

**Community
Pulse** 

**October 2023
England**



SPORT  **ED**

**Taking the pulse of
community sport**

The view from the ground

The Community Pulse is a longitudinal study of Sported members on the sustainability, needs, and ambitions of grassroots groups throughout the UK. It ensures the voices of small community organisations are heard.

It aims to:

- inform others about the issues and opportunities facing community sports groups.
- increase awareness of funding and resources available for such organisations.
- help stakeholders make more-informed decisions in relation to grassroots sport in the UK.
- fill an insight gap on behalf of those who aren't 'traditional' sports clubs or who don't work as commercial or leisure providers.

453
responses

This report is based on **453 responses**, representing 21% of Sported groups in England, between **27 September – 9 October 2023**. These groups reach around 80,000 young people across England.

Sported and its network

Sported is the UK's largest network of community sports groups, supporting over half a million young people to overcome barriers to reach their full potential. Our role is to empower the local heroes running these groups by providing much needed professional expertise, resources, and operational support, free of charge, to help their group survive and young people thrive.

Sported's groups work within complex local contexts, often tackling some of society's biggest challenges. Around 50% are located in areas that sit within the highest three indices of relative deprivation in the UK, two-thirds are volunteer-led, and a third have an annual turnover of less than £10,000.



Key findings

Cost of Living Crisis continues to bite:

- **Concern about the impact of cost-of-living pressures continues to be very high**, with 91% of respondents either extremely or fairly concerned about the impact on their group.
- More than half of groups have had to **use reserves/faced a reduction in budget surplus** over the past six months and the same proportion have seen a **reduction in financial support** from external funding streams.
- A large majority of groups said their group has **made a change in response to cost-of-living increases; 58% have subsidised equipment and/or kit** for their young people and **50% have offered reduced or free membership**.
- **Groups' top priority over the next six months is securing funding**
- Groups are expecting **a significant increase in fees for using a facility (35%), the need to use their reserves/reduction in budget surplus (34%), an increase in the cost of their Public Liability insurance (34%), and a reduction in financial support from external funding streams (33%)**.
- **93% are concerned (extremely or fairly) about the rising cost of living's impact on their young people**, with around half witnessing young people disengage or reduce their participation in sport and physical activity in the last six months.
- Group leaders report that 66% of young people have seen **a reduction in disposable income** meaning they are less able to afford subs, travel costs, clothing or kit.
- 64% of group leaders have reported that their **young people have experienced reduced mental wellbeing** as a result of cost-of-living increases.
- Around a third of group leaders told us they are **only just about coping** in their capacity to support the mental health of their young people, staff, and volunteers.

Key findings

Despite these challenges, community organisations continue to reach, engage and empower young people:

- On average, groups who responded to Pulse are engaging around 190 young people, with 83% of these groups supporting young people from historically underserved communities and 55% located in the highest three areas of multiple deprivation (IMD 1–3).
- **Engaging new participants** continues to remain a top priority for groups.
- Over three-quarters of groups say they **get inactive young people active** in their communities (83%), despite activity levels within their communities being relatively low.
- More than three-quarters of groups (80%) said **the lack of representation of minoritised groups within sport impacts on young people** from their community taking part (to a great extent or somewhat).
- Group leaders report the best ways to get young people active include offering affordable activities, creating inclusive environments (for young people of all backgrounds and abilities), delivering fun non-competitive sessions with lots of encouragement, a variety of different activities, welcoming peer-to-peer support, and trusted coaching staff.
- Just over half of leaders agree (definitely or tend to) that **they personally can influence decisions affecting their local area** (59%).
- Confidence in **organisational survival is high**, with 90% of groups confident (extremely or fairly) in their group's survival over the next six months. This has increased since the early stages of the UK's Covid-19 lockdowns in spring/summer 2020, when one in five groups weren't sure about surviving the following six months. Currently, confidence levels are similar to those seen at the start of the cost-of-living crisis in autumn 2021.

But we must support these vital groups:

- 91% of our groups want government to encourage funders to make funding applications easier and more accessible.
- Two-thirds want government support in delivering health initiatives through their group and over half want school facilities more available and more affordable
- Groups would like to see corporates/ sponsors offer funding for different needs (especially facilities/capital/running costs, not just projects), and commit to long-term support, as well as more personalised engagement such as meeting groups in person more often.
- Groups have varying relationships with other organisations within the ecosystem. 63% are connected to their National Governing Body for sport. The majority of groups don't work with their Sports Council, leisure trusts or other voluntary sector umbrella organisations. Groups are most likely to get funding from other charities, and support with securing funding and sustainability from Sported.

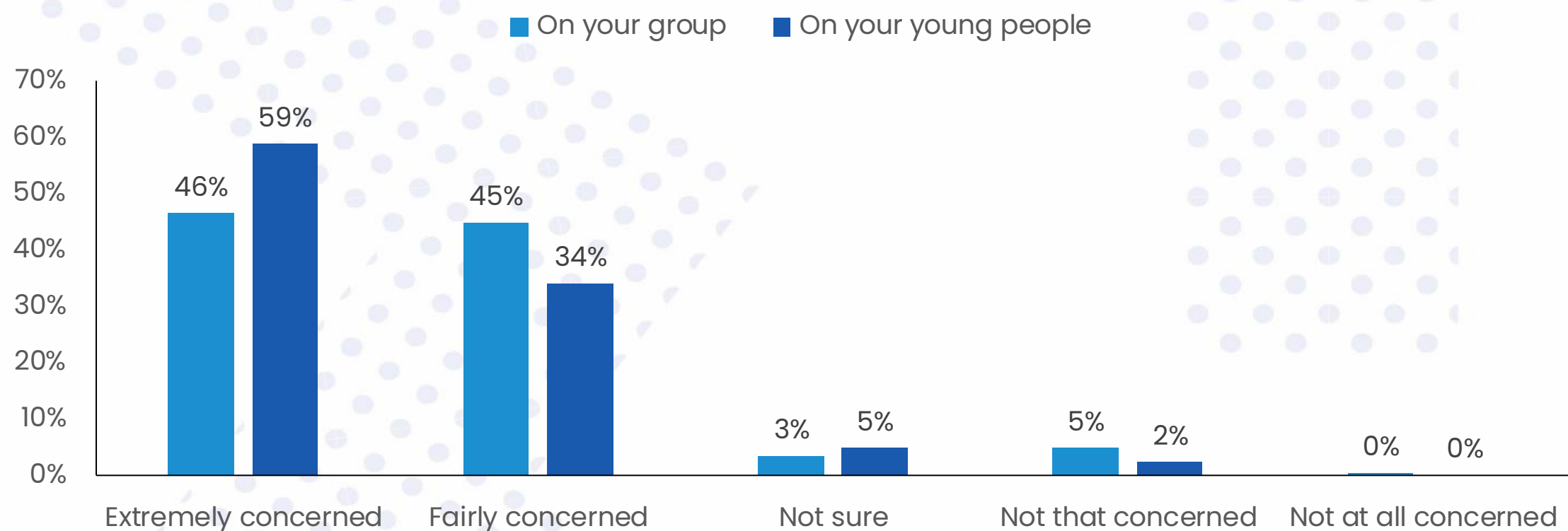
Cost-of-living increases

Impact on groups and their young people

Concern around the impact of cost-of-living increases on groups and their young people remains high. 91% are either extremely or fairly concerned about the impact on their group, with 93% concerned for their young people.

This level of **concern is similar to six months ago**, where 94% of respondents were concerned about the impact on their group and 93% for their young people.

