

North West: mature social enterprises, strong local engagement

State of Social Enterprise 2021
in the North West



Social
Enterprise UK



Social Enterprise UK (SEUK), in association with Barclays, commissioned the State of Social Enterprise Survey 2021 (SOSE), gathering 890 responses via telephone interviews and online surveys from across the UK. 103 of these responses were for North West England.

This report is one of nine setting out findings from the SOSE 2021 survey for each of the English regions. It is supported by Big Society Capital and Access - the Foundation for Social Investment. In the report, data for each region is compared both with data for the region from 2019, and to findings from the national dataset. For detail of the national data, please refer to No Going Back, our 2021 SOSE report ¹.

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Most importantly, thanks to the social enterprises who gave their time to complete the survey.

¹ <https://www.socialenterprise.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/No-Going-Back-State-of-Social-Enterprise-Survey-2021.pdf>

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A social enterprise:

- Has a primary social and/or environmental mission which is set out in governing documents
- Earns income from trading (for the purposes of SOSE, at least 25%)
- Is controlled or owned in the interests of the business
- Reinvests or gives away profits or surplus

North West Headline Findings

Our research found that social enterprises in the North West were:

Part of a mature regional ecosystem. Social enterprises in the region tend to be well-established and there are fewer start-ups here as a proportion of the overall social enterprise population compared to elsewhere in the UK, with corresponding higher average turnover level and higher staff numbers.

Generating less income through trading than the UK average. As elsewhere in the UK, the proportion of income generated through trading decreased since 2019, but to a greater extent here than elsewhere.

More likely to have seen turnover decrease, and less likely to have increased turnover compared to the UK as a whole. However, social enterprises here generated profits/surplus to a slightly greater extent than the national average.

Significantly more likely to have representatives of the local community on their Board than is the case elsewhere. Four-fifths of social enterprises here actively involve the local community in decision-making, a figure likely linked to the higher proportion of cooperative respondents in the region.

Particularly likely to have furloughed staff during the COVID pandemic, or to have been moved to new or different roles.

There is lower expectation that staff teams will grow over the coming 12 months here. However, the proportion of social enterprises paying the living wage has remained constant in the region, whereas it has fallen on average nationally.

In terms of the environment, it was more likely to determine choices in procurement for social enterprises in the North West compared to UK averages – but there were lower levels of codified commitment to climate change in the form of strategies, plans or mission-level commitment.

Growth expectations were lower here than elsewhere, with fewer respondents expecting to grow staff numbers or turnover in the year ahead. Innovation is the most-cited growth plan, but to a lesser degree than elsewhere.

Social enterprises in the North West sought higher levels of external finance than their counterparts elsewhere in the country, and were comparatively more successful in securing the amounts they sought. Where they did apply for finance, it was more likely to be from social investors (compared to UK-wide figures), and less likely to be from banks.

Methodology

SEUK commissioned BMG Research to conduct fieldwork and initial data analysis for the State of Social Enterprise Survey 2021. They gathered a total of 890 responses via telephone interviews and online surveys between February and April 2021.

Please see the national report, [No Going Back](#), for details of the methodology, including sampling approach and analysis. Please note that not all percentages will total 100% due to rounding or due to a question allowing multiple responses.

This series of regional reports presents data from SOSE broken down by the nine English regions. Data in the main survey report is weighted by region and can be considered broadly representative. Regional data cannot be viewed as having the same degree of statistical representativeness, particularly for regions with lower response rates.

Regional evidence is most presented in comparison to the UK-wide dataset (including the region studied and the three devolved nations), and also in comparison to data for the region from 2019.

In addition to the data analysis, each regional report has been reviewed by a member of one of the Social Enterprises Places network within the region. In some instances, additional regional data has been made available and is discussed in the report.

Regional overview

The North West region consists of the counties of Cheshire, Cumbria, Greater Manchester, Lancashire and Merseyside and is the third-most-populated region in the United Kingdom after the South East and Greater London.

The largest settlements in the region are Manchester, Liverpool, Salford, Warrington, Preston, Blackpool and Chester. Just under 40% of the North West's population resides in Greater Manchester. The North West is a highly diverse region in terms of population and business make-up and density.

The region is the home of Coops UK and the Greater Manchester area has a strong heritage of social and cooperative development, with social enterprises embedded in the economy, social value integrated into local authority procurement and strong support from the Greater Manchester Mayor and combined authority. There have been positive responses to foundation and social investor programmes in the region (Access Connect Fund, Successful Good Finance Live).

The region also contains less well-connected rural areas and pockets of deprivation where social enterprise has yet to gain such traction. There are exceptions, such as Alston Moor – a rural town named the UK's first Social Enterprise Town. As England's highest market town, Alston Moor is often cut off due to severe weather. This has led to a spirit of self-reliance and self-sufficiency which a diverse local social enterprise sector supports. In the town, social enterprises provide broadband services, electric vehicle charging points, community transport, run the local gym and operate the snowplough! There is a social enterprise for every 50 people in the town.

Since 2018 the county of Cumbria is also a Social Enterprise Place. A mapping exercise undertaken in 2019 showed that the county had over 1,100 social enterprises, employing around 9,000 people and contributing £450 million to the local economy. The Cumbria Social Enterprise Partnership (CSEP) was formed in 2003 and became a constituted organisation

in 2005. CSEP is an unincorporated association, with a volunteer Steering Group drawn from across public, private and VCFSE sectors. Cumbria County Council provides it with supporting services across Legal & Finance, Procurement and Contract Management and an annual budget for sector development and fulltime Social Enterprise Manager to lead this development. Since 2005 CSEP has levered over £1.5m of investment in sector development and currently delivers three sector support programmes worth over £100,000 of investment each year, which support the development of new social enterprises at pre-start and start-up phases as well as supporting existing social enterprises.

Greater Manchester is home to the North West's only Social Enterprise City, Salford and the borough of Wigan has recently joined their neighbours in achieving social enterprise place status. The Greater Manchester Combined Authority continues to develop their Social Enterprise Advisory Group as they look to grow a resilient and inclusive economy where social enterprises, co-operatives, community businesses, charities and microsocial business thrive. Salford City Council has followed Preston's lead with a Community Wealth Building Strategy which commits to new ways of funding and supporting the sector as well as encouraging new forms of enterprise ownership.

In Liverpool City Region, the Mayor established a £5.5 million fund in 2019 to support socially trading organisations to multiply and grow across the city region, which received a further £1 million from Power to Change. The fund is being managed through community investment company Kindred, with £1million invested in 2021 in a pilot round ².

Social Enterprise Demographics

Social enterprises in the North West are, on average, much more established than their counterparts elsewhere. The average time that respondents have been trading for in the region is 16 years (10 years UK-wide). Although there are also proportionately fewer start-ups in the region, 27% of respondents have been operating for less than three years so there is a steady stream of new social enterprises in the region too. Anecdotally, this could be due to social enterprises incorporating later in their journey than is the case elsewhere, or due to more limited social

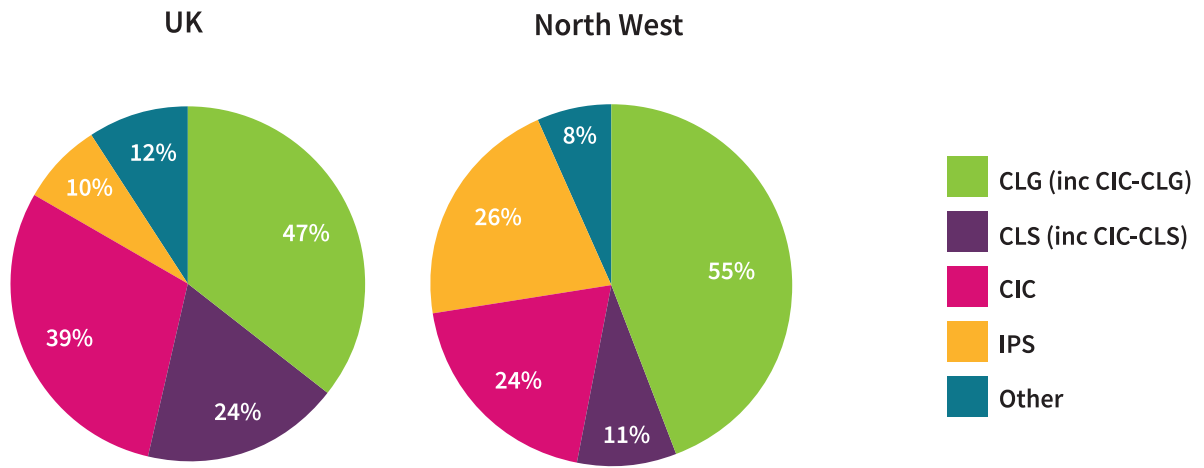
enterprise specific start-up support in the region.

In terms of the legal form under which social enterprises operate, social enterprise respondents in the North West are particularly likely to be cooperatives, less likely to be CICs and less likely to be limited by shares. Other data sets for the parts of the region have a lower proportion of cooperative representation, so it is possible that the SOSE sample over-represents cooperatives ³.

² <https://kindred-lcr.co.uk/about-us>

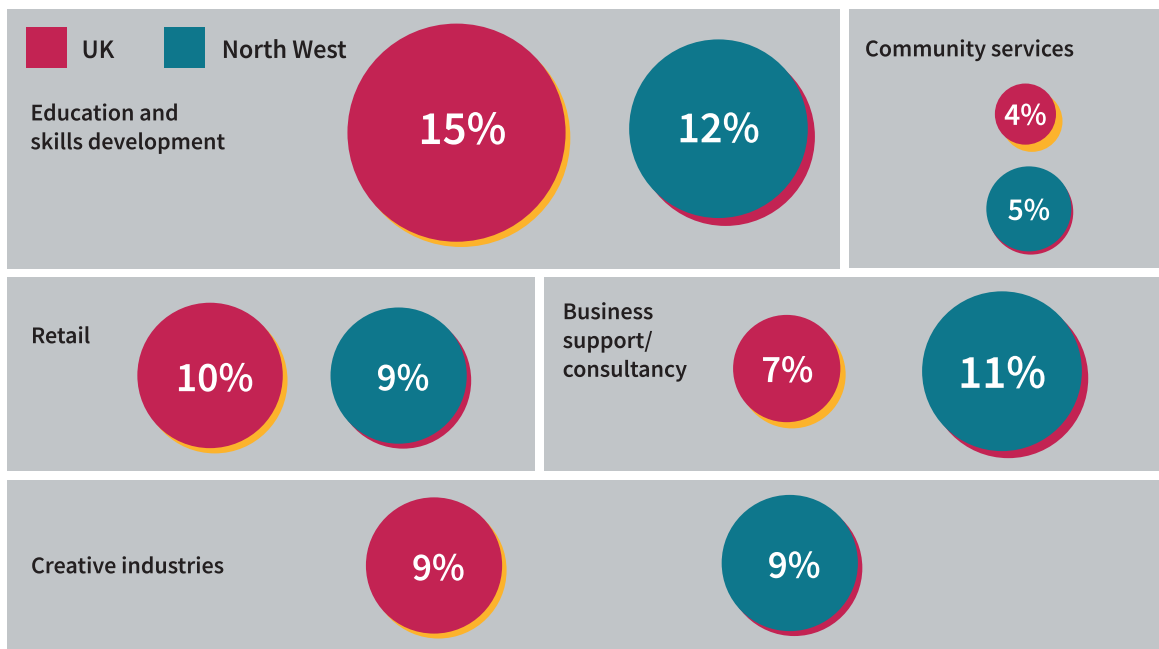
³ ISOSE sampling includes data from Coops UK, who are based in the North West. It is possible that there is a higher rate of coop responses in the region for that reason – although it is equally possible that there is a higher proportion of coops in the region, for the same reason.

