

**Community  
Pulse** 

**October 2023  
Northern Ireland**



**SPORTED**

**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.

**67**  
**responses**

This report is based on **67 responses**, representing just under a quarter of Sported groups in Northern Ireland, between **27 September – 9 October 2023**. These groups reach around 5,500 young people in Northern Ireland.

## 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 83% of respondents either extremely or fairly concerned about the impact on their group.
- Almost two-thirds of groups have experienced a **significant increases in utility bills** over the past six months and more than half have had to **use reserves/faced a reduction in budget surplus**.
- A large majority of groups said their group has **made a change in response to cost-of-living increases; 79% have subsidised equipment and/or kit** for their young people and **60% have reduced membership fees**.
- **Groups' top priority over the next six months is planning for the future.**
- Groups are expecting an **increase in the cost of their Public Liability Insurance** (43%), **a significant increase in fees for using a facility** (40%), a **reduction in financial support from external funding streams** (36%), and/or the **use of their reserves/a reduction in budget surplus** (36%) in the next six months.
- **80% are concerned (extremely or fairly) about the rising cost of living's impact on their young people**, with over half witnessing an increase in negative health behaviours among young people in the last six months and/or disengagement or reduced participation in sport.
- More than half of group leaders report that **young people have seen a reduction in disposable income** meaning they are less able to afford subs, travel costs, clothing or kit.
- 48% of group leaders have reported that their **young people have experienced reduced mental wellbeing** as a result of cost-of-living increases.
- Nearly half of group leaders told us they are **only just about coping** in their capacity to support the mental health of their young people.

# Key findings

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

- On average, groups in Northern Ireland who responded to Pulse are engaging around 90 young people, with 81% of these groups supporting young people from historically underserved communities and 38% located in the highest three areas of multiple deprivation (IMD 1-3).
- **Engaging new participants** continues to remain a top priority for groups.
- Three-quarters of groups say they **get inactive young people active** in their communities (72%), despite activity levels within their communities being relatively low.
- More than three-quarters of groups (79%) 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, and a variety of different activities.
- Just over half of leaders agree (definitely or tend to) that **they personally can influence decisions affecting their local area** (57%).
- **Confidence in organisational survival is high, with 93% of groups confident (extremely or fairly) in their group's survival over the next six months.** Groups are more likely to have the highest level of confidence in their survival compared to the start of the UK's Covid lockdowns in spring 2020. 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:

- 93% 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 more funding and for different needs (especially facilities/capital/running costs, not just projects), as well as a greater variety of support (such as volunteering).
- Groups have varying relationships with other organisations within the ecosystem. 78% are connected to their National Governing Body for sport. Nearly half of groups don't work with their Sports Council and two-thirds have no connection to leisure trusts. Groups are most likely to get funding from local businesses, and support with securing funding and sustainability from Sported.

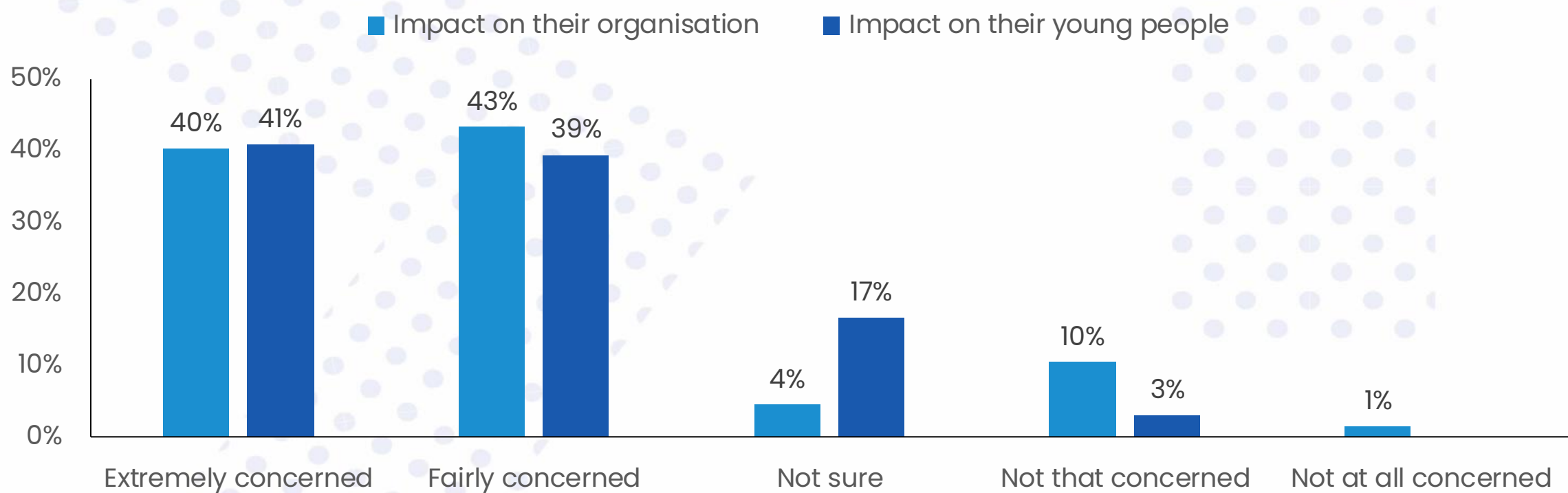
# Cost-of-living increases

## Impact on groups and their young people

**Concern around the impact of cost-of-living increases on groups and their young people remains high.** 83% are either extremely or fairly concerned about the impact on their group, with 80% concerned for their young people.

There's been a small decrease in concern for the impact on groups since spring, when 90% of respondents were concerned about the impact on their group, but concerns for young people remains the same compared to six months ago.

Concern about the impact of cost-of-living increases

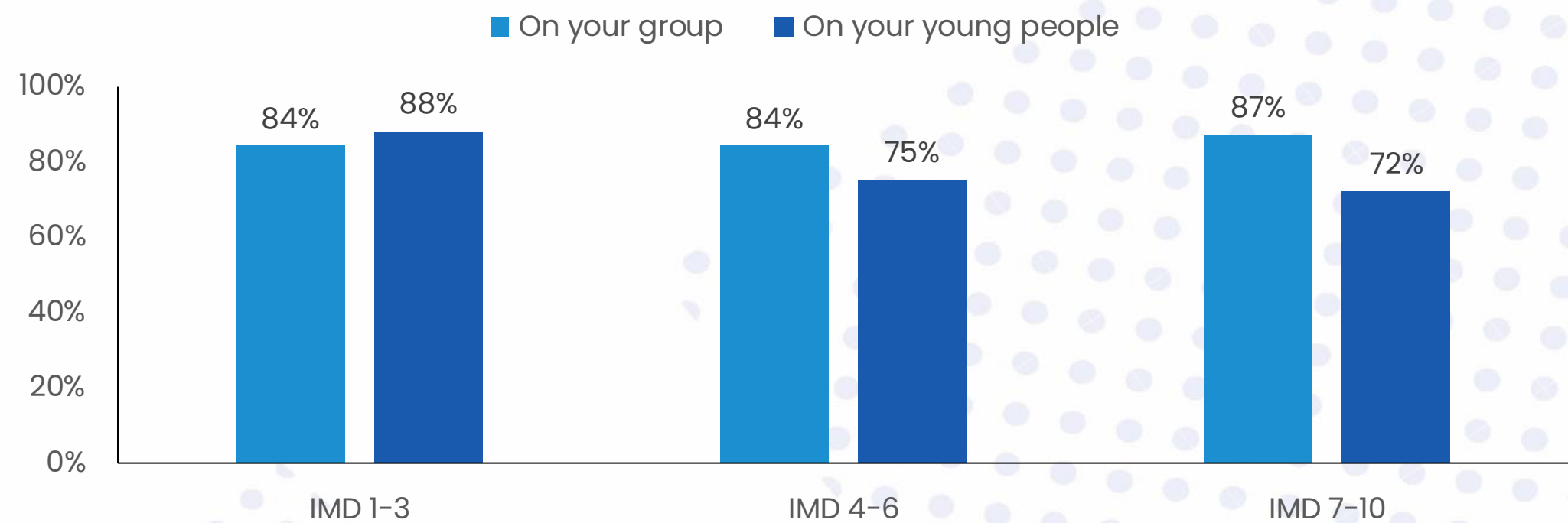


## Impact on groups and their young people by IMD

**High levels of concern** about the impact of cost-of-living increases on groups **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)



