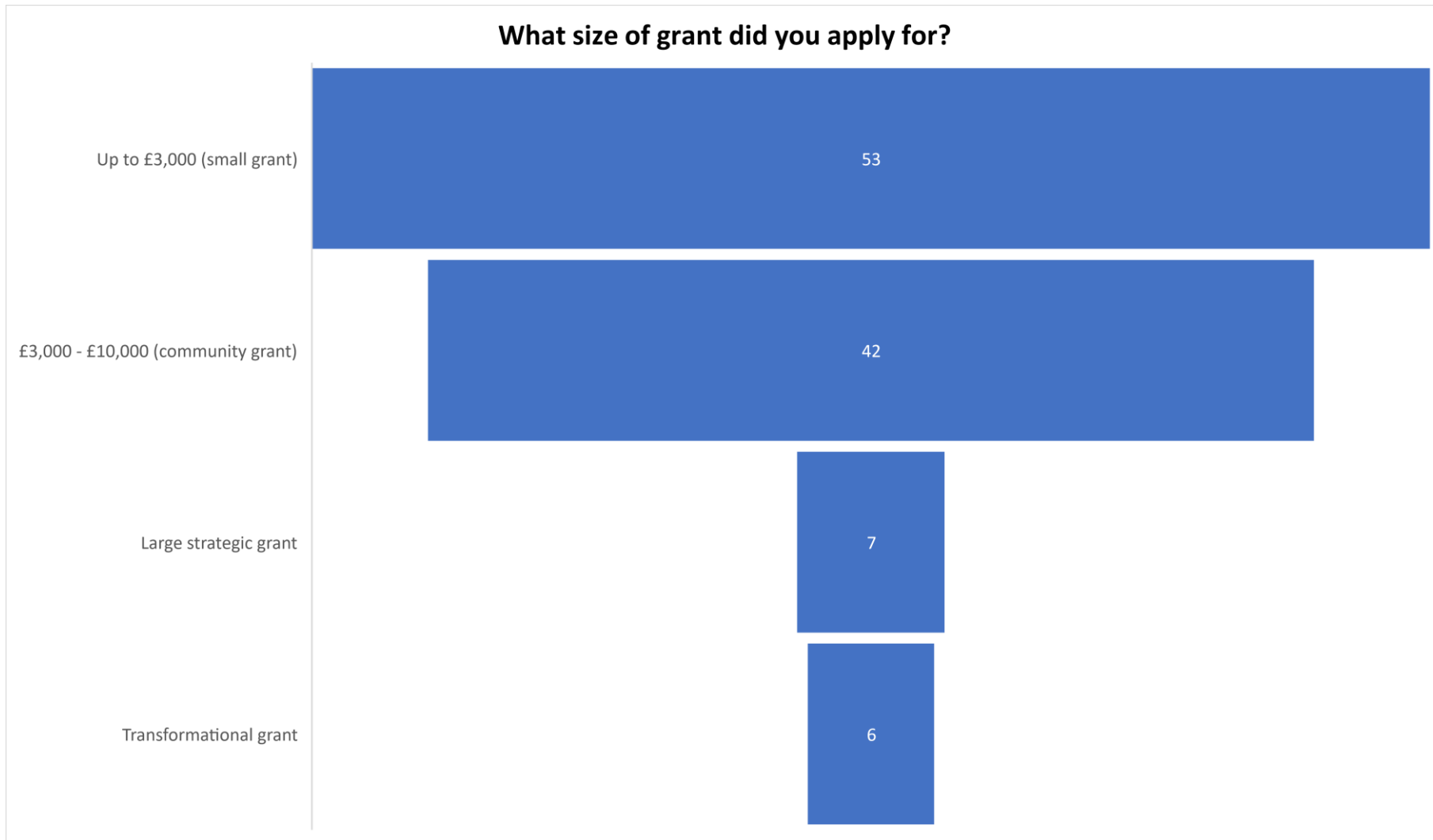
Figure 20 - What size of grant did you apply for?

Respondents were then asked whether the application was successful. As **Figure 21** shows, 81.1% said yes and 18.9% said no.

Was the application successful?
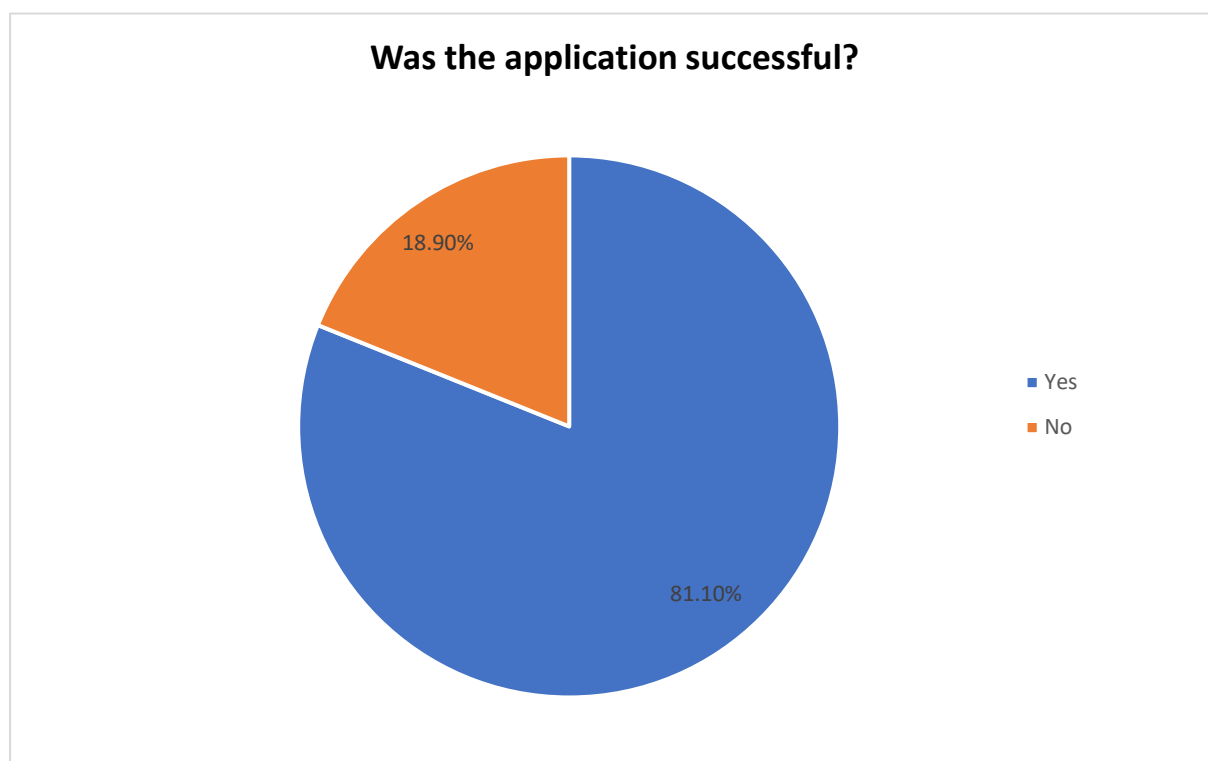
Figure 21 - Was the application successful?

Next, the survey asked respondents to rank on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 = not at all, 10 = extremely) how simple, easy to understand, fair and inclusive they found the MKCF application process. In terms of simplicity, as **Figure 22** (overleaf) shows, responses were generally positive in this respect, with most ranking 7 (12.3%), 8 (24.7%), 9 (19.2%) or 10 (13.7%) on the scale. Just 2.7% ranked the process 1 and 2, respectively. Equally, similar positive results can be found with ease of understanding: 7 (11%), 8 (20.5%), 9 (20.5) and 10 (19.2%). Here, just 1.4% marked 1 and 4.1% marked 2. Perceptions of fairness were also generally positive: 7 (15.1%), 8 (16.4%), 9 (17.8%) and 10 (26%). However, it is worth noting that there were slightly more negative responses to fairness than simplicity or ease of understanding (albeit still low), with 2.7% stating 1, 2 or 3, respectively. Responses were also generally positive when it came to inclusivity, with most scores ranked as 7 (12.3%), 8 (17.8%), 9 (13.7%) or 10 (30.1%). However, like with fairness, it is worth noting that, at the other end of the scale, 4.1% marked 1 and 2, respectively.

Respondents were also given the opportunity to elaborate on their rankings. There were multiple positive responses left about the Grants team and the application process:

"Excellent help and support and guidance from grant team"

"After explaining why we needed help it was very well accepted and we were given the help needed"

"The structure means that the charity receiving the grant has to find a % of funds from elsewhere. This is a good way to create partnerships and look for new areas of support."

However, one respondent outlined the difficulties of part-funding:

"We appreciate that often funders take the decision to part fund a project due to availability of funds. This can prove difficult when the expectation is to retain the deliverables. There are often very difficult decisions to make when this happens with regards what to cut from the project or to delay and continue the fundraising process to secure the additional funds from elsewhere."

In terms of simplicity and ease of understanding, several respondents stated that the application was too "onerous" and "inaccessible" for those without a dedicated fundraising team. Furthermore, it required too much information to be collated. Others found that the applications could be too "generic" (e.g. sports that are teams) and that "more specificity" would be useful. One respondent also noted that they had received conflicting information from staff, which had resulted in delays in the application process. Two other respondents also emphasised that response times could be quicker. With regard to fairness, one respondent stated that they had been asked to share their grant with another centre that was carrying out similar work in a different part of Milton Keynes, which they did not think was fair. Additionally, issues around the decision not to fund CICs came up as being unfair. Issues of inclusivity received the most comments, with several respondents making the point that not everyone is "computer literate" and, therefore, there should be alternative application options available. One respondent also strongly felt that MKCF had a lack of understanding of faith groups: "they are automatically thought of as proselytising and not understood for their inclusive social dimension. There is suspicion amongst staff and a lack of religious literacy." Finally, one respondent from a sports club with a high number of Asian players felt upset that they had been rejected for a grant "on diversity grounds."

Respondents were also asked whether they had used MKCF's Vital Signs report when preparing their application. As **Figure 23** (overleaf) shows, there was a rather mixed response, with 41.1% saying yes, 34.2% saying no and 24.7% saying I don't know. These results suggest that MKCF may need to do more to make applicants aware of Vital Signs, either by signposting it more clearly on their website or through community events.
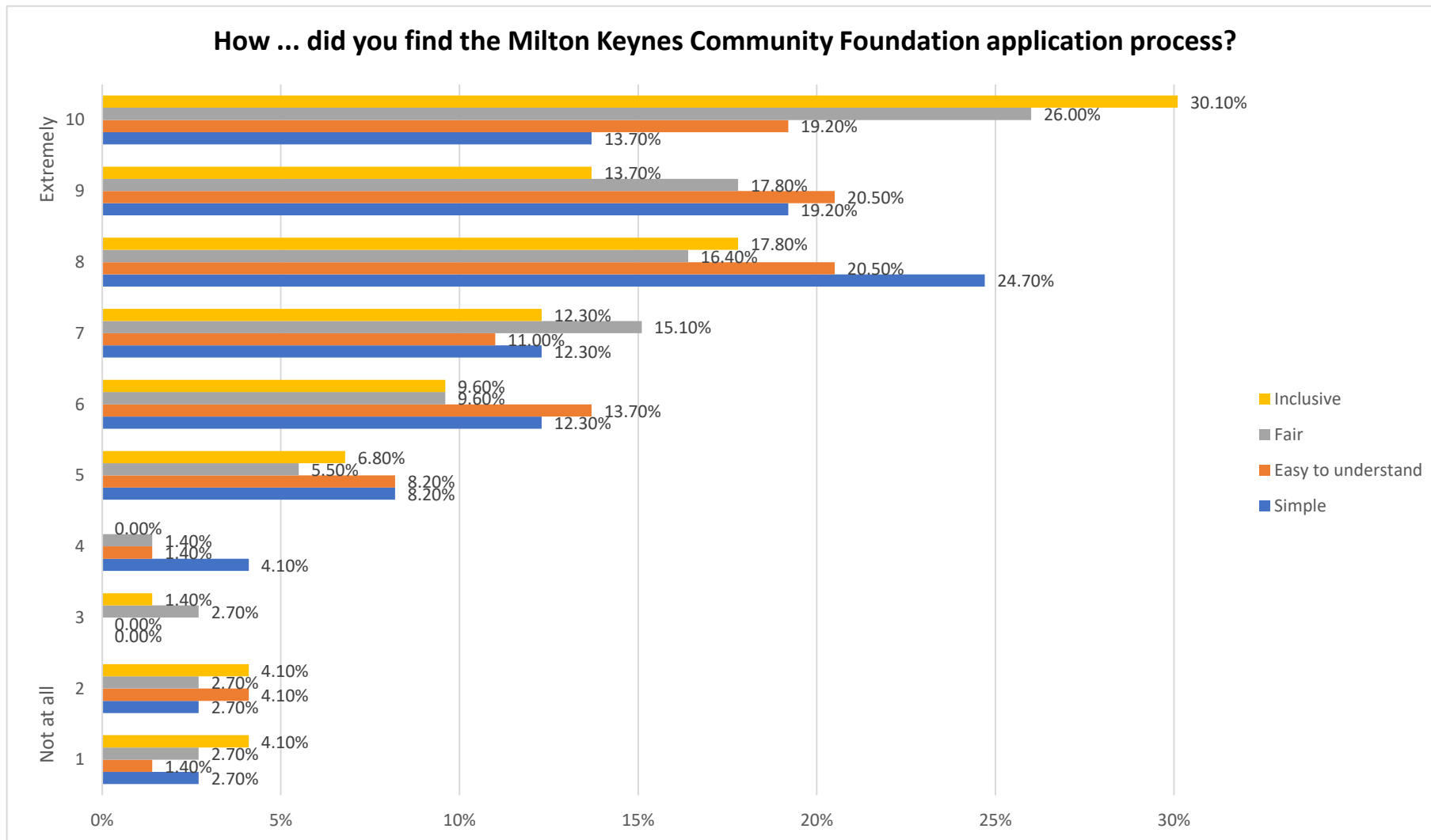
Figure 22 - How ... did you find the Milton Keynes Community Foundation application process?

Respondents were also asked whether they had used MKCF's Vital Signs report when preparing their application. As **Figure 23** shows, there was a rather mixed response, with 41.1% saying yes, 34.2% saying no and 24.7% saying I don't know. These results suggest that MKCF may need to do more to make applicants aware of Vital Signs, either by signposting it more clearly on their website or through community events.