Legal status



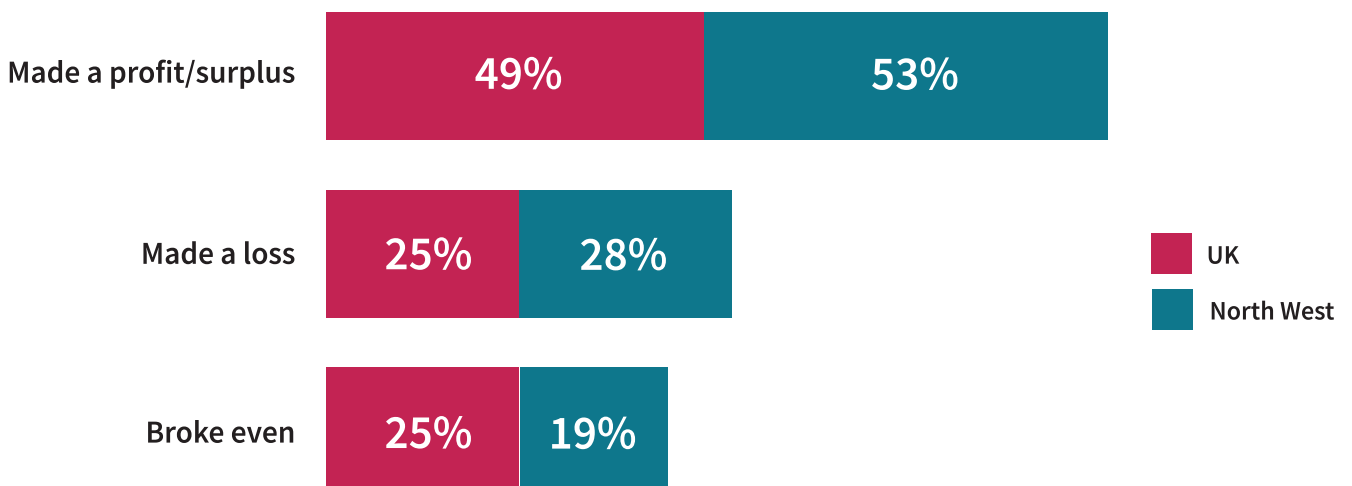
The table below shows the most cited trading areas of social enterprises in the region, compared to their popularity for the UK as a whole. As is the case nationally, the highest proportion of social enterprises work in education and skills development. The North West has more operating in business support and consultancy, with a lower proportion working in health care.

Top 5 principal trading activities



The average turnover for a social enterprise in the North West was £2.5 million (compared to £2.2m UK-wide). As well as having financially larger social enterprises, the region also

has slightly more social enterprises that made a profit or surplus over the financial year prior to the survey, although slightly more also made a loss.



COVID Impact

The COVID-19 pandemic has had far-reaching implications for social enterprise, many of which it is too early to fully understand.

CSEP, in Cumbria, have heard anecdotally that many social enterprises in the county pivoted toward the pandemic response, and have introduced new services/products; increased turnover and staffing, and raised their profile in doing so owing to their agile approach. Many shifted services to online or found new local outlets. And that social enterprise's lean governance, agile management and flexible delivery has been a benefit in being able to achieve this.

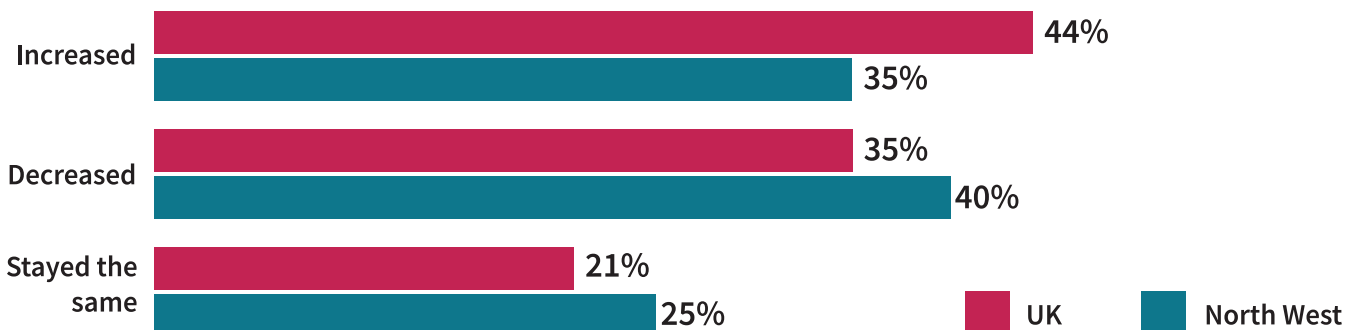
This year, the survey asked social enterprises a few additional questions about how they have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, a slightly higher proportion of social enterprises in the North West had temporarily ceased trading at the time the survey took place – 9%, compared to 6% of all respondents UK-wide.

Due to the combination of additional grant funding and restricted opportunities for many social enterprises to trade through usual routes during the pandemic, we explored the impact this had on the proportion of income generated through trading.

The proportion of income generated through trading was 76% in the North West, significantly lower than the 85% generated through trading in 2019, also lower than the UK average in 2021 of 80%.

Social enterprises in the North West were also more likely to have seen their turnover decrease in the last year, compared to the year before, and were less likely to have increased their turnover.

Compared with the previous 12 months, has your turnover in the past 12 months increased, decreased, or stayed roughly the same?



North West social enterprises were particularly likely to have seen trading income from the public sector decline in the 12 months prior to the survey – 30% said this income stream had decreased (20% UK-wide) and just 13% had seen it increased (22% on average UK-wide).

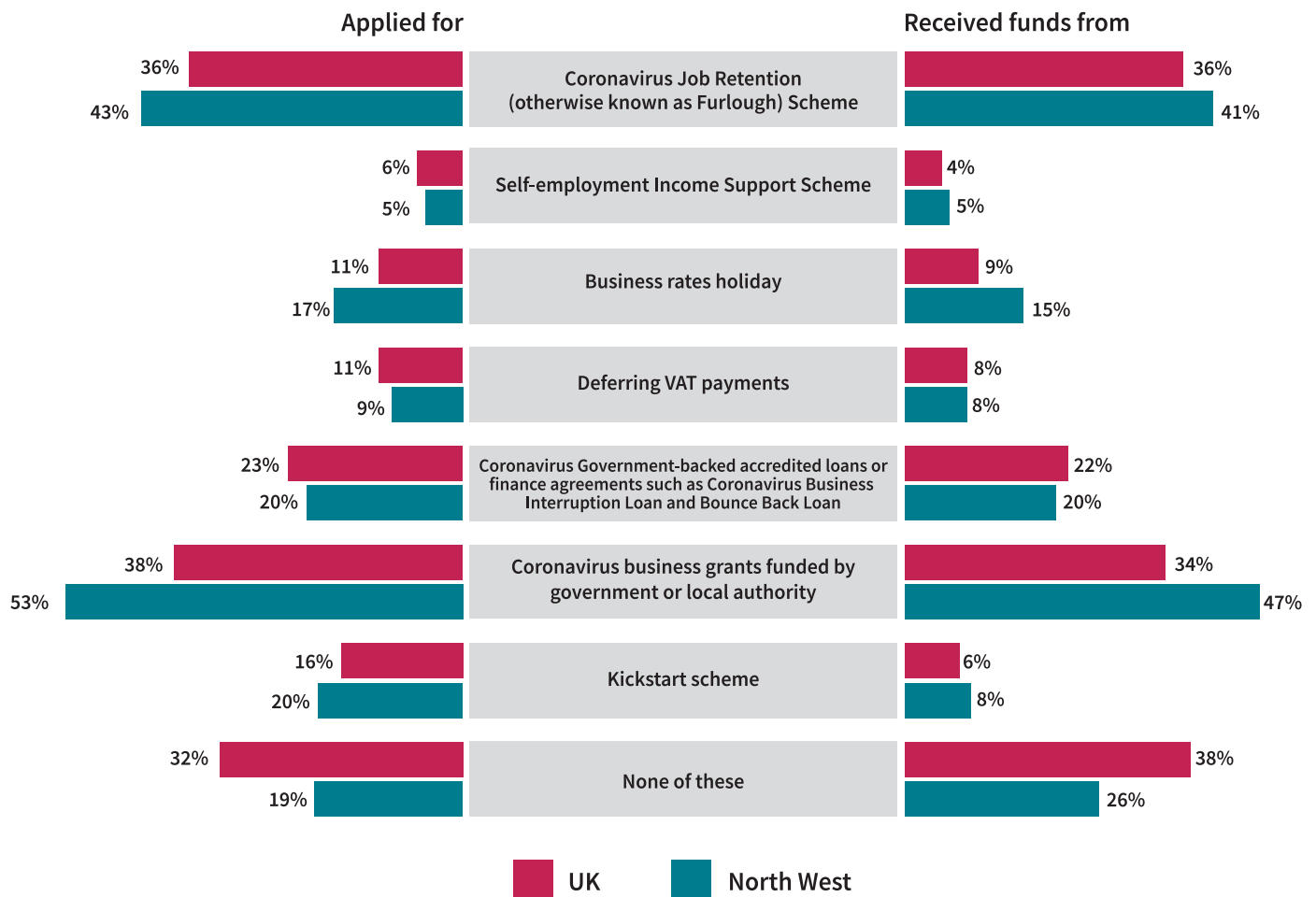
Due to the outbreak of COVID-19, we asked some additional questions about how social enterprises had coped ⁴. In terms of measures that impacted their workforces, social enterprises in the North West were more likely to have furloughed staff (44% did so, compared to 39% of social enterprise on average UK-wide). Staff here were more likely to have been moved to new or different roles, but less likely to have been provided additional training.