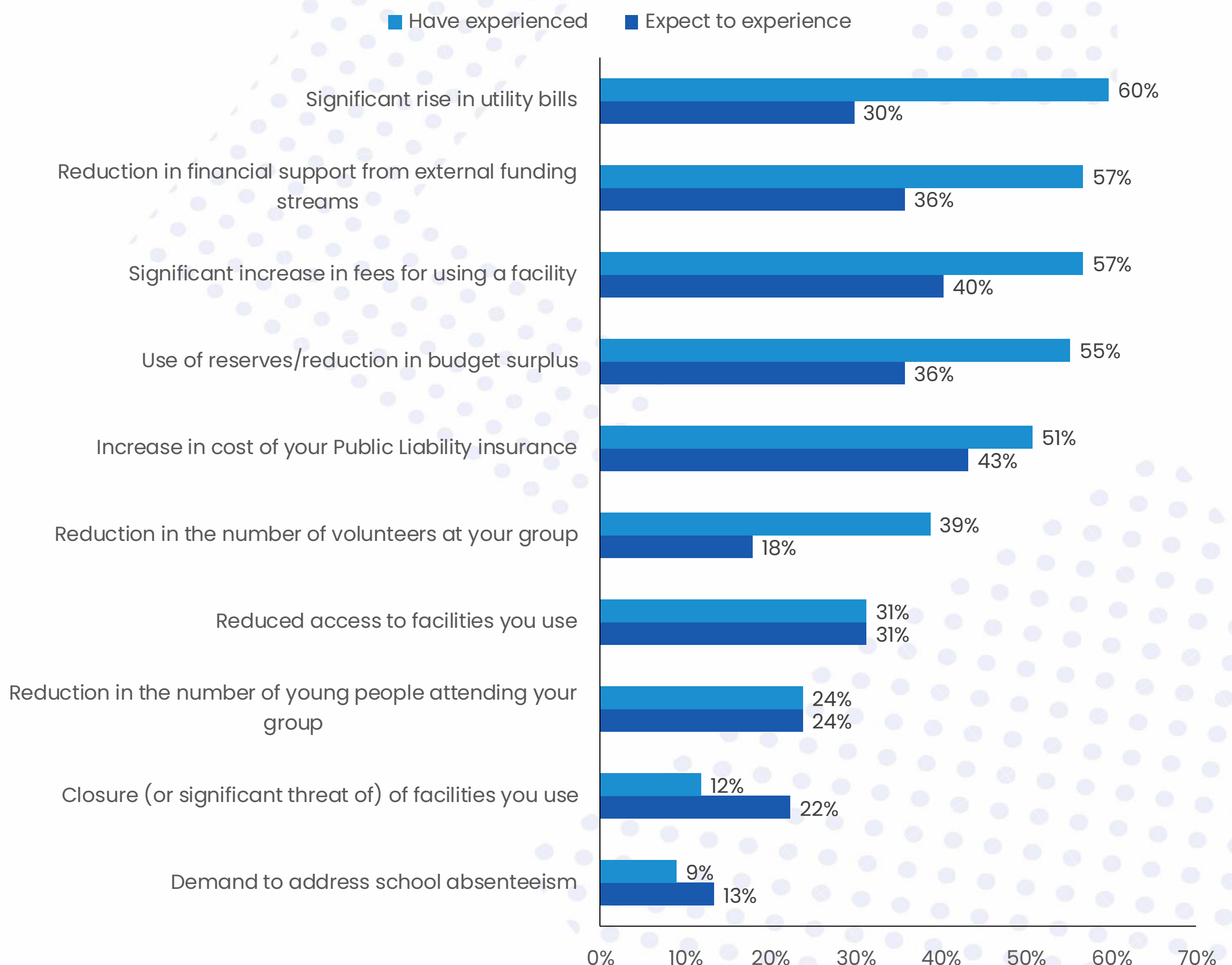
# Cost-of-living increases

## Impact of cost-of-living increases for groups

**The most common experience for groups over the last six months has been a significant rise in utility bills (60%). Half of groups have seen a reduction in financial support from external funding streams (57%), significant increases in fees for using a facility (57%), the use of reserves/a reduction in budget surplus (55%), and/or an increase in the cost of their Public Liability Insurance (51%).**

Looking ahead to the next six months, nearly half of groups expect to experience an increase in their Public Liability Insurance (43%). A similar proportion expect significant increases in fees for using a facility (40%). A third of groups are predicting a reduction in financial support from external funding streams (36%) and/or the use of reserves/a reduction in their budget surplus (36%).