Did you use the Vital Signs report?
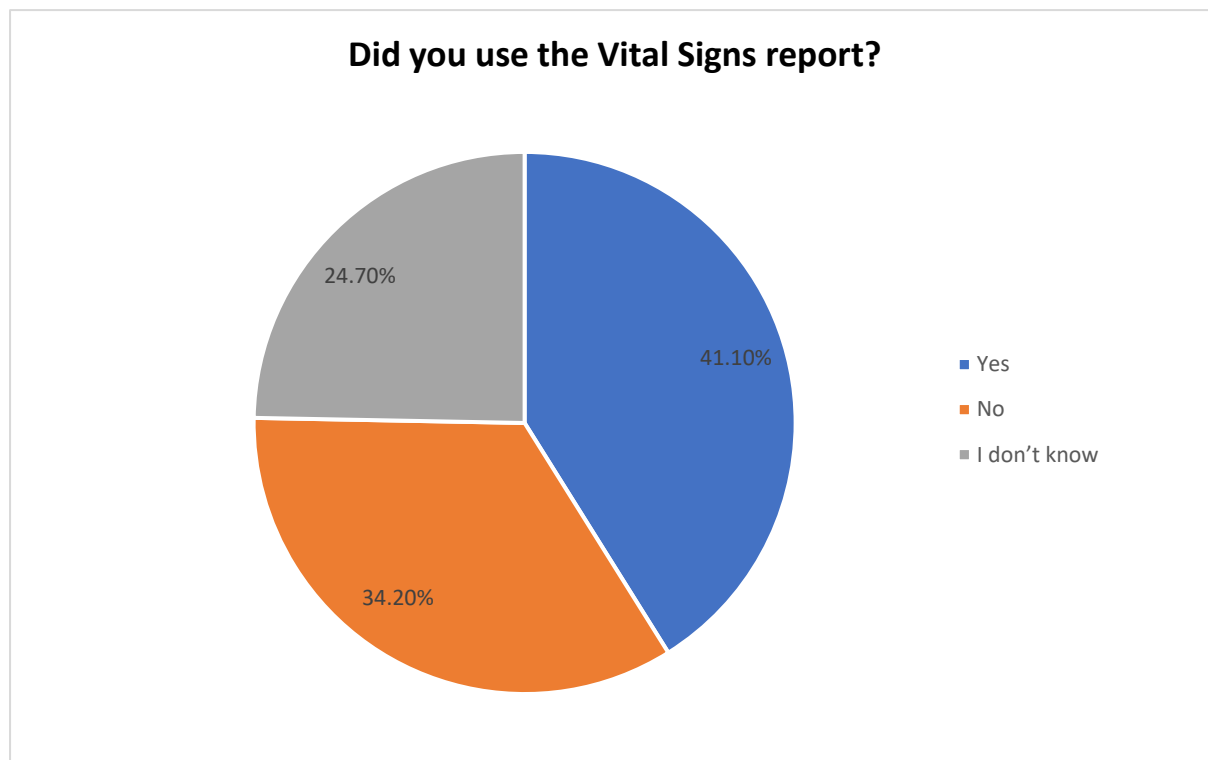
Figure 23 - Did you use the Vital Signs report?

For those who had used Vital Signs, they were asked how useful they found it. As **Figure 24** (overleaf) shows, the responses were overwhelmingly positive, with 50% stating very useful and 40% stating useful. Just 3.3% said somewhat useful and 6.7% were neutral.

For those who had not used Vital Signs, they were asked the reasons why. As **Figure 25** (overleaf) shows, in 68% of cases, this was because respondents were not aware of the report. Additionally, 28% did not find it relevant. 4% put "Other", stating that it had not been published when they applied to MKCF, but will be making use of it in the future. The high number of respondents who were unaware of Vital Signs emphasises once again that MKCF may need to do more to make applicants aware of the report.

If yes, how useful did you find it?

- Very useful — 40%
- Useful — 50%
- Neutral — 6.70%
- Somewhat useful — 3.30%
- Not at all useful — 0%
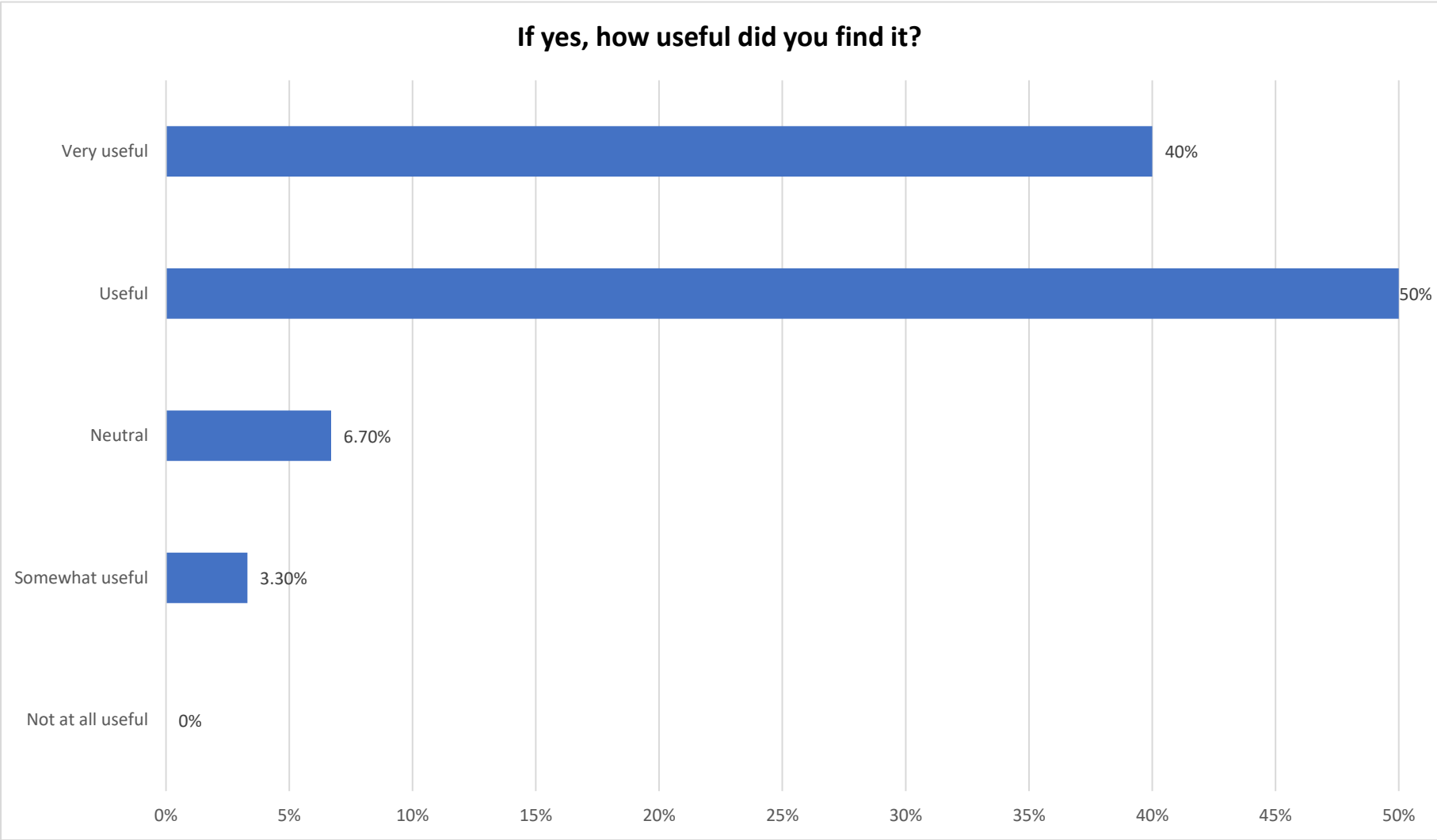
Figure 24 - If yes, how useful did you find it?

If not, why did you not use it?

- I was not aware of it
- I did not find it useful
- I did not find it relevant
- Other

28%

0%

4%

68%
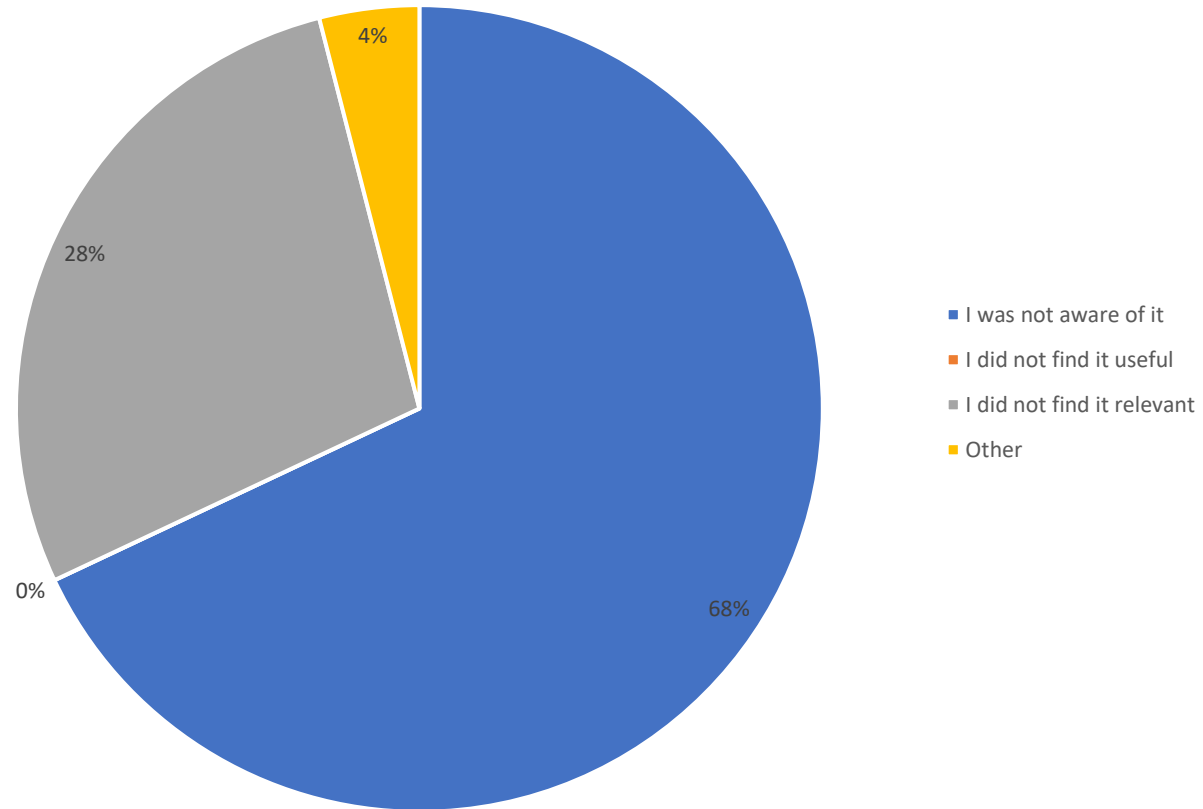
Figure 25 - If not, why did you not use it?

Respondents were also given the opportunity to provide more general comments on Vital Signs, should they so wish. Generally, comments towards Vital Signs were very positive:

"Vital signs is quite important because not everybody is aware of the rapid changes taking place in MK."

"Vital Signs has been very helpful in demonstrating need to different Funders"

"The vital signs report is always a valuable resource to better understand what is happening locally and priorities for the area."

"Helps understand MKCF priorities"

However, there were also some recommendations on how it could be improved, both in terms of content and raising awareness of the report in Milton Keynes:

- Vital Signs should be more clearly signposted on the MKCF website
- There should be more publicity to spread Vital Signs across the community, particularly for the BAME community
- Vital Signs should include more facts and figures on the number of people with learning disabilities and deeper broader picture of their lives (i.e., employment, housing, health etc)
- There should be more depth to the content in Vital Signs

One respondent also noted that they had contributed to the Vital Signs report, yet was not invited to the final conference at MK Centre, which was rather disappointing.

Respondents were also asked to rank the approachability and responsiveness of the Philanthropy Team at MKCF throughout the application process. On both accounts, positive responses were generally received. As **Figure 26** (overleaf) shows, 50.7% were very satisfied and 30.1% were satisfied with the Team's approachability. Just 1.4% were very dissatisfied and dissatisfied, respectively. Equally, 47.9% were very satisfied and 31.5% satisfied with the Team's responsiveness. Just 1.4% were very dissatisfied and 4.1% were dissatisfied. This indicates that, on the whole, organisations have positive perceptions of the Philanthropy Team at MKCF.

Comments left in the free-text space were also overwhelmingly positive, with respondents expressing gratitude and praise for the Philanthropy Team:

"Communication with the team was via email and was a good experience."

"The MKCF team are always warm and lovely to work with. They go above and beyond, and are extremely supportive to the sector. We regularly see them at sector events and are often in contact with regards partnerships and projects. They are often open to new ideas of working together and are great at partnership working."
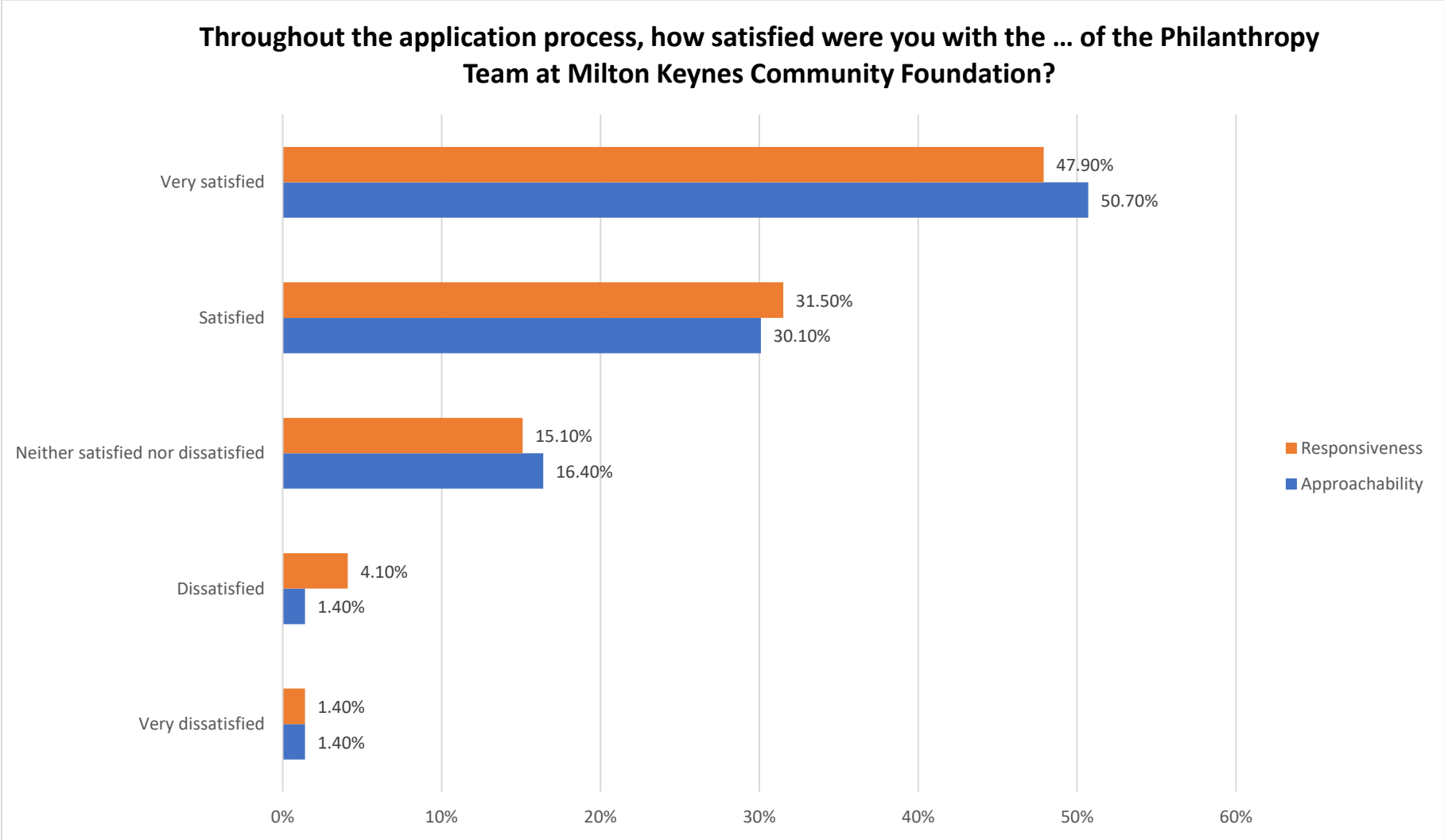
Figure 26 - Throughout the application process, how satisfied were you with the … of the Philanthropy Team at Milton Keynes Community Foundation?