Overall, North West-based social enterprises were more likely to have drawn on organisational reserves and to have postponed investments than UK averages. Significantly more changed the products and/or services that they provide as a result of the crisis too.

We also asked whether social enterprises had applied for COVID-19 support schemes. In the North West, a higher proportion of social enterprises applied to the furlough scheme and for business rates holidays, COVID-related grants, and the Kickstart scheme – and overall social enterprises here were more likely than elsewhere in the country to apply for some form of support.

⁴ Respondents were given the option to opt out of these questions, so there is a smaller respondent sample size.

Coronavirus COVID-19 schemes applied to/accessed



Reach and Local Participation

We use the survey to look at how social enterprises engage with their local communities.

In the North West, significantly more social enterprises have representatives of the local community on their Board than is the case elsewhere (15% more) and a higher proportion operate at local authority and regional level, as opposed to nationally or internationally (and compared to UK-wide averages). Anecdotally we know that many social enterprises in the region work hyper locally, with small teams and volunteer board members from the neighbourhood where they work.

80% of social enterprises in the North West think that external

stakeholders such as beneficiaries and the local community are actively involved in decision-making regarding the operation and future of their organisation – 16% more than the UK average.

We asked social enterprises who their three most important providers of external support are. Social enterprises in the North West are slightly less likely to rely on friends and family than the national averages, or on national membership bodies. They are more likely to see mentors as an important form of support, as well as grant providers.

Three most important providers of external support (n=61, highest 5 reported) ⁵

North West

Grant providers	41%
National membership bodies	31%
Peer networks	30%
Local government	28%
Mentors	26%
Friends and family	19%

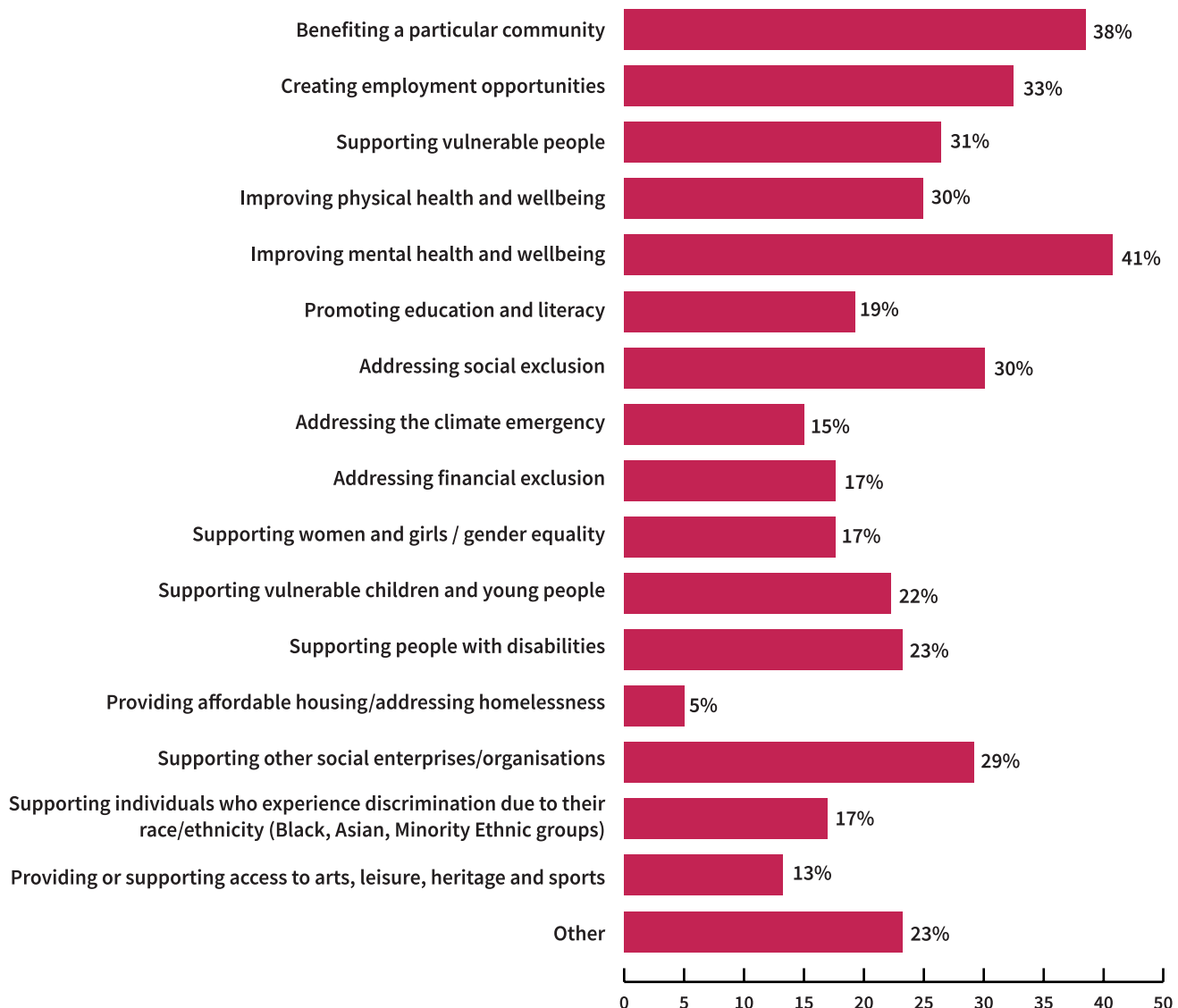
Social and Environmental Impact

The survey captures information about social and environmental impact of social enterprises.

Looking at the social and environmental objectives of social enterprises in the North West, mental health is the prominent objective – even more so than elsewhere in the UK. Benefitting a particular community is the next most cited objective, and at a higher rate than the UK average. There is also more activity

in the region on addressing racism, disability, social exclusion, creating employment opportunities, supporting women/girls and young people, and addressing financial exclusion. There are comparatively fewer social enterprises in the North West than elsewhere focused on addressing the climate emergency.

Main social and/or environmental objectives

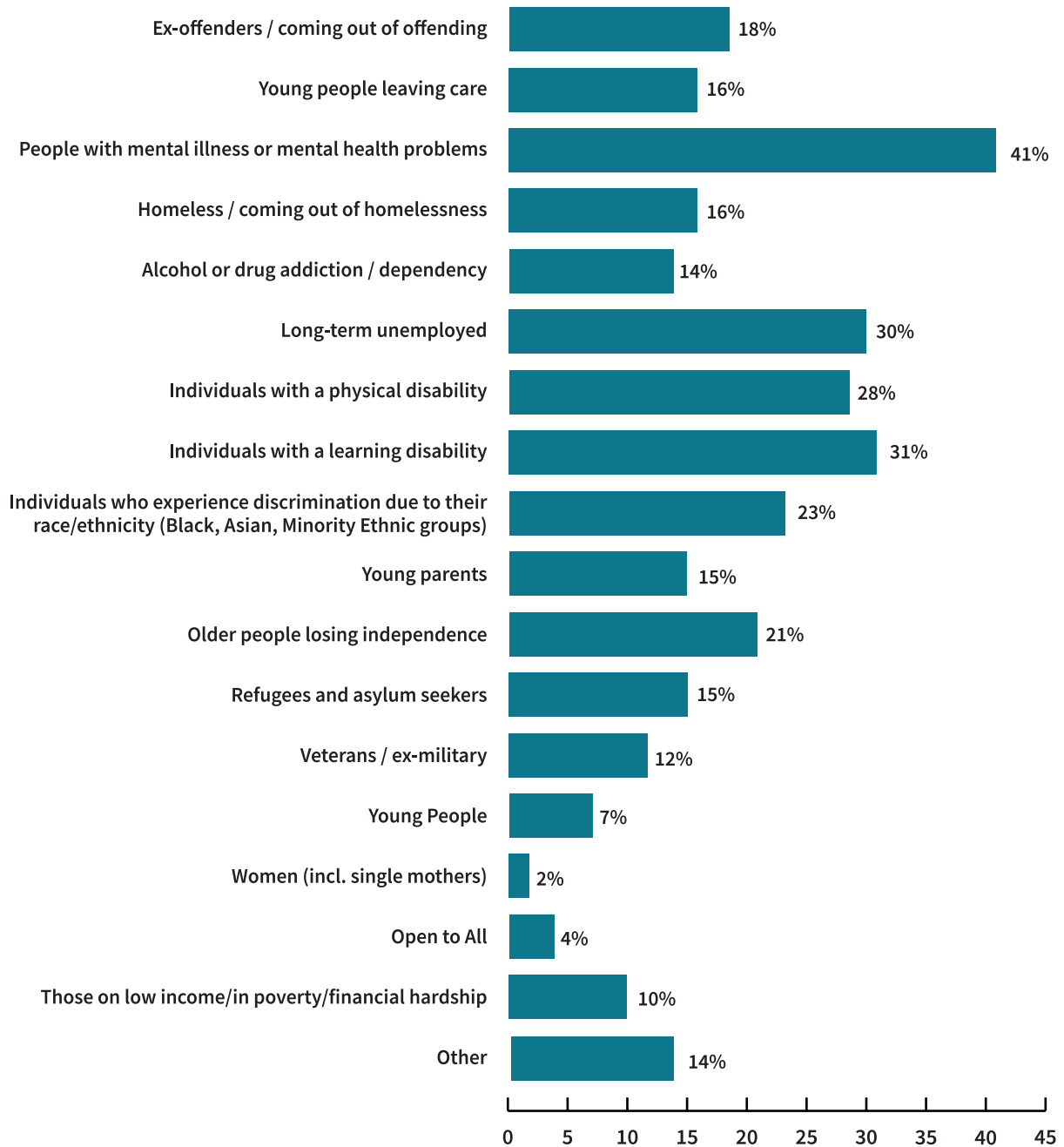


⁵ This data was collected through a top-up survey conducted with SOSE 2021 respondents in September 2021.

