

Beyond Representation: How diverse is the charity sector?

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Executive summary

In recent years, conversations around equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) have gained momentum across the nonprofit and charitable sectors in Europe and the UK.

Civil society organisations are increasingly being called upon not only to advocate for social justice externally but also to embody those values internally, in their leadership, staffing, funding structures, and workplace cultures. While countries like the UK have made progress in collecting and publishing workforce diversity data, much of Europe still lacks comprehensive, comparable information on who works in and leads the charity sector. Legal and cultural constraints around demographic data collection, particularly race and ethnicity, further complicate the picture.

This paper explores the current state of EDI in the nonprofit and charity sectors across the UK and Europe. It

examines workforce demographics, the lived experiences of underrepresented groups and emerging concepts reforms such as decolonising aid and intersectional reporting. Despite growing awareness, structural change remains limited. This research aims to map the landscape and highlight the steps needed to build a more inclusive and representative sector.

This report would not have been possible without the support of our interview participants and everyone who completed the survey. We thank all contributors for sharing their time and insights.



Underrepresentation and data gaps in diversity

Across the UK and Europe’s charity and nonprofit sector, racial and ethnically minoritised groups remain significantly underrepresented—especially in leadership roles.

Demographic data from the UK’s 2021 census shows us that 81.7% of the population is white. People from Asian ethnic groups made up 9.3% of the population followed by 4% from Black ethnic groups, 2.9% from mixed backgrounds and 2.1% from ‘other’ backgrounds. While around 18% of the UK population is non-white, just 9% of voluntary sector staff come from minoritised ethnic backgrounds, and fewer than 6% hold senior leadership roles (ACEVO, 2020). The disparity is starker at board level, where over 90% of trustees in England and Wales are white (ACEVO, 2020). Despite growing awareness, these figures have remained largely static over the past decade.

Other aspects of diversity show mixed progress. Women make up about two-thirds of the UK charity workforce, but remain underrepresented in top senior leadership, particularly among larger organisations (NCVO, 2023; The Philanthropist, 2021). The sector does comparatively better on disability inclusion: around 25% of charity employees identify as disabled—a higher proportion

than in the public or private sectors (NCVO, 2023). LGBTQ+ representation is less well tracked, though some organisations, such as Sustrans, have begun reporting pay gaps and inclusion metrics in this area (Civil Society, 2022).

>90%

of trustees in England and Wales are white (ACEVO, 2020)

Outside the UK, data collection is patchy. Legal and cultural restrictions in countries like France and Belgium limit the gathering of ethnicity-based workforce statistics (Brookings, 2020; Osborne Clarke, 2021). In the Netherlands, despite increasing policy interest, diversity monitoring remains fragmented and lacks consistent benchmarks (Cultuurmonitor, 2023). A recent analysis of Swiss foundation boards revealed limited diversity in age, gender, and educational background, with little data available on race or socio-economic status (The



Underrepresentation and data gaps in diversity

Philanthropist, 2021). Across continental Europe, most findings on diversity in the nonprofit workforce are either anecdotal or drawn from small-scale studies.

Additionally, research has shown that certain subsectors are especially homogenous. For example, environmental and international development NGOs, in particular, are known for being overwhelmingly racially homogenous, often dominated by white people. In the UK, just 4.5% of environmental NGO staff were people of colour in 2024, down from 6% the year before, despite increased participation in diversity reporting efforts (The Guardian, 2024). Larger organisations in this field tend to be the least diverse, indicating structural issues beyond hiring. International development NGOs have similarly struggled to diversify their leadership, which remains predominantly white and Global North-based (Yale Journal of International Affairs, 2021).

A study by Pro Bono Economics, published in 2025 into UK charity trustees, found that 43% of trustees are female, a 7% increase compared to 2017. The research also found that over half of the 2000 trustees surveyed were retired and people aged 44 and under made up only 8% of trustees. Just 1% were aged 30 and under.

The study also cited a lower percentage of trustees from racially minoritised groups compared to the general

population. 8% of trustees were from racially minoritised groups and 92% were from white backgrounds. This is compared to 18.3% of UK population coming from racially minoritised backgrounds and 81.7% being from white backgrounds according to the 2021 census.

The ACEVO 2025 Pay and Equalities survey highlighted that inequalities in charity leadership remain, and they cited pay equity and career development as the key sources of inequality. Other areas of challenges include diversity and wellbeing in the sector.