"The team were great - especially Charlotte and Sarah :)"

"This was a very positive part of the process as I had time on the phone and via a visit to our project, by one of the Philanthropy team, to explain the needs of the charity and the project we were seeking funding for."

"I would like to thank them on behalf of our group for the wonderful help and support they provide"

The more critical comments concerned the fact that there is such a fast turnaround of managers at MKCF that "it is hard to establish a relationship with anyone." Additionally, respondents mentioned the "conflicting information" that they have received at times and that phone messages are not always responded to. Finally, some respondents felt that an open discussion about MKCF's stance on CICs would have been beneficial.

Part 3b: The Milton Keynes Community Foundation Decision-Making Process

Part 3b sought to understand how organisations who applied for a grant with MKCF found the decision-making process.

The first question concerned how satisfied respondents were with the speed of MKCF's decision-making process. As **Figure 27** (overleaf) illustrates, on the whole, responses were overwhelmingly positive, with 34.4% stating very satisfied and 36.7% stating satisfied. 20%, on the other hand, were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. Just 8.9% were dissatisfied, while nobody was very dissatisfied.

When asked to add any comments to help MKCF improve their service, the following suggestions were made (listed in frequency of occurrence):

- Introduce a two-stage application process so that initial project ideas can be agreed or closed down with speed
- Provide decision dates so that applicants know when they can expect to hear back from MKCF
- Advisers should make clear in initial conversations whether an organisation's idea is fundable or not rather than immediately encouraging a written application

For many respondents, timeliness was not a problem; rather, it was the "tortuous", "long" and "drawn out" application process that caused frustrations. Additionally, one successful candidate noted that the time it took for MKCF to release money was longer than expected, while another expressed frustration at not receiving funding because MKCF did not want to fund similar activities in the same year.

Respondents were then asked to rate their level of satisfaction in terms of the feedback they received from MKCF about their application. As **Figure 28** (overleaf) shows, again, responses tended to be positive, with 36.7% saying very satisfied and 26.7% saying satisfied. 24.4%, on the other hand, were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. Just 1.1% were very dissatisfied, while 11.1% were dissatisfied.

How satisfied were you with the speed of the Milton Keynes Community Foundation's decision-making process?

Very satisfied	34.40%
Satisfied	36.70%
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	20%
Dissatisfied	8.90%
Very dissatisfied	0%
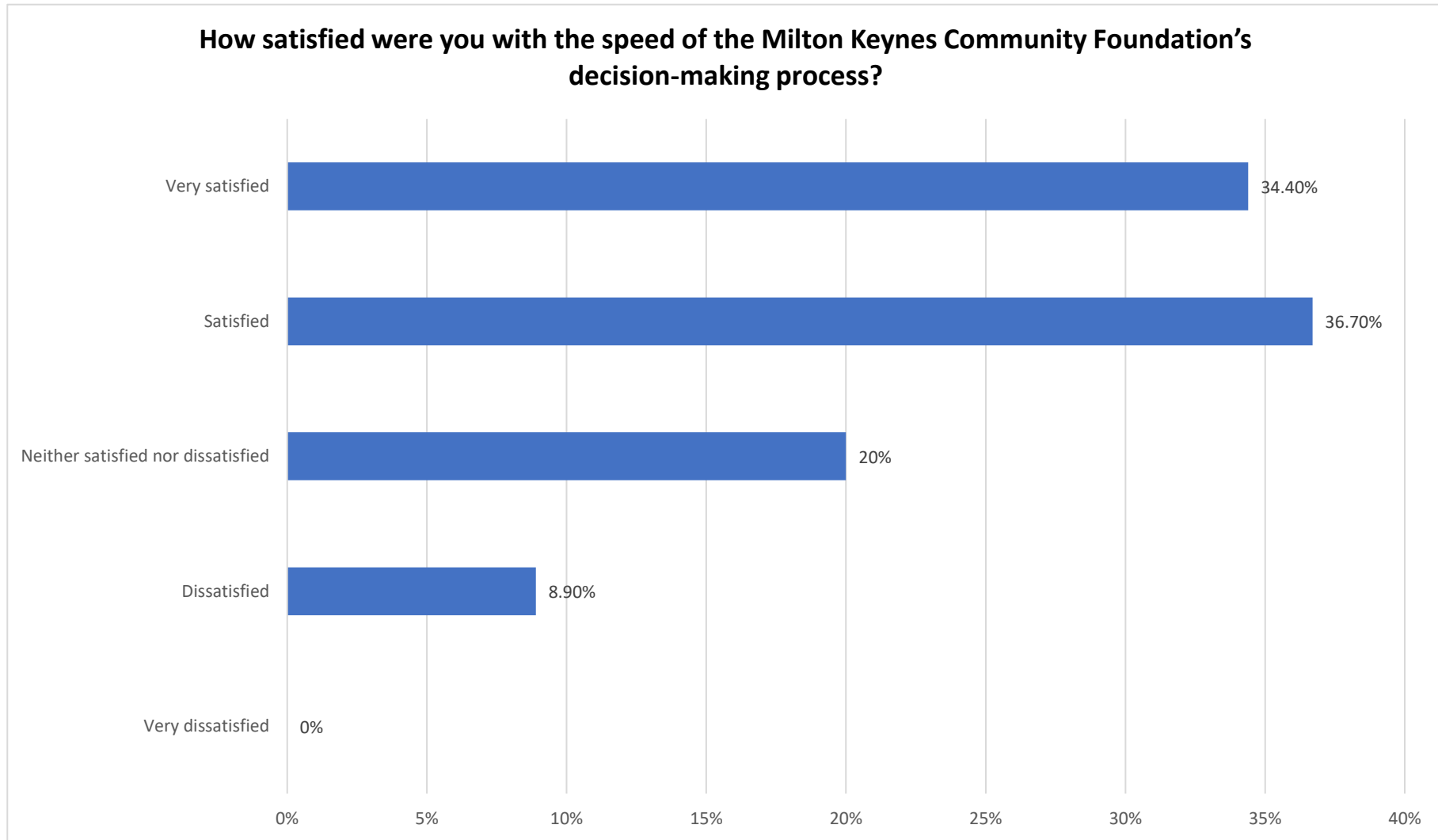
Figure 27 - How satisfied were you with the speed of the Milton Keynes Community Foundation's decision-making process?

How satisfied were you with the level of feedback from the Milton Keynes Community Foundation about your application?

| Response	Percentage
Very satisfied	36.70%
Satisfied	26.70%
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	24.40%
Dissatisfied	1.10%
Very dissatisfied	1.10%
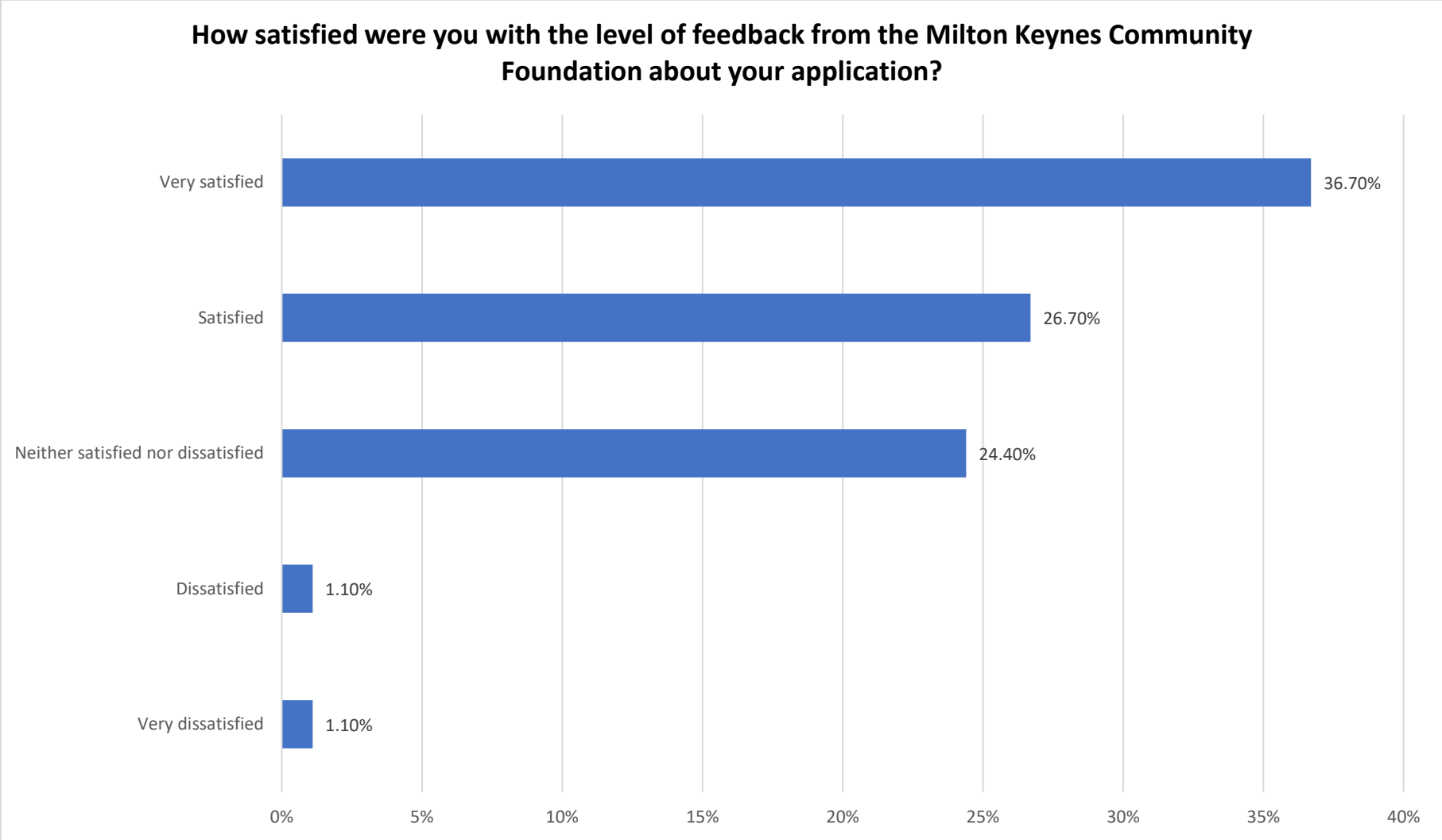
Figure 28 - How satisfied were you with the level of feedback from the Milton Keynes Community Foundation about your application?

When asked for additional comments, many respondents praised the feedback process:

"We received feedback and extra support when unsuccessful, and we found the team understanding and flexible most of the time."

"I wasn't involved in this part but believe the team was generous with changes and adapting the project due to the start of the pandemic the original proposal was no longer feasible but an alternative project allowed us to quickly adapt to changing circumstances and maintain a supportive service the met current needs throughout the pandemic."

"You couldn't improve anymore"

However, others felt frustrated at what they deemed a "lack of information, explanation or support," making it hard for them to understand why others received funding and they did not. For one respondent, "being told [the project] didn't fit the criteria" was "not sufficient feedback," while another felt frustrated that the feedback centred on start-ups because "sustained clubs still need help too." For another respondent, while the feedback was "thorough", they felt that there was some confusion over projects: "If we have different projects with similar aims you seem to not want to fund them. Even though they're for different beneficiaries." Others felt that reasons for not receiving funding were "spurious":

"Both reasons for rejection were spurious - that the schools should fund the project, despite them not having the funds, and the second ground was about the sustainability of materials and not fitting with increasing digitalisation. Given we were targeting the poorest section of MK society, this emphasis on digital resources does not make sense."

"A very long winded comment which basically said, if you fund others, we cannot accept your application. [We wanted to take a group of disadvantaged children, chosen by the charity to which they belonged to a youth camp."

Respondents who applied unsuccessfully for a grant were asked how satisfied they were with the reason. As **Figure 29** (overleaf) shows, this answer received a mixed response, with 25.6% stating that they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. The other responses were fairly equally spread: 10% stated very satisfied, 4.4% stated satisfied, 7.8% stated dissatisfied and 10% stated very dissatisfied. For 42.2%, the question was not applicable. Only a handful of comments were left in the free text box, namely concerning the fact that the decision "seemed completely arbitrary," the whole process was "too much effort" and that they only "failed" because there were "too many applicants," which seemed unfair.
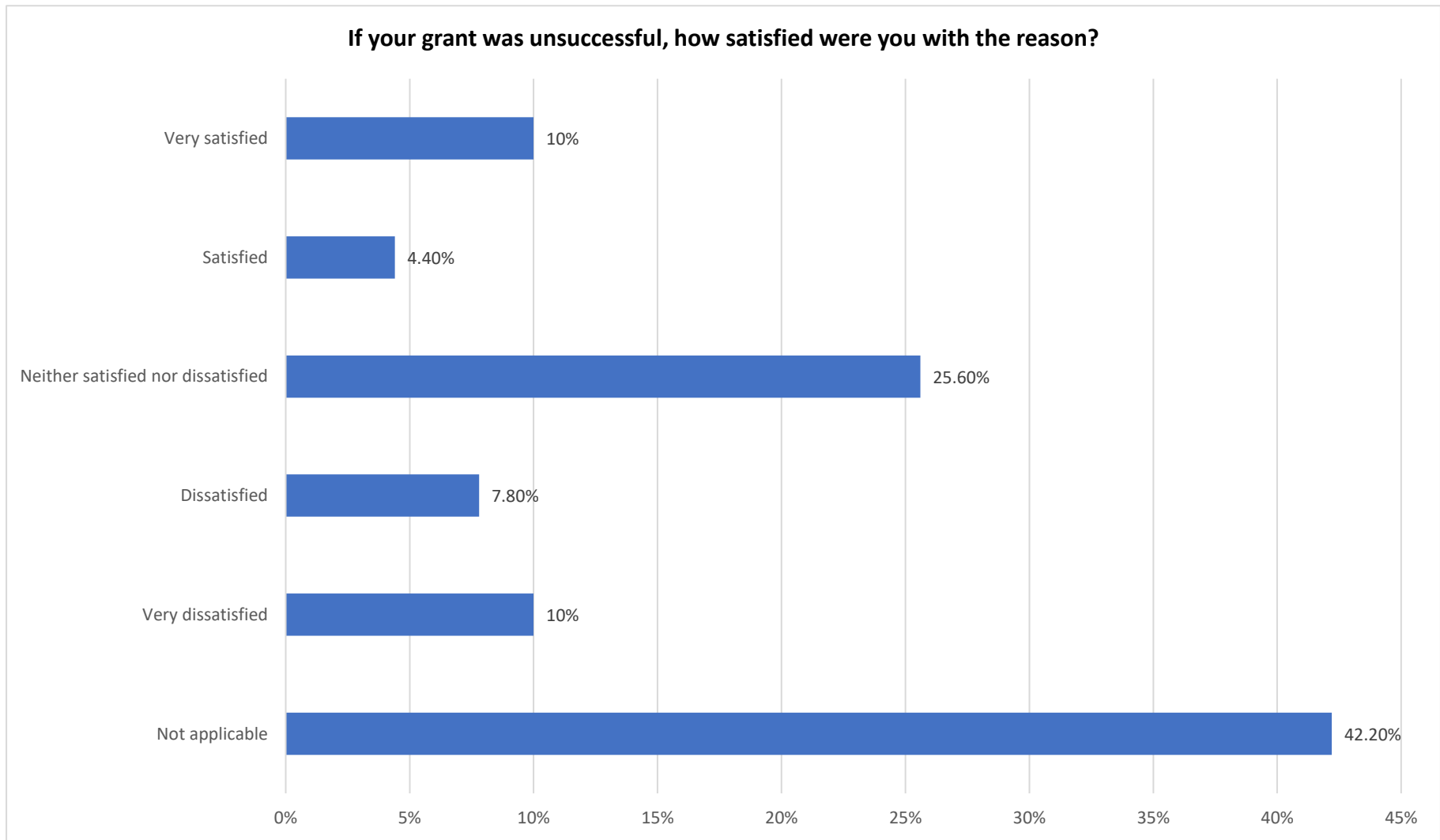
Figure 29 - If your grant was unsuccessful, how satisfied were you with the reason?