In terms of the groups or individuals that social enterprises in the North West seek to provide services or benefits to, after people with mental illness or mental health problems which are the prominent group, people with learning difficulties,

physical disabilities and people who experience racism are also more likely to be provided for by social enterprises here than on average elsewhere across the UK.

Disadvantaged groups or individuals with specific issues to which social enterprises provide services or benefits

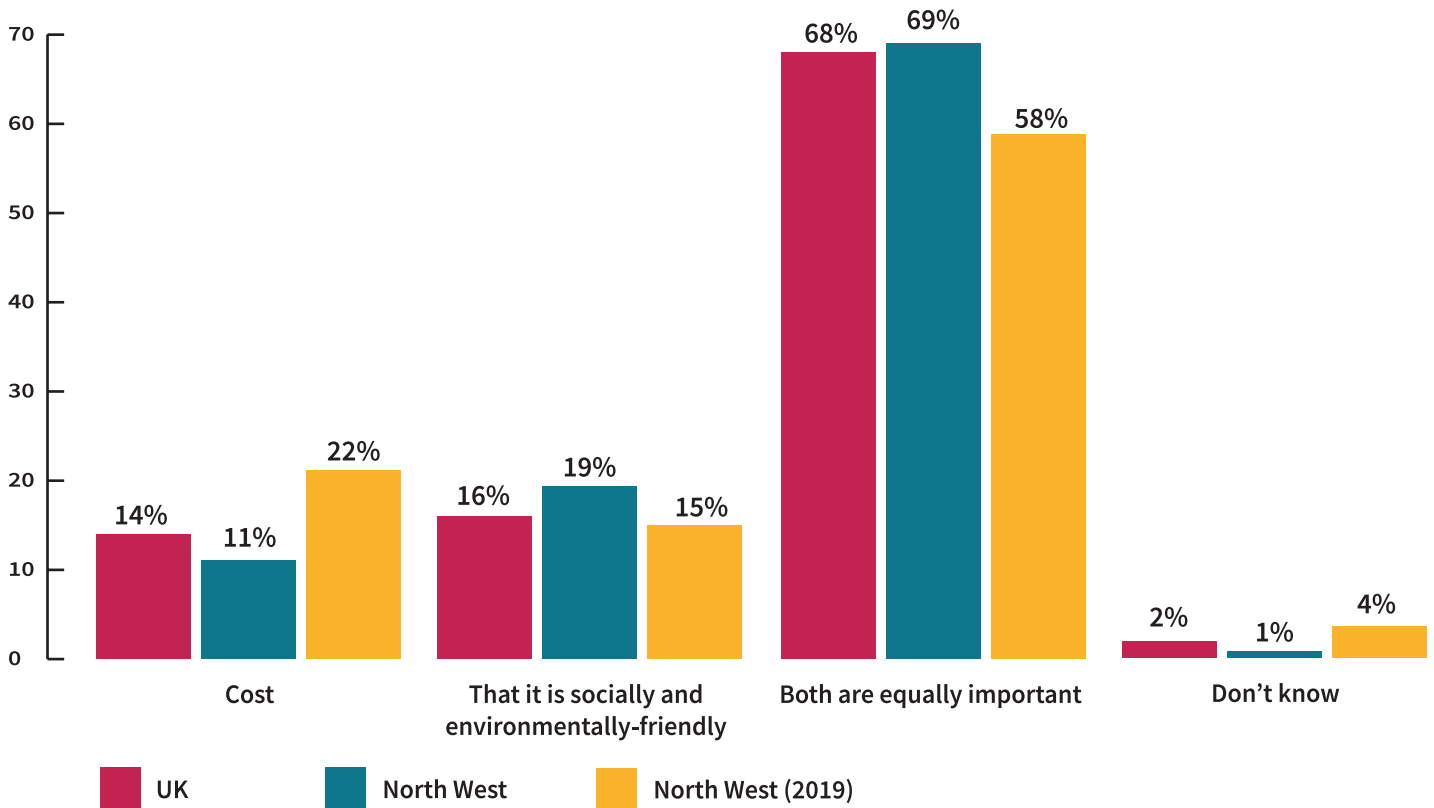


Environmental impact

As the climate emergency looms ever larger on the horizon, we explored the extent to which social enterprises are engaging with environmental change.

In the North West, social enterprises are slightly more likely to prioritise social/environmental factors over cost in procurement than the UK average. 11% fewer said that they would prioritise cost compared to when this question was asked two years previously.

Procurement prioritisation



Slightly fewer social enterprises in the North West have embedded tackling climate change/climate emergency into their constitution/mem & arts/articles of association than the average across the UK, although slightly more are considering doing this – or have a commitment to net zero or a climate strategy. Fewer said that they have no plans to undertake any of these actions, indicating that although the region might not be a leader in addressing the climate crisis, nor is it lagging behind.

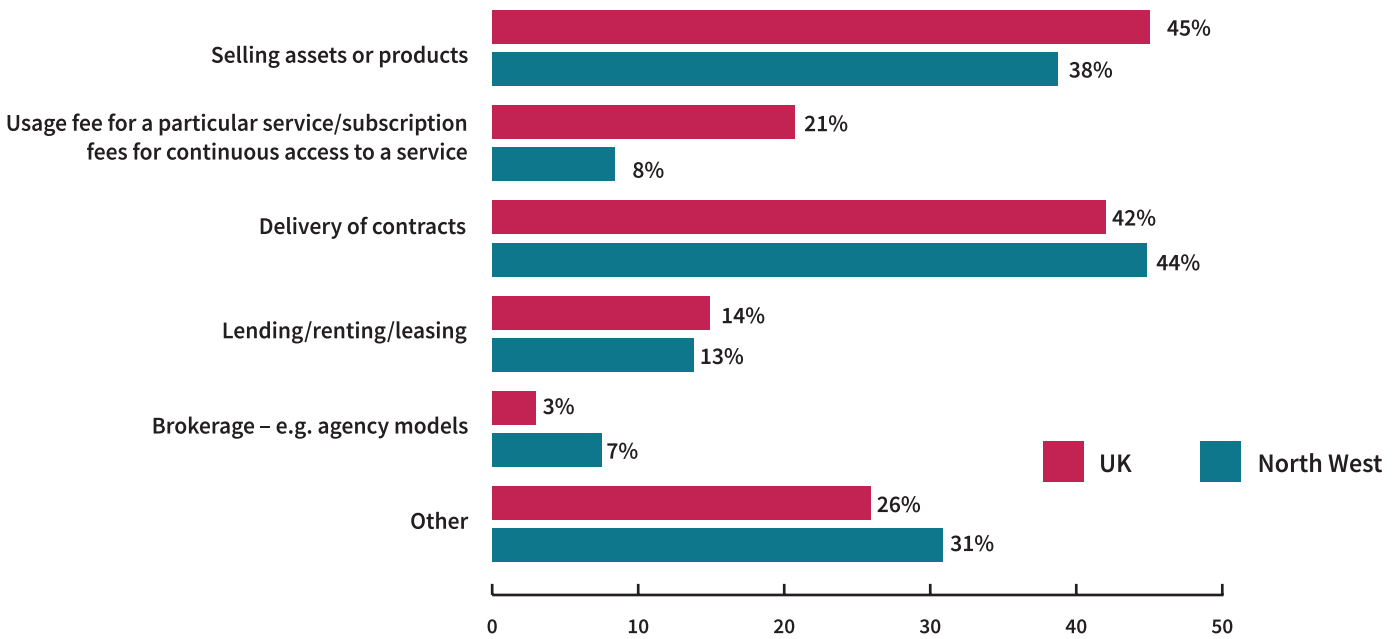
Business Model: Income and Trading

This year we asked for the first time about social enterprises' revenue generation models and the relationship between revenue generation and social/environmental mission.

In the North West, the main revenue generation model was delivery of contracts, with slightly fewer social enterprises than elsewhere saying that they generate income through

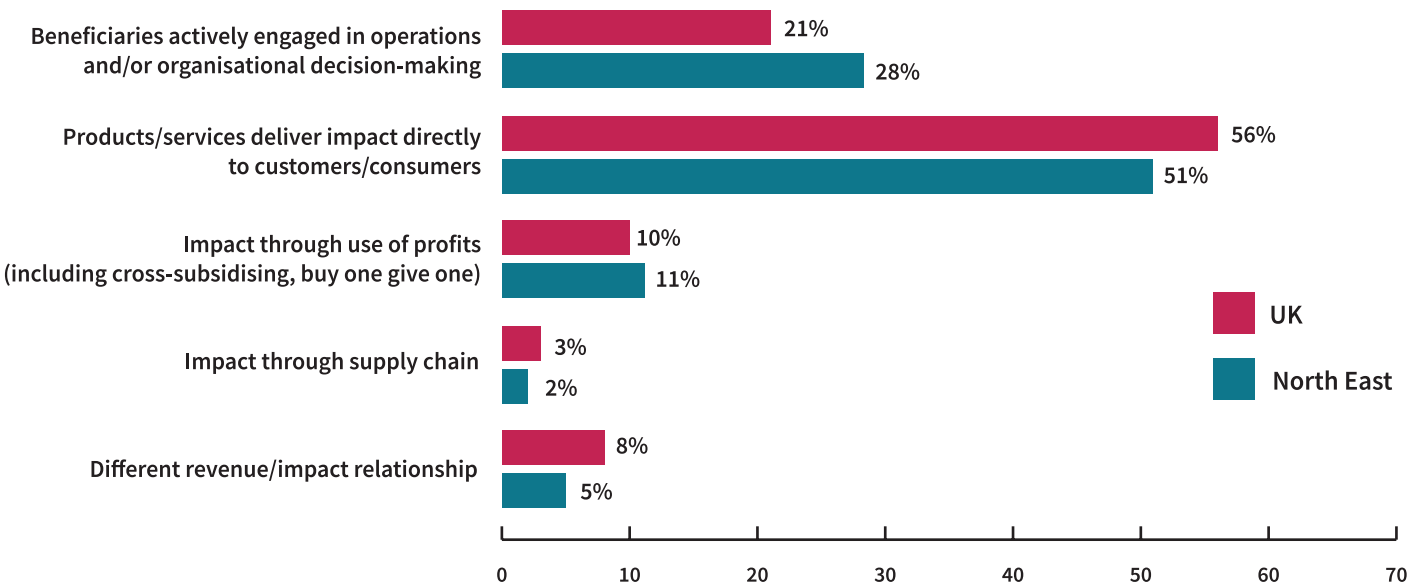
selling assets or products, and significantly fewer charging a usage fee for a service/subscription.