The ACEVO report found that 6% of CEOs identify as Asian or Minoritised Ethnic and no Black CEOs responded to the survey in 2025. Additionally, the number of respondents who identified as having a disability, learning difference or health condition dropped to 17% from 20% last year.

One other finding of the survey found that satisfaction with charity board ethnic diversity is low, with just a third of CEOs expressing contentment. More specifically, disability was the area with the lowest board diversity satisfaction (31%).

This lack of diversity contributes to a visibility gap: many nonprofits don't reflect the communities they serve. Research and lived experience show that staff from

minoritised backgrounds often face exclusion, tokenism, and "cultural taxation" - being expected to lead diversity efforts without structural support (Voice4Change England, 2020; ACEVO, 2020). Initiatives exist to improve inclusion, but the sector still lacks a unified framework for measurement and accountability.

In summary, while there are encouraging signs of greater transparency and commitment to EDI, data gaps and

underrepresentation persist, especially beyond gender and disability.

Without better measurement and targeted action, meaningful progress will remain limited.



Lack of formal strategies and accountability

Although many charities in Europe publicly prioritise EDI, few have formal strategies, measurable targets, or accountability mechanisms in place.

In the UK, a survey by ACEVO (2020) found that while most charity CEOs acknowledged their organisations' lack of racial diversity, the majority had no concrete plans to address it. As a result, initiatives often remain ad-hoc or symbolic rather than embedded and sustained.

A cross-sector study by Russell Reynolds Associates (2019) found that more than one-third of European organisations lacked a D&I strategy entirely, and only 15% were classified as "advanced" meaning they integrated diversity into core business goals. The rest were in "early" or "intermediate" stages, treating EDI as a reactive HR issue rather than a strategic imperative. Common shortcomings include a lack of leadership accountability, limited data collection, and no defined goals or timelines (Russell Reynolds Associates, 2019).

Organisational culture is often a barrier: many charities treat diversity as a compliance or PR matter rather than linking it to their mission. For example, few nonprofits set targets for board or staff composition, and even fewer tie leadership performance or funding decisions to equity

outcomes. ACEVO (2020) notes that, without clear action plans, simply acknowledging inequality is insufficient.

>1 in 3

European organisations lack a D&I strategy

Despite this, positive developments are emerging. An increasing number of UK charities have begun publishing diversity metrics and pay gap reports. For instance, only 3% of environmental NGOs had published race-related pay data as of 2022, but campaigns like The RACE Report are pushing for greater transparency (The RACE Report, 2022). Some larger charities have established chief diversity officer roles and or EDI committees, although these remain exceptions.

In continental Europe, EDI charters do exist such as national diversity pledges encouraged by the EU, but they are primarily geared toward corporate employers. The charity sector has not yet developed a shared Europe-wide charter or standards. There is also no regulatory

requirement to track diversity (with limited exceptions such as gender pay gap reporting in certain countries), making accountability highly variable (Russell Reynolds Associates, 2019).

In summary, while rhetorical support for EDI is growing, structured strategies with defined accountability mechanisms remain rare. Without leadership commitment and measurable benchmarks, progress will likely remain fragmented and uneven.

Based on this, the research questions for this study are:

1

What are the current EDI demographics (e.g., gender, ethnicity, disability, age, sexual orientation, religion, work pattern, flexible working patterns) in the charity and nonprofit sector across UK & Europe?

2

What policies and practices are in place to promote EDI in these organisations?

3

What are the challenges and barriers faced by underrepresented groups in entering and advancing in the sector?

Methodology

Mixed methods were used including 10 interviews and a questionnaire survey was devised.

Quantitative Question Development

The research questions in both the quantitative survey and the qualitative interviews were designed to understand the demographic spread of people who work in the charity and nonprofit sector. This meant asking questions about the 9 protected characteristics including age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, socioeconomic status and job level etc. We also asked questions about whether their organisations had an EDI policy/strategy, whether there was a person in their organisation responsible for EDI and measured levels of belonging and comfort around EDI topics.

Qualitative Question Development

The qualitative interview questions focussed on understanding specific organisational outlooks, policies and practices around EDI as well as best practice examples of inclusive workplace behaviours. The interviews were semi-structured and interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes each.

Interview Format

Semi-structured interviews were used to focus conversations on topics about EDI adoption within their organisations and the sector as a whole. Semi-structured interviews offer both flexibility and structure, allowing researchers to focus on areas and themes that may be more nuanced in certain interviews. Although there was a list of questions, an interview guide was created to create a question order. This process and the open-ended nature of each question, provide the interviewer and interviewee with the ability to discuss some topics in more detail.