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



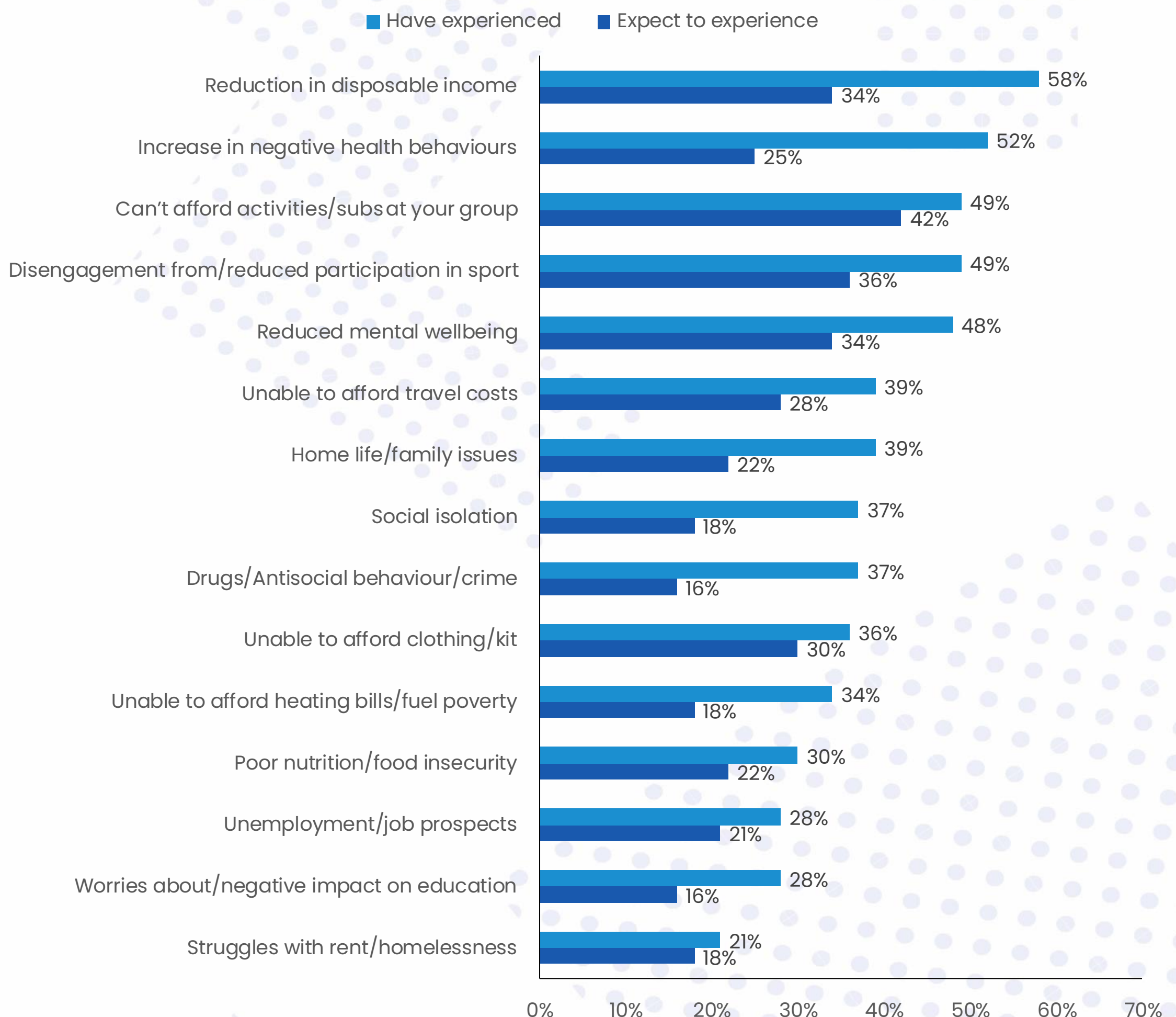
# Cost-of-living increases

## 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 (58%). Around half of leaders told us their young people experienced an increase in negative health behaviours (52%), haven't been able to afford activities/subs at their groups (49%), have disengaged/reduced participation in sport (49%), and/or faced reduced mental wellbeing (48%) as a result of cost-of-living increases.

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 (42%). A third of groups said they expect young people to disengage/reduce their participation in sport (36%).

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



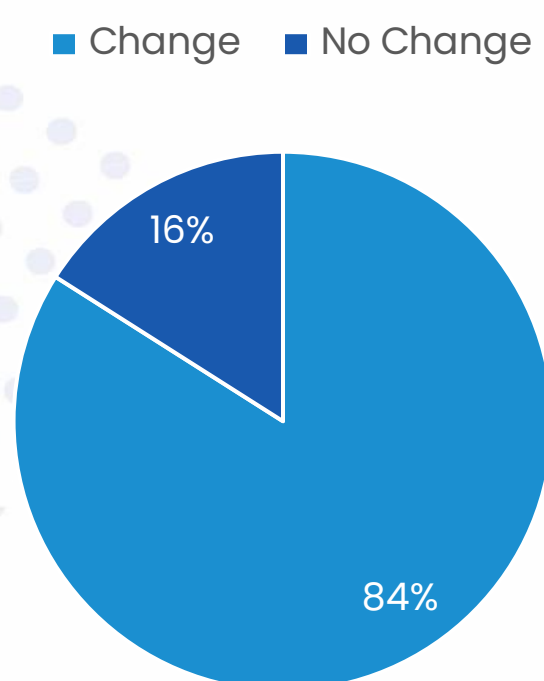
# Cost-of-living increases

## Groups' responses to the increases

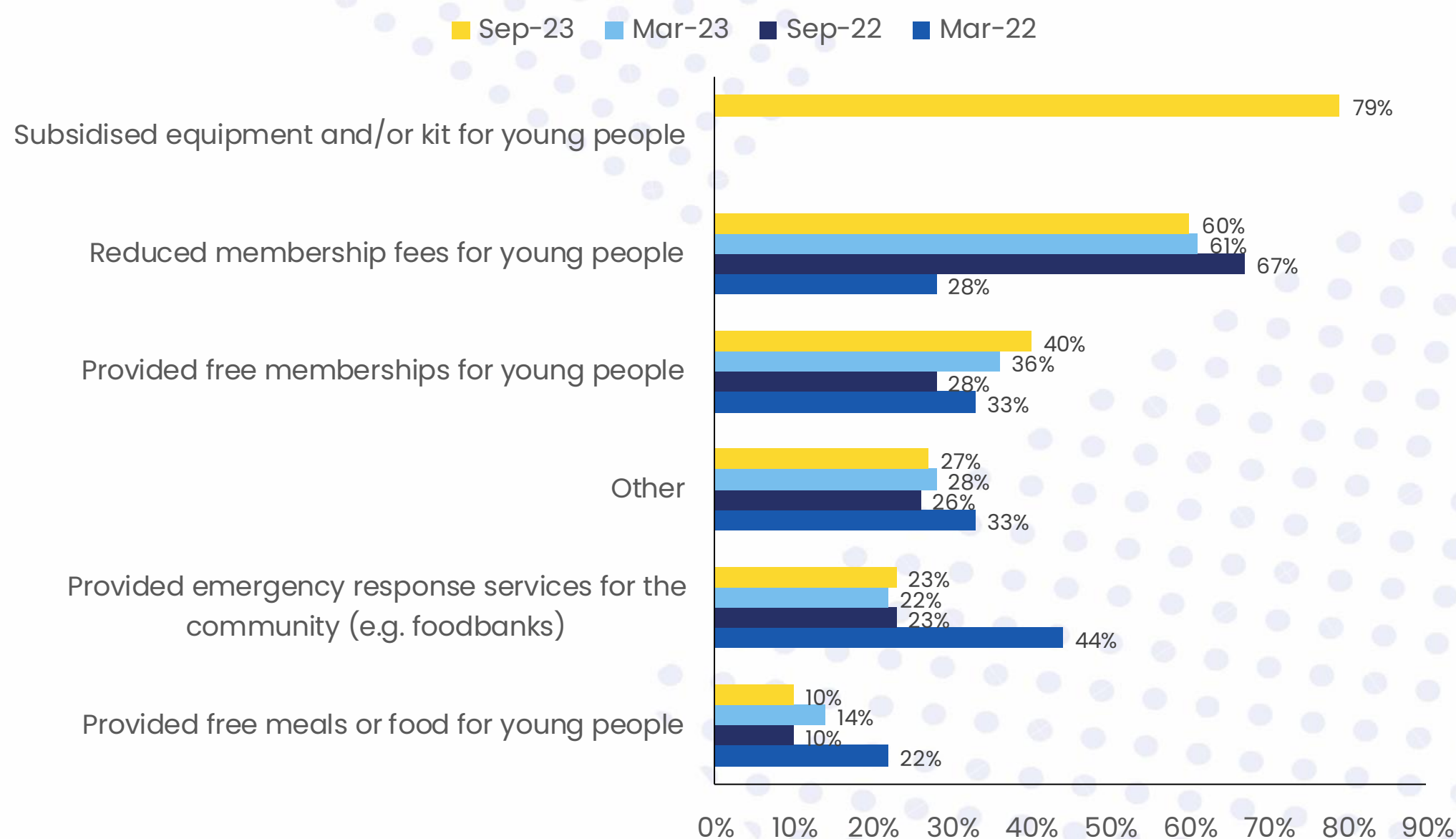
**A substantial majority of groups have responded to cost-of-living increases by making a change to their operation (84%).** This is an increase from March, when 69% of respondents indicated they'd made a change.

