



2025 Scottish Voluntary Sector Workforce Survey

Executive Summary

January 2026



The headlines...

Job satisfaction

- 64% of paid staff are satisfied with their jobs, down from 79% in 2015.
- 87% of volunteer respondents are satisfied with their main volunteering role.

Fulfilment and purpose

- 87% of paid staff believe their work benefits society
- 84% of paid staff said that making a real difference to people and communities was one of the top five aspects of working in the voluntary sector.

Wellbeing and support

- Nearly three quarters of paid staff reported increased workloads
- 1 in 5 took time off due to work related stress, twice the rate reported a decade ago
- However, only half (51%) felt their organisation has a culture that prioritises and supports staff wellbeing.

Staff and volunteer support

- 74% of paid staff feel well supported by their managers, and 70% of volunteers feel well supported

Job security and pay

- 54% of paid staff felt that the uncertainty around funding for their role is one of the worst aspects of working in the voluntary sector.
- 1 in 5 said their pay does not cover their basic needs.

Staff and volunteer retention

- 39% of paid staff thought it quite or highly likely that they would voluntarily quit their jobs in the next 12 months – double the rate seen in other sectors.
- Among volunteers, retention is stronger but not guaranteed: One in four are considering stepping back within two years, citing time pressures, stress, and a sense of having “done their bit.”

The **2025 Scottish Voluntary Sector Workforce Survey** conducted by SCVO, Volunteer Scotland, and Charity Leadership Scotland gathered responses from 1,316 individuals including over a thousand paid staff and hundreds of volunteers and trustees. The survey explored workforce experiences across recruitment, retention, wellbeing, inclusion, pay, and career pathways.

The survey paints a picture of a sector deeply committed to its purpose but increasingly strained by funding insecurity, low pay, rising workloads and stress, and limited progression opportunities. The findings reveal a workforce motivated by values and a desire to make a difference yet grappling with challenges that threaten its sustainability.

Recruitment and Retention

For paid staff, job satisfaction has slipped significantly over the past decade. While two-thirds of respondents still describe themselves as satisfied, this is down from nearly 80% in 2015, and dissatisfaction has doubled to almost one in four.

Despite this decline, the sense of purpose remains strong: 87% believe their work benefits society, and 83% say it aligns with their personal values. Volunteers and trustees echo this commitment, with 87% satisfied in their roles and many citing altruism and belief in the cause as their primary motivations.

However, satisfaction alone is not enough to keep people in post. Pay and job security emerged as critical pinch points.

Only 39% of paid staff feel that they are fairly paid, and more than one in five say their salary does not cover basic needs. Three-quarters of staff are on permanent contracts, but a quarter are employed on fixed-term contracts or more casual arrangements – a rate far higher than in other sectors. This insecurity is compounded by funding uncertainty, which respondents consistently describe as the most stressful aspect of their work.

It is little surprise then that 39% of paid staff expect to leave their role within the next year, most often for better pay, improved management, or clearer career development opportunities.

Among volunteers, retention is stronger but not guaranteed: one in four are considering stepping back within two years, citing time pressures, stress, and a sense of having “done their bit.” Volunteers highlight the importance of flexibility and recognition, with many saying they would take on new roles if time commitments were more adaptable or if they were personally invited.

Career progression is another sticking point. While most paid staff report opportunities to learn and grow, 42% feel there are no promotion prospects within their organisation. Flat structures and funding constraints limit advancement, and many respondents feel trapped in roles that offer little scope for development.

Wellbeing

If recruitment and retention are the sector's structural challenges, wellbeing is its human one. Rising workloads and mounting pressure are taking a toll. Nearly three-quarters of paid staff say their workload has increased in the past year, and more than half report experiencing high levels of stress on a regular basis.

One in five have taken time off due to work-related stress – double the rate recorded a decade ago. High stress levels were seen across all roles from frontline staff to management, with senior leaders and trustees in particular describing feeling overwhelmed by responsibility and the emotional weight of sustaining services in the face of financial uncertainty.