Revenue generation model



In terms of the relationship between revenue generation and mission, over half of social enterprises in the North West (as across the UK as a whole) achieve their mission through products/services that deliver impact directly to customers/consumers. Slightly more social enterprises in the region engage beneficiaries in operations/organisational decision-making.

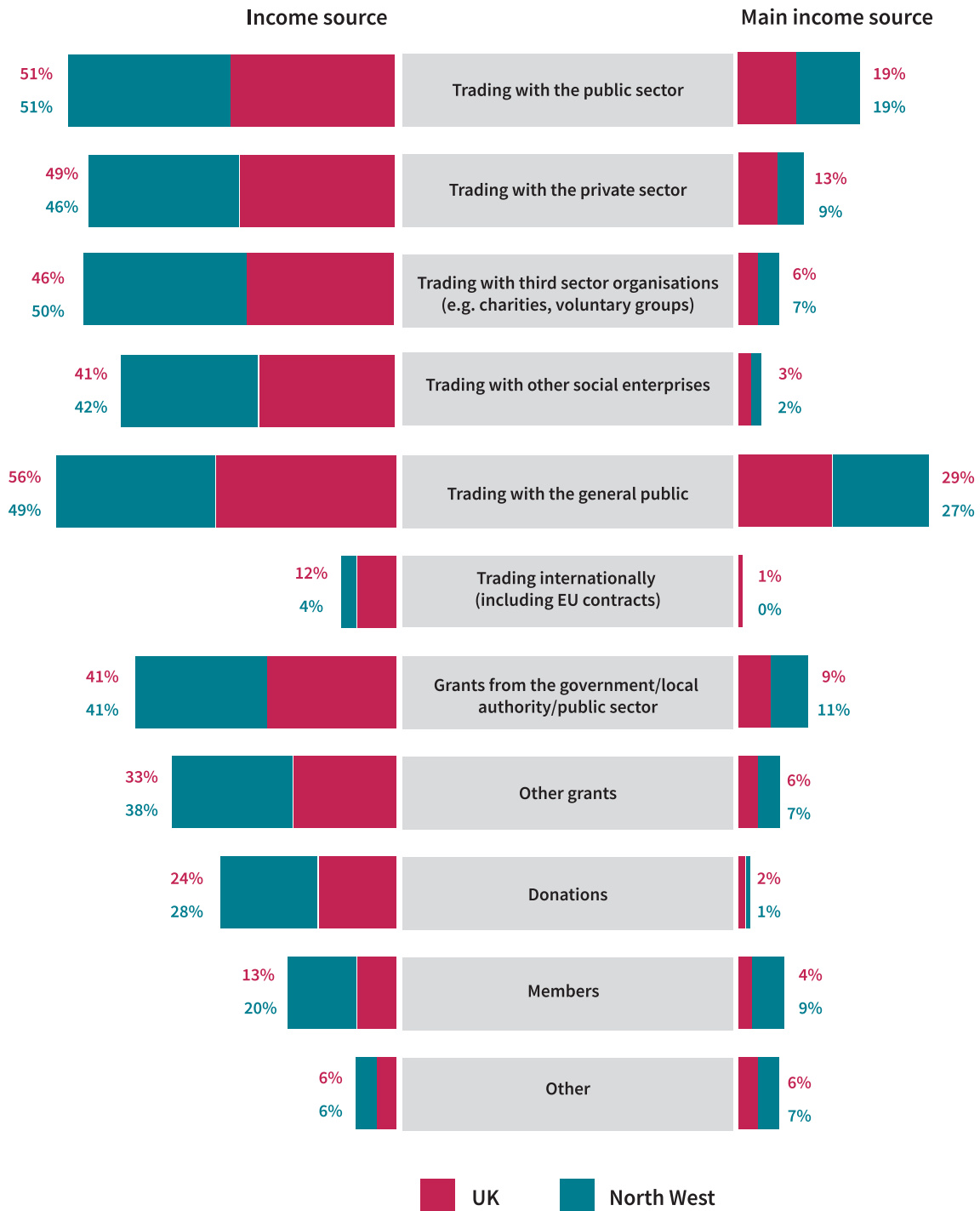
Main relationship between your organisation's revenue generation and your social/environmental mission



Looking at how income is generated in terms of sources of income, social enterprises in the North West trade less with the general public or internationally than their counterparts

elsewhere in the UK. Here, they are more likely to trade with third sector organisations, and through donations and members.

Income generation



Of those that trade with the public sector, social enterprises in the North West are more likely than those in other parts of the country to generate income from the local authority (73% of those that trade with the public sector, compared to 65% of these social enterprises on average UK-wide).

Local experts consider that, anecdotally, this is possibly

linked to social enterprises stepping in to deliver more services as local authorities retreated from delivery due to austerity, which is known to have hit parts of the North West region particularly hard⁶. Staff moving out of local authorities and into the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector may also have had some influence on the proportion of social enterprises working with local authorities here.

⁶ <https://www.centreforcities.org/publication/cities-outlook-2019/>

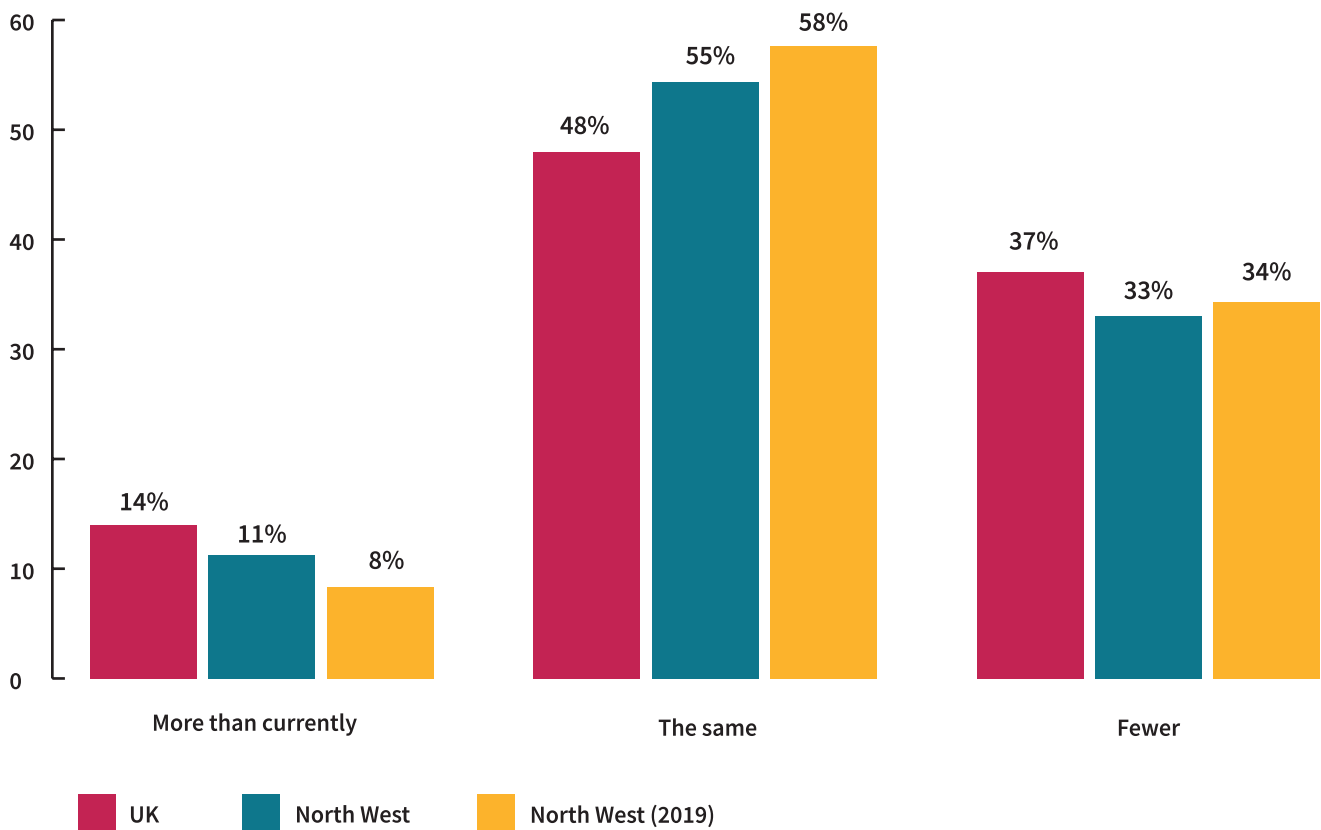
Workforce Demographics and Staff Engagement

Social enterprises in the North West have a significantly higher average number of staff due to some large social enterprises in the region (738 paid employees on average, compared to 128 in the UK as a whole). The median number of paid employees for social enterprises in the region is 5, compared to 4 for the UK as a whole.

Of those that have one or more paid employee, it is slightly more likely that these employees will be full-time in the North West than elsewhere. 63% of the workforce of social enterprises in the North West is female, 9% are people with disabilities, and 11% are people from Black, Asian and other minoritized ethnic groups.

We asked social enterprises whether their staffing levels have changed compared to 12 months ago. North West social enterprises were more likely than UK averages to have the same or more staff compared to the previous year. They were slightly more likely to have lost staff in the year prior to the 2019 survey than in the year prior to the 2021 survey.