Concern about the impact of cost-of-living increases

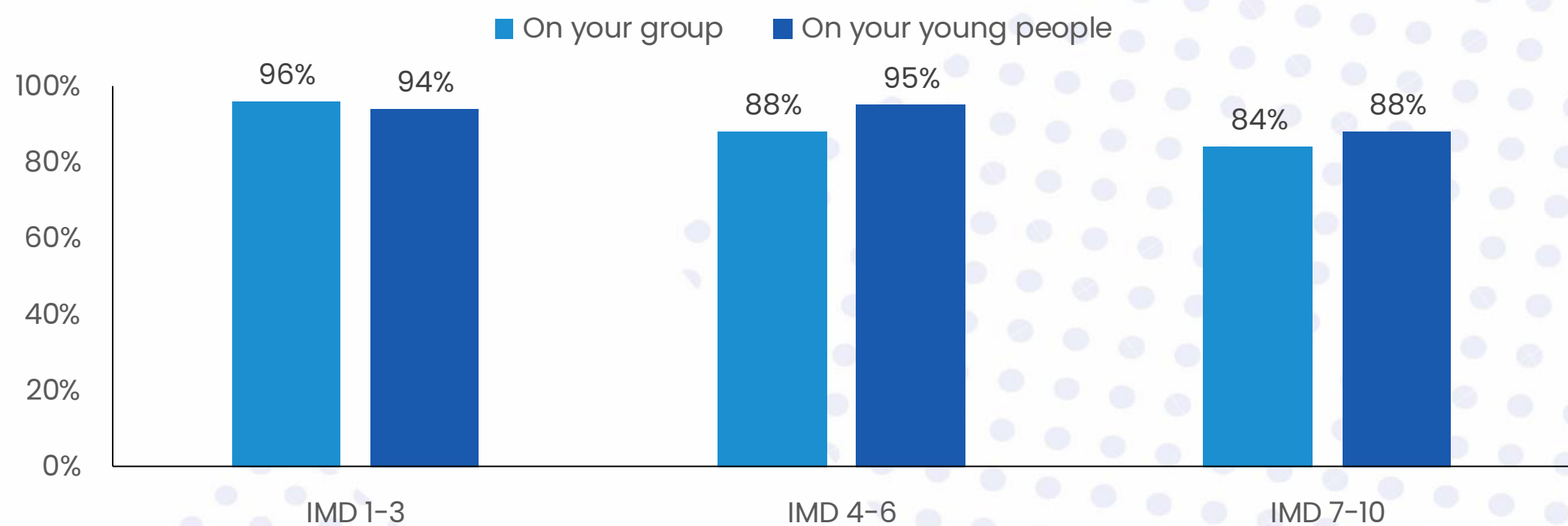


Impact on groups and their young people by IMD

High levels of concern about the impact of cost-of-living increases **are found across all indices of multiple deprivation.**

The highest concern for the impact on young people is felt by those groups working in areas of higher relative deprivation (IMD 1-3).

Groups who are extremely/fairly concerned about the impact of cost-of-living increases by IMD (1-10)



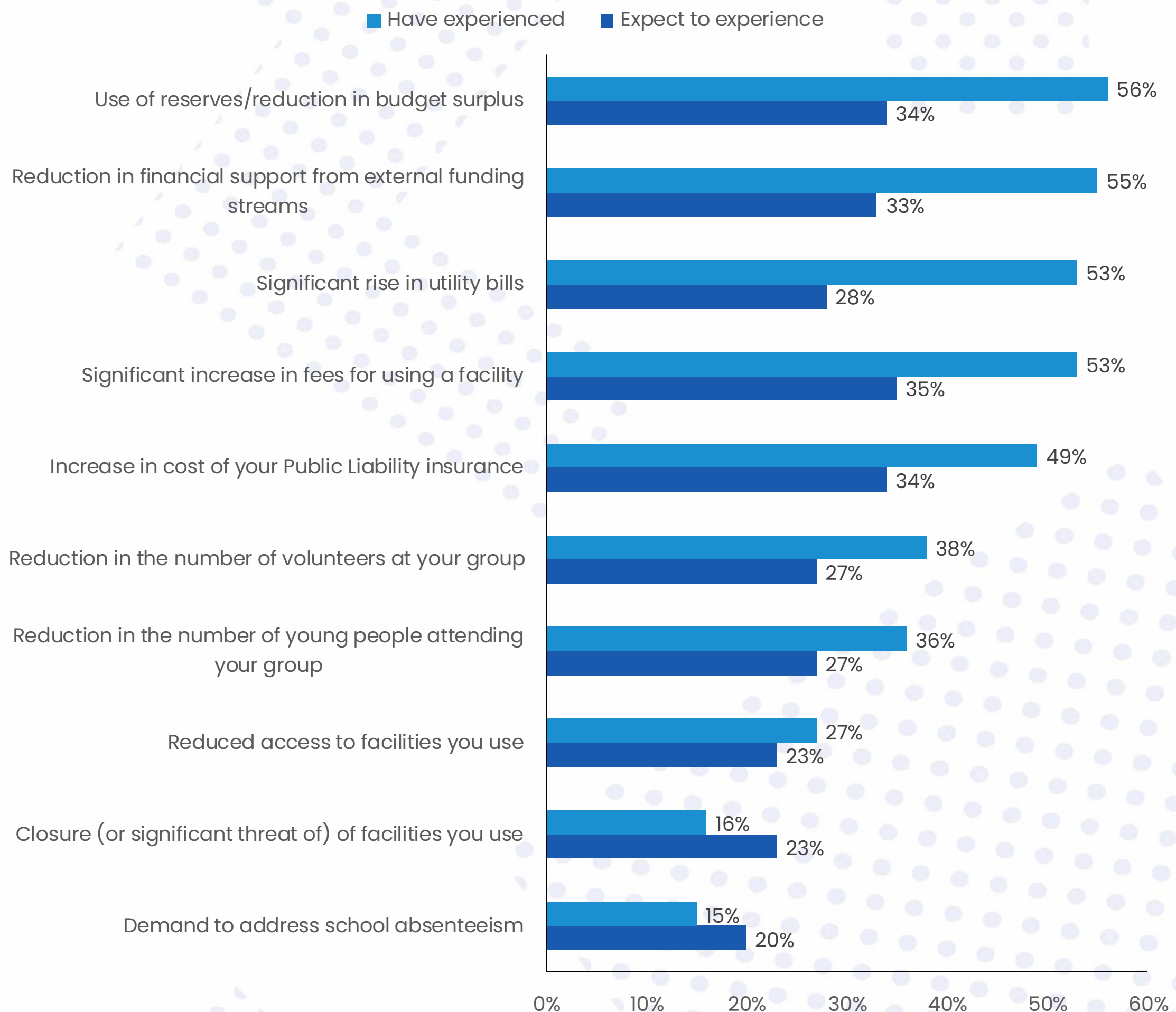
Cost-of-living increases

Impact of cost-of-living increases for groups

The most common experiences for groups over the last six months have been the use of reserves/a reduction in budget surplus (56%), a reduction in financial support from external funding streams (55%), and a significant rise in utility bills (53%). Half of groups have seen a significant increase in fees for using a facility (53%).

Looking ahead to the next six months, a third of groups expect to experience a significant increase in fees for using a facility (35%), the use of reserves/a reduced budget surplus (34%), an increase in their Public Liability Insurance (34%), and/or a reduction in financial support from external funding streams (33%).

Issues experienced because of cost-of-living increases (in the last six months/expected in the next six months)



