

# Public trust and confidence in charities in Northern Ireland

Snapshot report 1: Overall trust and confidence in charities and charity regulation.



# The Charity Commission for Northern Ireland

The Charity Commission for Northern Ireland is the regulator of charities in Northern Ireland, a non-departmental public body sponsored by the Department for Communities.

## Our vision

To deliver in partnership with other key stakeholders in the charitable sector “a dynamic and well governed charities sector in which the public has confidence, underpinned by the Commission’s effective delivery of its regulatory role.”

Further information about our aims and activities is available on our website [www.charitycommissionni.org.uk](http://www.charitycommissionni.org.uk)

## Equality

The Charity Commission for Northern Ireland is committed to equality and diversity in all that we do.

## Accessibility

If you have any accessibility requirements please contact us.

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## Section 1: Introduction

In November 2020, the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland (the Commission) contracted Cognisense Ltd to conduct research to explore the public's views of the charitable sector in Northern Ireland. This is the second time the Commission has carried out an extensive piece of research into the levels of public trust and confidence in charities and charity regulation. As the current research was conducted during the COVID-19 crisis it was not possible to completely replicate the earlier research. However, the online survey was designed to, as far as possible, allow comparison with the research conducted in 2016 and benchmarking with similar research carried out by other regulators in Britain, Republic of Ireland and internationally.

COVID-19 presented an extraordinary challenge to society and to charities in particular. Many charities saw an increase in demand for their services, while their ability to raise funds was curtailed by the need to reduce social contact.

The research provides crucial information for stakeholders, the charity sector and the public. We hope that charities across Northern Ireland use these findings to gain insight into what drives the public's trust and confidence, allowing these findings to shape and inform their future planning.

This document provides a short overview of the key findings taken from the research. The full research report, including in-depth analysis of the findings and details of the methodology and questions asked, is available in the *Research* section of the Commission's website. Further short reports, each providing a 'snapshot' focused on specific findings, will also be published on our website.

We would like to thank those members of the public who gave their time to participate in the research.

### 1.1 Methodology

In order to conduct the research in an efficient and safe manner, Cognisense Ltd administered an online survey.

- 1,500 online surveys were conducted with a representative sample of the population of Northern Ireland in terms of age, sex, social class and geographic location.
- Fieldwork was conducted between 18 January 2021 and 14 February 2021.

## Section 2: Overall trust and confidence in charities

The public was asked to rate their overall level of trust and confidence in charities. A scale of zero to ten was used, where zero means that people do not trust charities at all and ten means that people trust charities completely. Trust ratings were grouped as follows:

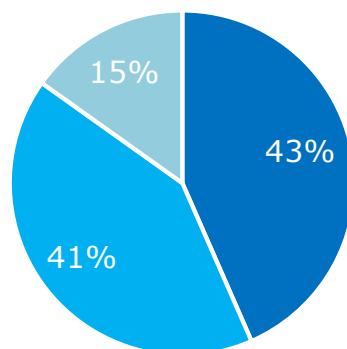
- scores eight to ten indicate high levels of trust
- scores five to seven indicate medium levels of trust
- scores zero to four indicate low levels of trust.

Participants were also asked whether their level of trust and confidence in charities had increased, decreased or stayed the same over the two years prior to the research.

### 2.1 Findings

The research found that public trust and confidence in charities is strong in Northern Ireland, with 84 per cent of the public reporting a medium to high level of trust in charities. However, a significant proportion of the population (15%) have a low level of trust and confidence in charities.

How much trust and confidence do you have in charities in Northern Ireland?



- High level of trust
- Medium level of trust
- Low level of trust

## Reported changes in levels of trust and confidence

Three quarters of the public, 75 per cent, reported that their trust and confidence in charities has stayed the same over the last two years, while 13 per cent said that their trust and confidence had decreased. Ten per cent of those who responded said that their trust and confidence in charities has increased over the last two years.

## Reasons for a decrease in trust and confidence

Negative stories reported in the media featured as a core reason why participants reported that their trust levels had decreased. Around half (52%) of those who reported their levels of trust had decreased indicated this was due to media coverage about how charities spend the donations they receive. Another reason for this decrease were media stories about charities in general.