1

The current EDI demographics

Based on the above research summary, it can be seen that there is a lack of information about the demographic make up of the charity and nonprofit sector in the UK and Europe. Having an up-to-date demographic outlook will help organisations to create and develop policy, strategy and programmes that help to attract, recruit and retain different individuals into the sector.

Quantitative Survey – Descriptive Statistics Results

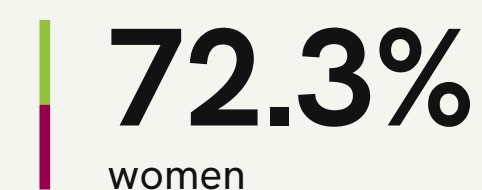
Following the removal of data-points from respondents outside of Europe, we were left with 423 survey responses.

Age



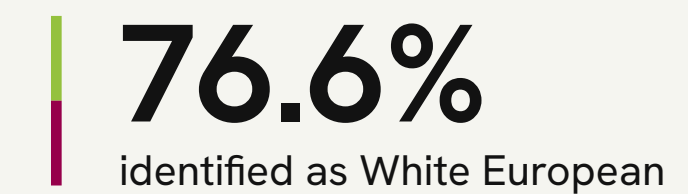
The highest age group that was represented was 45-54. This was followed by the 35-44 age group with 27.9% of the sample and then 55-64 age range which represented 21% of those who completed the questionnaire.

Gender



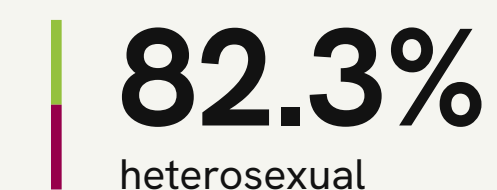
Women comprised 72.3% of the sample, with men representing 26%. Non-binary/third gender represented 1.4% and 0.2% of those questioned preferred not to say.

Ethnicity



76.6% of the participants identified as White European, 7.1% were South Asian, 5.4% were Black African, Caribbean or other, 4.3% were people from Mixed Ethnicities, 1.7% are from Middle Eastern or North African backgrounds.

Sexual Orientation



4.7% of the sample who were bisexual, 3.3% were gay men, 3.1% identified as queer, 2.1% were lesbian, 1.4% were pan sexual and 0.2% were pansexual.

Marital Status



The participants were represented by 59% of the sample being married or in a civil partnership, 19% single and never married, 9% cohabiting, 8% divorced, followed by 1% who were separated and 1% who were widowed.

Religion



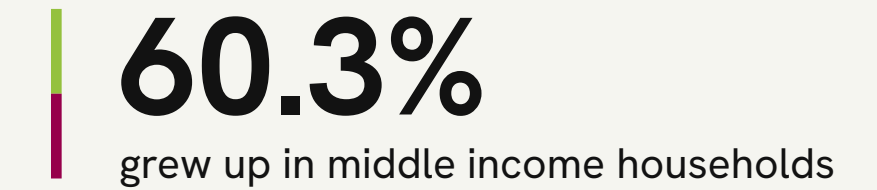
42.1% of the sample did not identify as any religion or were atheist, 29.8% were Christian, 10.2% were agnostic, 5% were Muslim, 1.4% were Hindu, 1.2% were Jewish, 0.9% were Sikh and 0.7% were Buddhist.

Country



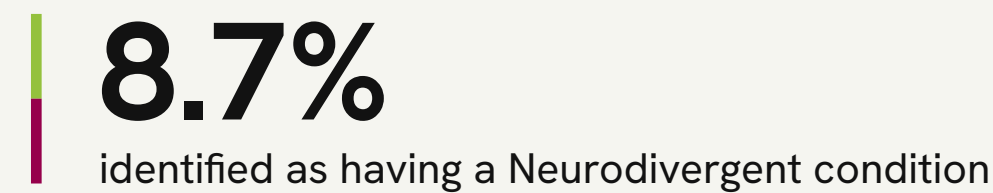
This was a Europe wide study, and the majority of responses came from the UK which accounted for 83.2%. 2.8% of the participants were from the Netherlands, 2.1% were from Belgium, 2.1% were from Spain.