Respondents were then asked how MKCF could improve its current grant application and decision-making process to make it easier to apply. As **Figure 30** (overleaf) shows, there was a fairly even split in responses, with 36 out of 90 respondents stating "provide clearer examples of what information is needed for each section, 29 stating "offer more support to applicants throughout the process," 29 stating "reduce amount of supporting documentation required" and 26 stating "decrease length of application form." Of the other responses, 23 stated "reduce time it takes for grant application to be processed," 18 stated "provide min/max word counts for application forms," 12 stated "have a jargon buster" and 11 stated "have video guides to help support the application." 18 people selected "Other".

When asked to elaborate, many of the comments about MKCF were positive:

"I actually think the current questions and length of form is really good and much better than other funders. I was asked some additional questions to clarify a few items. This was really helpful and I appreciated the opportunity to do this."

"It is a good application process, much better than others I have experienced."

"What you ask for is acceptable"

Many of the ways in which MKCF could improve were previously mentioned in the survey by respondents, but emphasised again here:

- Introduction of a two-tier application or pre-form to "eliminate organisations that don't stand a chance of being successful and thereby save much heart ache."
- Provision of clearer instructions on the difference between the different grants on offer and more detailed guidance for the application process
- Reverse the decision on not funding CICs
- Consider funding ongoing costs rather than just new projects
- Provide more explanation for what will not be funded ("if you will never support work in schools in the education sector, this should be declared. If you will not support materials available to people without access to computers, this should be declared or explained")

Other suggestions/feedback include:

- Be more flexible about repeat funding
- Allocate an officer to provide guidance
- Team up with other organisations to offer a "bid buddy" service
- Change policy on land use and warehouse rentals
- Do not ask for copies of quotes at the time of applying

How could the Milton Keynes Community Foundation improve its current grant application and decision-making process?

Category	Value
Provide clearer examples of what information is needed for…	36
Offer more support to applicants throughout the process	29
Reduce amount of supporting documentation required	29
Decrease length of application form	26
Reduce time it takes for grant application to be processed	23
Provide min/max word counts for application form	20
Other	18
Have a jargon buster	12
Have video guides to help support your application	11
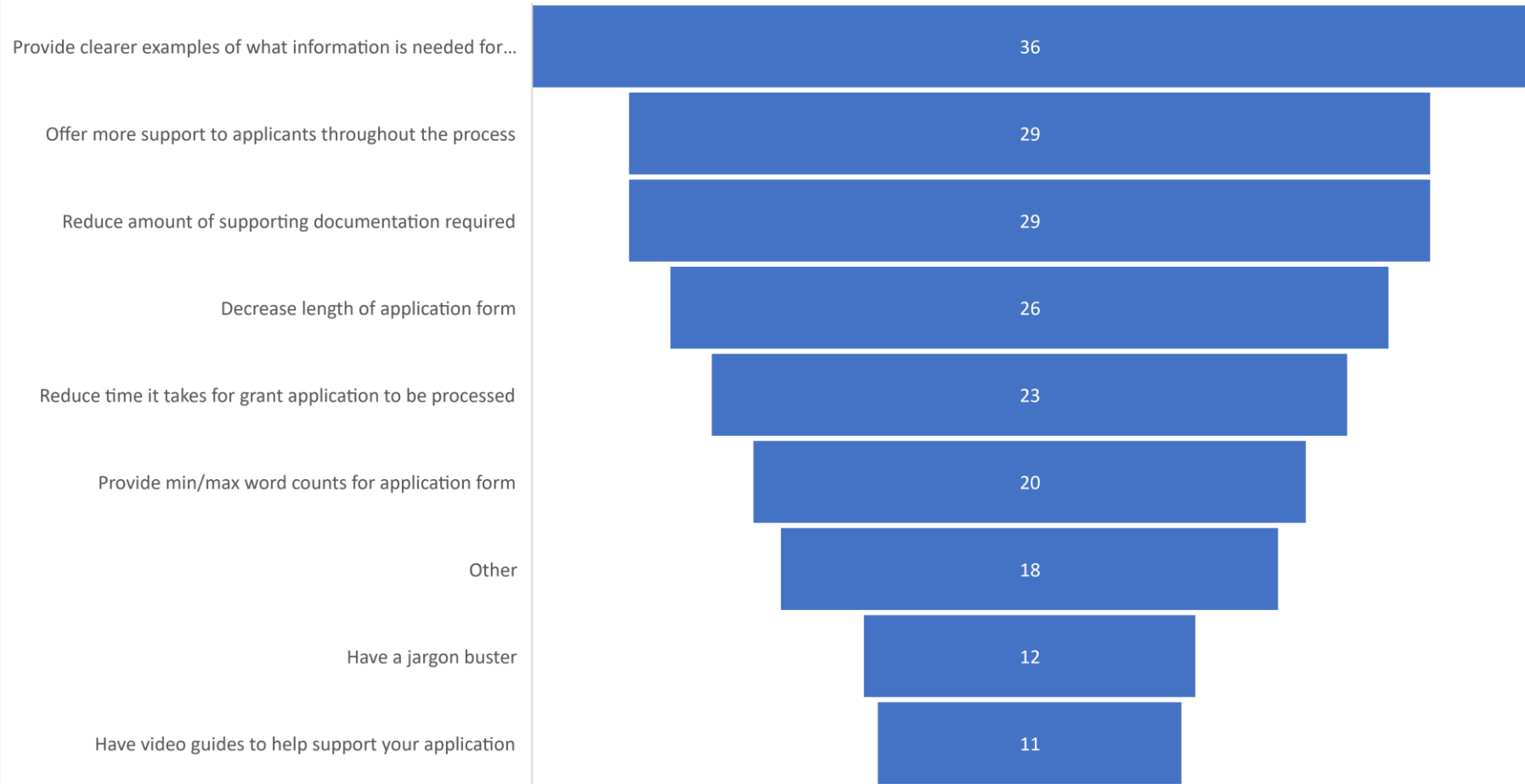
Figure 30 - How could the Milton Keynes Community Foundation improve its current grant application and decision-making process?

Part 4: Your Perception of Milton Keynes Community Foundation Decision-Making Process
The final section of survey was concerned with organisations' general thoughts on MKCF.

To this end, the first question asked respondents to select three adjectives from a list to best describe their perception of MKCF throughout the application and decision-making process. These responses are presented in a Word Cloud in **Figure 31**, followed by a detailed bar chart in **Figure 32** (overleaf). As they show, "supportive" was overwhelmingly the most frequently occurring word, with 57 out of 90 respondents selecting it. The other four words to make up the top five were also highly positive: friendly (27), professional (26), approachable (26) and helpful (23). While negative adjectives were used on a far lesser extent to describe MKCF, it is worth pointing out that "narrow-minded" did appear 12 times in comparison to "open-minded", which appeared just twice. Although on an even lesser extent, other negative adjectives included unsympathetic (6), distant (6), unhelpful (6) and old-fashioned (6). Of those who selected "Other", additional adjectives included: "out of touch with the sector", "too narrow-focused", "too short-term in its thinking", "inconsistent", "lightweight" and "could be more forward thinking on the arts". However, one respondent made clear that MKCF is "generally supportive, friendly and encouraging, but they have a limited budget available so can't be as extreme as the question suggests."

Figure 31 - Word Cloud with adjectives to describe Milton Keynes Community Foundation
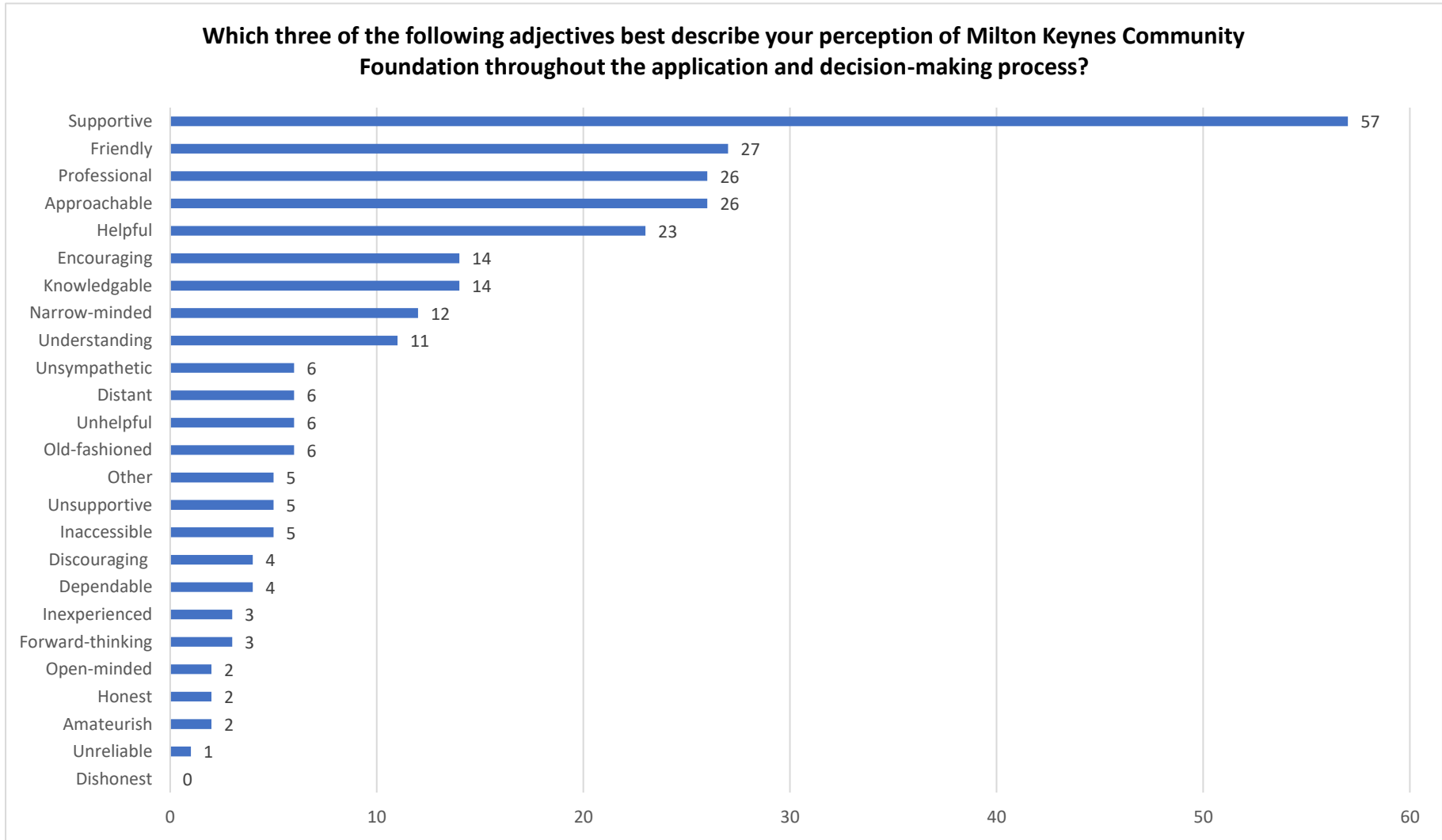
**Figure 32 - Which three of the following adjectives best describe your perception of Milton Keynes Community Foundation throughout the application and decision-making process?**

Finally, respondents were asked to rate their overall experience of dealing with MKCF. As **Figure 33** (overleaf) shows, on the whole, respondents seemed happy with 36.7% stating extremely positive and 32.3% stating positive. 20% expressed neither positive nor negative. While nobody rated their experience extremely negative, 11.1% did state it as negative.

When asked to leave any further comments, many respondents were keen to express their support for the work of MKCF:

"Any time I have had contact with C F I have always been well received with pleasantness"

"We are extremely happy and I think we are fortunate in MK because we have such a team working closely with the community."

"Always brilliant, but sometimes difficult to get a timely reply - I suspect this is due to high demand."

"The Foundation staff are always approachable and interested."

However, there was also a considerable number of comments regarding MKCF's perception as an "old-fashioned" and "formal" organisation with big picture policies that are "far too inflexible" and "narrow-minded." One respondent suggests that the process could be made more informal in a similar vein to the National Lottery Community Fund, while another suggests that there should be "more open professionalism at the top" in order to produce a "more structured approach." Some respondents also hoped that MKCF could offer timelier and prompt communication in the future.

Some negative responses were more personal and related to personal experiences:

"Left us demoralised and unhappy after weeks of work form filling, getting advice from others in the community - applying for grants is hard work and one wants to feel there is an 80% chance of being successful. Any bid for under £1000 can cost that in time just to get the info together."

"We made an application focused on the most deprived areas of MK, yet the decision made no reference to this and seemed to ignore the benefits to deprived communities."