The most common change has been to subsidise equipment/kit for their participants (79%), with more than half reducing fees for their young people (60%). Over a third of groups have provided free memberships (40%). 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



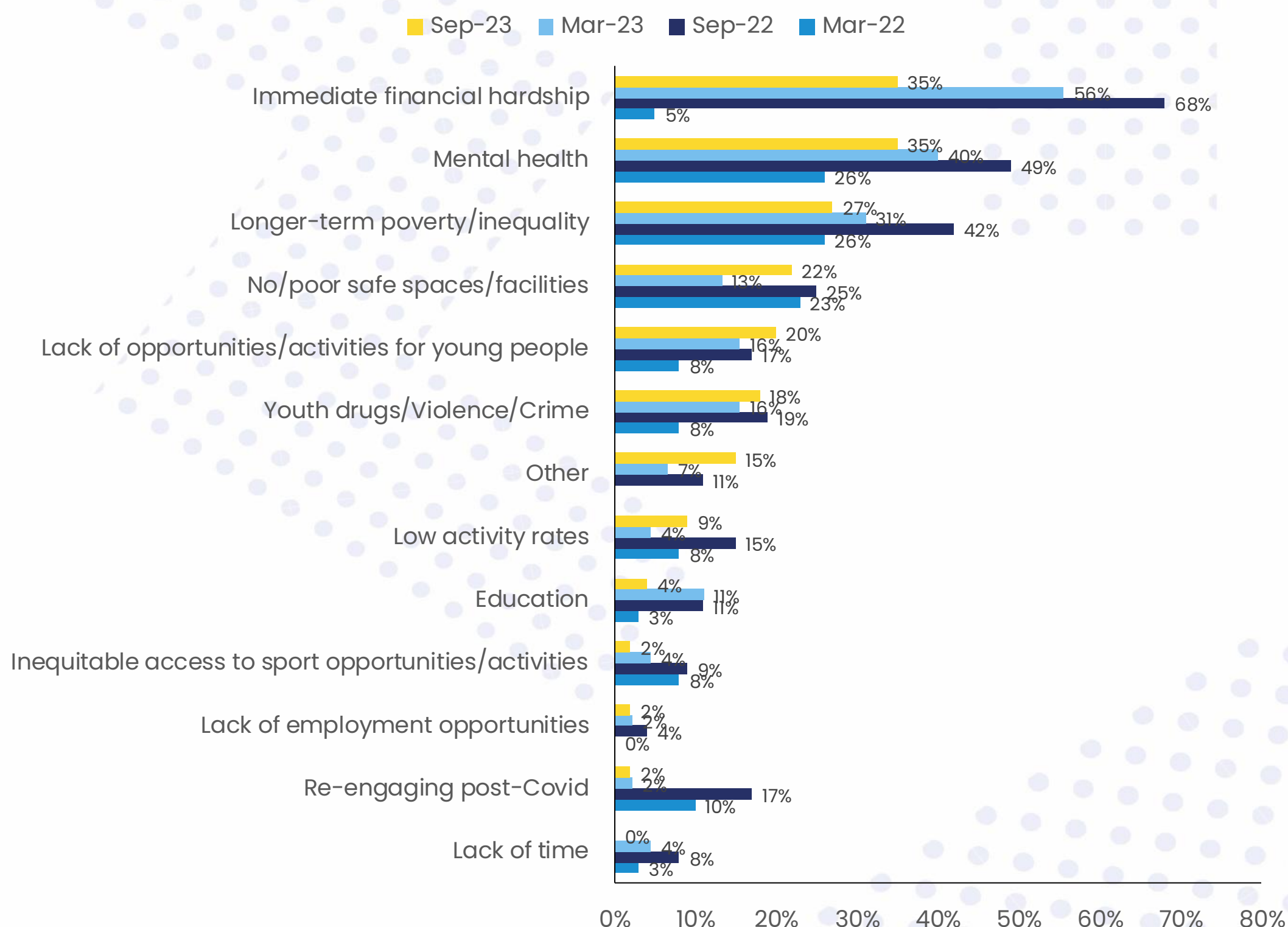
# Challenges for young people

## 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, a third of respondents (35%) 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 also continue to be prevalent, with mental wellbeing remaining the second most reported concern. There has also been a rise in the number of leaders noting a lack of opportunities/activities for young people, with a quarter (22%) commenting on this compared to 13% six months ago.

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



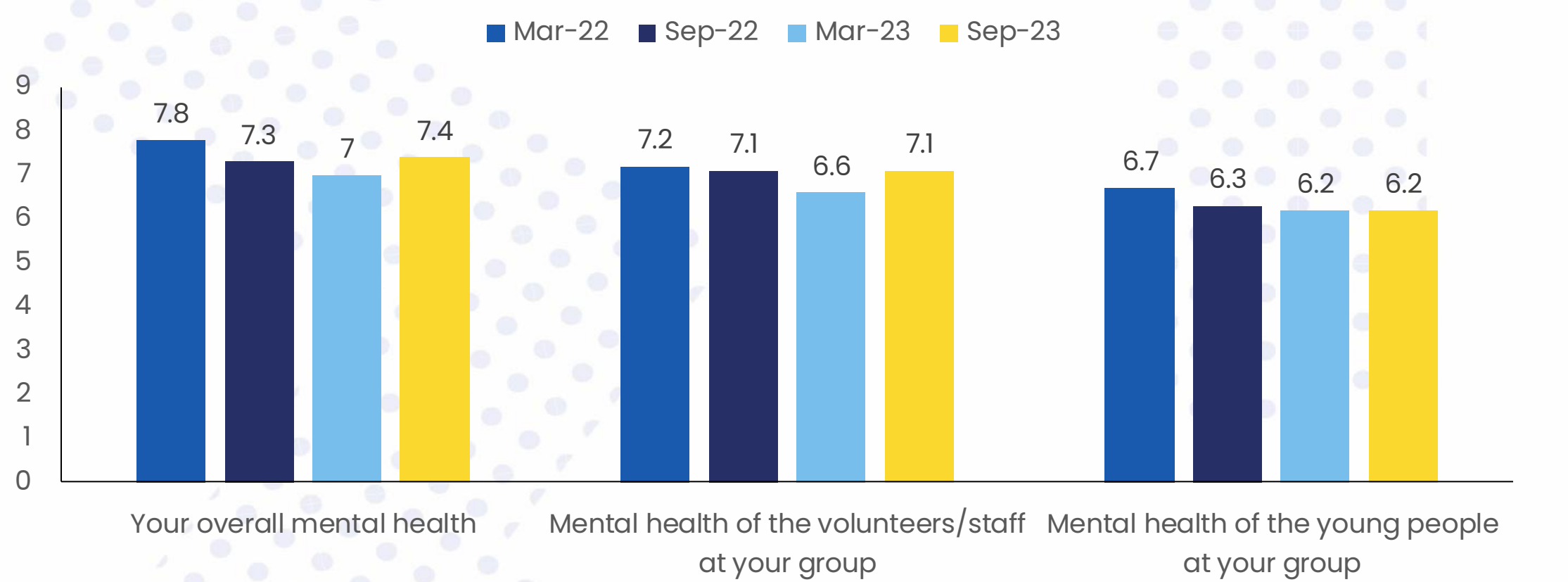
- 'There are very few free sporting opportunities that exist outside school, and charges are unaffordable for some families. Funding needs to be made available to community clubs to ensure they can offer low cost and free participation.' – survey respondent
- 'The cost-of-living crisis is the main one, as some potential members are looking for brief escapes from reality through sport but can't afford it, especially coming into the colder months.' – survey respondent
- 'Social isolation, places to meet in person outside of school, and social media hazards.' – survey respondent

# Mental health

## Leaders, staff/volunteers, and young people

**Group leaders reported improved scores for their mental health and that of their volunteers/staff compared to six months ago.** They told us their young people’s mental health has remained similar to March.