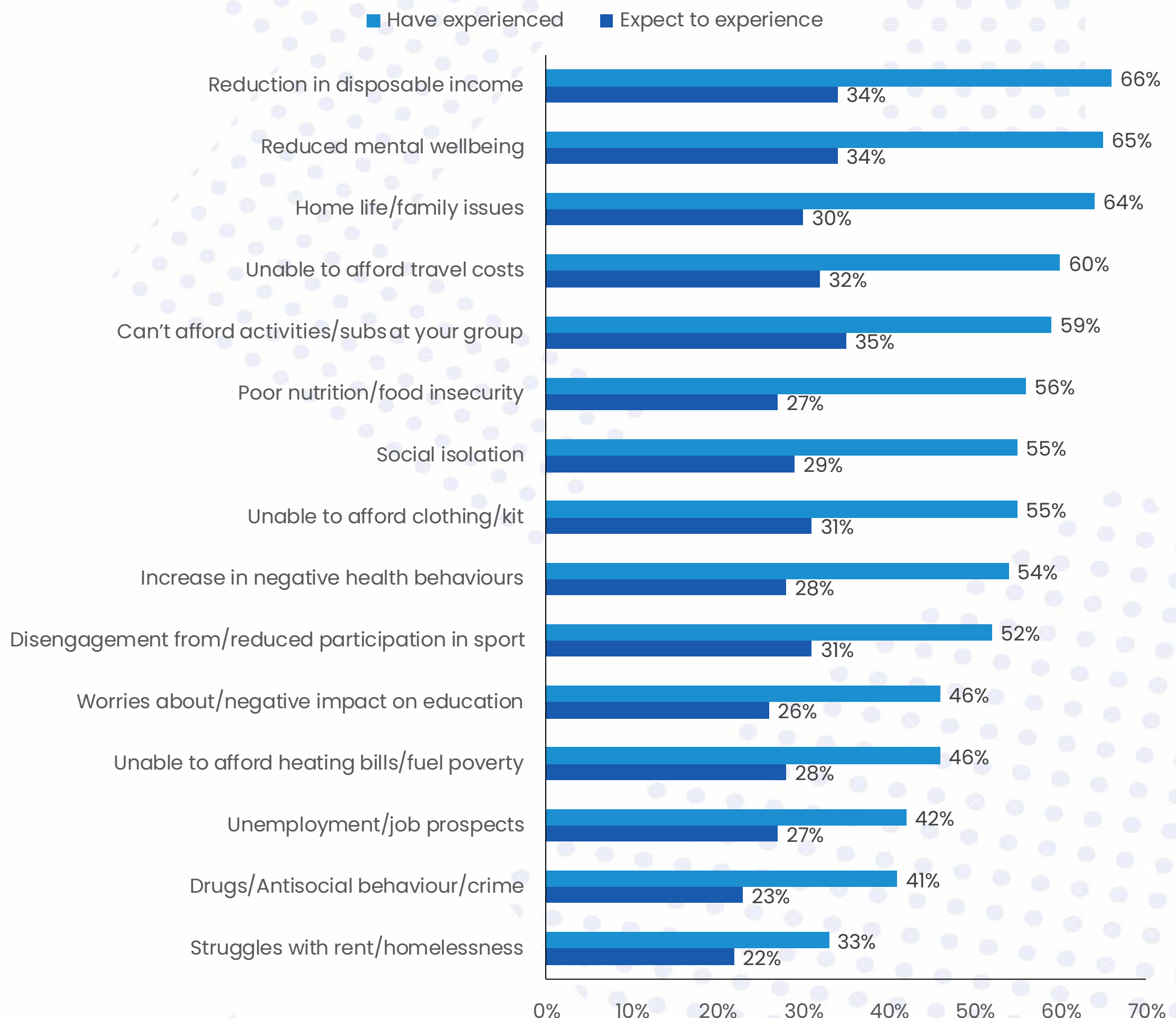
Cost-of-living increases

Impact of cost-of-living increases for young people

Group leaders report that young people are most likely to have experienced a reduction in disposable income over the past six months because of cost-of-living increases (66%). Two-thirds of leaders told us their young people faced reduced mental wellbeing (65%), with nearly as many reporting home life/family issues for their participants (64%).

Looking ahead to the next six months, leaders told us that young people are most likely to be unable to afford activities/subs at their group (35%). A similar number are expected to face a drop in their disposable income (34%) and/or reduced mental wellbeing (34%).

Issues experienced because of cost-of-living increases (in the last six months/expected in the next six months)



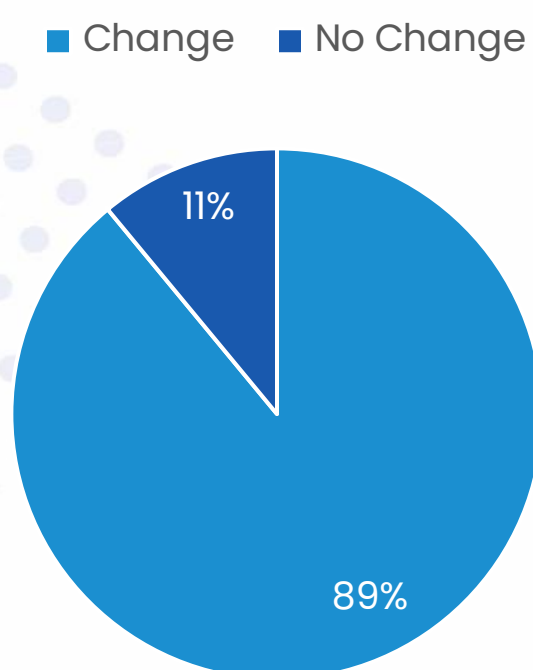
Cost-of-living increases

Groups' responses to the increases

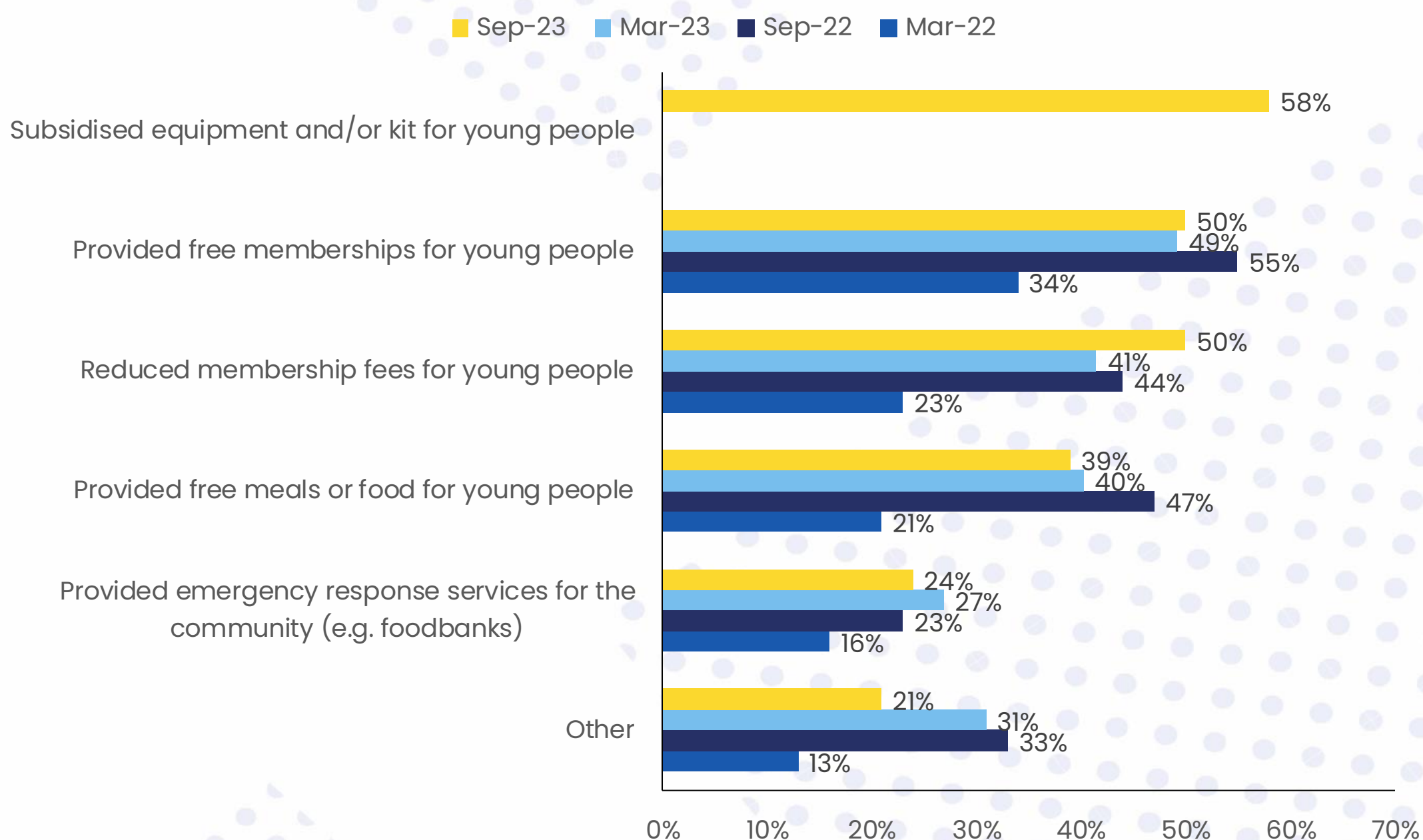
A substantial majority of groups have responded to cost-of-living increases by making a change to their operation (89%). This is an increase from March, when 82% of respondents indicated they'd made a change.

The most common change has been to subsidise equipment/kit for their participants (58%), with around half reducing fees for their young people (50%) and/or providing free memberships (50%). This illustrates that although groups are under financial pressure, they are removing cost-related barriers from their participants to enable them to still attend.