Work-life balance has deteriorated, with only half of paid staff saying they achieve a healthy balance between work and personal life. Flexible and hybrid working arrangements have helped to some extent – 61% of paid staff work remotely or in hybrid patterns, and most are satisfied with the flexibility available. But flexibility alone cannot offset the impact of chronic under-resourcing and rising demand.

Volunteers generally report positive experiences, with 81% finding their organisations flexible. However, some concerns around bureaucracy, stress and blurred boundaries between unpaid and paid work persist.

Organisational support for wellbeing is inconsistent. Just over half of respondents feel their workplace genuinely prioritises staff wellbeing, and those with long-term health conditions or from minority ethnic backgrounds are less likely to feel supported.

Among both paid staff and volunteers the link between support and retention is clear: those who feel well supported are far more likely to remain engaged and satisfied.

Conclusions

The survey findings reveal a sector held together by commitment and values but increasingly stretched by structural and financial pressures.

Recruitment and retention challenges are driven by low pay, job insecurity, and limited career progression, while wellbeing is undermined by rising workloads, stress, and inconsistent support. Volunteers and trustees share many of these pressures, particularly around stress and role boundaries, often exacerbated by the knock-on impact that funding cuts and associated staff shortages are having on services and volunteers.

Underlying all of this is a single, dominant issue: funding insecurity. Short-term, unpredictable funding cycles create instability that ripples through pay, job security, organisational capacity, and ultimately the wellbeing of those who keep the sector running.

Without systemic change – reforming the funding landscape, investing in career and volunteer pathways, and a stronger focus on wellbeing – the risk is clear: a sector that cannot sustain the people who sustain it.

Key findings

1. About the survey

In 2025, **SCVO**, **Volunteer Scotland** and **Charity Leadership Scotland** undertook a major workforce survey to better understand the realities facing paid staff and volunteers across Scotland's voluntary sector.

The survey was in part driven by growing concerns about staff recruitment and retention, with evidence from the **Scottish Third Sector Tracker** and national volunteering data showing persistent challenges around staff and volunteer retention and recruitment. Wellbeing was another key focus, following reports of rising stress, burnout, and leadership turnover. The research also sought to examine job security and pay in the context of short-term funding practices, assess how post-Covid working arrangements such as hybrid and flexible work have bedded in.

The online survey ran from Thursday 26 June to Thursday 21 August 2025.

2. Respondent profile

1,316 people filled in the workforce survey, consisting of 1,071 paid staff and 570 volunteers, with 325 people answering questions in both the paid staff and volunteer sections.

Respondents came from across all local authority areas, from organisations of all sizes and all sectors, from arts to community development to health and social care.

Respondents tended to be slightly older than the wider Scottish population, were 80% female, tended to be mainly white, and tended to have high levels of formal education, with 73% holding a degree-level university qualification.

Paid staff responses came from: assistant or entry level staff (5%), frontline workers (22%), officers (28%), managers (21%), senior managers (13%), and CEOs (10%).

3. Paid staff: things to celebrate

Respondents spoke of a wide range of positive aspects to working in the voluntary sector including: purpose and impact on communities; strong organisational values and inclusive culture; connection with beneficiaries; flexibility and work-life balance; supportive teams and colleagues; autonomy, creativity, and variety; and opportunities for growth and development.

We look at all of these aspects in more detail in the other survey sections.

- 84% of respondents said that making a real difference to people and communities was one of the top five aspects of working in the voluntary sector.
- 56% selected the people /clients they support
- 50% chose their colleagues and team
- 48% chose the independence and autonomy they have, 44% chose the variety of the work, and 31% like the ability to be innovative and creative.
- 40% chose their organisation's values and 34% chose the ethos of the sector.
- Less popular but still important to many respondents were flexible working (38%), having a supportive employer (20%) and decent work benefits (12%).