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

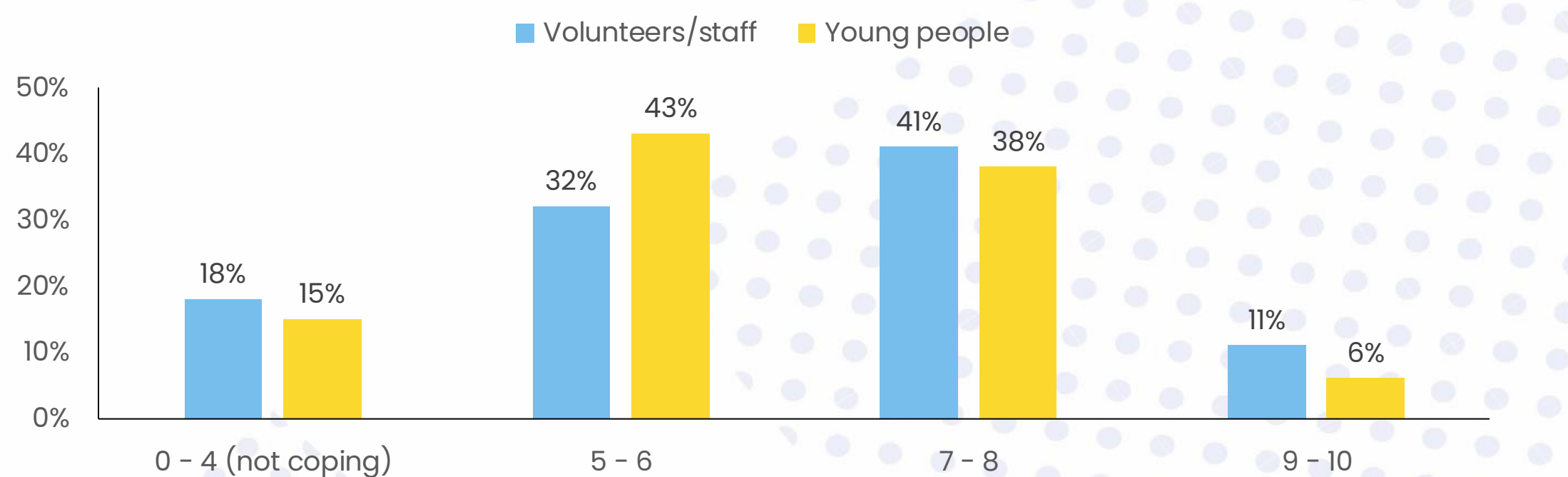


## Capacity to support mental health

**Half of groups (52%) reported a score of 7 (out of 10) or above for their capacity to support the mental health of their volunteers/staff. Less than half scored 7 or above for capacity to support their young people’s mental health (44%).**

Nearly half are only just about coping (5–6, out of 10) in supporting their young people, with a third saying the same for supporting their staff/volunteers. One-in-five leaders said they’re currently not coping in terms of capacity in supporting their volunteer and staff’s mental wellbeing.

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

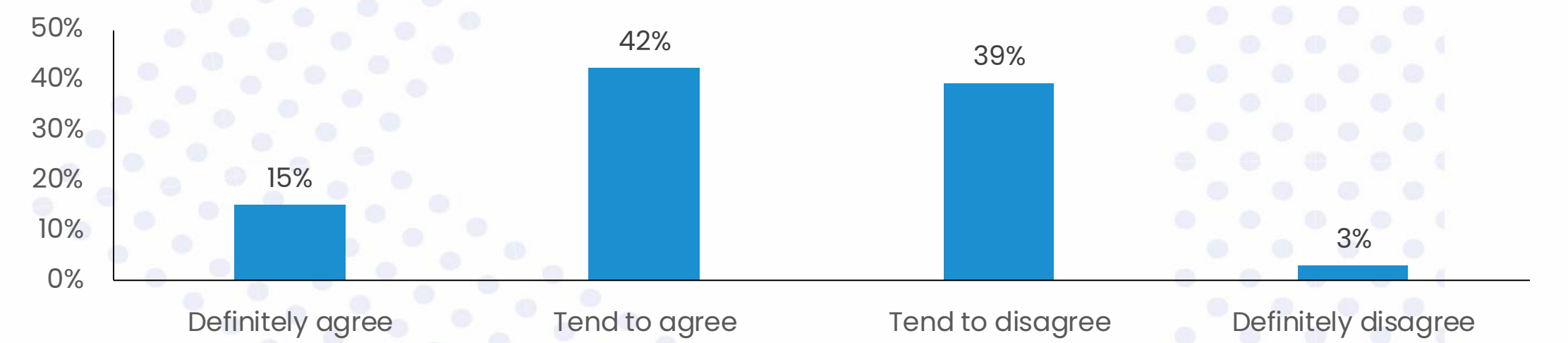


# Connecting communities

## Influencing the local area

Just over half of leaders agree (definitely or tend to) that they personally can influence decisions affecting their local area (57%) which implies some of our group leaders feel they have a **sense of agency** within their communities.