Proportion of groups making a change in response to cost-of-living increases



Changes made in response to cost-of-living increases



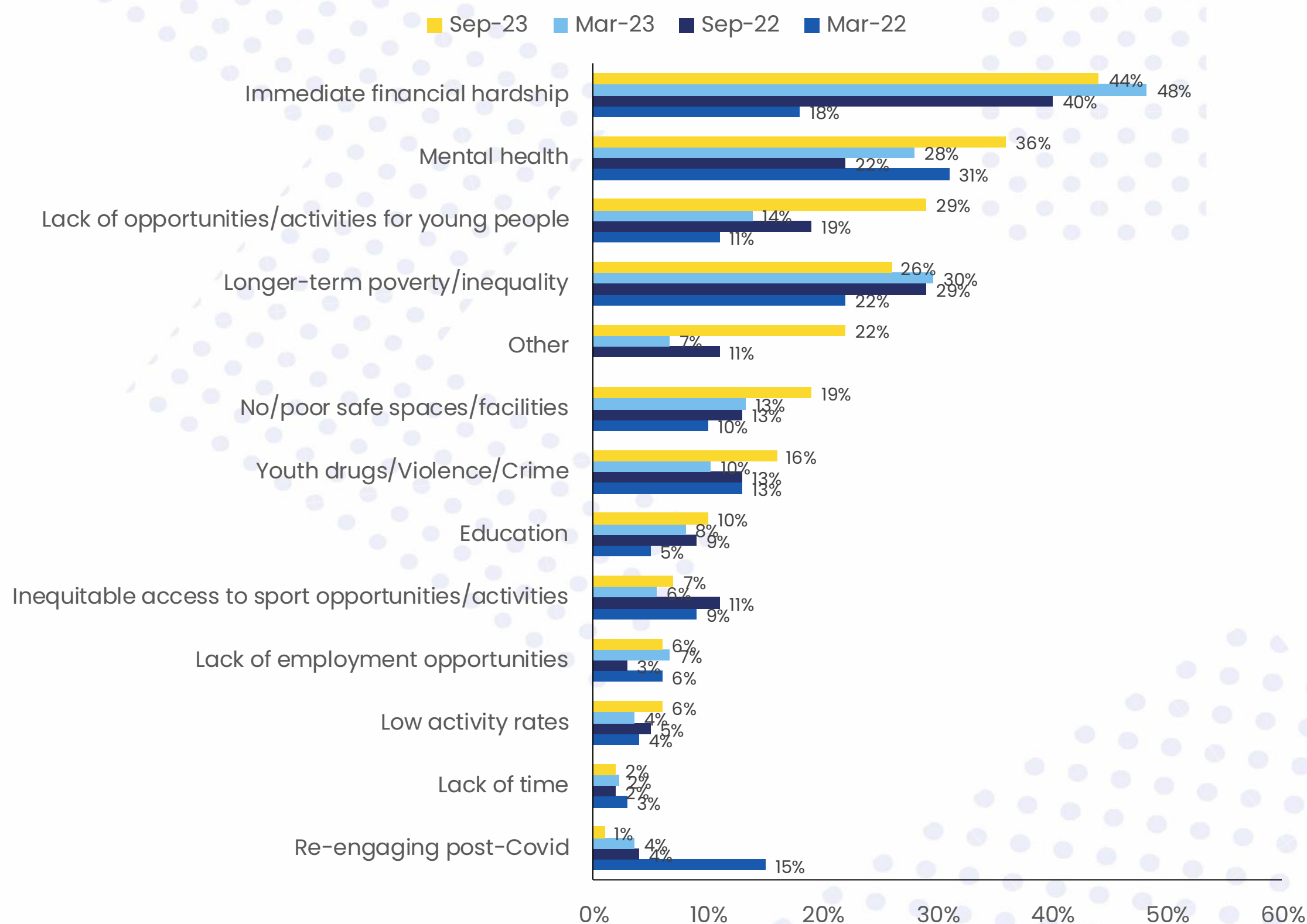
Challenges for young people

Key issues facing young people in their communities

Immediate financial hardship remains the most reported challenge for young people by group leaders. Referring to answers centred on the cost-of-living crisis and current economic hardship, nearly half of respondents (44%) said this was a challenge for their young people. It has been the most cited challenge for young people for the past year now.

Challenges around young people's mental health have grown in the past six months, with this now rating as the second most reported concern. There has also been a substantial rise in the number of leaders noting a lack of opportunities/activities for young people, with over a quarter (29%) commenting on this compared to 14% six months ago.

Key challenges young people are facing in groups' communities at this time



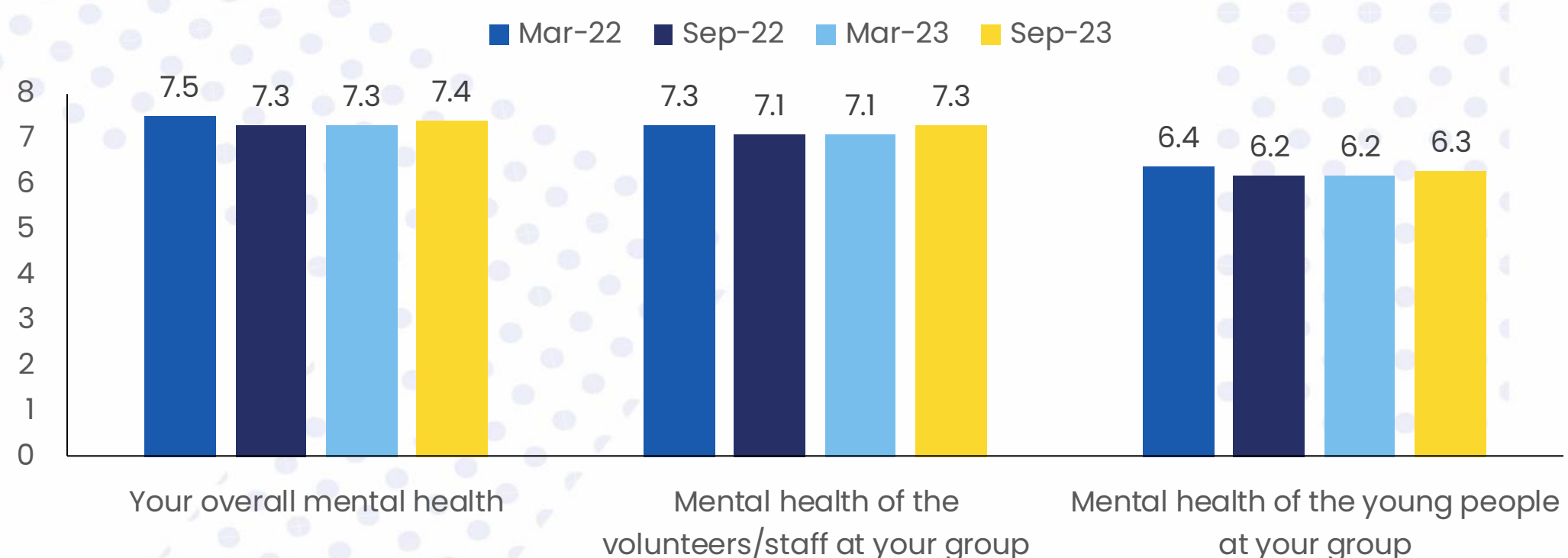
- 'We have had increasing requests for people to come to regular sessions but they or their families can't afford to on a regular basis. We are constantly waiving costs for people to train and supporting their travel costs too.' – survey respondent
- '1. High cost of living crisis 2. Mental Health challenges post Covid-19 era 3. Lack of constant social activities to keep young people engaged 4. Lack of mentors 5. Lack of esteem and self-confidence.' – survey respondent
- 'Poverty is one of the main issues, it results in mental health issues, no funds for transport to access the activities and services they would benefit from. Along with poor diet results in bad health and wellbeing.' – survey respondent

Mental health

Leaders, staff/volunteers, and young people

Respondents reported **similar scores for their mental health** (7.4 out of 10) compared to that of **their volunteers/staff** (7.3) and **young people** (6.3). Scores across these three audiences have been consistent since March 2022.