4. Paid staff: areas to strengthen

Respondents highlighted a range of negative factors to working in the voluntary sector, including: chronic funding insecurity and short-term contracts; low pay and

limited career development; overwork, burnout, and lack of resources: poor leadership and governance; undervaluation of the sector by public sector partners; recruitment and retention challenges.

We look at all of these aspects in more detail in the other survey sections.

- 54% of respondents feel that the uncertainty around funding for their role is one of the worst aspects of working in the voluntary sector.
- This was closely followed by a lack of parity with other sectors/similar roles (49%) and low pay (46%).
- Other negative aspects were: high workloads (45%); poor career progression (41%); challenging, stressful work (38%); poor management/leadership (32%); inadequate resources (31%); and feeling undervalued by stakeholders and partners (29%).

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We increasingly pick up what the public sector used to do (which is now outsourced or left to the third sector), but have to deliver it for a fraction of the cost, with only one quarter of pension contribution and constant insecurity about future funding. Yes, the sector innovates, often has fantastic people working in it, and delivers social good (this is why I work in the sector), but beyond a certain point, it's not enough to be driven by values if that cannot provide financial security.

5. Job satisfaction and fulfilment

Job satisfaction in the Scottish voluntary sector remains relatively high but has declined notably since 2015 (**SCVO Workforce Survey 2015**). Currently, 64% of respondents are satisfied with their jobs, down from 79% in 2015, and only 22% are “very satisfied” compared to 33% a decade ago.

Job satisfaction is strongly linked to factors such as job role, remuneration, job and pay security, flexible working, work-life balance, stress levels, supportive management, and opportunities for learning and development. While the sector does well in areas such as **flexible work and staff support** it appears to be falling behind in other areas notably **pay, security and workload**.

Despite the overall decline in job satisfaction, sector staff generally report high levels of fulfilment, and a strong sense of purpose persists: 87% believe their work benefits society, 83% feel it aligns with their values, and 77% are inspired by their organisation's mission - figures far above those for the wider Scottish workforce (**CIPD 2025a**).

“Making a real difference” remains the most valued aspect of working in the sector. 84% of respondents selected this as one of their top five ‘best aspects’ of working in the voluntary sector.

6. Diversity, inclusion and workplace culture

The voluntary sector tends to be very inclusive in many ways, with high representation from women and those with health issues across all role levels.

Most respondents feel that their organisation is open and inclusive, and many spoke of very positive experiences:

- **69% said their organisation feels open and inclusive**
- **67% feel that opportunities are provided equally**

However, our findings suggest the sector could do better, especially around **support for those with physical and mental health issues** and those from **minority backgrounds**.

We also found that **24% of respondents felt they had been unfairly treated in last 2 years** mainly due to age, gender, physical health reasons or mental health reasons, and socio-economic class.

7. Health and wellbeing



“I feel my employer is genuinely invested in staff wellbeing at all levels. I see the organisation actively promoting this as much as possible. I truly have never felt more supported in a job until now.”

Overall, respondents reported generally good levels of health and wellbeing, though many felt less optimistic and lacked energy, and a significant 42% were living with a

long-term physical or mental health condition.

Work-life balance, workloads and stress:

- Nearly three quarters reported increased workloads and many struggle to switch off, contributing to widespread stress - over half regularly experience high stress, and 1 in 5 took time off due to work related stress, twice the rate reported a decade ago.
- Work-life balance has also worsened especially for senior staff, and is strongly linked to pressure and rising workloads. Only 49% of respondents felt they had a good work-life balance, down from 60% in 2015.
- However, **only half of respondents (51%) felt their organisation has a culture that genuinely prioritises and supports staff wellbeing.**

Management support: the majority of employees agree their manager respects them (79%), and is supportive if they have a problem (74%).

However, only 67% agree managers are open and approachable on mental health and around 1 in 5 do not feel adequately supported in terms of their development, getting feedback, or being helped to perform their job well.