When compared to 2016, the proportion of the public who agreed that charities spend too much of their funds on salaries and administration decreased (down to 58% from 72%). However, this remains a very emotive issue as the following comments show:

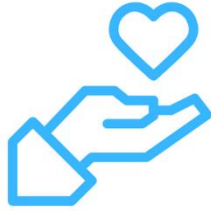
- The stories in the news of CEOs of charities earning way more than they should. (Female, aged 25-44)
- The salaries of some charity senior operatives are well above what seems a reasonable income and put beside the language of the fundraising campaign they sometimes seem obscene. (Male, aged 65+)

## What do people trust charities to do?

Using the same scale as set out above the public was asked to rate their level of trust in specific aspects of charities' work. 57 per cent of people have a high level of trust that charities will have a positive impact on the causes they represent, while almost half, (48%), trust charities to do what they say that they will do. Similar proportions display high levels of trust that charities are well managed (43%) and that charities ensure the funds and/or donations they raise will be used properly (47%).

These key findings are set out in the infographic below.

## Key findings:



public trust and confidence in charities is strong in Northern Ireland



84% of people have a medium to high level of trust in charities



Using a scale of one to ten the average score of trust in charities is 6.59



younger people are more likely to have a high level of trust and confidence than older people



75% of people report their trust and confidence in charities has stayed the same from 2016



13% think their trust and confidence has decreased

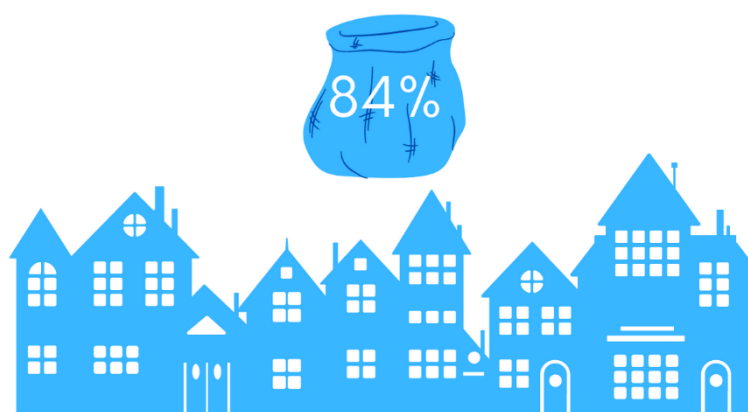
## 2.2 Overall trust and confidence in context

Overall trust and confidence in charities was rated using a scale between zero and 10. Using this scale 43 per cent of the public reported a high level of trust in charities. This was significantly higher than the 30 per cent who did so in 2016. A similar number, (41%), reported having a medium level of trust in charities.

The ratings from the survey equate to an overall trust and confidence rating in charities in Northern Ireland of 6.59/10.

To allow a comparison with Scotland and England and Wales, we need to use figures from their 2018 surveys, as their most recent surveys no longer ask a question which allows direct comparison. Views change over time and are influenced by events, so the 2021 survey is not precisely comparable to a survey conducted in 2018. Bearing this limitation in mind, in 2018 the Charity Commission for England and Wales (CCEW) found the average level of trust and confidence in charities was rated 5.5. In the same year the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR) reported an average rating of trust and confidence in charities of 6.14. This suggests that charities in Northern Ireland enjoy a comparatively strong level of overall trust and confidence.

## 2.3 Support for charities



Participants supported a charity in the six months before the research was conducted.

The main ways participants supported charities was through donations: either donating items to a charity shop or charity appeal or making a donation online.

Members of the public were asked about the support they give to charities and which factors influence their decision to support a charity.

Overall, charitable giving in Northern Ireland is high, with 84% reporting they had supported a charity in some way in the six months leading up to the research. The main way participants supported charities was through donations,



for example, through donating items to a charity shop or charity appeal (43%) or making a donation online (30%).

Females (51%) were considerably more likely than males (38%) to have donated items to a charity shop or charity appeal, while those aged 65+ (54%) were more likely than those from other age groups to have done the same. Online donations were also more common among females (33%) than males (26%).