Overall, how would you rate your experience of dealing with the Milton Keynes Community Foundation?

| Rating	Percentage
Extremely positive	36.70%
Positive	32.20%
Neither positive nor negative	20%
Negative	11.10%
Extremely negative	0%
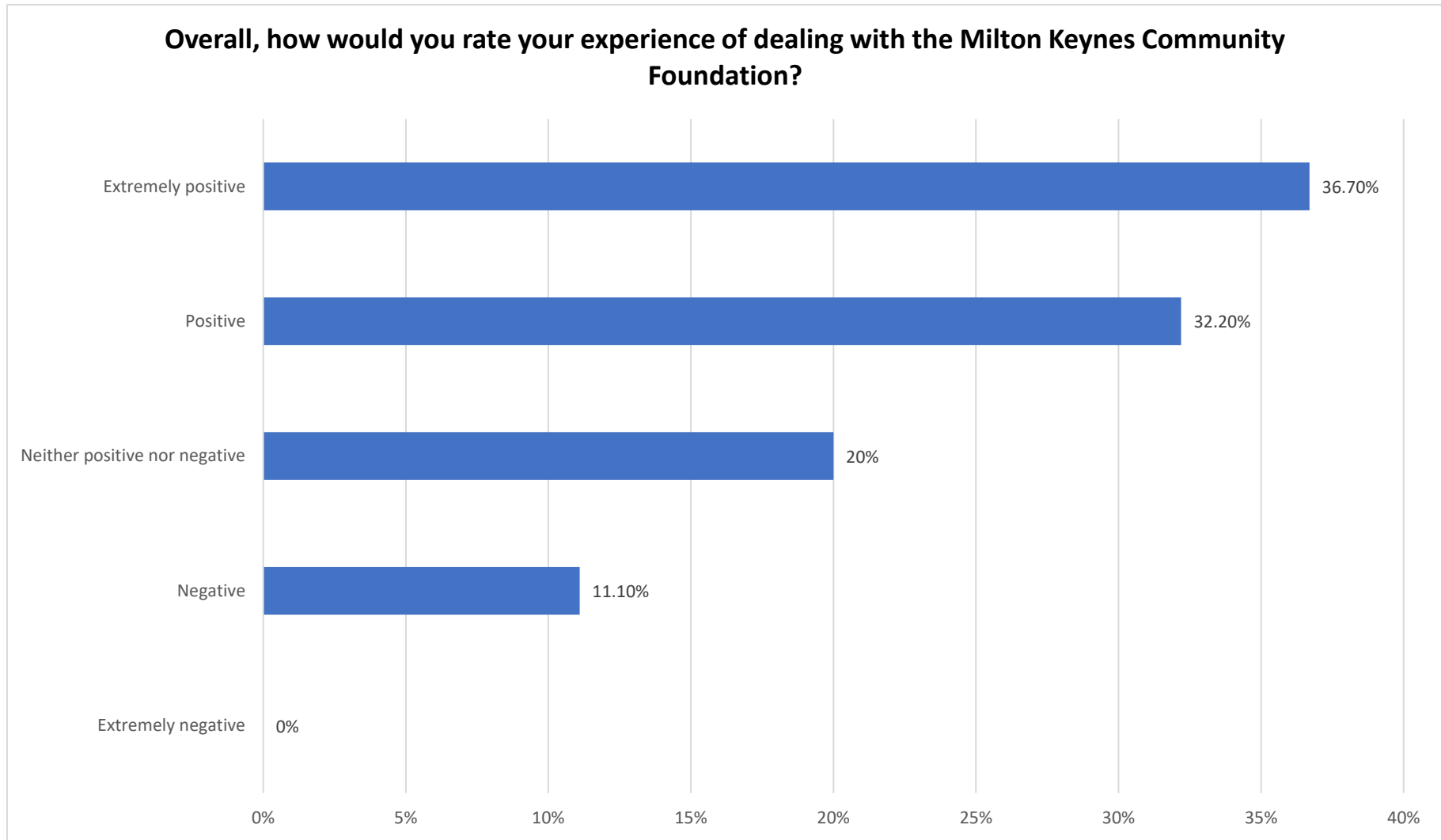
Figure 33 - Overall, how would you rate your experience of dealing with the Milton Keynes Community Foundation?

Respondents were also asked whether MKCF's financial support helped their organisation obtain its project goals. As **Figure 34** shows, almost three quarters of respondents (74.4%) stated yes, while just 15.6% said no. The other 10% stated not applicable.

Did the Milton Keynes Community Foundation's financial support help your organisation obtain its project goals?

- Yes
- No
- Not applicable

10%

15.60%

74.40%
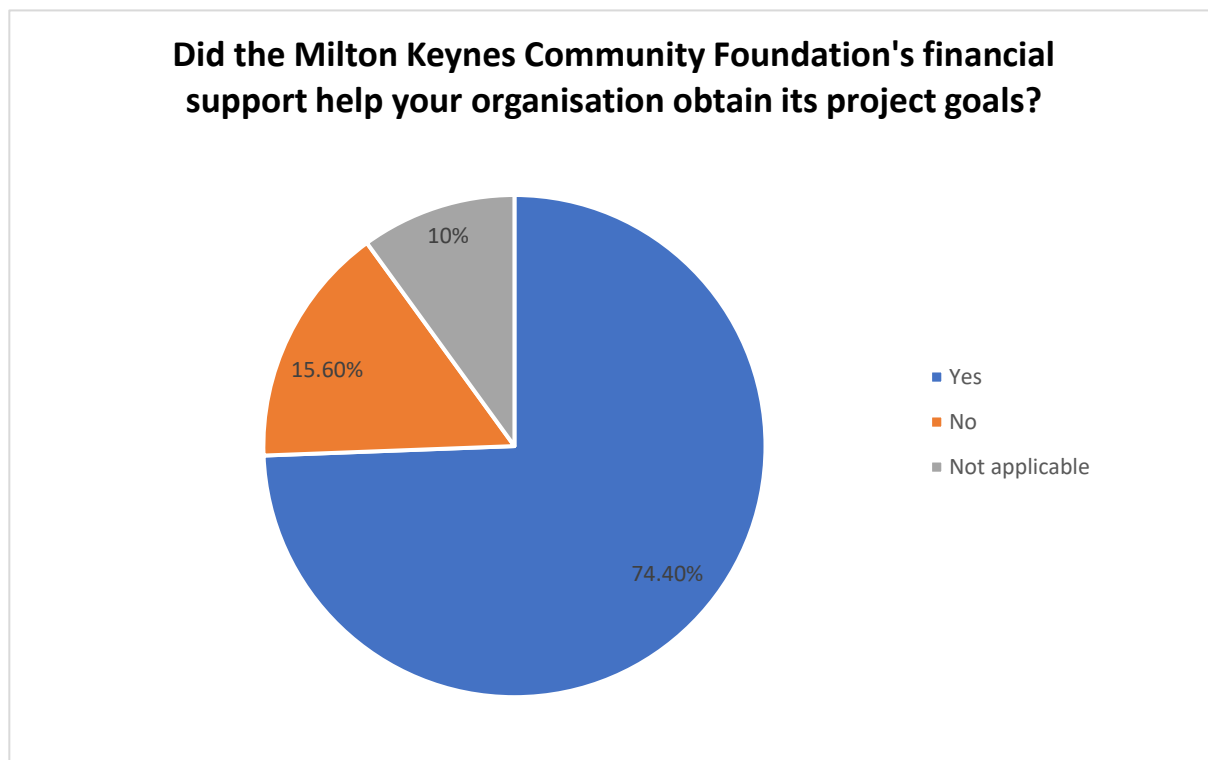
Figure 34 - Did the Milton Keynes Community Foundation's financial support help your organisation obtain its project goals?

When asked to elaborate, many respondents expressed gratitude to MKCF for their support in funding vital projects:

"Funds from MKCF came at a vital and early stage of our organisational development. It was appreciated how much faith the team had in us and our work as we had a previous strong relationship with them from our previous roles. We appreciated that we came to MKCF as a new organisation, with no track record, but they were encouraging and supportive. The funding transformed what we were able to achieve in that first year, strengthening our work, and enabling us to build trust with other funders outside of MK."

"We were able to very quickly adapt our service, develop and offer the right support to staff and participants quickly due to the funding provided"

"The Foundation has been extremely supportive of our organisation and has helped us bring new projects to life which have made a lifechanging impact."

"The grant enabled us to develop and launch our website"

"We hosted the First ever public memorial to Covid loss on 23rd June 2021 thanks to the foundations support."

"Particularly important on this occasion as the Charity was having a tough time with the pandemic and other issues."

"The MKCF have been supportive throughout the length of the strategic grant and very understanding with the impact of COVID on the outcomes including extending the grant period."

"Bosom Pals MK were able to purchase new information leaflets"

"The funds will enable one of our social enterprises to increase production which will increase income and provide the young people we work with a more professional working environment to learn in."

"100% !! so very grateful for their support and funds to help us plant our community orchard"

However, a small number of comments were less positive:

"Due to financial constraints, we were not able to offer the support to deprived communities which we wanted to offer and our project is likely to be completely discontinued after this year. This is deeply disappointing. We will not be applying for funding from you in the future."

"We have not had much support from MKCF despite people constantly pushing us at the organisation. We never seem to fit with their goals despite the fact that we are the only providers of music services to the MK communities and we are doing great work funded by outsiders."

"We have had success with applications for £10,000 or under, but not for the larger schemes. For small grants, we tend to have to use our own funds to make the projects viable, which in the current climate we can no longer afford to do. Smaller grants for running costs rather than projects with project grant schemes for over £10k would be helpful."

The final question asked respondents whether they would recommend MKCF based on their experience. As **Figure 35** (overleaf) shows, an overwhelming 90% said yes, while just 10% said no.

Based on your experience, would you recommend the Milton Keynes Community Foundation to others?
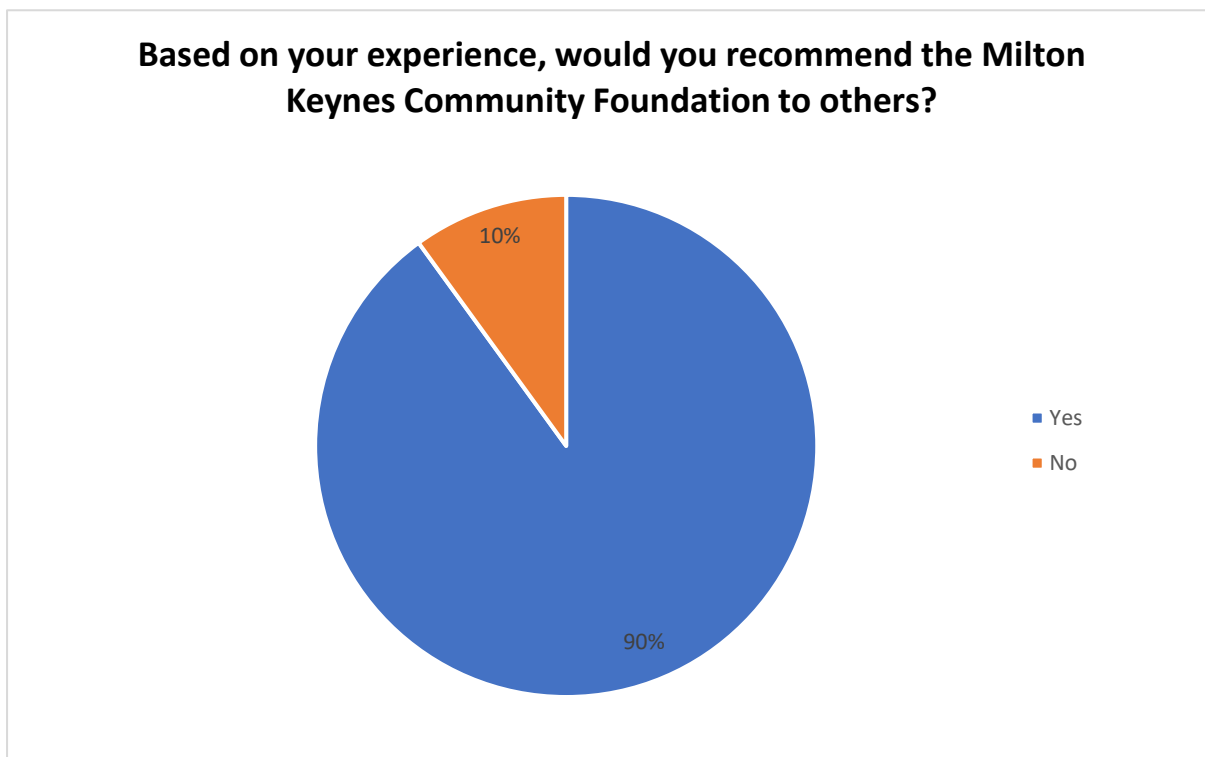
Figure 35 - Based on your experience, would you recommend the Milton Keynes Community Foundation to others?

In the additional comments box, many respondents stated that they had already recommended MKCF to others and would continue to do so in the future. There were also many positive comments about MKCF and the work it does:

"Yes of course - they have significant funds for local VCS organisations. This funding is critical to the success of the charitable sector in terms of helping those in need and enhancing our communities - the VCS really has very few other choices for funding!

"There to help the many voluntary groups in MK and to coordinate where possible"

"You couldn't find more helpful people in their position"

Others had reservations in recommending MKCF, seeing there as being "no choice" because they are the only main funders in Milton Keynes. Other reasons for scepticism came from MKCF's decision to no longer fund CICs or because the respondent had been rejected for a grant despite believing that they fit the declared purposes of MKCF's funding. Several respondents also stated that it seems that only "people who tick certain boxes" receive funding from MKCF and that MKCF is far too "narrow" in its focus on short-term grants rather than long-term solutions in the sector. One respondent elaborated further on their disappointment with MKCF with quite strong views:

"It feels to me that there are organisations that are "in" who get constant funding from MK Community Foundation, and organisations who are ignored. The decision not to fund us as a community benefit society is out of kilter with many national funders, and other community

foundations locally (for instance Northamptonshire do support social enterprises). We have yet to have a proper explanation for this Trustee decision, and it does not feel that the Foundation want to engage with us or others on this matter. I do not believe they can claim to "fund fairness" when large, affluent charities in MK get funding, and small community based organisations do not. This may sound like "sour grapes" but it is not - this is a point of principle about whether or not they believe in communities taking action on behalf and creating a model that has the potential to sustain in the long-term. It feels that they aren't interested in this, but have an old fashioned attitude which assumes that charity equals "good" and social enterprise equals "bad".

Follow-Up Interviews/Focus Groups

The survey ended by asking respondents whether they wanted to be contacted to participate in an interview or focus group. Of the 142 respondents, 67 said yes: 13 with a preference for interviews, 6 for focus groups and 48 with no preference.

Respondents were also asked whether they wanted to be entered into a prize draw to win £100 Amazon voucher. 98 of the 142 respondents said yes.

Qualitative Methodology

To explore the issues raised in the survey stage of the research a programme of qualitative research was carried out. This comprised of two related arms; semi-structured interviews and focus groups. The interviews were designed to elicit more in-depth responses to the areas explored in the survey and to highlight areas of interest to participants which had not been covered in the survey. The focus groups were designed to explore areas of interest which emerged from the interviews, alongside topics from the survey identified by members of MKCF as of interest to them. The programme of interviews therefore commenced before the focus groups in order to inform the refinement of the topics discussed in the focus groups. The methodologies used in each arm are presented separately below, whilst the results are presented together.

Methodology 1: Individual interviews
Semi-structured interviews were planned with up to 25 of those who had indicated a willingness to be involved in the next stage of the research. Loose interview guides were developed by Dr Lauren Alex O'Hagan and Dr Mari Greenfield of the Open University in an iterative process with members of MKCF. The interview guide received ethical approval alongside the survey methodology on 22 June 2023 by the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC/4711/Turner). A copy of the interview guide can be found at Appendix 1.

Those who had provided an e-mail address at the end of the survey were invited to attend online or in-person interviews. Interviews were conducted primarily online by Dr Mari Greenfield, with Dr Wendy Turner and Dr Fidele Mutwarasibo conducting those where participants preferred to be interviewed in person, or those where there was a date clash. On initial contact, several potential participants withdrew from the qualitative stage of the research. Where automatic out of office emails were received a note was made on the file and the initial email was resent several days after the potential participant had returned to work. Further targeted recruitment was carried out by Dr Fidele Mutwarasibo, who invited individuals from key organisations who had taken part in the survey but had not stated they wished to be interviewed.

The initial email included a participant information sheet, which can be found at Appendix 2. Those who responded to book an interview slot were asked to complete a consent form. Non-responders were followed up a maximum of three times. Those who booked interviews but did not appear were subsequently contacted a maximum of three times before being removed from the contact list.