Household Income



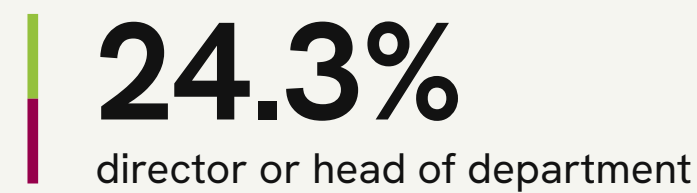
In terms of socio-economic status, 60.3% of the sample identified that they grew up in middle income households - where caregivers were able to pay for basic needs with some disposable income left over.

Disability



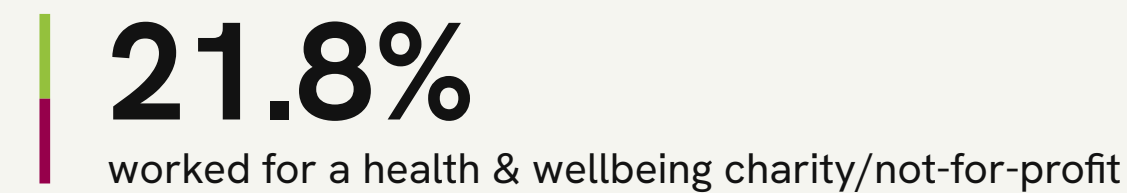
8.7% identified as having a Neurodivergent condition such as autism spectrum disorder, ADHD or dyslexia; 8.5% had a chronic health condition such as diabetes, epilepsy, multiple sclerosis etc. 8% of the sample had a mental health condition such as anxiety or depression and 2.5% had a hearing impairment for example full or partial deafness.

Job Level



24.3% of the sample was a director or head of department, followed by 21% of the sample being a C-suite leader including CEO, CFO or CTO. 17% were senior leaders such as senior managers or senior consultants with 16.3% being manager or team leaders.

Type of Organisation



As the research focussed on the charity, non for profit and for purpose sector organisations, we wanted to get a better idea of which type of organisations people worked in. 21.8% of the sample worked for a health and wellbeing charity or not-for-profit with 17.6% of the sample identified they worked for the category 'other'. 10.8% worked for an education charity, with 9.5% working for advocacy and campaigning organisations. 8.8% worked for human rights and social justice organisations with 7.9% working for community development and local engagement organisations.

Education - Qualifications



The highest level of education of the sample was as follows. 45% of the participants had a master's degree and 37% of the sample had an undergraduate or bachelor's degree. 6% had a doctoral degree, 5% with a technical or vocational training. 4% had a high school leaving certificate such as a Baccalaureat, Arbitur, GCSE etc.

The current EDI demographics

Caring Responsibilities

50.1%

had no caring responsibilities

50.1% of the sample did not have any caring responsibilities, i.e. didn't care for children or elderly relatives. 32.6% of the sample did have caring responsibilities for children, 10.9% cared for an elderly relative and 4.3% were supporting a partner or another household member with a health condition or a disability.

Work Pattern

61.2%

worked full time

61.2% of the sample worked full time and 16.8% worked part time hours (less than 35 hours per week). 7.8% worked compressed hours, where they worked full time hours but over less than five days. 6.9% worked as freelancers or contractors, 0.9% worked term time only, 0.2% worked as a job share and 0.2% did shift work.

Education - Type of School

61.2%

educated in non-selective schools

61.2% of those who completed the questionnaire went to schools that were state funded, where there were no fees. 14.9% of the sample attended state funded schools where there were no additional fees, but they were selected based on academic ability, faith or other grounds. 13% of the sample attended fee paying independent private schools where their caregivers paid 100% of the fees and 9% of the sample attended a fee-paying school with full or partial bursaries or school scholarships.



Quantitative Survey – Statistical findings

There was no statistically significant difference between gender and job level, education and job level, childhood household income and job level, or ethnicity and job level. This suggests that in this data set there were no clear correlational links between job level and these protected characteristics.

For the question, “I feel valued at work” on a 5-point Likert scale, these factors led to higher scores:

- White British, Spanish, Russian category had statistically higher scores on this question compared to any other ethnic group. They scored on average 0.8 points higher

- People from C-suite (CEO, CFO, CTO) also scored statistically higher on this question. They scored about 0.3 higher than other groups
- Those who other’ on job level also scored statistically higher for this question. They scored an average of 0.75 of a point higher.
- Those who were from Belgium also scored statistically lower on this question by an average of 0.75 below other nationalities.