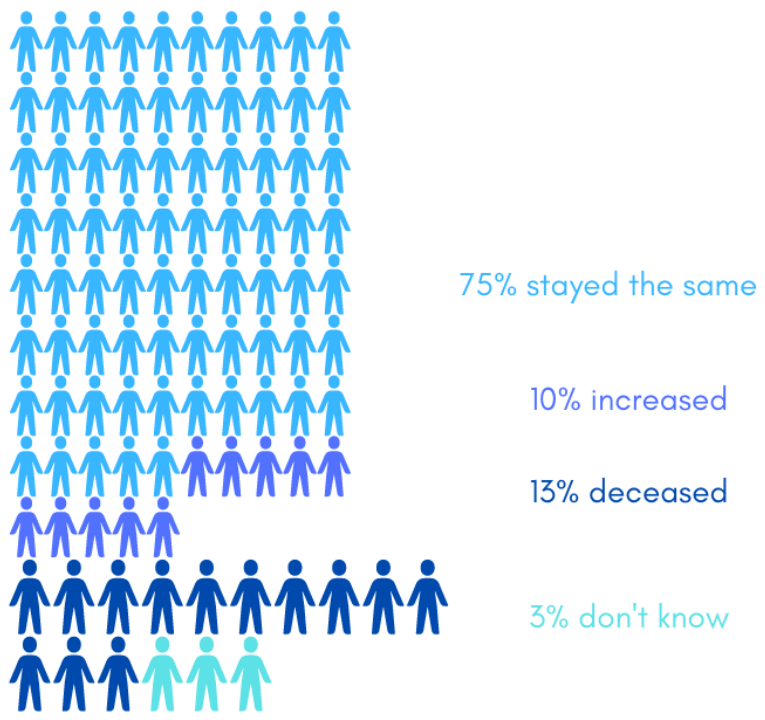
Those aged 16-24 years were significantly more likely than those from other age categories to have sponsored someone who was taking part in a charity event (28%), to have taken part in a charity event themselves (22%) and to have volunteered for a charity (21%) in the six months before the research was conducted.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the ways in which the public supported charities can perhaps be seen best by comparing the ways reported in 2021 with those reported in 2016. This comparison finds notable decreases in the number who donated money to a street collector (down to 24% from 51%), the number who signed up to a direct debit (down to 10% from 21%) and the number who had taken part in a charity event (down to 10% from 16%).


The cause that a charity represents was the main factor influencing the public's decision to support a charity with almost two thirds (64%) of people indicating that this affects their decision. Compared with the findings of the 2016 research there were significant increases in the number of people who were influenced by awareness of the impact a charity has on the cause it represents (up to 49% from 24%), by personal trust of the charity (up to 45% from 11%) and by the fact that they may need to use the charity in future (up to 20% from 8%).

The infographic on the next page gives an overview of the changes to levels of trust and confidence since the research was last conducted in 2016; and the reasons offered for these changes.


Reported change in trust and confidence since 2016




Reasons for a decrease in trust and confidence



Media coverage about how charities spend the donations they receive



Media stories about charities in general



Media stories about fundraising practices used by some charities

## Section 3: Overall perceptions of charities

The public come into regular contact with many charities and can often have a clear picture of how charities work and what they contribute to our society. Sometimes the public can perceive charities to be simpler and bigger organisations than many actually are. The public can also have strong views on charities often wanting them to do more with less, or demanding that they adhere to higher ethical standards than they require of many other sectors. As we have already seen the public's level of trust and confidence in charities can be impacted by media coverage of any scandals that involve charities.

The survey asked members of the public about their perceptions of charities: their conduct, their expenditure and fundraising, and how they are managed.

### 3.1 Findings

#### Perceptions of charities' conduct

The research found that 86 per cent of respondents felt that it is important that charities demonstrate how they benefit the public. While 59 per cent agreed that most charities are trustworthy. Agreement was higher among those who had used a charity during the COVID-19 (67%) crisis than those who had not done so (57%). This perception was also held by those who had used a charity (68%) or knew of someone else who had, compared to those for whom this is not the case (54%).

#### Expenditure and fundraising

The public had mixed views about expenditure and fundraising, with 58 per cent of people thinking that charities spend too much of their funds on salaries and administration. While 59 per cent agreed that they trust charities to spend their funds appropriately.

Despite the impact of the pandemic on fundraising, 45 per cent of respondents reported that some fundraising methods used by charities make them feel uncomfortable. Like so many of the survey's findings this is actually a decrease from the 66 per cent who reported this view in the 2016 survey. The decrease may also be influenced by changes in the means of donating to charities as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, despite the decrease, this view continues to be held by almost half of respondents and the strong feelings that this issue can provoke can be seen from comments such as:

- *I hate being door stepped. Generally, if you are not prepared to sign up there and then a guilt trip ensues. Older people can feel pressure to sign up.* (Female, aged 45-64)

- *I don't like being badgered by phone or email to increase donations. I don't like cold calling on my doorstep.* (Male, aged 45-64).