In addition to written consent forms, interviewees were asked if they had any questions at the beginning of the interview, before recording began. Once questions were answered, consent to record and transcribe the interview was sought. Verbal consent to the interview was taken once recording had begun. The semi-structured nature of the interviews meant they were of variable length, with the shortest lasting for 30 minutes and the longest lasting for 90 minutes. Interview guides were focused around four key areas:

- Understanding your organisation
- Awareness of the Milton Keynes Community Foundation
- Grant Application Process
- Perception of the Milton Keynes Community Foundation

Participants co-directed the topics covered and the length of each interview. In addition, at the end of each interview participants were asked if they wished to say anything that had not been covered already. In total 20 interviews were carried out. Interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically.

Methodology 2: Focus groups

Up to four focus groups were planned with survey respondents who had indicated a willingness to be involved in the next stage of the research. Loose topic guides were developed by Dr Lauren Alex O'Hagan and Dr Mari Greenfield of the Open University in an iterative process with members of MKCF and received ethical approval alongside the survey methodology on 22 June 2023 by the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC/4711/Turner). As planned, these topic guides were significantly refined after the members of the MKCF had reviewed the findings of the quantitative research and the first 10 interviews had been conducted, thus ensuring that areas of interest to both MKCF and the voluntary organisations they support were explored. The final topic guide can be found at Appendix 3.

Those who had provided an e-mail address at the end of the survey were invited to attend a focus group and asked for their preference of online or in-person focus groups. Around 75% of those who responded preferred an online group and around 25% preferred an in-person group. Focus group composition was determined by this preference, availability and ensuring a representation of different types and sizes of organisation. Three of the focus groups were conducted online by Dr Mari Greenfield, with Dr Wendy Turner and Dr Fidele Mutwarasibo conducting the fourth in-person focus group at the Open University.

On initial contact, several potential participants withdrew from the qualitative stage of the research. The same contact protocol was followed for focus group attendees as interviewees – where automatic out of office emails were received a note was made on the file and the initial email was resent several days after the potential participant had returned to work, and non-responders were followed up a maximum of three times.

The initial email included a participant information sheet, which can be found at Appendix 4. Those who responded to book a place in a focus group were asked to complete a consent form. In addition to written consent forms, focus group participants were asked if they had any questions at the beginning of the group, before recording began. Once questions were answered, consent to record and transcribe or take fields notes was sought. Verbal consent to the focus group was taken once recording or note-taking had begun. The semi-structured nature of the focus groups and the different mixtures of participants meant that different topics were covered in each group. All groups were kept to time, meaning that some covered a wider range of topics than others.

The three online focus groups were recorded and transcribed, whilst recordings were used to supplement field notes for the in-person focus group due to the difficulty of differentiating with in-person audio recordings. Transcripts and field notes were analysed thematically and the findings were then integrated with findings from the individual interviews.

Methodological notes

Response and attendance rates for research are never 100%. However, we noted that a higher proportion of interviewees and focus group attendees did not appear at pre-arranged sessions than we have usually experienced as researchers. We also noted that a relatively high number of interviewees and focus group participants were concerned that their comments might be identifiable, and had concerns about the consequences of this. Individuals who were concerned about anonymity included:

- Organisations who were funded by MKCF
- Organisations who worked in funding or infrastructure partnerships with MKCF
- Organisations who rented space from MKCF

Results of qualitative research

Following the closure of the survey, the 67 people who said that they would like to be contacted for an interview or focus group were emailed by Dr Mari Greenfield from the Open University. From 19th July to 10th October 2023, 22 took part in interviews and 17 in focus groups. The remainder either did not respond to invitations or withdrew from the qualitative stage of the research. Below we report firstly the types of organisations that participants represented, followed by the main themes that we drew from the data.

Organisations represented

Participants were asked a series of questions about the organisations they represented. As not all individuals provided all information, data may not total the number of participants. Participants were asked about the income of their organisation, as a proxy for organisational size. As can be seen from the results in **Figure 36** below, interview and focus group participants came from organisations of widely varying sizes. (Income categories are shown according to the data received, there are therefore gaps where no participants reported an income of that value.)

What is the approximate income of your organisation/charity/group? (in GBP)

Legend: 0-500 | 5,000-20,000 | 20,001-100K | 100-500K | Over 1 million
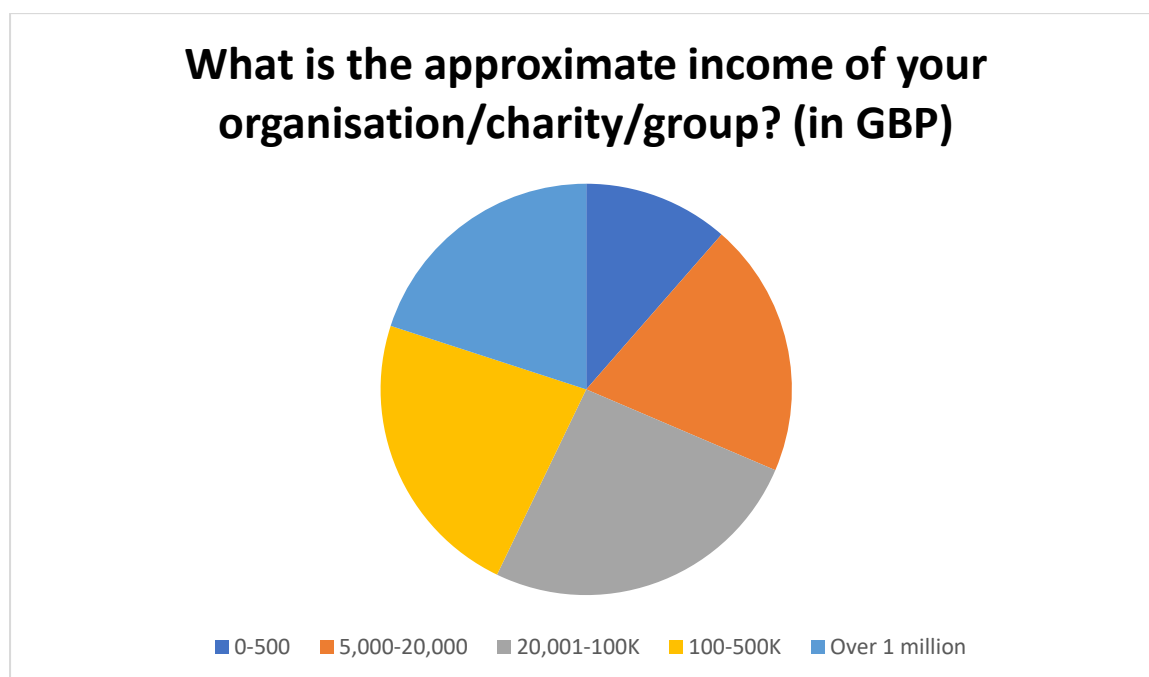
Figure 36– Organisational income

Interviewees and focus group participants represented a range of different organisational types, as shown in **Figure 37** below.
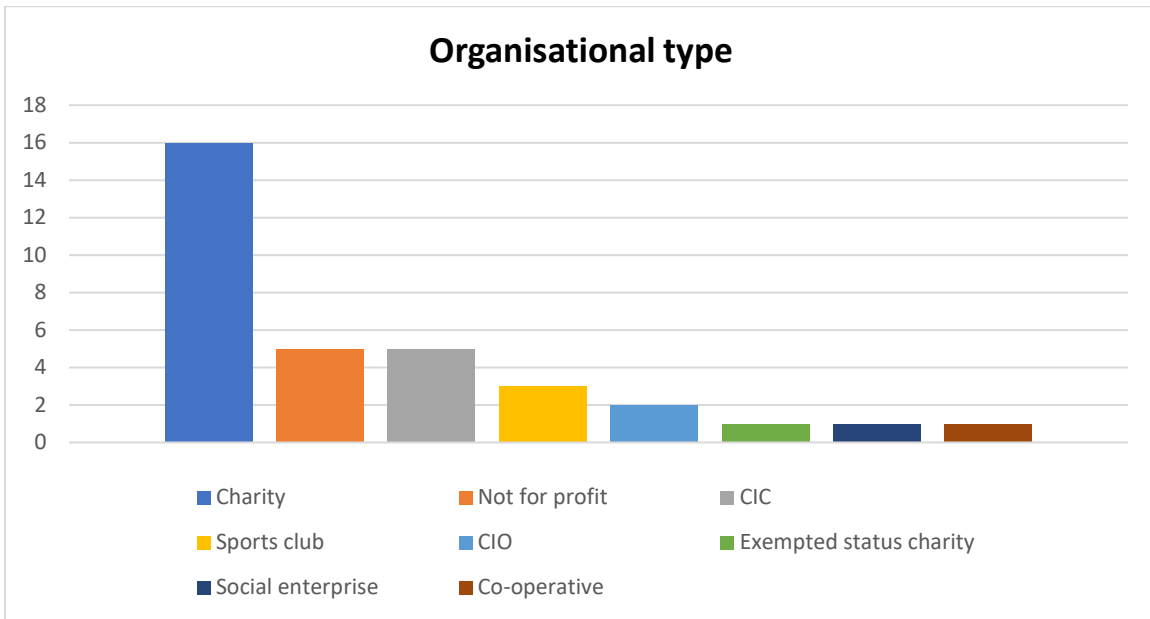
Figure 37 – Organisational type

Participants were asked about the sector they worked in. As shown in **Figure 38** below, they represented organisations working across most of the 12 Vital Signs areas, other than transport and the local environment. Many participants gave responses which covered more than one area. Diversity was most represented area, with four organisations working in the field of disability, three in gender-related projects, three with specific ethnic groups, two with older people and two with young people. In addition, four participants stated that their sector was Sports.
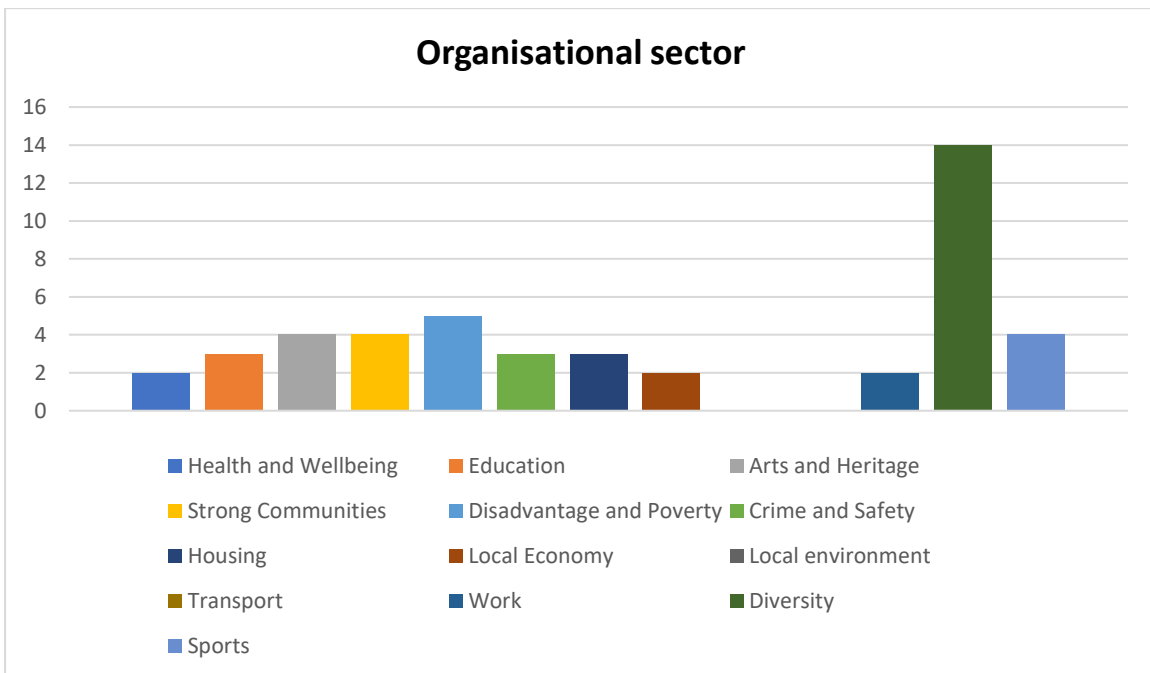
Figure 38 – Organisational sector

Qualitative results

Participants' responses were thematically analysed, drawing connections between the different interviews and focus group comments. Themes that were drawn from the data are shown in **Figure 39** below. Each theme is then described, with illustrative quotes.

	Themes
1	Main issues affecting voluntary sector
2	Voluntary sector infrastructure
3	Grants
4	Accommodation
5	Other functions
6	General perceptions of MKCF

Theme 1 – Main issues affecting voluntary sector

Participants described three main issues affecting the voluntary sector in Milton Keynes currently. They were:

1. Economic situation
2. Physical accommodation
3. Volunteer recruitment

Overwhelmingly, the main issue affecting both the organisations that participants represented and the people they helped was the current economic situation. The cost of living crisis and post-pandemic recovery were both mentioned in this context. Participants said the costs of running their organisations had risen, including physical accommodation (Interview 9), energy costs (Interview 11), and consumables (Interview 8). Their volunteers were also struggling to afford to donate their time, both because they needed to work longer hours in a paid role and because the cost of transport to reach the organisation had risen (Focus group 2). At the same time, the effect on donations was noted as negative:

> People haven't got the extra finances to donate to charities at the moment (Focus group 1)

The cost of living crisis was also affecting those who used the services of many of the organisations participants were from:

> You've got it from both sides. You can't raise as much money and in charities like food banks, you're having an increase in demand for their services with their decrease in generated income (Focus group 1)

In most cases, this rise in demand for services resulted in an increased need for funding. On average, affected organisations felt they needed to generate an extra 25-50% revenue over the next 2-3 years in order to continue to operate, with three participants saying their organisation was now using reserves to fund operational work. However, this was not universal but was dependent on the business model of the organisation. One participant described that because their organisation charged a subscription fee, increased service use resulted in an increased income. They were however aware that some members might no longer be able to afford the subscription fee, which might mean a reduction in membership and a consequent financial loss – a situation that had already begun to affect the viability of another participant's organisation (Interview 5).

The second most mentioned issue facing the voluntary sector was that of physical space to run organisations from. This was mentioned as a concern by a wide range of organisations, from those who needed office space, to sports groups, youth groups and arts and crafts groups. There was a sense that physical spaces were both in short supply and, where they were available, cost a considerable amount. Several organisations with incomes under £100,000 mentioned that the cost of physical accommodation was their biggest expenditure, whilst two organisations with an income of over 1 million said that rising physical accommodation costs had forced their organisation to use reserves to meet operational costs within the last 12 months. A further two smaller organisations had decided they could not have a physical base for their activities, and described creative ways in which they used outside space such as parks to base their activities in.

A number of participants described the difficulty of recruiting volunteers. This was explicitly linked by several participants to the financial and consequent time pressures created by the cost of living crisis, but was also affected by other factors. In some cases, participants described needing to recruit volunteers who had specific skills (for example, working with ex-offenders), whilst in other cases participants described difficulties in communicating to potential volunteers that they did not need specific skills (for example youth sports and activity clubs).