Good management support is linked to job satisfaction and staff retention, with 53% of those planning to leave said they are 'Unhappy with management'. However, when we look at the open text comments from staff who were unhappy with management a lot of people's complaints are not actually around managers being poor, but that managers are overstretched with little time to support staff or even that no manager is in place, often related to funding issues and redundancies/restructuring.

Flexible working: the majority of voluntary sector staff were happy with the choices they have around when and where they work. Those unhappy with flexible working options were more likely to report low job satisfaction.

"In a previous role I occupied we used to joke that it was called the 'third' sector because we did a 'third' more work than the other sectors, for a 'third' less of the pay. That joke is wearing thin the longer I stay in the sector."

8. Funding landscape and the political environment

Funding insecurity was reported to be the main factor impacting on the recruitment and retention of staff, as well as staff wellbeing. The difficult funding environment and the relationship between the voluntary sector and public sector were strong themes that recurred throughout almost all sections of the survey and were particularly prominent in the 'final comments' sections.

Impact of funding on working environment: Pay inequity and funding insecurity

Paid staff were asked whether they had any final comments about their job, or paid work in the voluntary sector in general. 285 respondents shared their thoughts. When we analysed these free text comments almost half related to **pay inequity and fair pay** and **funding insecurity and short-termism**.

Pay issues: Over a third of respondents raised pay as a key concern in their final comments, with many situating pay within the context of funding levels, funding practice, pay parity with other sectors and wider funding uncertainty.



The low pay, lack of basic resources and job insecurity from year to year which is shockingly normalised in this sector

Short-term funding and funding insecurity and its impact on staff and pay were key themes for a fifth of the 285 respondents who left comments with many frustrated with the lack of progress on long-term funding.



All of my organisations' current challenges stem from a lack of certainty over funding

Relationships with the public sector

Relationships with the public sector was the second most prominent theme. Around a quarter of the final open text comments related to government funding and procurement practices and/ or working relationships with public sector bodies.

Respondents described government and local authorities providing **insufficient, short term or inconsistent funding, and reported feeling undervalued**. Many identified a disparity with 'mainstream' public sector services, particularly in relation to pay, recognition and resourcing.

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Having spent my main career (25 years) in the public sector, I feel able to say, with a good degree of certainty, that the third sector is dealing with the fall out of cuts to services and having to act as the 'underpaid help'. Public sector leaders would not work or expect their staff to work for what they pay the third sector to provide services they have stopped providing or cut. That puts third sector leaders in the unenviable position of having to deliver services knowingly under remunerating staff and relying on volunteers or cutting corners in other aspects of their operations.

“

The budget cuts and increased expense cost (wage increase, NI increase - to be covered without any extra cost provided) all together are crippling organizations which impacts staff well-being, recruitment and it will have a major negative impact on society overall once voluntary organizations will vanish into nothing due to lack of money. There's a constant feel that funders just want more and more service to be provided for the same or less money.

9. Pay and benefits

Security is one of the five key dimensions of [Fair Work](#) and covers both **pay** and job security. However, despite positive policies both pay and job insecurity appear to have worsened over the last decade.

Pay

1 in 5 voluntary workers say their pay does not cover their basic needs.

Frontline workers in the voluntary sector are most likely to have issues around pay, but pay insecurity is experienced by around 2 in 5 workers across all roles, even in senior roles. The number of respondents who feel they are paid fairly has fallen since 2015, as has the number who feel they are paid comparably to people doing similar jobs in the private or public sectors.

“

I don't get paid enough to pay bills so I have to work 2 jobs.

“

Poor pay might be the worst thing about my job. We're a high

profile national org and I think people would be shocked to know how little we are paid at the officer level and the salary discrepancies that don't reflect difference in skill or workload.