Staff compared to 12 months ago

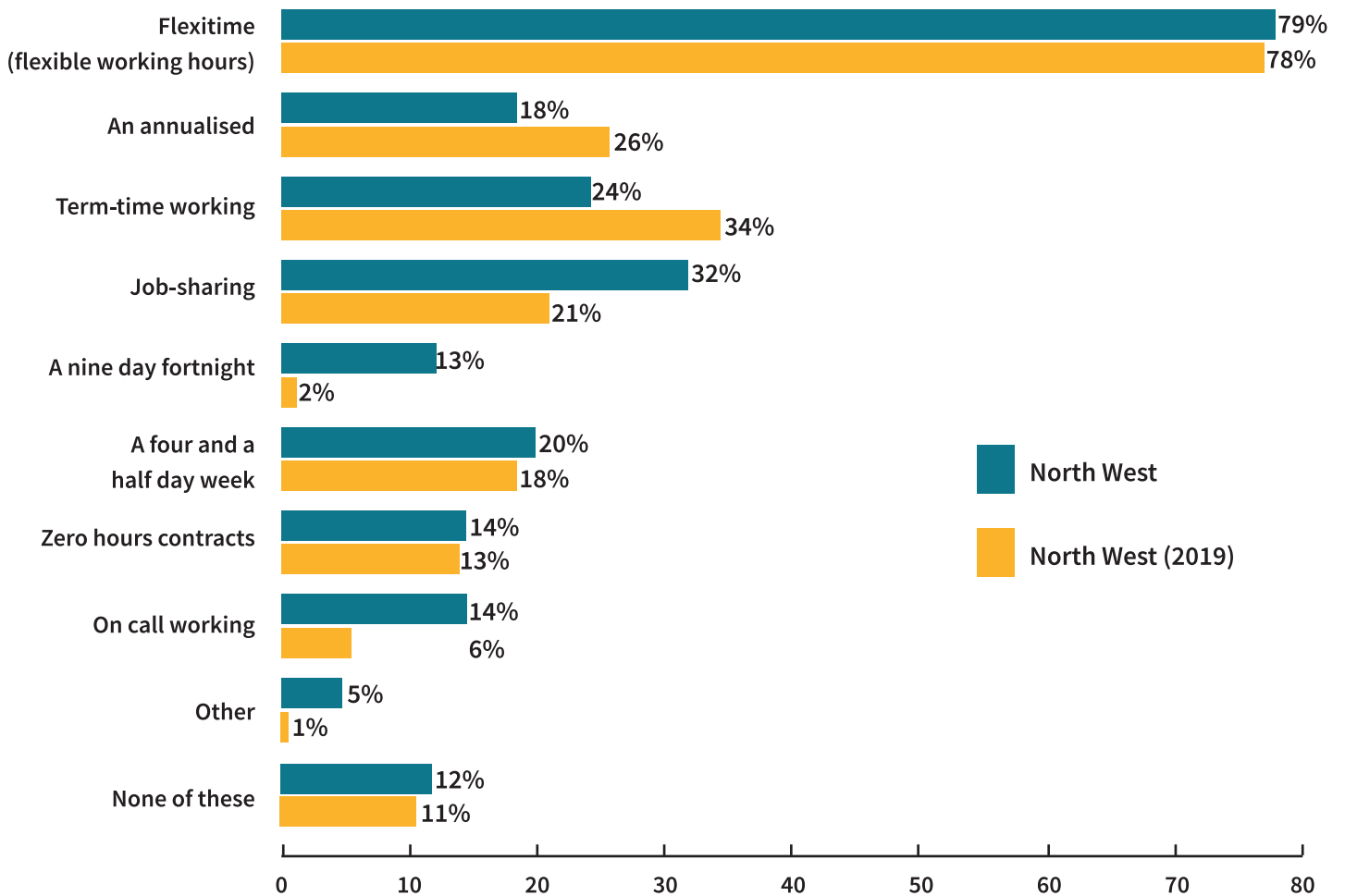


In terms of investing in staff, North West social enterprises are slightly more likely to actively involve staff in organisational decision-making compared to the national average – 68% said that they do so to a large extent. 83% said that they invest in staff training and development.

Flexible working arrangements have become significantly

more prominent due to the pandemic. Flexitime (79% of respondents) and job shares (32%) are more common in the North West than on average for the UK. Slightly fewer social enterprises here offer term-time working however, compared to the national average – and compared to 2019 figures for the region. On call working has increased significantly since 2019, as has working a nine-day fortnight.

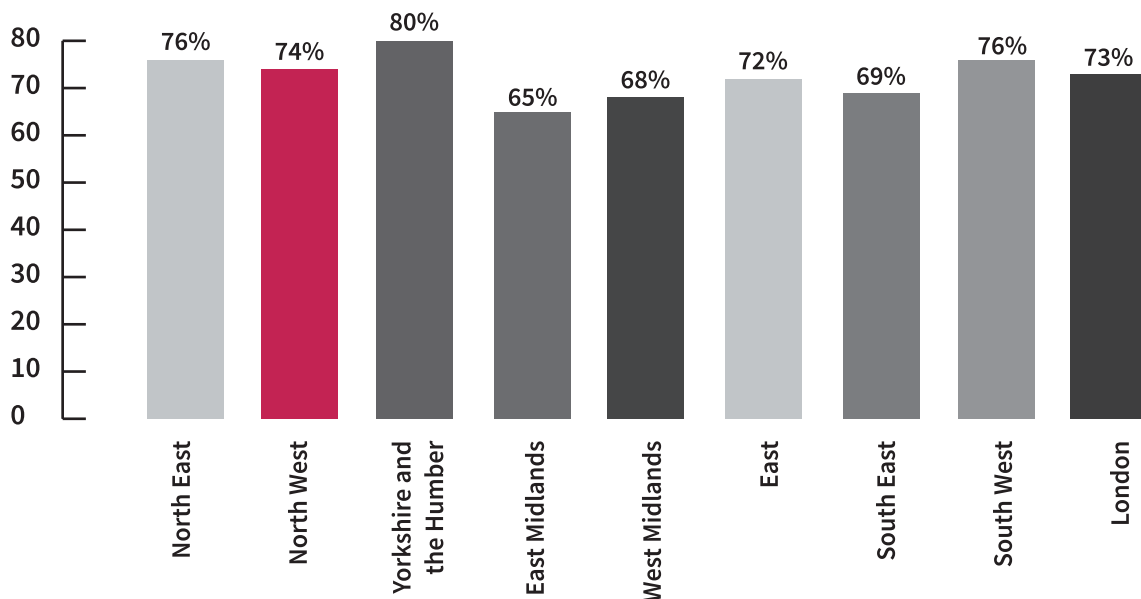
Working hours arrangements for employees



Unlike the UK-wide averages which have seen the proportion of social enterprises that pay the living wage⁷ decline, the level has remained the same in the North West since 2019, with slightly fewer saying that they don't pay it in 2021. This

could be related to living wage campaigns in Salford, Greater Manchester and Preston, and potentially linked to local authority community wealth building activity.

Proportion of social enterprises that pay the living wage, by region



⁷ The Living Wage is an hourly wage calculated based on the cost of living. It is higher in London, to reflect the higher cost of living in the capital. At the time of the survey, the Living Wage Foundation rates were £9.30 for the UK, except London where it was £10.75. <https://www.livingwage.org.uk/>

Leadership Demographics

Social enterprises in the North West are less likely to be led by a woman than their counterparts elsewhere: 39%, compared to the UK average of 47%. A higher proportion of leaders in the region identify as being White British (82%, compared to 74% across the UK as a whole). A lower proportion of leaders in the region are from Black, Asian and other racialised ethnic backgrounds.

Leadership here is also older than elsewhere⁸ – 22% of leaders are aged 44 or under, compared to 33% nationally. Of all respondents, cooperatives seem to have the least representative leadership – all cooperative respondents in

the North West were led by White British people, and 69% were led by men.

Although social enterprises are far more representative of their communities than other businesses, representation is not just lower than national averages, but also given the region's ethnic make-up, 87% of the population is White British and around 10% of the region's population comprises people of Asian, Black and Other Minority Ethnicity backgrounds⁹. It should be noted that sampling, outreach and survey response rates could also be a factor in this.

Leadership demographics

	UK	North West	FTSE100 ¹⁰	SMEs
Male	47%	47%	94%	79%
Female	47%	39%	6%	16%
White British	74%	82%		84%
White Other	7%	3%		6%
Asian or Asian British	4%	2%		2%
Black or Black British	6%	1%		*%
Other including Mixed heritage	2%	3%		3%
ALL racialised communities	12%	6%	6% (2020)	5%
16 to 24	1%	0%		
25 to 44	32%	22%		
45 to 64	53%	56%		
65+	8%	9%		
Disability	11%	10%	0%	No data
No disability	82%	78%	100% ¹¹	No data

Social enterprise leaders in the North West earn more than elsewhere in the UK. The average salary of the highest earner in an organisation is £74,000 here (including a couple of significant outliers), compared to £37,000 for the UK as a whole.

⁸ It was noted by a reviewer that parts of the region have a 'super-ageing population', where there is a high proportion of people aged over 65, living longer, and with lower birth rates than UK/regional averages.

⁹ <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity/national-and-regional-populations/regional-ethnic-diversity/latest#areas-of-england-and-wales-by-ethnicity>

¹⁰ https://www.cipd.co.uk/images/ftse-100-executive-pay-report_tcm18-82375.pdf

¹¹ <https://www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/news/articles/no-ftse-100-executives-or-senior-managers-have-disclosed-a-disability#ref>

Growth trends

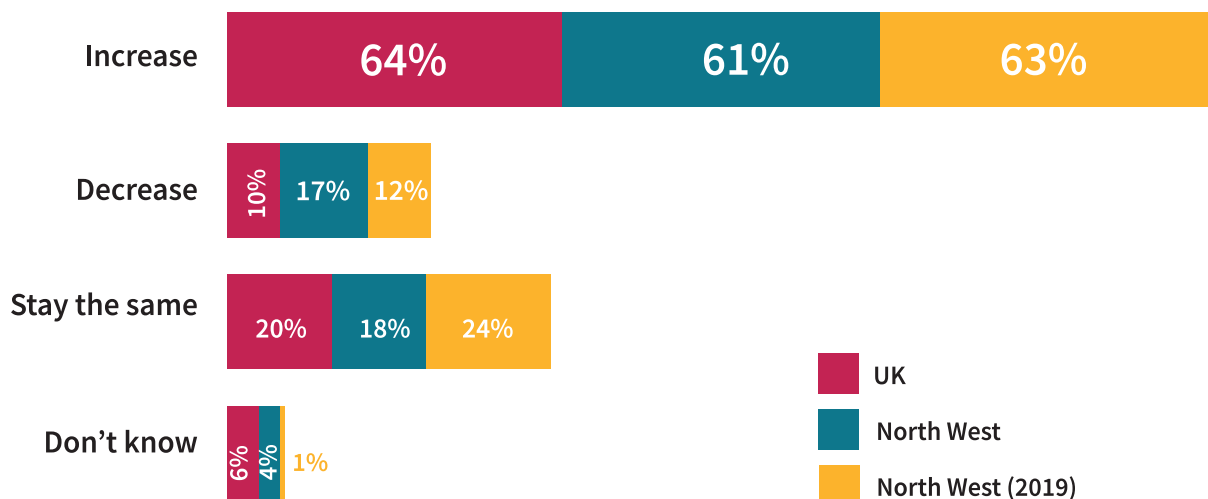
We ask a number of questions about growth trends through the survey. There is far lower expectation to grow staff teams in the North West than elsewhere, although social enterprises here expect teams to remain the same size rather than reduce.