Average rating (scale: 0 – 10, where 0 is not at all good, 5 is coping, and 10 is excellent)

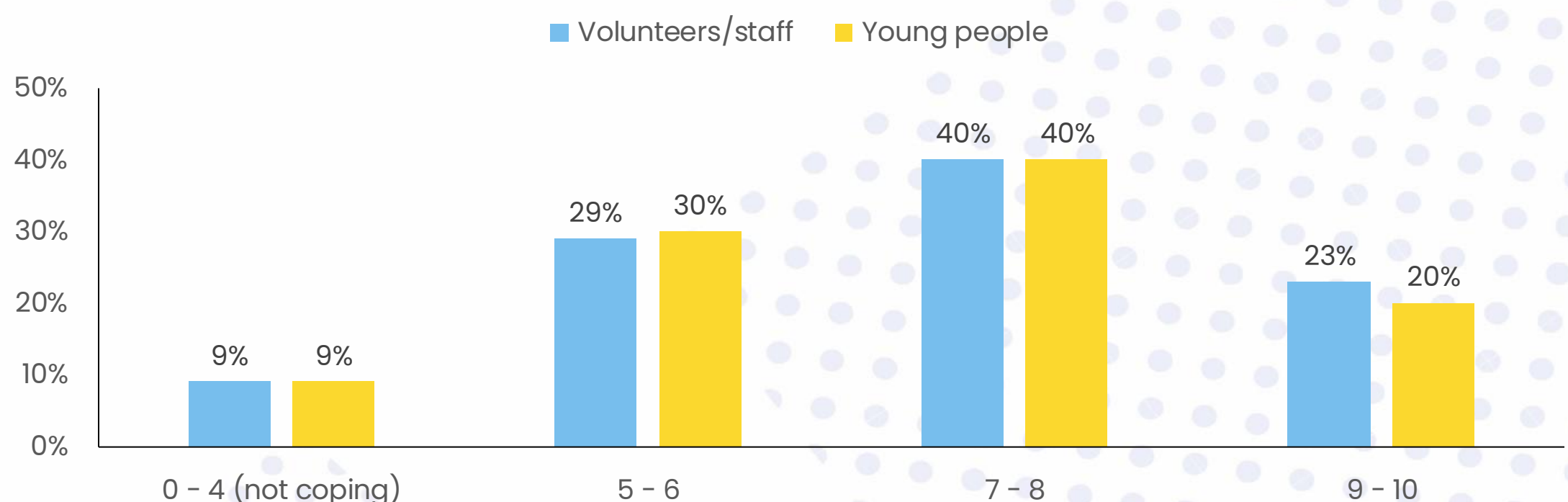


Capacity to support mental health

Nearly two-thirds of groups (63%) reported a score of 7 (out of 10) or above for their capacity to support the mental health of their volunteers/staff. A similar proportion (60%) scored 7 or above for capacity to support their young people’s mental health.

However, around a third are only just about coping (5–6, out of 10) in supporting their volunteers/staff and their young people. One-in-ten leaders said they’re currently not coping in terms of capacity in supporting their young people’s mental wellbeing.

Capacity rating distribution (scale: 0 – 10, where 0 is not at all good, 5 is coping, and 10 is excellent)

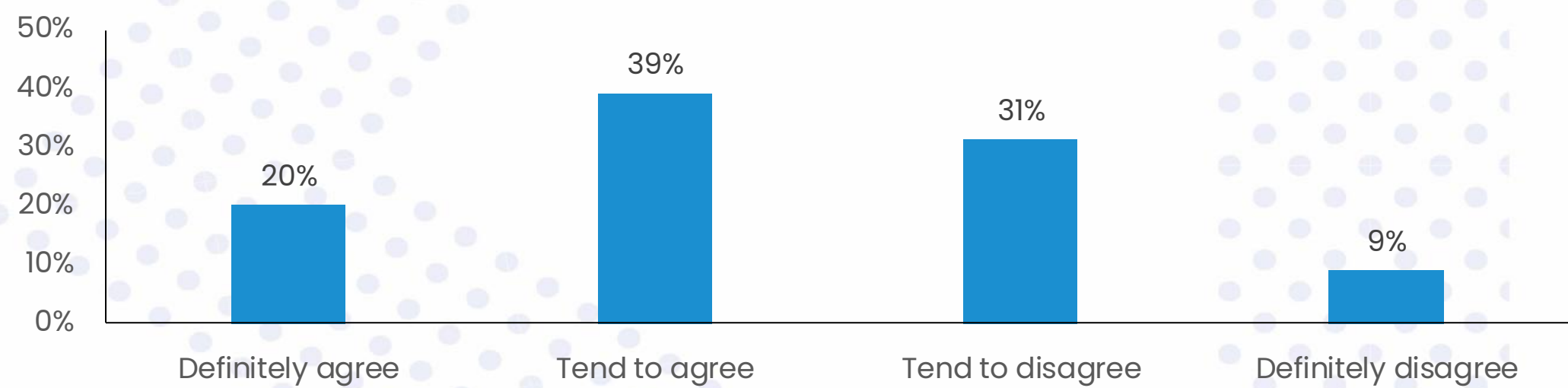


Connecting communities

Influencing the local area

Just over half of leaders agree (definitely or tend to) that they personally can influence decisions affecting their local area (59%) which implies some of our group leaders feel they have **sense of agency** within their communities.

Group leaders' belief that they personally can influence decisions affecting their local area

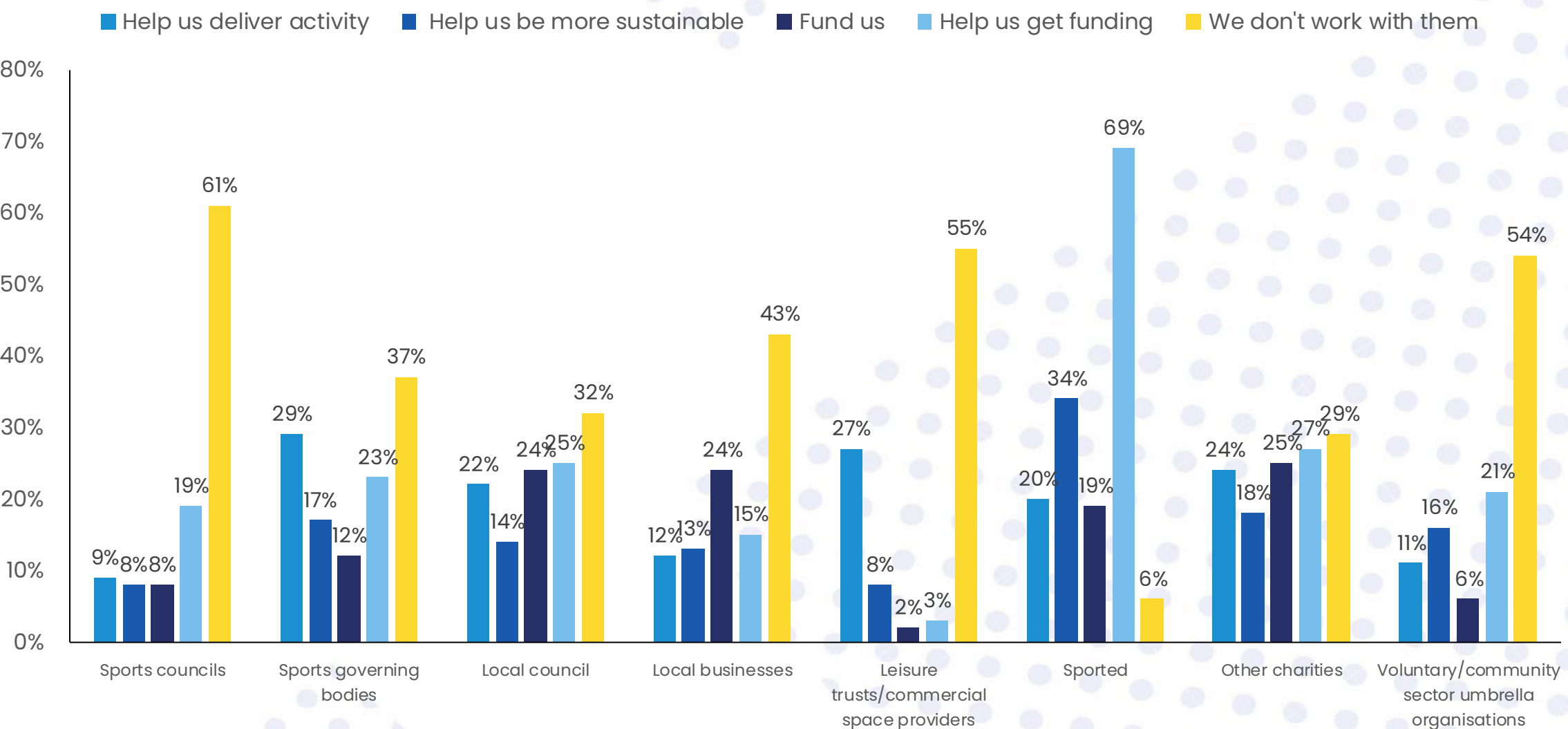


Groups' relationships to other organisations

Our groups have varying relationships with other organisations within the ecosystem. Sports governing bodies are most likely to help groups deliver activities (29%), with Sported supporting a third of groups to be more sustainable (34%). Around a quarter are funded by local businesses (24%), local councils (24%) and/or other charities (25%). Sported provides over two-thirds of groups with support in getting funding (69%). Relationships with other charities are varied, with around a quarter of groups helped in delivery, directly funded, and/or helped to get funding by these organisations.