### How charities are managed

Almost half of the participants (49%) reported knowing very little about how charities are managed. Although a significant proportion (42%) agreed that they know where they can find out more information about how charities are run. A clear majority (88%) in this research agreed that proper regulation of charities is important to them.

### Overall perception of charities:



88% of people think that proper regulation of charities is important



86% think charities must show how they benefit the public



59% trust charities to spend their funds appropriately



58% of people perceive that charities spend 'too much' of their funds on salaries and administration



45% of people perceive that fundraising methods used by charities make people 'uncomfortable'



49% of people know very little about how charities are actually run

## Section 4: Public understanding of charity regulation and the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland

The previous public trust and confidence research was carried out when the Commission, established in March 2009, was seven years old and charity registration (launched in December 2013), had only been in operation for three years. Questions within the 2021 research explored whether levels of public awareness of, and attitudes towards, charity regulation and the regulator had changed over the last five years.

### Charity regulation and the Commission



50% are aware of the Commission



61% think charities are regulated effectively



92% of people have a medium to high level of trust in the Commission



those aware of the Commission gave it an overall trust rating of 7.24 out of ten



68% of people, who had not heard of Commission, when told there was a regulator said it had a positive impact on their trust and confidence in charities

## 4.1 Findings

### Awareness of the Commission

The research found that 50 per cent of respondents have heard of the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland. This is a significant increase from the third (33%) who were aware of the Commission in 2016. Males (55%) were more likely than females (45%) to be aware of the Commission and those aged over 50 years were more likely to have heard of the Commission than younger members of the public. Awareness levels are similar to those recorded in the 2018 surveys conducted for the charity regulator for England and Wales (52%) and significantly higher than the figure recorded for the Scottish charity regulator (33%) that year.

### Effective regulation of charities

The research also found that 61 per cent of respondents think that charities are regulated effectively in Northern Ireland. Of these 13 per cent believed that charities are regulated very effectively, an increase from the 8 per cent who thought so in 2016. Over a quarter (26%) do not know how effective the regulation of charities is in Northern Ireland, with those aged 50+ more likely to have offered this response. A smaller, but still a significant proportion (13%), think charities in Northern Ireland are not regulated effectively.

Interaction with a charity had a significant impact on perceptions, with those who had used a charity during the COVID-19 crisis (77%) more likely to have felt that charities are regulated effectively than those who had not (57%). While those who had used a charity or knew of someone else who had (74%) were more likely to think that charities are regulated effectively than those for whom this was not the case (52%).

### Trust in the Commission

The research found that 92 per cent of the public reported a medium or high level of trust and confidence in the Commission. With 55 per cent reporting a high level of confidence in the Commission. This is a notable increase on the number (36%) who reported having confidence in the Commission in 2016.



### Impact of awareness of the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland

Among those who were not previously aware of the Commission, the existence of an organisation which regulates charities in Northern Ireland is positively received. Over half (68%) said that this new information had either a very or fairly positive impact on their trust and confidence in charities. This is a significant increase in the number (58%) who felt expressed this view in 2016.

While the Commission welcomes these increasing levels of trust and confidence which the general public has placed in it over the last five years, it intends to work to maintain and improve on these levels in the years ahead.

## Conclusion

These are challenging times for charities and we hope that this research, carried out independently of the Commission, will be a valuable tool for charities across Northern Ireland who can use the findings to gain further insight into the factors that drive trust and confidence within the general public. The Commission will use this valuable information to inform and assist us to shape our future planning and delivery. We also encourage charities to apply this feedback to their future development as they strive to build back stronger and smarter from the impact of COVID-19.

For an in-depth analysis of the research findings, and details of the methodology and questions asked, please refer to the full research report, prepared by Cognisense Ltd, which is available on the Commission's website.

Please do not hesitate to contact the Commission to discuss this report and share your views. The Commission plans to produce other snapshot reports looking in detail at various aspects of the research findings. We are keen to hear from anyone with an interest in this research to help identify what information would be most useful, and in what context, for analysis in the future.



**Further information on our activities is available from:**

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