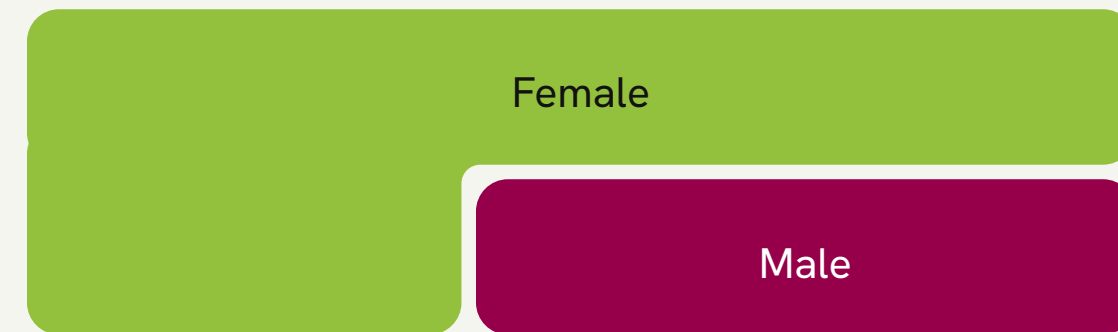
To read the data in more detail, please see the Annex on page 25.



Qualitative Interviews

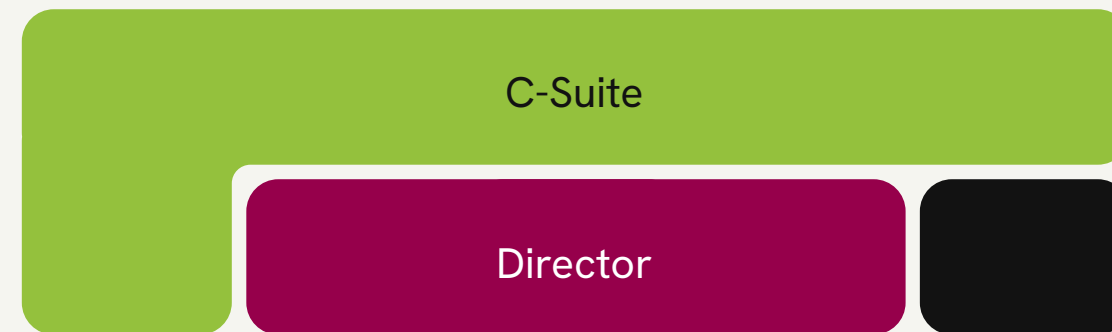
Qualitative interviews were conducted with 10 individuals from the sector. Interviews were conducted between August and September 2025 online using Microsoft Teams, recorded, transcribed and analysed.

Gender and Country



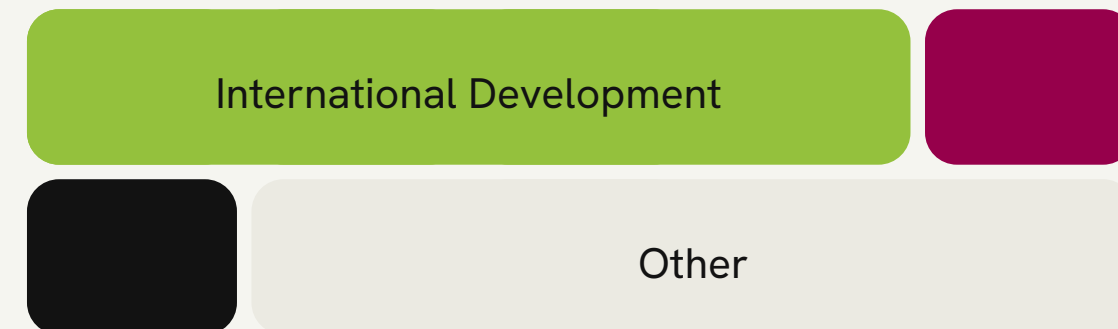
70% of the interviewees were female. 90% of the sample were based in the UK with 10% based in the Netherlands.