Groups told us that the key to making these relationships work is regular and effective communication, openness, honesty and mutual trust, and an understanding of their needs and situation. Shared values and goals are also important, along with flexibility of approach and simplicity of processes. Finally, access to funding is a major boost for relationships, alongside a willingness to listen to smaller groups within communities.

Relationships with other organisations

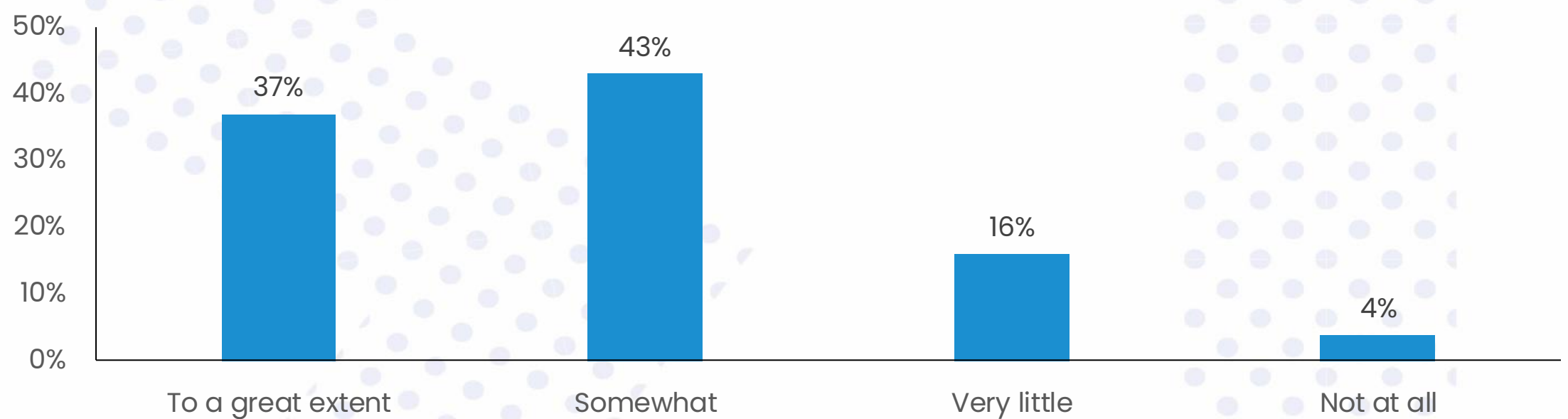


Tackling inequalities

Representation of minoritised groups and the impact on participation

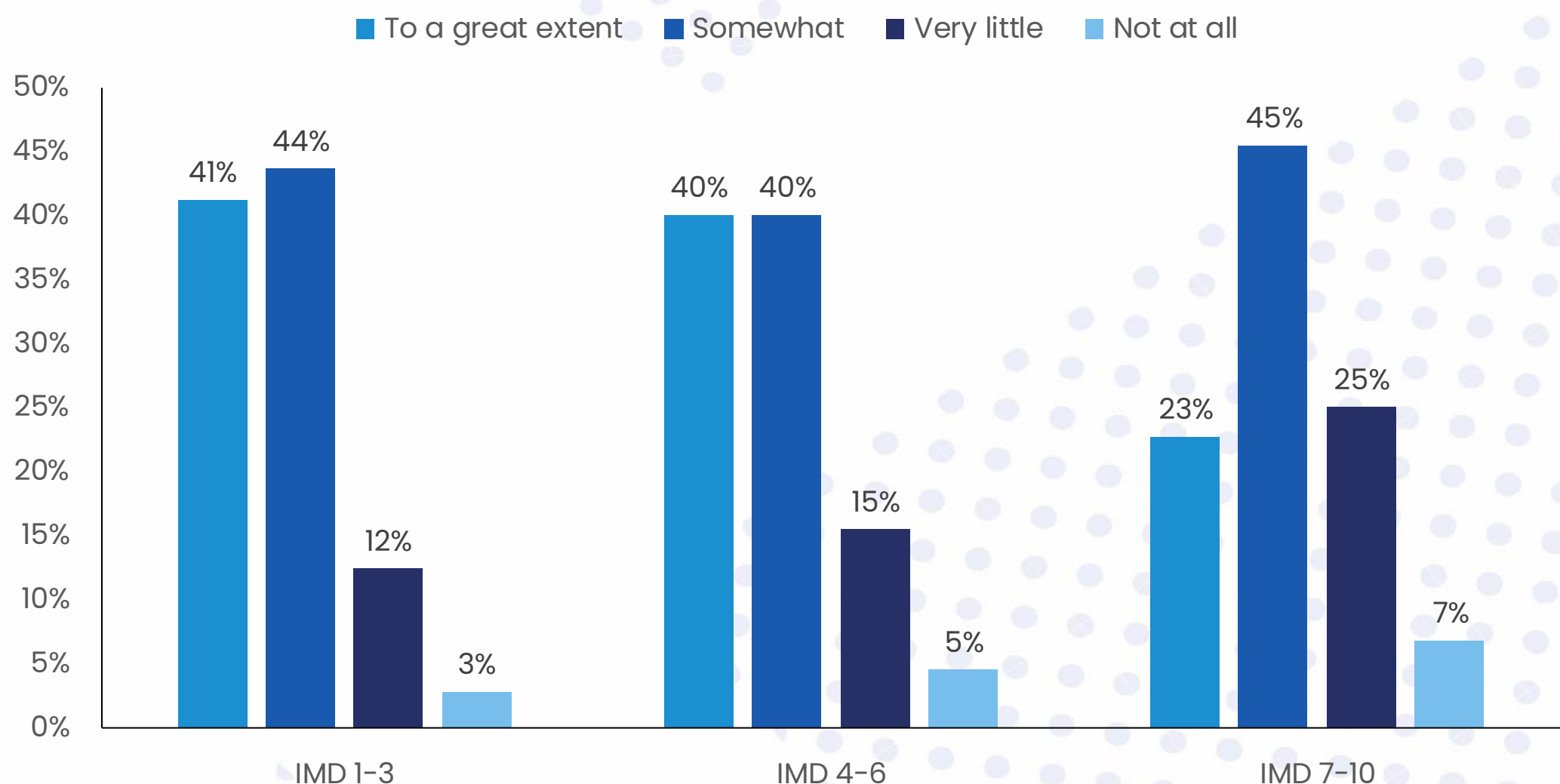
More than three-quarters of group leaders told us that the lack of representation of minoritised groups within sport impacts (to a great extent or somewhat) on young people from their community taking part (80%).

The lack of representation of minoritised groups within sport impacts on young people from leaders' communities taking part



Group leaders from areas of higher relative deprivation are more likely to agree that a lack of representation of minoritised groups impacts on young people from their communities taking part in sport and physical activity. 88% agreed (to a great extent or somewhat) when based in areas of highest relative deprivation (Indices of Multiple Deprivation 1-3), compared with 80% in IMD 4-6 and 68% in IMD 7-10.