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

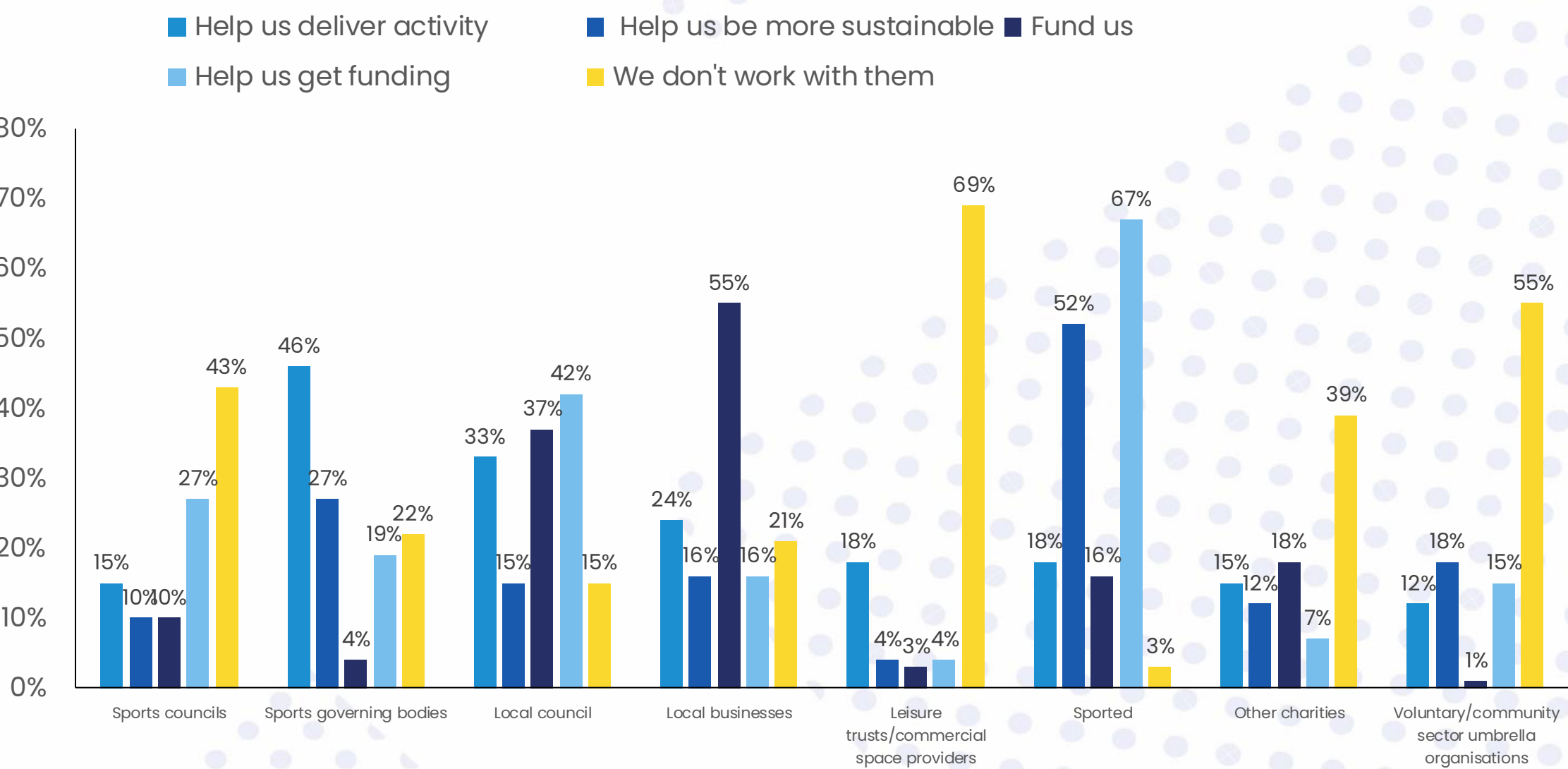


## Groups' relationships to other organisations

Our groups have varying relationships with other organisations within the ecosystem. Sports governing bodies are most likely to help groups deliver activities (46%), with Sported supporting half of groups to be more sustainable (52%). More than half are funded by local businesses (56%) and Sported provides over two-thirds of groups with support in getting funding (67%). Relationships with other charities are varied, though more than a third don't have a connection to other charities.

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. Flexibility in these partnerships is also appreciated, as is external partners taking the time to visit with community groups and see their work in action.

### Relationships with other organisations

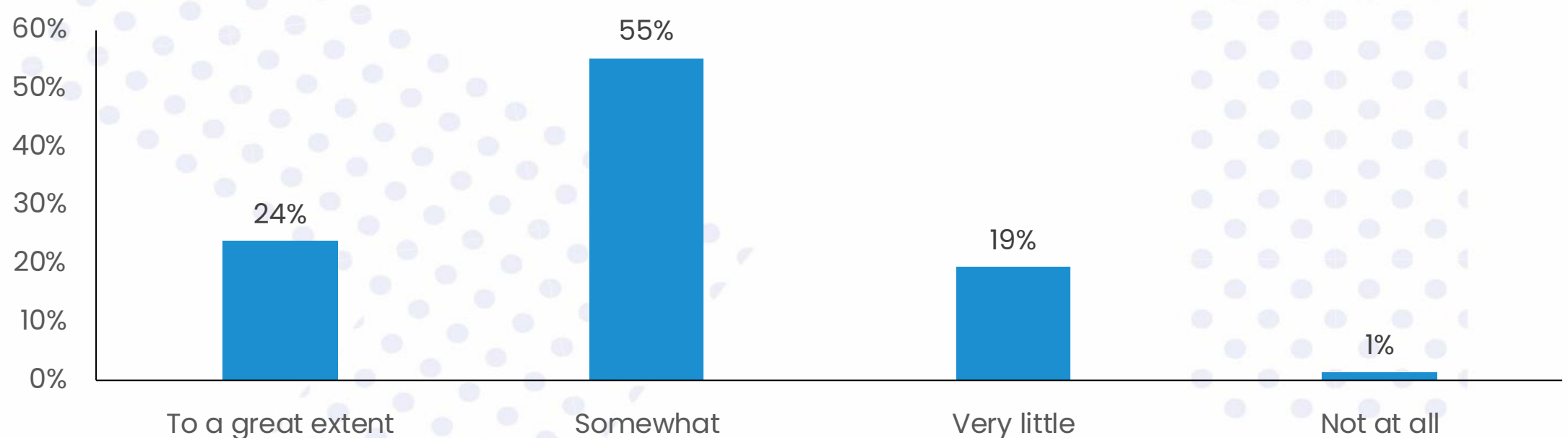


# Tackling inequalities

## Representation of minoritised groups and the impact on participation

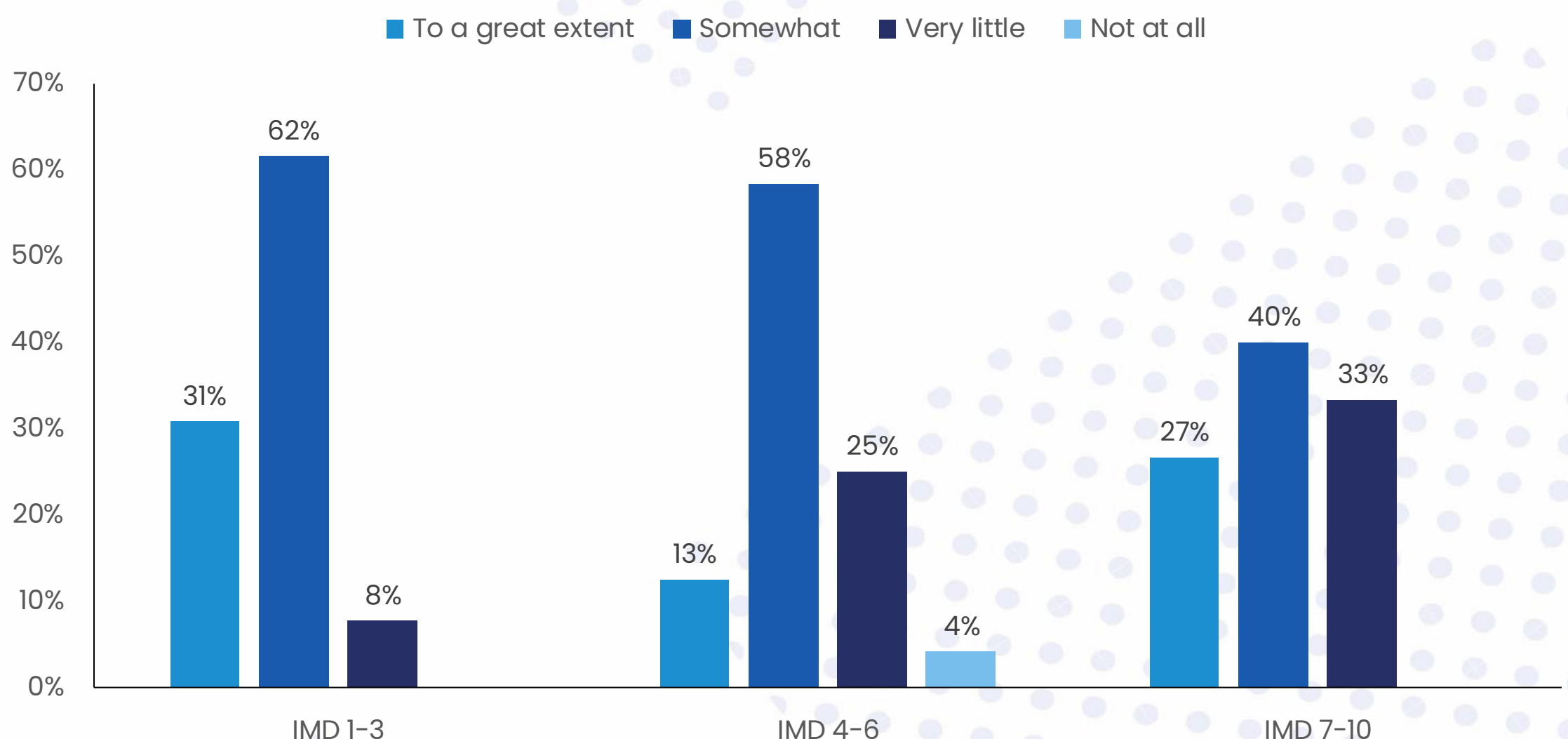
**More than three-quarters of group leaders told us that the lack of representation of minoritised groups within sport impacts (to a great extent or somewhat) on young people from their community taking part (79%).**

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



**Leaders from groups in 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.** 93% agreed (to a great extent or somewhat) when based in areas of highest relative deprivation (Indices of Multiple Deprivation 1-3), compared with 71% in IMD 4-6 and 67% 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)