Job Level



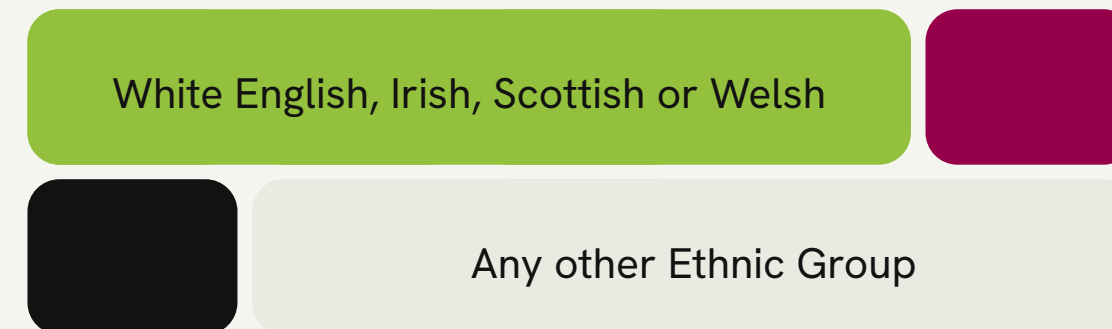
60% of the interviewees were C suite individuals and 30% were director level.

Type of Charity



40% of interviewees were from the international development sector, 10% were from environment and sustainability sector and 10% were from the health and wellbeing sector.

Ethnicity



40% of the sample were White English, Irish, Scottish or Welsh, 10% were Pakistani, 10% were from a mixed or multiple ethnic background and 40% were from any other ethnic group.

Educational Background

60% of the sample had a master's degree with 30% having an undergraduate degree and 20% a professional or technical qualification.

Sexuality and Disability

80% of the interviewees were heterosexual, and 60% had no disability, 40% had a Neurodivergent condition, with 10% also having a chronic health condition.



2

Policies and practices in place to promote EDI

Another research question that underpinned this research study was about policies and practices that exist within organisations to support inclusive workplaces. This information came from the qualitative research interviews, with those who work in the sector.

Findings from the quantitative data

the organisations in our dataset covered a range of sizes and sectors. They ranged from having only early stage EDI interventions to fully embedded solutions where they held themselves fully accountable.

The analysis showed that organisations with a more developed EDI policy and 'mature outlook' shared these three features:

1

Visible senior ownership of EDI (board/CEO accountability).

2

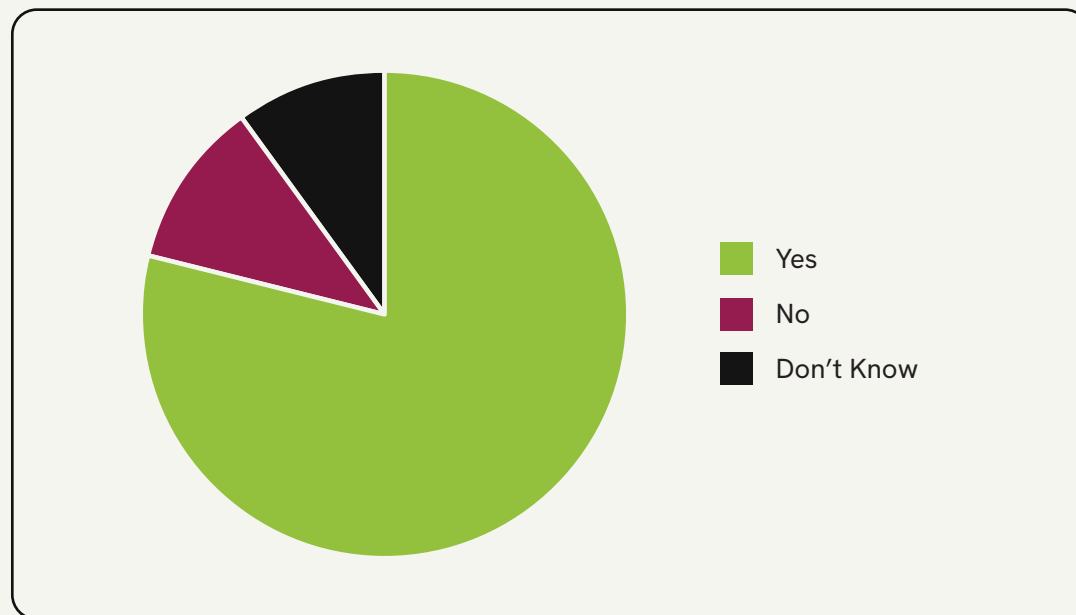
Integrated systems in recruitment, performance reviews and strategy including EDI measurement and metrics.