“

Lack of long-term prospects for pay progression mean it seems unsustainable to continue in this role if I want to start a family

In-work benefits

Many respondents commented on the importance of decent in-work benefits but there was a lot of uncertainty around in-work benefits, with many respondents unsure if their employer offered certain benefits. And while many staff valued the in-work benefits offered by employers, several noted that these softer benefits were no replacement for decent pay and pensions.

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It is nice to have soft benefits, enhanced sick pay etc but it doesn't pay bills or lets one save for buying own property and prepare for a secure future.

10. Job security, job mobility and future plans

Security is one of the five key dimensions of **Fair Work** and covers both pay and **job security**. Despite positive policies like Fair Work, job insecurity appears to have worsened over the last decade. Fixed-term and non-permanent contracts are the norm for a quarter of the sector's staff, primarily due to the way the sector is funded. Voluntary sector staff are twice as likely as those in other sectors to be worried about losing their jobs, and we also see higher numbers considering quitting their current role and actively seeking new jobs.

Staff were less likely to be looking for new roles if they reported high job satisfaction, felt they were paid fairly, had strong managerial support, and if they felt their organisation supported their wellbeing, offered flexible working, and invested in staff development.

Job security

- Around 1 in 4 respondents reported having a non-permanent contract, a far higher proportion than in other sectors.
- 26% said they worry about their job 'all of the time' or 'often', rising to 41% among those on fixed-term contracts.
- 27% felt it was quite or very likely they would lose their job within the next 12 months – double the rate reported in the wider workforce ([CIPD 2025b](#)).



Lower wages, less pension, less annual leave and increased job insecurity... in March I didn't know if I had a job in April.

Job mobility and future plans

- 39% of respondents thought it was quite or highly likely they would voluntarily quit their job in the next year - almost double the rate seen in other sectors.

The main reasons for considering leaving were better pay, followed by issues with management, improved development opportunities, higher job satisfaction, and greater job security.

More than half of survey respondents (55%) said they were actively job-seeking or planning to look for a new job in the next 12 months, and while most respondents were looking for new roles within the voluntary sector over a third (37%) were also - and in many cases only - looking for work in the public or private sector. However, only 22% of respondents thought it would be easy finding a new job.



This sector is in crisis - people are tired and burnt out. I am actively seeking work elsewhere & so are my colleagues. Talent will leave this sector in droves if funding and recognition of fair pay for the work we do is not addressed.

11. Routes into the sector, staff development and career

pathways

Attracting and retaining good quality staff with a diverse range of skills and experiences is critical for the voluntary sector. The survey looked at current routes into voluntary sector careers, staff development and career pathways.

Routes into the sector: Over half of respondents were already in the voluntary sector before joining their current employer. 18% came from the public sector, 14% from private sector, 6% were studying, and 4% were not working or studying.

Job adverts were the main entry route for those entering the sector, with Goodmoves being the most cited source (especially among respondents from minority ethnic backgrounds). Nearly 20% heard about roles through word of mouth, and 17% had transitioned from volunteering to paid work in the voluntary sector.

Learning and development:

Investment in learning strongly correlated with job satisfaction and staff retention, but barriers included a lack of time, funding cuts, and absence of a learning culture.

- 36% of respondents felt they had access to training and skills support if needed.
- 44% believed their organisation encourages and supports them to take up formal and informal learning or continuing professional development.
- However, around 1 in 10 do not feel that their organisation supports learning, and 42% believe it only does so to some extent.

Career progression: Lack of progression was most common in small organisations but also present in large ones. Barriers include flat structures, funding constraints, unclear pathways and limited CPD, but many staff avoid promotion due to concerns around additional stress for little additional remuneration.

12. Leadership

Drawing on responses from 1,011 current paid staff including **10% CEOs** and **13% senior managers**, the report provides a detailed examination of leadership culture, pressure, sustainability, and future leadership capacity across Scotland's voluntary sector.

Leadership is widely experienced as values-driven, accessible, and purpose-led:

- two-thirds of respondents describe senior leaders as very or fairly accessible.
- 87% of the workforce believe their work is useful to society and leaders themselves speak strongly about impact, autonomy, and commitment to mission.