Over half of social enterprises in the North East expected their staff numbers to grow in the year ahead, significantly more than was the case in 2019. And over half of social enterprises here expected turnover to grow too, albeit that this is a smaller proportion than the UK average. It could be that social enterprises here exceeded their own growth expectations and are, again, cautious to predict here growth.

Workforce size expectations for the next 12 months



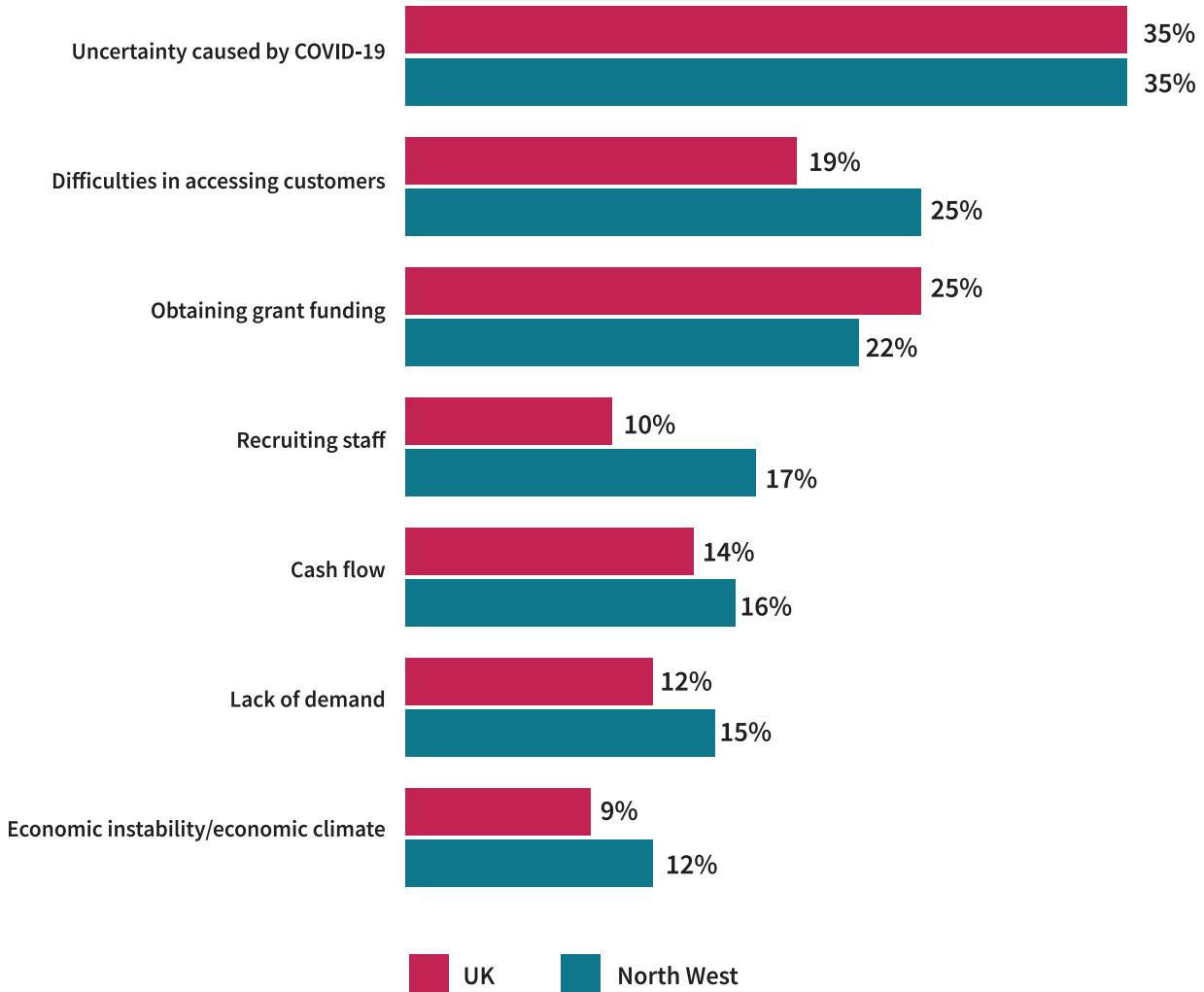
Turnover expectations for the next 12 months



We asked social enterprises what actions they have taken in the previous 12 months to sustain and grow their businesses. In the North West, social enterprises were most likely to say that they had developed new products and/or services – albeit at a lower rate than the national average. 52% had diversified or expanded into new geographies or different customer markets and 51% had recruited new staff or increased the level of training.

The survey asks what social enterprises see as their top three barriers to sustainability and/or growth. In the North West, as UK-wide, uncertainty caused by COVID was the primary concern. Social enterprises in the North West reported being more concerned about accessing customers than was the case elsewhere. Slightly more saw shortage of managerial skills as an issue, there were also slightly fewer respondents who said that accessing repayable finance was a significant barrier to growth compared to the UK average.

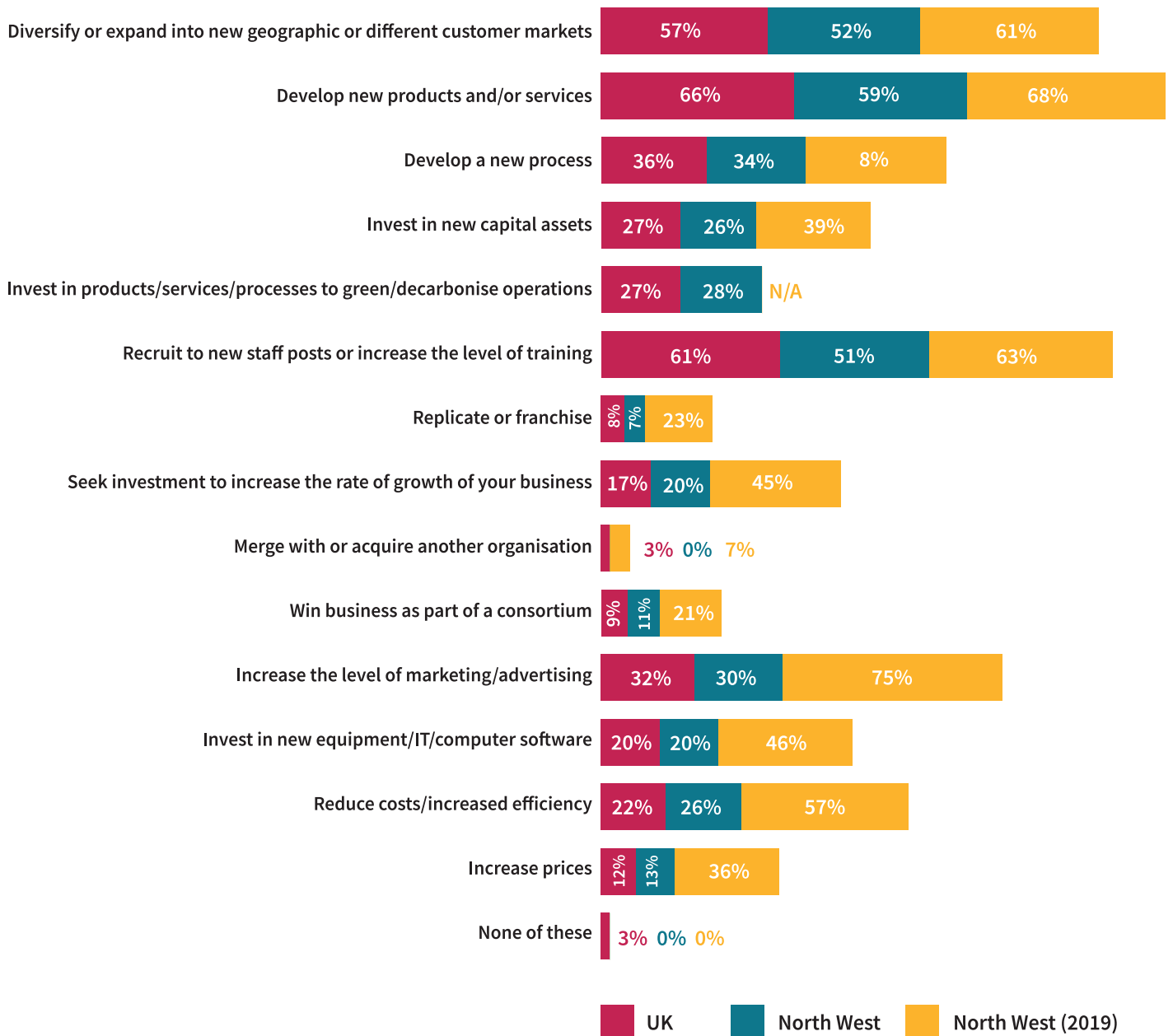
Three most significant barriers to your organisation’s sustainability and/or growth (responses that attracted 10%+ response rate)



In terms of future growth, respondents who expect their turnover to grow were asked how they envisage achieving this. Innovating by developing a new product/service is the

most-cited growth plan, although fewer social enterprises in the North West expect to do this than elsewhere- and the rate of planned innovation has decreased in the region since 2019.

Growth plans



Finance

The final set of survey questions relate to funding and finance. 36% of social enterprises in the North West applied for finance last year, and a further 21% considered applying but didn't.