3

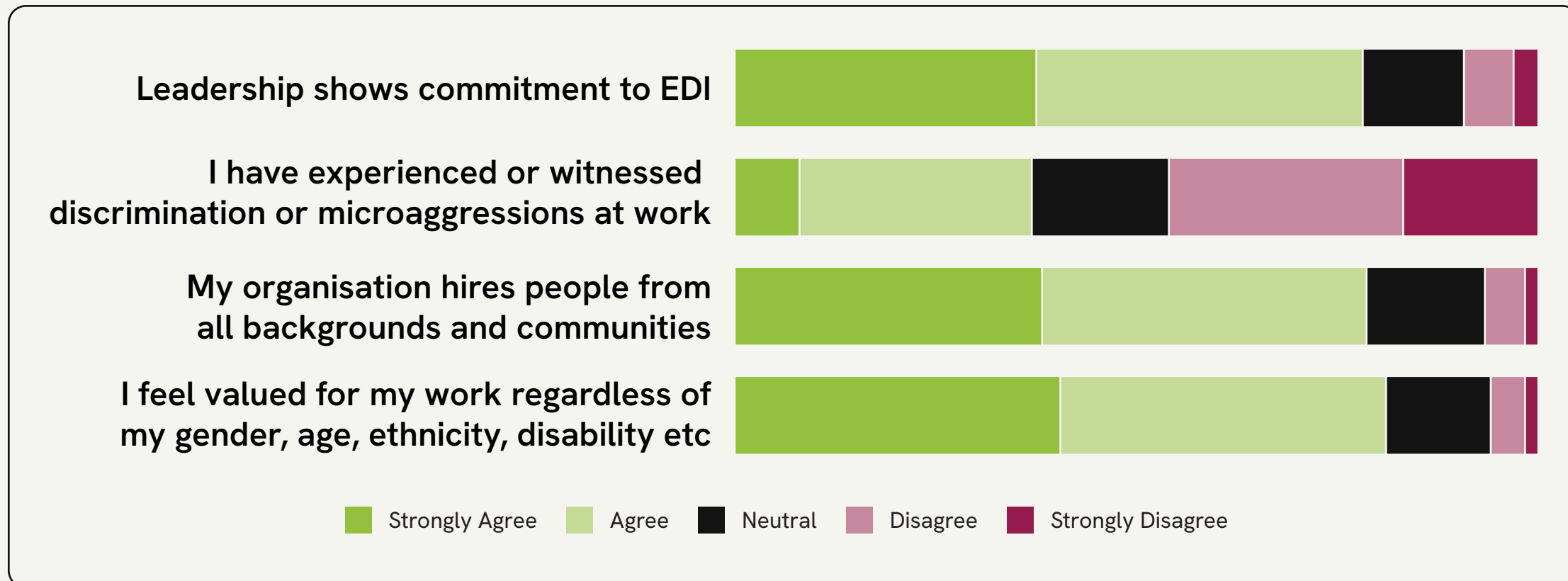
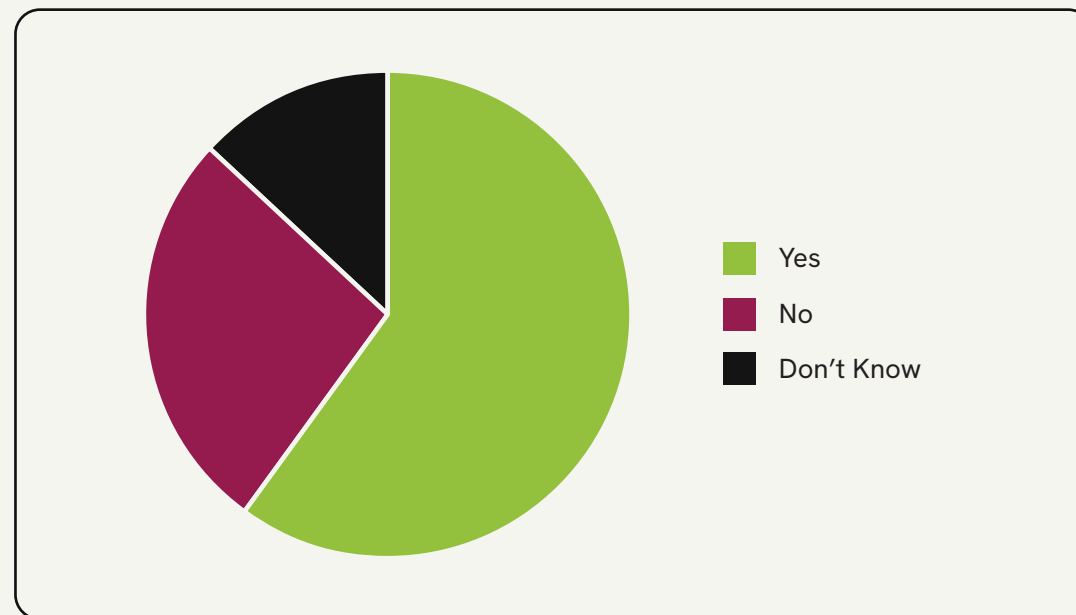
Co-production with staff and service users with lived experience.