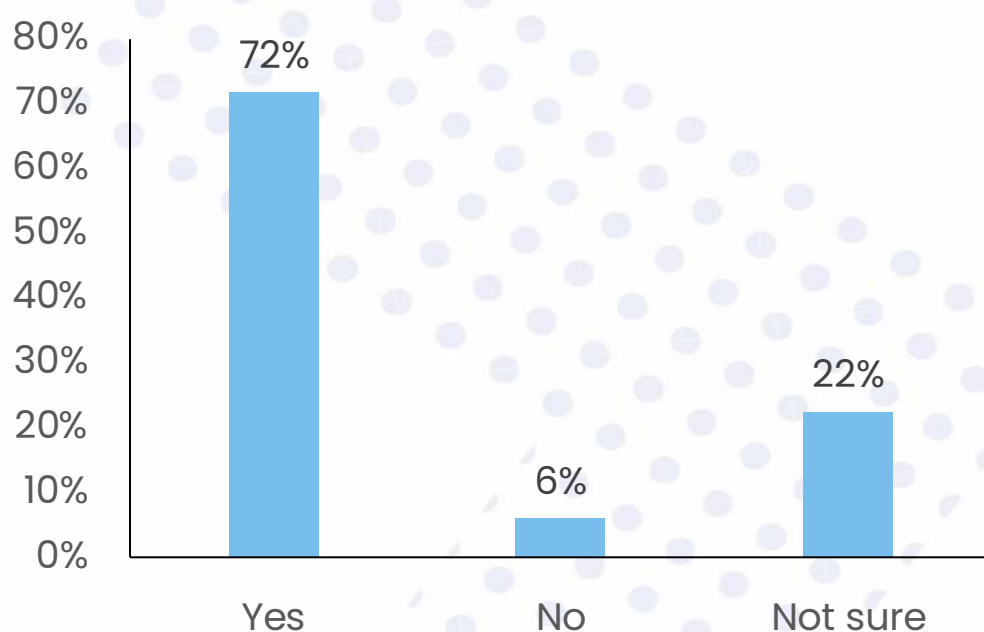
# Getting active

## Understanding activity levels

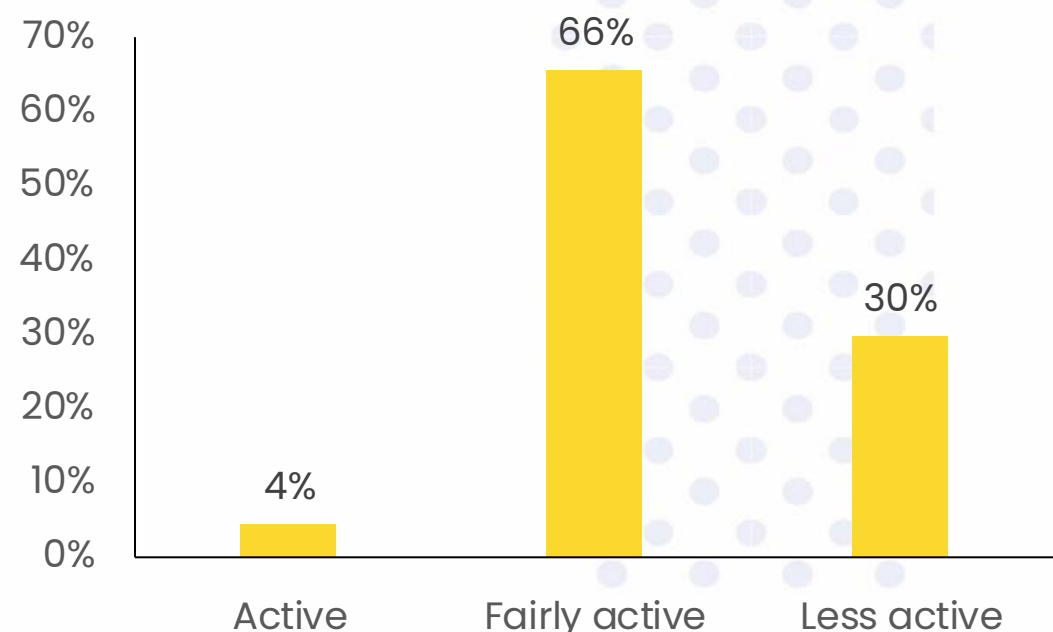
72% of groups told us **they get inactive young people active**.

**Two-thirds reported young people in their communities are fairly active (an average of 30–59 minutes of physical activity a day), with a third saying young people are less active (less than an average of 30 minutes).** 4% 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.

## 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:**

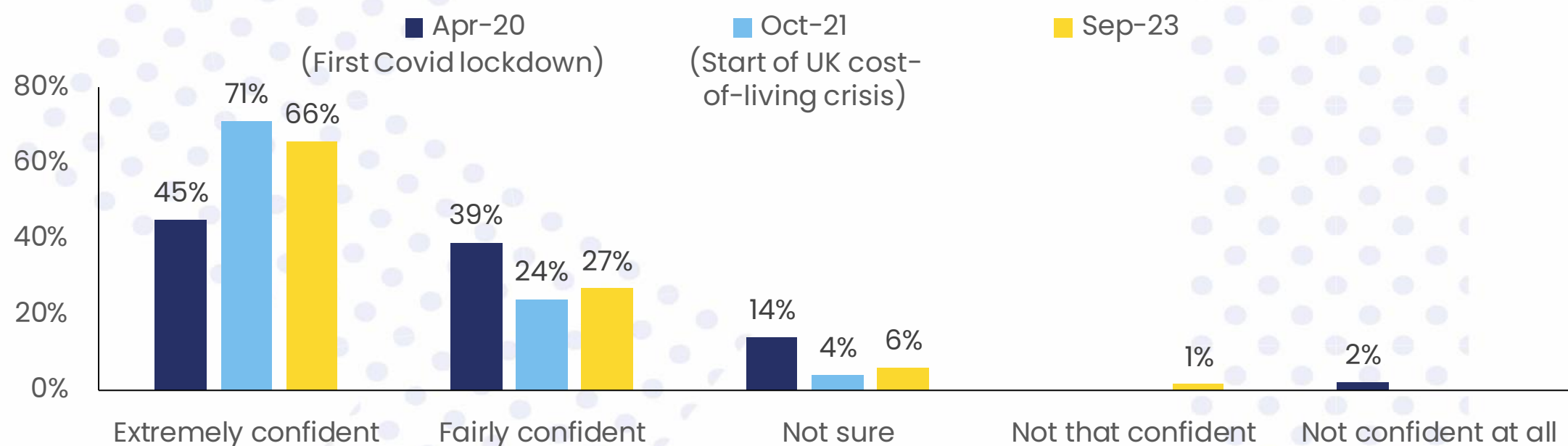
- ☐ A lack of facilities and safe spaces in which to deliver activities.
- ☐ Financial barriers and the cost of taking part for young people.
- ☐ Motivation and the time away from other activities, such as computer games and social media.
- ☐ Mental health challenges, including peer pressure, low self-confidence, and anxiety.

# Survival and priorities

## Organisational survival

**Confidence in organisational survival is high, with 93% of groups confident (extremely or fairly) in their group's survival over the next six months.** Groups are more likely to have the highest level of confidence in their survival compared to the start of the UK's Covid lockdowns in spring 2020. Currently, confidence levels are similar to those seen at the start of the cost-of-living crisis in autumn 2021.