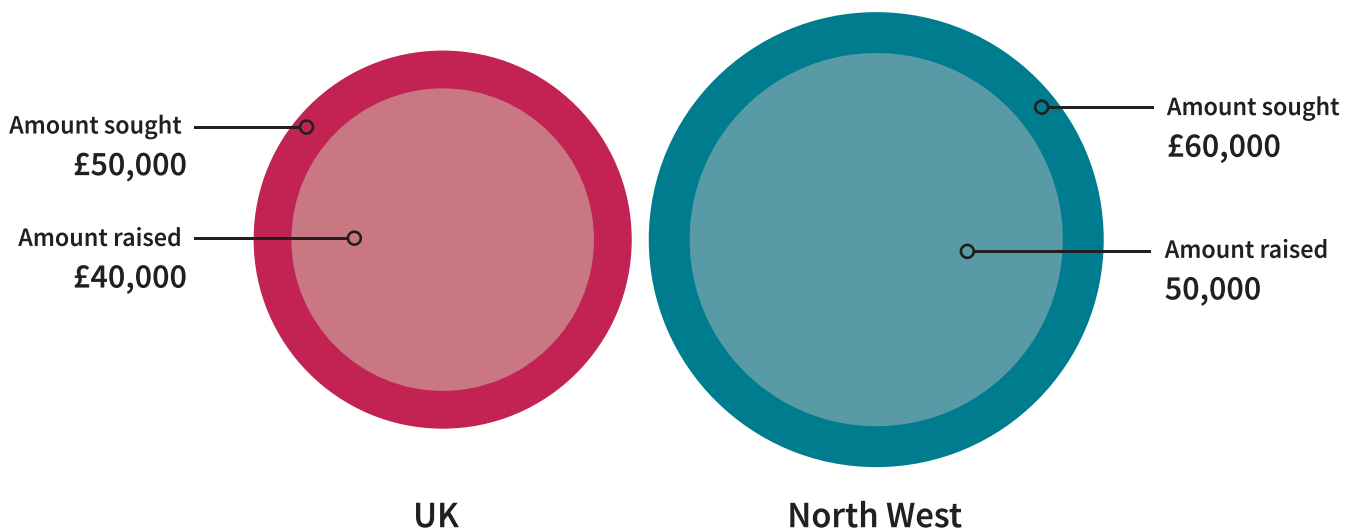
Summary of interest in external finance



Of those that decided not to apply for finance, 23% said that no finance was required and 18% said that they didn't know where to find appropriate finance (this is higher than the equivalent for the UK as a whole – 12%). There was significantly less concern about being rejected for finance in the region (5% cited this as a reason they didn't apply, compared to 15% UK-wide).

Where they applied for finance, social enterprises in the North West applied for a median amount that was more than the UK median. They raised less than they sought, but more than was raised across the UK and were proportionately more successful in securing closer to the amount sought than was the case nationally.

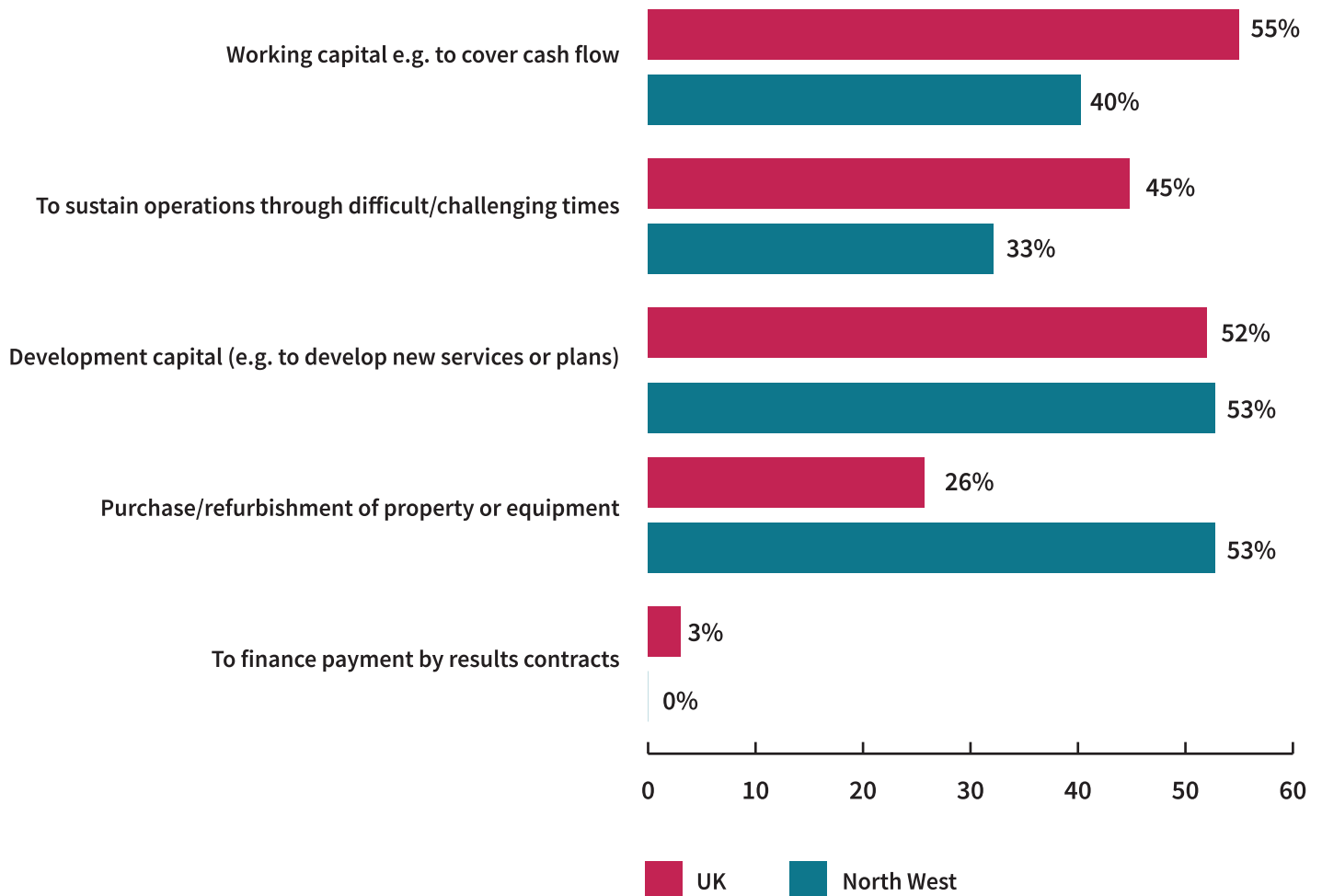
Amounts of external finance (excluding grants) sought and raised



In terms of who they sought finance from, North West social enterprises were less likely to apply to banks on average than social enterprises for the UK as a whole. They were 5% more likely to apply to specialist social investment organisations and 12% more likely to apply for finance from their local authority, and 9% more likely to seek money from a grant-making trust or foundation. As with non-financial support, there is less reliance on friends and family in this region than in other parts of the UK.

In the North West, the most common reasons for seeking finance were for development capital and to purchase/refurbish property or equipment. Fewer social enterprises here were seeking working capital or money to sustain operations through difficult times.

Purpose of finance or capital sought



We ask a few questions about perceptions of external finance. In the North West, social enterprises are more likely than elsewhere to say that the amount of external finance available to their organisation is sufficient – but they are slightly more likely to disagree that they have the skills needed to access finance within their organisations.

Deep dive: Greater Manchester

Of those that shared location data, 27 of the survey respondents were based in the Manchester (M) postcode which covers much but not all of the Greater Manchester area. We have looked at questions where at least the majority of these 27 responded to give a brief summary of social enterprise activity in the Manchester area.

Social enterprises in Manchester are older than those in the wider North West region, they have been trading, on average, for 23 years. Although a handful of large social enterprises in the city region mean a high average number of paid employees (over 2,500), the median number of staff is 3 – lower than for the region as a whole.

Similarly, the average turnover is far higher here at £4.8m – but the median figure is £125,000, lower than for the region as a whole (£160,000).

Social enterprises in Greater Manchester were more likely to have made a profit/surplus last year compared to their counterparts elsewhere in the North West. 64% made a profit and 24% made a loss.

Far more social enterprises in the city region (48%) applied for finance last year than was the case for the region as a whole.

There are slightly more social enterprises led by women in Manchester than in the rest of the North West, although at 42% the average here is lower than for the UK as a whole.

Within the Greater Manchester region, Salford is the first Social Enterprise City in the North West of England. Salford has a range of sizeable social enterprises, tackling a variety of social issues including some that have developed from scratch and others that have spun out from the public sector. There are a significant number of smaller enterprises, both more established and start-ups. Social Enterprise City status demonstrates a commitment to investing in the sector and reflects our strengths of working across public, private and voluntary sectors to promote, raise awareness and build markets for social enterprise.

The city has roots in the co-operative movement and it has a history of driving economic and social change that continues today. Salford became the first city in Greater Manchester to commit to the real Living Wage and delivered an award-winning strategy to tackle poverty.

Case study: Reason Digital

Reason Digital is a Manchester-based social enterprise which creates digital products and services for social benefit. Acutely aware of the potential but also the risks of technology, Reason Digital seeks to use digital products to solve the problems.

The business is user-led, working in partnership with individuals and organisations with lived experiences of particular challenges to develop tech-based solutions to social problems from poverty and inequality to sexual exploitation, domestic violence, mental health and healthy ageing.

All products and services developed by Reason Digital are co-created with the charities, social enterprises and the individuals who these organisations support. For example, Reason Digital helped design Missing People and NSPCC's chatbot "Is this OK" - a chatbot which helps vulnerable young people use familiar technology to access support. The initial small pilot generated over 700 monthly interactions with young people on the chatbot, 20% spoke to a counsellor and almost 50% were able to report that they were experiencing issues relating to coercive control, sexual or physical violence.



Reason Digital has also worked with Age UK to develop a 'Call in Time' service which matches older people with volunteer telephone befrienders. Through digitising previously manual processes and using internet-based technologies to schedule, make and record calls the service has scaled rapidly to play a vital role in combating isolation during COVID-19 lockdowns. Now, almost 4000 older people are matched with a volunteer friend.

Other projects the social enterprise have created include an online fundraising platform for Dementia Revolution which saw it raise £4m in 2019 making it the London Marathon's most successful charity partnership in the race's history. Reason Digital have also worked on a project with Turn2Us to help people navigate the complexities of the UK's welfare system creating a peer supported web application which is aided by an online volunteer. This has seen a 56% decrease in anxiety levels from people seeking to claim state support.

Combining tech with ethics forms the basis of Reason Digital's work and they have placed this in their Articles of Association. The business is committed to increasing equity, diversity and inclusion in the workplace with an emphasis on supporting women, LGBTQ+ and employees from racialised communities. They are also dedicated to doing their part in protecting our planet hosting all their website and apps on servers which use renewable energy.

The wider support eco-system

In terms of perceptions of the local social enterprise ecosystems, Ed Cox, co-founder of Reason Digital, believes that whilst historically there's been a patchy and piecemeal approach to supporting social enterprises in Greater Manchester, in recent years the region has seen more "more co-ordinated efforts to support social enterprises and social entrepreneurs at the local government level, including initiatives from Andy Burnham's office and better co-ordination across public, private and voluntary sectors. There has also been great work done by individuals and small groups of people organising to bring people together and supporting each other, whether it's social entrepreneurs in Oldham, the Rochdale Social Enterprise & Co-operative Forum or the Manchester Social Entrepreneurs meetup group."

Ed also cited the importance of national schemes like SEUK's Social Enterprise Places Programme which has both Salford and Wigan as accredited hotspots of social enterprise activity.