Theme 2 – Voluntary sector infrastructure

Milton Keynes was described by many participants as a unique place to run a voluntary sector organisation for several reasons:

> Milton Keynes population, it's got a spike in terms of people over 70. So it's different to other places (Focus group 1)

There was a general perception that there are far more voluntary sector organisations within Milton Keynes than in other places, and that the strong voluntary sector infrastructure is in part responsible for this. MKCF was described as having a central role in this infrastructure and as providing very good support to both existing organisations and those who wanted to establish something new. Milton Keynes Community Action was also seen as an integral part of the infrastructure, as were a range of existing networks that formed an interface between the voluntary and statutory sectors. Networks mentioned included:

- Climate Action group
- Child Poverty partnership
- District Scout network
- Disability Advisory group
- Older Person's board
- Regional Cricket board
- Mental Health networks
- Arts and Heritage network
- Hubbub
- Homelessness partnership
- Intercultural partnership
- Physical Activity Alliance
- Various locality based networks

Focus groups explicitly discussed what was meant by the voluntary sector infrastructure, as well as what existed in Milton Keynes. Answers varied by the size of the organisation and the length of experience of the participant. Those who worked in paid roles for larger organisations described complex systems of support for governance, access to the statutory sector, training and policy development and networking. Those who had less experience or volunteered with smaller organisations broadly described infrastructure as networking opportunities between organisations working in the same sector or in different sectors but with the same clients.

Whilst having so many voluntary sector groups within Milton Keynes was seen as a strength, it also led participants to feel they lacked knowledge about other organisations and their work, perhaps leading to duplication. There was a strong desire to forge connections with

other organisations, to the extent that participants in three focus groups swapped contact details during the group as they uncovered synergies between their organisations. Focus group participants made suggestions for improving the networking opportunities, and this became an iterative process, with each group beginning with the ideas of the previous group and refining them.

Group 1
- Face-to-face networking
- Regular basis (twice yearly)
- Charity fair

Group 2
- Multiple charity fairs, organised by sectory
- Should be purposeful
- Needs to be backed up by a live database of current organisations

Group 3
- Promoting equity between organisations
- Need to ensure it isn't dominated by larger organisations
- Should not duplicate what already exists

Group 4
- Not during working week as it excludes smaller volunteer-only groups
- Should be less formal than the existing voluntary/statutory networks, but feed into them
- Needs formal links to existing networks - could be organised around those themes

The final model arrived at would therefore appear to be a live database or register of all voluntary sector organisations in Milton Keynes, with a brief description of the work they carry out and the sectors they work across. Alongside this, there is a desire for regular face-to-face charity fair events, particularly aimed at smaller organisations, which are organised loosely around the themes of existing formal networks and have representatives from those networks attending to facilitate access if desired. Participants felt this model would enable organisations to organically form partnerships – a model that was preferred over training in partnership strategies.

Participants recognised that creating and maintaining this kind of infrastructure comes with significant costs. There were discussions in several groups about whether this was appropriate to be part of MKCF's role or whether this work would be better undertaken by a voluntary sector umbrella body (Focus group 3). Others felt that an umbrella body would add an unnecessary layer to an already complex infrastructure landscape. Some participants were concerned that any sector-wide work could increase confusion that resulted from different approaches that already existed within the voluntary sector infrastructure – they perceived that MKCF, as a funder, worked with a 'top-down' approach in that organisations need to be established and have well-developed project plans in place to secure funding, whilst other organisations worked with a 'bottom-up' approach, providing support primarily to organisations who are not as well developed. Experiencing these differences in organisational culture as reducing support already, they were concerned that if any

organisation took the lead on establishing this kind of network it would result in an almost monopoly situation within the voluntary sector.

Theme 3 - General perception

Interviewees and focus group participants were asked about their general impressions of MKCF, their strengths, and what they could do better. Almost all participants had a positive general perception of MKCF, although surprisingly, one participant was unaware of MKCF (Interview 17). A small number of participants appeared to have some confusion between MKCF and Milton Keynes Community Action (Focus group 3). At the end of each interview, interviewees were asked for three words that described their overall perception of MKCF. These are shown as a word cloud in **Figure 39** below.
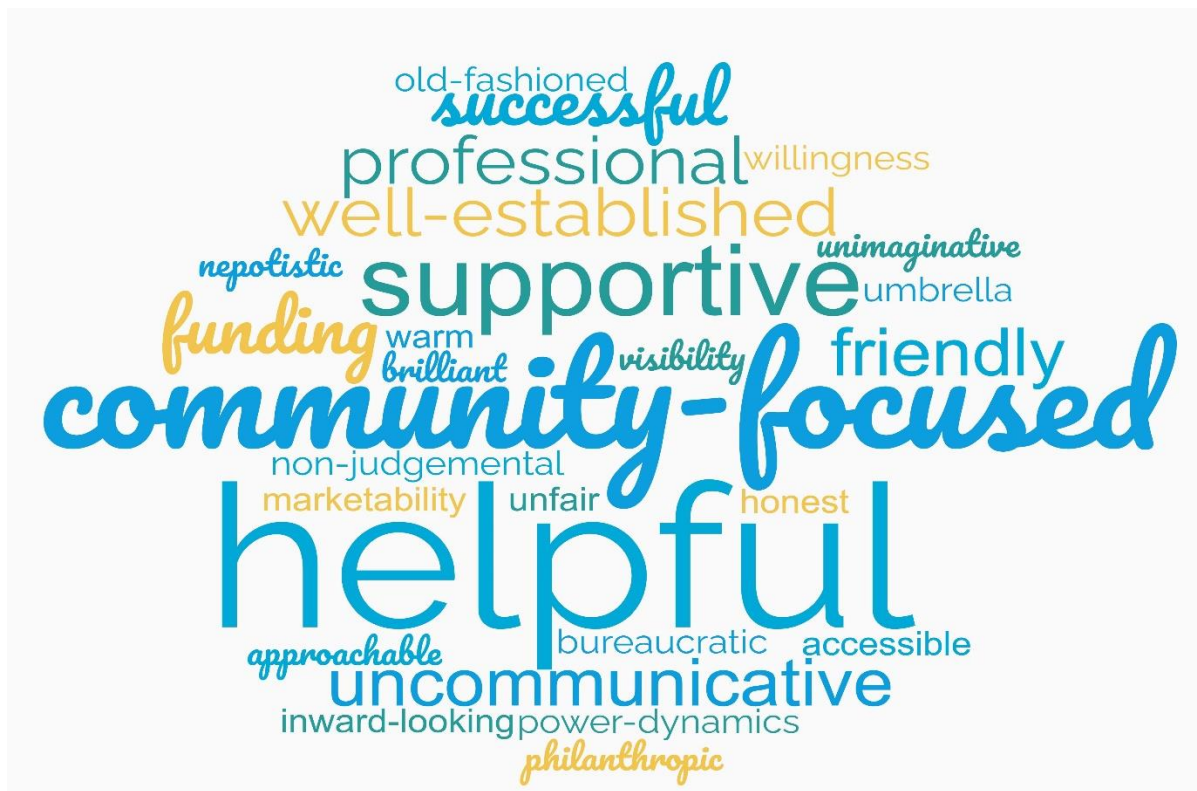
Figure 39 – Word Cloud with adjectives to describe Milton Keynes Community Foundation

As can be seen from the word cloud, the majority of participants had very positive general perceptions of MKCF. Areas that were mentioned as leaving room for improvement often concerned communications:

> Sometimes I feel like they're dissatisfied with us, but I'm not quite sure why. The feedback that we've had is that it should be a two way relationship, but they've never really sort of said what it is they would like us to do. (Interview 7)

Several participants noted that they found the Philanthropy team extremely friendly and helpful in person, but that they found it more difficult to get responses to email enquiries. Others would have valued proactive contact from MKCF, particularly when applying for grants:

If they were to follow up, just a quick phone call would have been quite helpful to just encourage, the progress of the application, know if they thought it was viable, just to hear someone rather than typing, typing. (Interview 6)

There was also an awareness that funder requirements will always shape organisations. This was seen as inevitable, and as having positive benefits in that meeting the requirements of MKCF could ensure that organisations had appropriate policies and procedures. Many participants attributed the flourishing of the voluntary sector in Milton Keynes in part to the way MKCF had shaped smaller voluntary sector organisations. However it also led to some uneasiness that was connected with the size of MKCF and the potential power it therefore wielded over the voluntary sector as a whole within Milton Keynes. Several participants expressed slight concern that in being both a funder and offering services such as capacity building and development work, a potential conflict of interest arose:

'You can't be a friend and your funder.' (Interview 18)

<u>Theme 4 - Grants</u>

The grant giving function of MKCF was highly appreciated by almost all participants, regardless of whether they had received a grant or not. The variety of grants on offer was felt to be easily understandable, and the website was described as easily navigable. No suggestions were made for additional information to be covered in the frequently asked questions, which were described as comprehensive. The process of applying for grants was seen as transparent, and the timescales were described as reasonable by all participants.

For the smaller grants, a few organisations described the amount of information required as somewhat onerous, especially by smaller organisations with no paid staff:

> I think their form is really ridiculous. There's so much monitoring information. You can't possibly say at the point of application, how many people from BME communities you're going to reach at that point. And yet that's what your required to say in the application (Interview 21)

The timescales in which reports about how items purchased had been used were also mentioned as occasionally awkward by some groups – one interviewee described having been awarded a grant for outdoor equipment:

> I needed to have them for the spring, but I was awarded in November, they expected the report by the end of January, it's supposed to include like how it's how the equipment's been used. And obviously at that point it won't have been used because it's been winter (Interview 15).

The participant had needed to hold a special session of their group to use the equipment so that they could write a report stating it had been used within the timescales. When asked whether they had contacted the Philanthropy team to discuss the issue, the participant explained that they found it difficult to contact the Philanthropy team as they worked full-time in a role where they could not easily make a phone call during working hours.

When it came to larger grants, participants divided into two groups. Organisations which had salaried staff who wrote bids as part of their paid role found MKCF's processes considerably easier to follow than other similar funders. They complemented the responsiveness of the Philanthropy team and found the timescales to be similar to or faster than other grants of a similar size:

> The last strategic grants when we applied it was a very basic form that was very, very straight forward with add this add this don't add this, don't add that. That's just my personal experience again (Focus group 2)

Smaller organisations – especially those staffed by volunteers who ran their organisations alongside working full-time – had a different experience. Many found the application process time consuming because it was unfamiliar to them. Several participants described not having applied for a grant because they were not confident about whether their proposal aligned with MKCF's funding priorities. Whilst they were aware of the information MKCF published about priorities, especially in the form of the Vital Signs report, these participants sometimes described being overwhelmed by the quantity of information, which they had difficulty in interpreting to answer the question of whether their project was of interest to MKCF:

> What they wanted from us at the time, they wanted DBR checks and all this stuff. It was just a concept at that stage and they wanted a whole project plan for it, which I completely understand, but obviously we were just looking at that point to pitch the idea, to see if they would be interested in it, other places it could go, and what other people we could reach out to. And all they said was submit it, we'll get back to you and I think that's where the communication breakdown was. (Focus group 2)

This was not a universal experience; in the same focus group another participant from a similarly sized volunteer-run organisation described a very different experience:

> So they actually came to us and said, do you need help? How can you how can we help you? (Focus group 2)

This proactive approach was highly appreciated, but left the first participant wondering why this difference existed.

One suggestion for improving this situation was that there could be an optional preliminary application stage, where organisations could submit an expression of interest with a lot less information. Depending on the outcome of the expression of interest, the organisation could then decide whether to invest the time in a full application.

Several of those whose applications had been unsuccessful commented positively on the fact that the email subject line stated whether they had been successful, as they did not have to open the email attachments to find out the result. There were mixed experiences about whether participants felt they had received sufficient information about the reasons their applications were unsuccessful, divided along similar lines to those described above. In general, those from larger organisations who had a paid role in their organisation felt they had a good understanding of the reasons, whilst volunteers from smaller organisations were less likely to say they understood the reasons. We suggest this may be linked to two factors – understanding of the grant criteria and confidence in asking for clarification.

It was notable that when participants talked about contacting the Philanthropy team, those from larger organisations frequently mentioned phoning or visiting MKCF, whilst those from smaller organisations described e-mailing. In part this appeared to be a practical differentiation, as those from smaller organisations were less likely to be available during working hours, and in part it appeared to be due to a form of imposter syndrome, where volunteers from smaller organisations felt they would be causing inconvenience for MKCF if they phoned to ask questions. As an illustration, in response to a question about whether they had considered phoning to ask a question that they had needed an answer to, one participant from a smaller organisation answered:

> 'No, because I'm very compliant. Sorry, I just do as I'm told.' (Interview 15)

As every participant who had had direct contact with the Philanthropy team described them as friendly and helpful, finding ways to enable (in terms of working hours) and encourage smaller organisations to initiate direct contact might be helpful.

Five participants represented CICs. They were all aware that MKCF do not offer funding to CICs and of the reasons behind this. Several suggestions of ways in which MKCF could offer support specifically to CICs were mentioned. The first related to advice provided. One participant stated that had they known MKCF did not provide grants to CICs, they would have set up their organisation with a different structure. They would therefore have liked advice from either MKCF or another infrastructure agency about the practical consequences of choosing different governance and organisational forms at an early point. Secondly, there was a request for signposting to other funders, alongside support with funding applications for CICs:

> For those new CICs or smaller ones who have never applied for a fund before it'd be great to be given some tools to be able to do it ourselves if nobody else can help (Focus group 4)

Theme 5 – Accommodation

The dearth of affordable hireable space was mentioned as an issue affecting the voluntary sector in Milton Keynes by a number of participants. Participants described needing physical spaces for groups to meet, for offices for their organisation, and needing sports facilities:

> When we first started, if it was raining, we didn't have anywhere to go, so we had to curtail our training at that point, which is never going to be sustainable long term. So we've had to hire an additional facility, their biggest sports hall, which is again a bigger cost and in order for us to get it, we had to hire it for the full year (Interview 2).

MKCF's role as landlord and provider of hourly hired space was mentioned by a number of participants. Most were very grateful for the service provided:

> The receptionists at the MK Community Foundation are brilliant, when we contact them fairly last minute and go something's changed - can we book a room for two nights time? They're really good. (Interview 14)

However there was a sense of concern that with the current redevelopment of some of the spaces provided, costs might increase to a level that was not possible for organisations who currently used the spaces to be able to meet. Several participants also raised questions about the dual role that MKCF play. They understood that acting as a landlord raised funds for grants, but had questions about the sustainability of this if organisations were unable to afford the spaces that MKCF had available for hire.

All participants who rented spaces on a long-term basis from MKCF raised issues relating to the non-responsiveness of the management company who are employed.

<u>Theme 6 – Other functions</u>

Alongside funding grants and physical space, participants identified a range of other support that they either had received or would find useful to receive for their organisation. This support largely comprised of advice, policy/practice development, and volunteer recruitment and support. In general, this kind of support need was discussed more by participants representing smaller groups (as defined by income). This was not universal though – small groups who belonged to an umbrella organisation (for example Scouts) did not appear to need the same kind advice and policy/practice development support as this role was fulfilled by the umbrella organisation, but did still want support in volunteer recruitment. Simultaneously, participants who represented smaller organisations said that they found it more difficult to access the support services that MKCF provided, as they were more likely to be volunteering outside of standard working hours:

> They've had volunteering days, but they're during the week. Most of our volunteers work full time and the people we will likely attract also work full time. (Interview 16)

Producing the Vital Signs report was seen as an important part of MKCF's work. Many organisations used it to either target their work or as evidence when applying for funding. Some participants did note that the fact funding decisions are guided in part by Vital Signs, which is based on local quantitative data about what has already happened and been measured, can become a cyclical process. This could give rise to the potential for previously unrecognised issues to be missed until they are already impacting the local community. Several participants suggested that Vital Signs could be strengthened by adding a horizon scanning element, rather than reporting only on the current situation. Suggestions for this element coalesced around the idea of including a section co-authored with local voluntary organisations, reporting qualitatively on issues they were noticing as new and arising.