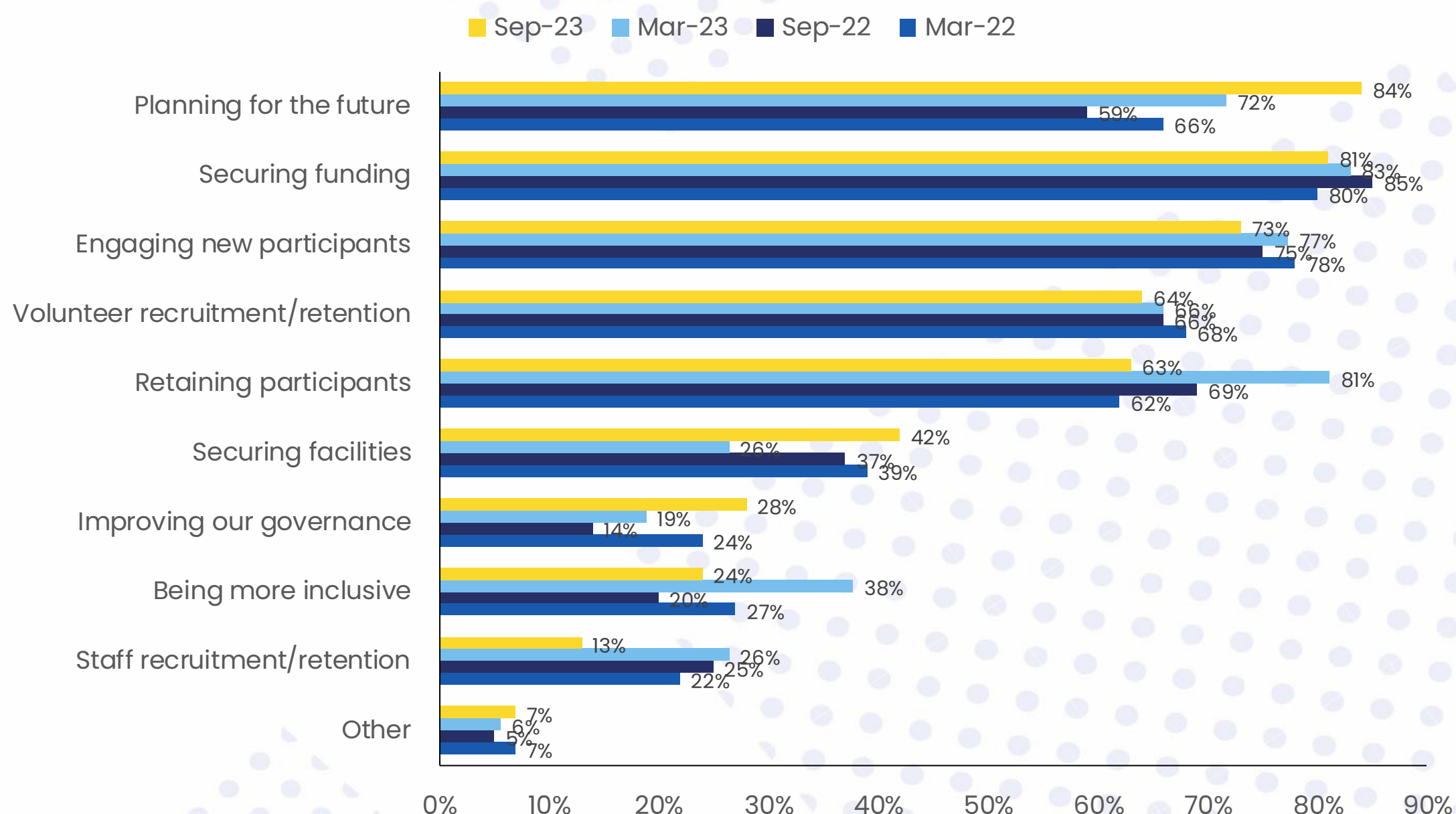
### Confidence in organisational survival in the next six months



## Top priorities over the next six months

**Planning for the future is now the most common priority for groups, with 84% of groups identifying this as a key task for the next six months.** This is an increase from March, when three-quarters (72%) told us this was a priority. Securing funding remains among groups' top priorities along with engaging new participants.

### Groups' priorities over the next six months

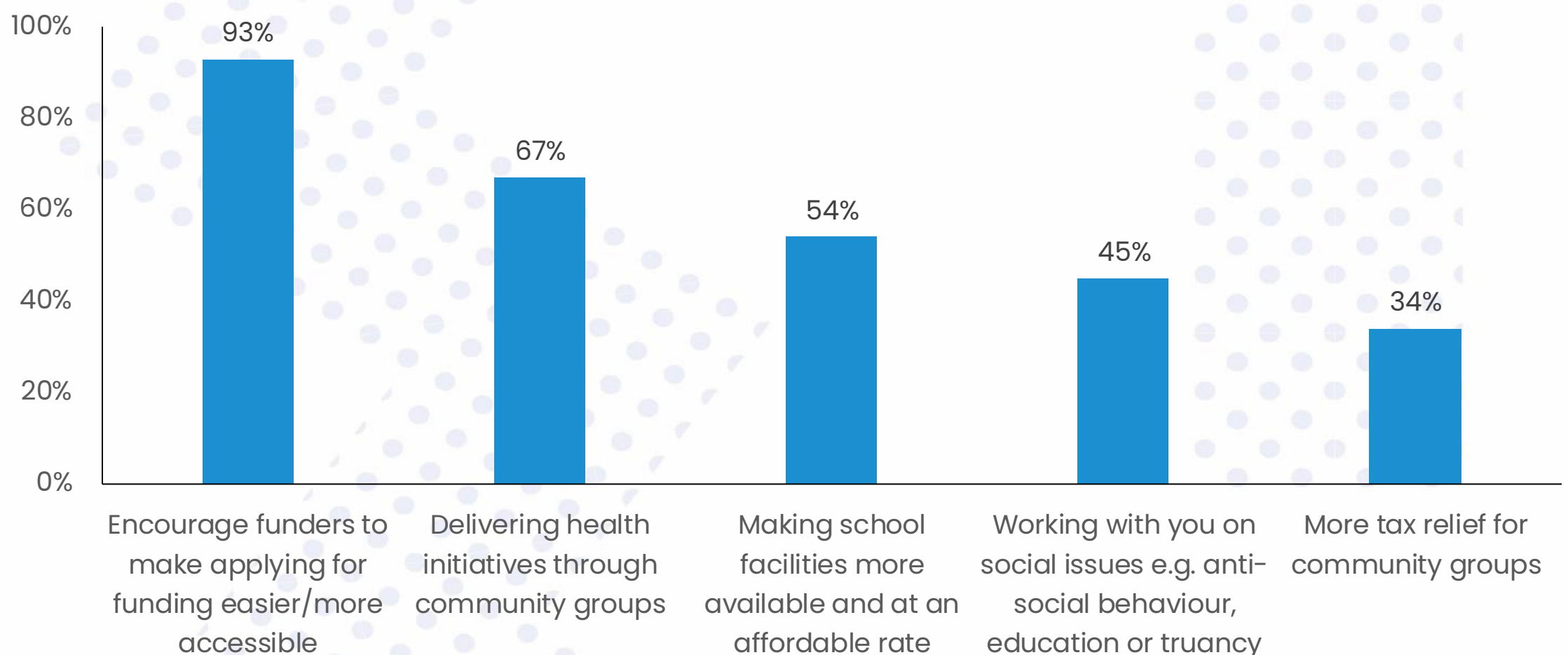


# Supporting community groups

## 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 (93%).** More than half of respondents also said government support in delivering health initiatives through community groups (67%) and making school facilities more available and more affordable (54%) 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.



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



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

# 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. Last year, we distributed £1.77m in grants thanks to funders including Barclays, Sport England, P&G, CVC and Vodafone.
- 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](http://www.sported.org.uk)