The lack of representation of minoritised groups within sport impacting on young people from leaders' community taking part – breakdown by Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD)



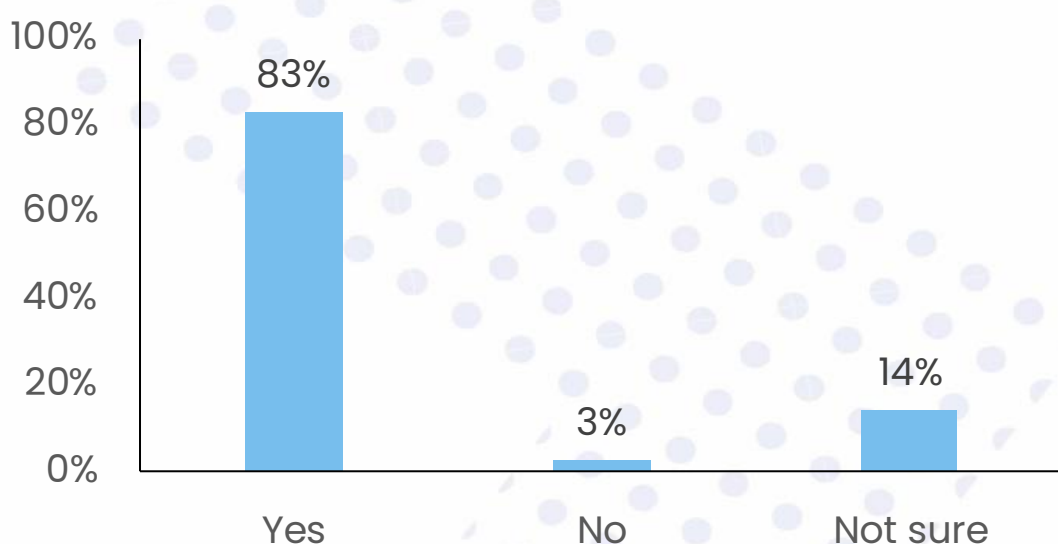
Getting active

Understanding activity levels

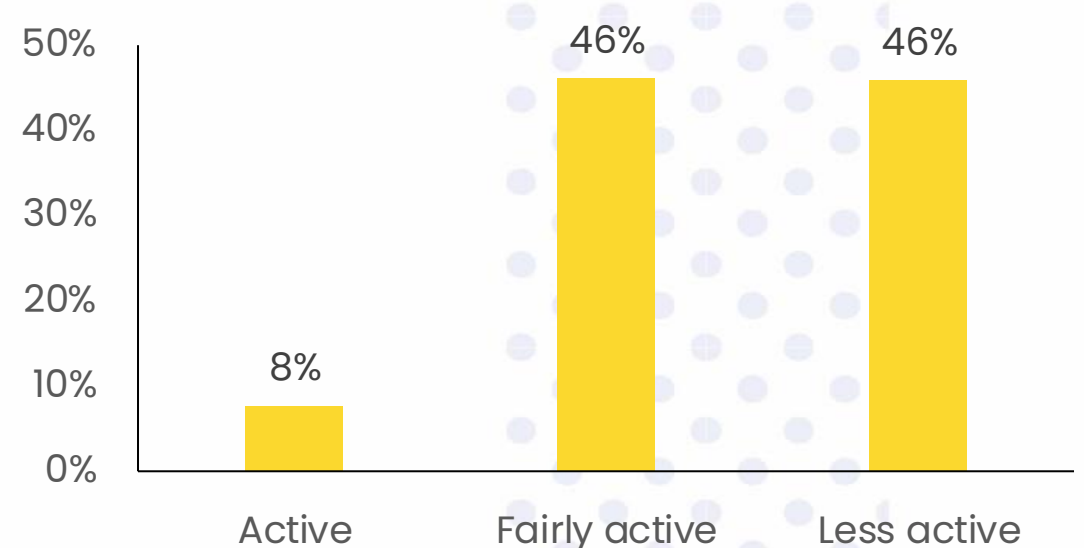
83% of groups told us **they get inactive young people active**.

Around half (46%) reported young people in their communities are fairly active (an average of 30–59 minutes of physical activity a day), with 46% saying young people are less active (less than an average of 30 minutes). 8% said young people in their area are active (an average of 60+ minutes per day).

Do groups get inactive young people active?



How active are young people in groups' communities



What works for getting young people active?

Asked about what works well at their group for getting young people active, leaders identified several key approaches:

- ☐ Affordable activities, either free or at reduced cost, to maximise the opportunities for every young person regardless of their economic situation to take part.
- ☐ Inclusive environments that welcome young people of all backgrounds and abilities.
- ☐ Fun, encouraging, and non-competitive atmospheres, recognising that participation – rather than competition – is key.
- ☐ Engaging young people through lots of different activities where possible: variety and choice helps keep young people interested and lets them take part in the activities they like best.
- ☐ Qualified coaching staff who have the skills to deliver activities and are a trusted presence for the young people taking part.

What are the challenges in getting young people active?

Reporting on the challenges in getting young people active, leaders told us the main issues are:

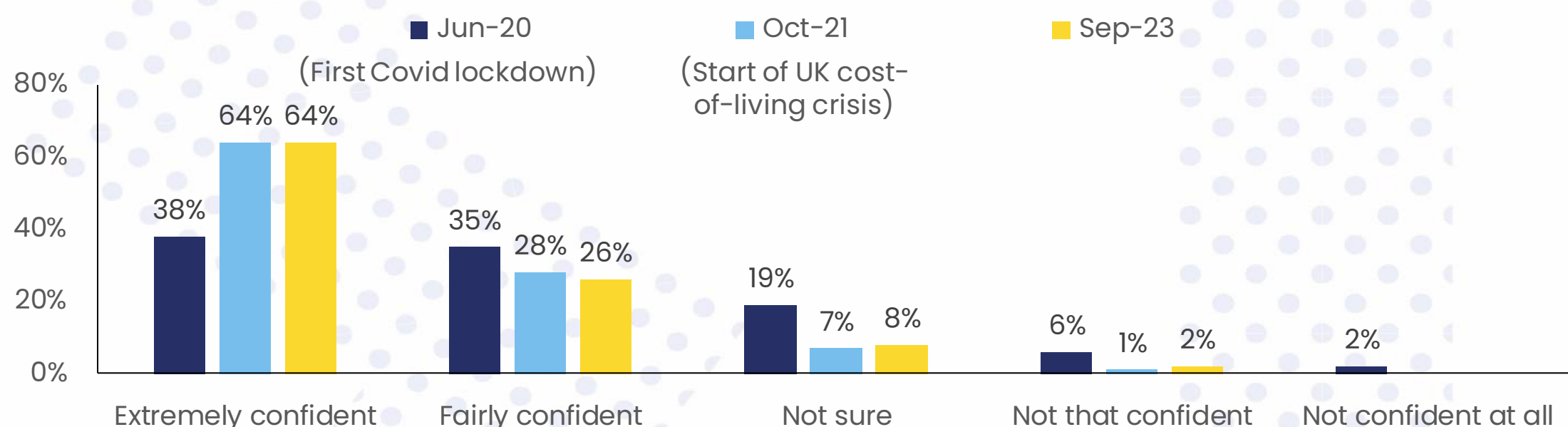
- ☐ A lack of facilities and safe spaces in which to deliver activities.
- ☐ Financial barriers and the cost of taking part for young people.
- ☐ Access to affordable and reliable transport that enables young people to attend activities.
- ☐ Mental health challenges, including peer pressure, low self-confidence, and anxiety.

Survival and priorities

Organisational survival

Confidence in organisational survival is high, with 90% of groups confident (extremely or fairly) in their group's survival over the next six months. This has increased since the UK's Covid-19 lockdowns in spring/summer 2020, when one in five groups weren't sure about surviving the following six months. Currently, confidence levels are similar to those seen at the start of the cost-of-living crisis in autumn 2021.