However, this strength is increasingly undermined by structural pressures that impact on leaders' wellbeing:

- 86% of CEOs and 78% of senior managers feel under pressure at work, 69% of CEOs regularly experience high stress, and four in five senior leaders report difficulty switching off from work.
- Job insecurity, funding precarity, workload growth, and limited progression pathways are creating serious risks to leadership sustainability and succession.

The leadership pipeline is fragile:

- 41% of respondents identify poor career progression as one of the worst aspects of sector work
- 39% of respondents (including 1 in 3 managers, senior managers and CEOs) say they are likely to leave their job voluntarily within the next 12 months.

Better pay, improved management, and development opportunities are the most commonly cited reasons for potential exit.

13. Volunteering

The Workforce Survey highlights a deeply embedded culture of volunteering among respondents, with over half of respondents consistently involved as volunteers throughout their lives.

Volunteers and trustees are highly satisfied, and many respondents spoke about the personal fulfilment gained through volunteering, including improved wellbeing and a strong sense of purpose. Most volunteers feel well supported and find flexibility in

their roles, though there were some concerns about organisation, bureaucracy, and blurred boundaries. Retention appears reasonably stable, but around a quarter of respondents are considering quitting - the key drivers for this are time pressures, stress, and a sense of completion.

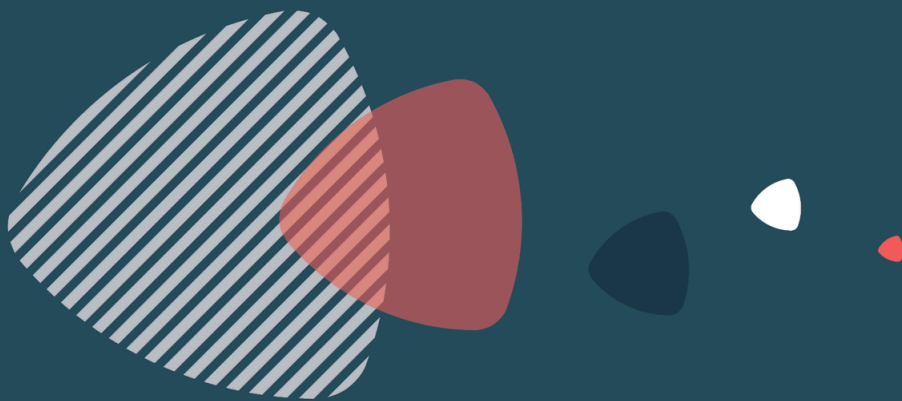
- **Volunteer satisfaction** is very strong: 87% are satisfied with their main role, especially younger (18–24) volunteers (89%) and older (60+) volunteers (92%).
- **Fulfilment and wellbeing:** Respondents highlighted the personal fulfilment gained through volunteering, including increased confidence, improved wellbeing, and a strong sense of purpose.
- **Volunteer support and organisational experience** are generally positive, with 70% feeling well supported and 81% finding their organisation flexible, though 42% think things could be better organised. Volunteer support appears to be strongly linked with both volunteer satisfaction and likelihood to want to continue volunteering.
- **Volunteer retention** is mostly stable, with 55% unlikely to leave soon. However, 1 in 4 are considering leaving due to time pressures, stress, or feeling they've "done their bit", with volunteers aged 40–49 most likely to quit.

14. Focus on Trustees

Trustees in the Workforce Survey show strong engagement and commitment, with most having volunteered consistently throughout their lives and holding their roles for several years.

While satisfaction levels are broadly similar to other volunteers, **trustees report slightly higher stress and concerns about unpaid work resembling paid roles.** Inclusivity perceptions remain positive, though bullying concerns are marginally higher among trustees.

Retention intentions mirror the overall volunteer base, but **trustees are more likely to cite "having done their bit" and stress** as reasons for leaving.



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