Organisations who had received advice and developmental support from MKCF really appreciated the help they had been given. As mentioned in Theme 2, five participants represented CICs, and found that they had struggled to access needed support. One participant had needed advice about how to register that they had taken over the organisation:

> Their CIC data that I was trying to assume control of, I struggled to because we were like these people just disappeared off the the face of the earth. We could not get in touch with the bank or Companies house about transferring the ownership, the director information (Interview 13)

Participants found that because they were a CIC, this support was unavailable from MKCF. Whilst understanding the reasons that grants were not available to CICs, they questioned

the rationale behind not providing other kinds of support such as advice. Participants from CICs also would have liked MKCF to act a signpost to additional funders:

> I don't think a lot of the people that are entitled to that funding know where to go, what to do or again who to communicate with (Focus group 2)

Without this advice coming from MKCF, several participants from CICs found they could not obtain the information easily, due to MKCF's prominence in the local voluntary sector infrastructure:

> It's very hard to know where to go to get that right information to be able to offer services (Interview 20)

Without access to funding, several participants from CICs mentioned that they were providing the funding for their organisation themselves – a practice which was not sustainable:

> Funding wise, it's out my pocket (Interview 20)

The desire for additional advice and developmental support was strongest amongst the participants who represented CICs, and was absent amongst participants who hired space on a long term basis from MKCF, suggesting perhaps that those who had a more constant connection with the foundation were able to access the support that other participants would have found useful. In between these two groups, the remainder of the participants representing smaller organisations expressed a desire to be provided with additional support to improve their successfulness as an organisation:

> Their biggest strength is they run a very successful charity. The weakness is not telling other charities how to be as successful as they are. (Focus group 2)

Summary

There is a strong voluntary sector within Milton Keynes. Many voluntary organisations are small and only make up to £10,000 per year, having few paid staff or being run entirely by volunteers. MKCF has a strong presence in Milton Keynes with good reach, and is positively regarded by most voluntary sector organisations. Many organisations became aware of MKCF through word of mouth or networking rather than digital means.

Amongst our participants there was good representation from the Health and Wellbeing, Education, Arts and Heritage and Diversity and Inclusion sectors. The majority had applied for small or community grants. A significant proportion of participants had not ever applied for a grant, citing a lack of organisational readiness, a lack of time, or concerns about either eligibility or that they would not be successful.

The main issues facing the organisations are financial sustainability predominantly, as well as meeting demand for services – it was felt the cost of living crisis and ongoing effects of the pandemic were responsible for both of these issues. Many organisations described seeing a huge growth in demand for services and need for funding over the last 12 months, which left a significant number using their reserves to continue operating. Almost 80% are expecting their funding needs to increase over next 2-3 years as Milton Keynes grows, local authorities face more cuts, and the cost of living crisis deepens.

Locally, there was a perception that more infrastructure support was needed for the voluntary sector, and that greater clarity and a more streamlined approach within the existing infrastructure would be beneficial. Suggestions were made for a register of voluntary sector organisation, alongside a repeated series of voluntary sector fairs, each linked to an existing network, preferably outside of core hours to facilitate the involvement of smaller organisations. This was felt likely to increase collaboration between charities.

Feedback about MKCF's website was generally positive, and most people understood the programmes on offer. Those who used the FAQs generally found them useful, however a number of people overlooked them or were not aware of them. The application process for grants was generally seen as simple, easy to understand, and a fair and inclusive process, but some participants raised issues around computer illiteracy, attitudes towards faith groups and definitions of diversity. The timescales for grant decisions were felt to be reasonable. There was a lot of frustration with the application form and many suggestions on how it could be improved, particularly in terms of length. Participants who had had contact with the Philanthropy team generally had a very positive view about the support they provided. A divide appeared larger organisations, who were more likely to have had

direct contact due to availability during working hours and to confidence in phoning or visiting MKCF, and smaller organisations where availability and confidence meant they were more likely to search for information on the website or email. Those who had only had indirect contact had a slightly less positive view of the team, or in some cases were not aware it existed.

Vital Signs was positively regarded. Suggestions were made for the improvement of the report in terms of including up and coming issues and also for the visibility of the report in the local community via events.

Participants highlighted a range of areas where they would appreciate additional or renewed support from MKCF, which included:

- CICs
- Animal welfare and music and sports clubs
- Running costs and/or unrestricted funding
- Sustained clubs rather than just start ups
- Reducing restrictions on repeat funding
- Venue hire

There is a generally positive view of MKCF, but a small number of participants perceived it as a narrow-minded and old-fashioned organisation that needs to be open to supporting a more diverse range of organisations, rather than just traditional registered charities. Overall 90% of our participants would recommend MKCF to another organisation like themselves.

Recommendations

Infrastructure
- To consider the relationship between MKCF and other large infrastructure organisations and funders in the area, either merging or having a clearer demarcation with better referral routes
- Promote existing voluntary networks in the area better
- Facilitate – or fund the facilitation of – relationships between smaller and medium sized voluntary sector organisations in Milton Keynes, perhaps through a series of charity fairs, organised around the existing voluntary network themes
- Consider alignment with local public sector priorities
- Create a register or directory of types of support available in MK to increase visibility

Website
- Offer a simple table that provides an overview of the different grant funding schemes with eligibility and timescales
- Add a preload option for return applicants (contact/company details)
- Add a clearer rationale for why CICs are no longer supported
- Provide a page with a selection of all the grant-giving bodies/grants in the local area
- Provide examples of previously funded projects that fit each scheme/criteria
- Give clearer guidance on the rolling processes
- Send out regular emails communicating the different grant options available

FAQs
- Give FAQs a more prominent place on the MKCF website
- Keep FAQs up to date
- Provide clearer information on the restrictions of applying for a smaller grant
- Provide clearer information on the difference between being a "Member" and a "Friend"
- Provide better explanations for what will not be funded

Vital Signs
- Give Vital Signs a more prominent place on the MKCF website
- Include more facts and figures in Vital Signs on the number of people with learning disabilities and deeper broader picture of their lives (i.e., employment, housing, health etc)
- Provide more depth to the content of Vital Signs
- Increase publicity of Vital Signs across the community, particularly for BAME groups
- Consider expanding the 10 categories of Vital Signs

- Be aware of the circular nature of using Vital Signs as a funding criteria, consider adding qualitative data from horizon scanning with local voluntary sector organisations

Grant Application Process

Application Process

- Introduce a two-stage application process so that initial project ideas can be agreed or closed down with speed
- Provide option to have a face-to-face meeting or telephone appointment to help with grant applications
- Offer workshops/social entrepreneurship courses for "rookie" applicants
- Advisers should make clear in initial conversations whether an organisation's idea is fundable or not rather than immediately encouraging a written application
- Offer a paper version for those who are not computer literate
- Provide decision dates so that applicants know when they can expect to hear back from MKCF
- Do not ask for copies of quotes at the time of applying
- Allocate an officer to provide guidance throughout the process
- Team up with other organisations to offer a 'bid buddy' service

General

- Provide more community meetings to raise awareness of MKCF and tell local organisations what they do and how they can help businesses, or provide this information via a series of charity fairs, linked to the existing voluntary sector networks
- Consider extending support to sustained clubs rather than just start ups
- Be more flexible about repeat funding and core funding
- Consider changing policy on land use and warehouse rentals
- More collaboration with neighbouring areas to learn from their practices
- Focus more on supporting costs of venue hire
- Have a more laidback stance towards the Arts, particularly music and sports
- Consider core hours and accessibility to smaller organisations

Appendix 1 – Interview guide

Below is a rough guide to the types of questions that we will be asking in our interviews and focus groups. The questions are based on discussions with the Milton Keynes Community Foundation and have built upon our survey questions.

Understanding your organisation
- What type of organisation/group are you?
- What sector does your organisation primarily operate in?
- What is your approximate annual income? What are your core costs?
- Do you receive any funding from the Council? If so, have you experienced any shortfalls in Council funding?
- What are the main issues affecting your charity/group/organisation currently?
- Do you feel the current infrastructure support for the voluntary sector in Milton Keynes is sufficient? If not, can you tell me where the gaps are?
- In trying to understand more about the priorities and challenges that your charity is currently facing, to what extent have you seen a change in:
  - Demand for services in the last 12 months
  - Need for funding has increased over the last 12 months
  - Use of reserves to continue to operate
- Using 2022 as a base by what % do you think you will need to grow your funding over the next 2-3 years to continue operating?
- What are the main current challenges you face as an organisation in terms of volunteers? Is there any support specifically around working with volunteers that you would find useful?
- What partnerships are you currently involved in? What partnership strategies do you currently use? What would you find useful in helping you develop partnership strategies?

Awareness of the Milton Keynes Community Foundation
- How did you first become aware of the MKCF?
- Are you aware of MKCF's Vital Signs report? Do you find the report helpful, and if so, how do you use it?
- Are you aware of MKCF's Capacity Building programme? Have you attended any of their training programmes, and if so, do you have any feedback?
- Did you use the MKCF website as a first point for information on grants?
- How easy did you find it to navigate round?
- Did you understand the various grant giving programmes that were on offer and easily know which one was relevant to you? If no, what would you like to have more information on to support any applications?
- Did you find it easy to get information about the application process?
- Did you find the FAQ's useful? What further information would you have liked?

Grant Application Process
- Have you ever applied for a grant with the MKCF before if so what type?

- If so, was it successful?
- Have you ever had any unsuccessful grant applications?
- How easy was the application process?
- How speedy was the application process?
- How responsive were the Philanthropy team; what could have been better?
- How approachable were the MKCF in supporting your application in the early stages?
- For those that were unsuccessful. how satisfied were you with the response rate and reasoning for rejection?

Perception of the Milton Keynes Community Foundation
- What is your general perception of the MKCF? What are their strengths?
- Do you understand how the MKCF works as a charity?
- How approachable do you find the MKCF with dealing with your queries?
- What words spring to mind when you hear about MKCF?
- Would you recommend the MKCF?
- What could the MKCF do better?

Appendix 2 – Participant information sheet

Determining the Funding Requirements of the Voluntary, Community and Cultural Sectors of the City of Milton Keynes

INFORMATION SHEET FOR FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

You recently took part in a survey where you were asked to share your views on the current infrastructure support for the voluntary, community and cultural sectors in Milton Keynes. At the end of the survey, you expressed an interest in participating in the next phase of the project – focus groups – and kindly shared your email address with us.

We are now inviting you to take part in an audio-recorded focus group to further discuss your experiences and opinions on the topic. However, before agreeing to take part, it is very important for you to understand why the research is being done and what participation will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

What is the focus group's purpose?

- The focus group offers the opportunity for you to elaborate on the answers given in the recent survey about the current challenges facing the voluntary, community and cultural sectors in Milton Keynes, as well as your engagement with and perception of the Milton Keynes Community Foundation (MKCF).

- By taking part, you will be contributing to a better understanding of how the MKCF operates, which has the potential to help determine the funding requirements of the voluntary, community and cultural sectors of the borough of Milton Keynes for the next 2-3 years.

- The study is being coordinated by academics from the Open University on behalf of MKCF.

- The study has been reviewed by the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee who have agreed that the study can be conducted: HREC/4711/Turner

What will I be asked to do if I agree to take part?

- You will be invited to take part in either an online or in-person focus group (held at the Open University in Milton Keynes).

- The focus group will involve 4-8 participants and will last no more than 60 minutes.

- The focus group will be led by two of the named researchers and, with permission, will be audio-recorded. If you do not want to be recorded, we will make notes instead of your responses.

- Participation is voluntary; before attending the focus group, you will be asked to read and complete a consent form.

- It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time.

How will the data I provide be used?

- All the information that we collect about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential and stored on a secure server in accordance with the Data Protection Act 2018 and General Data Protection Regulation.

- All focus group data will be transcribed by members of the project team; at this stage, participants will be anonymised and any identifying features will be removed.

- All audio recordings will be destroyed once transcripts have been made and checked.

- Quotes from the focus group may be published in an internal report for the MKCF, as well as other academic outputs, such as papers in relevant conferences and journals. However, quotes will not be used that might identify who you are.

- Any data which can or could be linked to you will be stored securely in a digital format according to university policy for a maximum period of ten years. It will then be destroyed.

- The data controller for this project will be The Open University (OU). The OU Data Protection Office provides oversight of OU activities involving the processing of personal data and can be contacted at data-protection@open.ac.uk if you are concerned about how your personal data is being processed.

How do I agree to take part?

- If you would like to take part, please read and complete the consent form.

Can I withdraw from the study?

- If you agree to take part in the study, but then decide to withdraw, that is fine. Simply tell the research team and we will take your name off our list. During and after the focus groups, it will not be possible for participants to withdraw their data, and the participants will be reminded beforehand that, due to the nature of the group discussion, once the focus group has been completed, data cannot be withdrawn.

Questions?

- If you have any questions about the study or would like to withdraw, please contact the Principal Investigators, Dr Wendy Turner (wendy.turner@open.ac.uk) or Dr Fidele Mutwarasibo (fidele.mutwarasibo@open.ac.uk)

- If you would like to contact a third party who is not involved in this research, please contact Dr Michael Ngoasong (michael.ngoasong@open.ac.uk)

THANK YOU FOR TAKING THE TIME TO READ THIS PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

This project has been reviewed by, and received a favourable opinion from, The Open University Human Research Ethics Committee: HREC/4711/Turner. The study will conform strictly to ethical guidelines at the OU and to those issued by the British Educational Research Association: BERA.

Appendix 3 – Focus group topics

Below is a rough guide to the types of questions that we will be asking in our focus groups. The questions are based on discussions with the Milton Keynes Community Foundation and have built upon our survey questions.

Understanding future grant-giving pots
- What type of organisation/group are you?
- What sector does your organisation primarily operate in?
- What do you understand by the term infrastructure? Do you feel the current infrastructure support for the voluntary sector in Milton Keynes is sufficient? If not, can you tell me where the gaps are?
- What would good infrastructure support look like?
- What are the main current challenges you face as a voluntary organisation?
- What partnerships are you currently involved in? What partnership strategies do you currently use? What would you find useful in helping you develop partnership strategies?
- What type of guidance and support would you find most useful? (Prompts - Working with volunteers, governance, EDI)

The Milton Keynes Community Foundation
- Are you aware of MKCF's Vital Signs report? Do you find the report helpful, and if so, how do you use it?
- Are you aware of MKCF's Capacity Building programme? Have you attended any of their training programmes, and if so, do you have any feedback?
- One of the themes was around Voluntary support and a network that was lacking – What would they like to see put in place, what type of format for a network, should this be online or F2F – if the need is strong then this maybe an area we need to develop as a service so lets take the opportunity to explore what that would look like.
- If you have used the MKCF website, how did you find it?

Perception of the Milton Keynes Community Foundation
- What is your general perception of the MKCF? What are their strengths?
  - Do you understand how the MKCF works as a charity?
  - How approachable do you find the MKCF with dealing with your queries?
  - What could the MKCF do better?
- What words spring to mind when you hear about MKCF?