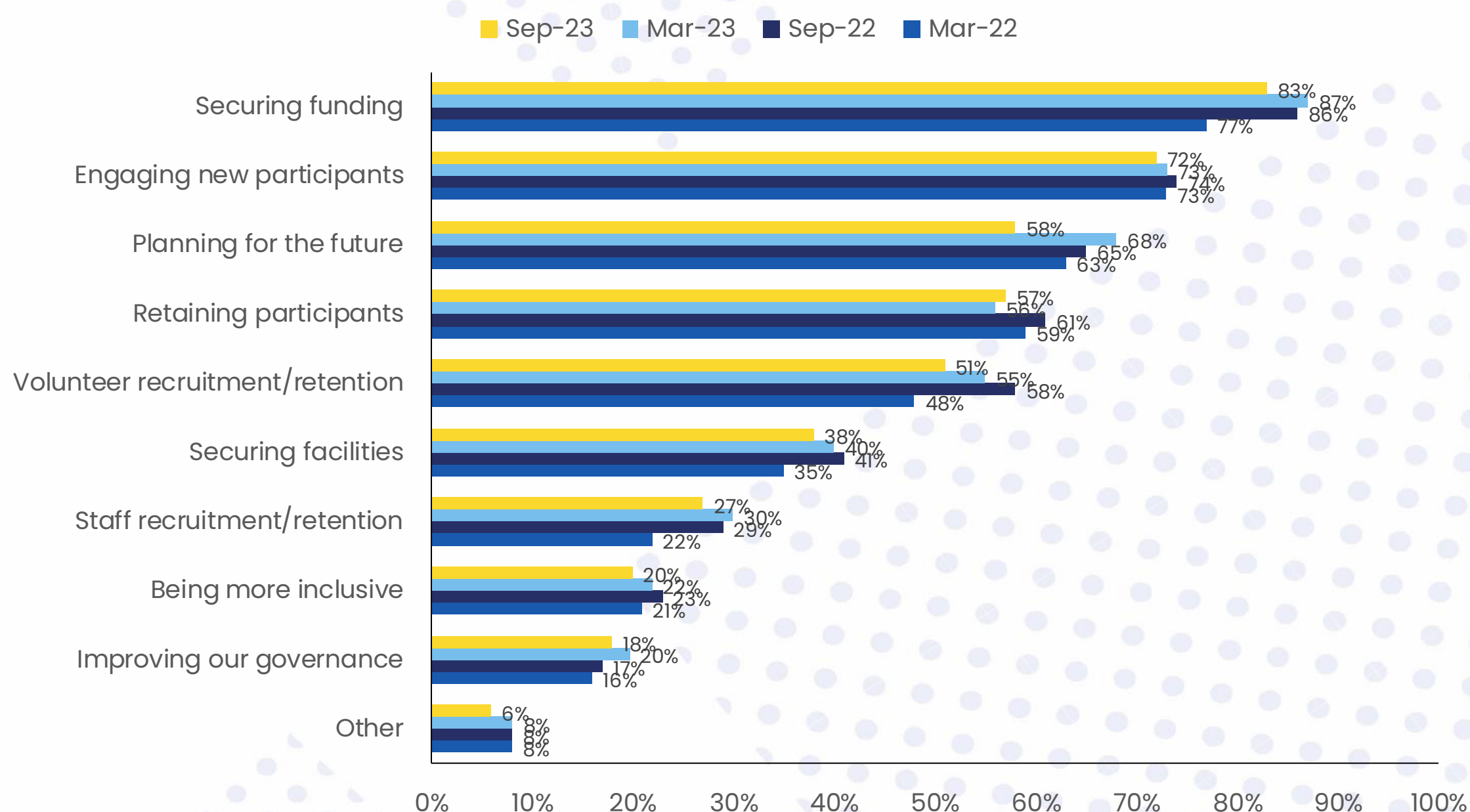
Confidence in organisational survival in the next six months



Top priorities over the next six months

Securing funding continues to be the most common priority for groups, with 83% of groups identifying this as a key task for the next six months (a similar proportion to six months ago). Engaging new participants also remains the second most common priority from six months ago.

Groups' priorities over the next six months

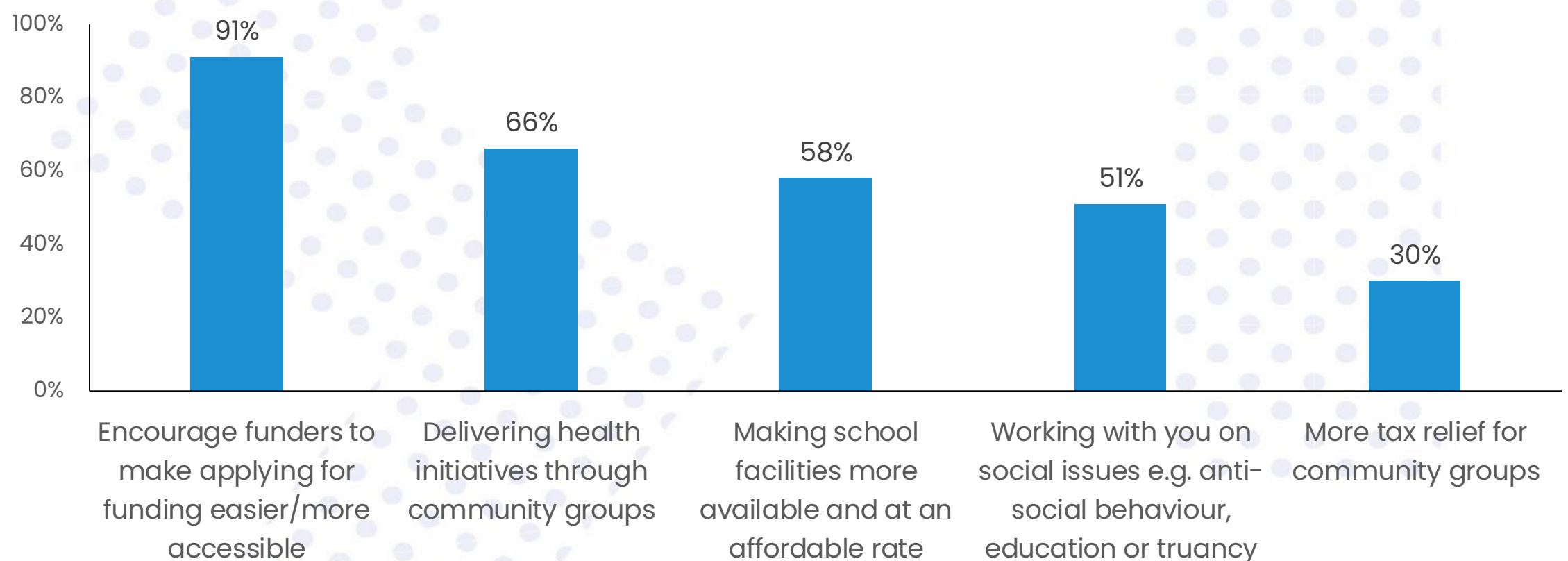


Supporting community groups

What can government do to better support groups?

Almost every group told us that government, whether at national or local level, can better support them by encouraging funders to make applying for funding easier/more accessible (91%). More than half of respondents also said government support in delivering health initiatives through community groups (66%), making school facilities more available and more affordable (58%), and working collaboratively on social issues (51%) would be helpful.

What more could the government at national or local level do to support groups?

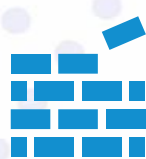


Support from sponsors and companies

What's the one thing groups would like to see sponsors/companies do more of to support grassroots sport?



Increase the amount and availability of funding to help groups access vital financial support.



Diversify funding types to let groups access money for different needs, including for staff costs, day-to-day expenses, and facilities.



Go beyond money and help groups through volunteering, coaching, and support in running groups.



Expand the range of sports that funding is available for and support activities that are often over-looked.



Simplify application processes to make it easier and less time-consuming for groups to apply for support.



Increase support for community groups and smaller organisations who don't often get the attention reserved for elite-level sport.

Our response

Our spring 2023 edition of Pulse allowed us to:

- Understand the current needs, issues and jeopardy surrounding community sport to allow us to better define Sported's offer to our members.
- Engage every parliamentarian across the UK, as well as key agencies, and advocate on behalf of our groups, highlighting the huge collective impact they make on their communities and on young people in tandem with calls for further support and engagement from all branches of government. This includes illustrating the stark impacts of cost-of-living increases, maintaining the traction gained in our 'Keep the Doors Open' campaign.
- Deepen our connections in the Statutory sector, among devolved government, regional agencies and other charities in order to highlight the effective and revenue-efficient role that community organisations can play in delivering local solutions to local problems through channels of activity which reach audiences who are either hard to reach or simply over-looked.
- To engage the national and regional media to amplify the issues at stake surrounding grassroots sport and young people, spotlighting the research and, significantly, telling the powerful stories of our members and allowing their voice to be heard.
- To open doors for new or extended conversations with corporate partners, illustrating the difference they can make by supporting the sport for development sector and the areas of involvement open to them.

Keep the Doors Open

Community sports organisations are critical to the lives of disadvantaged young people. Our reach on the ground tells us the cost-of living-crisis is limiting access to activity and support to young people with the greatest need.

Groups are experiencing significant increases in bills, reduced support from external funders, and a drop in participation levels – they urgently need more funding to mitigate the pinch felt by their participants and their families and to cover the increased running costs. In listening to these organisations, they are asking us to both assist and to use our voice on the issue.

Deploying our research to reach a media and policy audience, Sported has continued to run our Keep The Doors Open campaign to push for change based on the issues raised in the survey. As well as numerous discussions with government and others in the political sphere, the data leveraged coverage in the media through outlets including BBC, ITV, The Guardian and The Sun during the past few months. Our campaign stressed the need for support and action so that these groups survived the winter but also are put on a more sustainable footing in the long term.



You can find out more about our campaign here: [Keep The Doors Open | Sported](#)



www.sported.org.uk