Survey results

My organisation has an EDI strategy or policy



My organisation has a member of staff responsible for EDI



Qualitative results

Organisations surveyed demonstrate a range of mature and developing policies and practices, often integrating EDI into governance structures, operational workflows, and external service delivery.

Governance and policy frameworks

EDI responsibilities are increasingly being embedded at the highest levels of the organisations. Many maintain dedicated EDI policies, though the review cycles vary, from annually to every two years or every three years, often requiring board approval. In some cases, the policies are not standalone but are incorporated into “lots of policies”.

Accountability for EDI usually resides with senior leadership. In one organisation, EDI leadership sits with the Chief of Staff (Migrant Help) while another CEO is personally “accountable for delivering not just on our policy but also our ED and I strategy, which is annually reviewed” (OnSide). Leadership teams demonstrate commitment by establishing and publicly endorsing policies and making EDI a regular “conversation point at each of the meetings” for both SLT and the Board (Migrant Help).

Strategic integration and internal initiatives

To ensure EDI moves beyond a mere policy document, organisations employ numerous mechanisms for integration:

- 1. Staff involvement and feedback:** Dedicated staff groups are crucial. One organisation has an EDI Staff Committee where “every department has a member” to ensure it is a “regular discussion point in team briefings” (Migrant Help). This breadth of involvement has been key, as one interviewee noted that before the committee, “it was fairly isolated, and one person was responsible”. This broad engagement fostered a Neurodivergent working group to “inform how we interview staff and how we talk about Neurodiversity and how we can make adjustments for it” (Migrant Help). Another organisation utilises a “FREDIE group” (Fairness, Respect, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion



■ Policies and practices in place to promote EDI

Employee group) to “hold me in the organisation to account for delivering the strategy” and act as a “brains trust” for generating new ideas (OnSide).

- 2. Workflow and performance:** For many organisations featured, EDI is formally embedded across the employment lifecycle. One organisation incorporates EDI into every staff member’s appraisal, requiring them “to give an example of each of the values” (Migrant Help). This is also the case at OnSide and ShelterBox, and Practical Action is starting to embed this into leaders KPI’s. Furthermore, major projects and decision-making processes, including restructures, require Equality Impact Assessments (EIA) to be done (Migrant Help).
- 3. Recruitment and progression:** To mitigate bias, several practices have been adopted, notably “encouraging anonymous recruiting” (OnSide) or “blind recruitment” (ShelterBox). One organisation found that this simple step has generated a “real skew” towards all-female shortlists (ShelterBox). For progression, one organisation identifies high-talent individuals and puts them through an internal “leadership Academy” to help development and increase diverse representation at senior levels (Migrant Help).
- 4. Supportive Policies and Training:** Some organisations are proactive in offering specific support. One example includes introducing a policy on menstruation (Amnesty International). Another organisation implemented

mandatory anti-sexual harassment training and increased paid parental leave for both mothers and fathers. Leaders “model their behaviour” by openly discussing issues, such as one manager creating a video during Ramadan to understand the religious significance of it (Trussell). Additionally, there are efforts to promote neurodiversity, including the adoption of inclusive fonts on emails and continually asking staff, “Do you need any reasonable adjustments to be made [for] this to be more, more accessible for you?” (Practical Action)

Lived experience and external engagement

Organisations working with marginalised communities embed EDI through co-production and lived experience engagement. One organisation has a former client as a board member and lived experienced members on board committees). They maintain a “National Lived Experience Advisory panel” which meets with the senior leadership as “equal members of the organisations”. This panel co-produces services, develops staff training videos, and is used to test “out our concepts for what we want to put into our bid submission”. This model is identified as the “golden bullet” for service delivery and funding applications (Migrant Help). Another organisation ensures that 50% of its project participants must be women and children, a metric that is “reported quarterly” (ShelterBox).



3

Challenges and barriers faced by underrepresented groups

Underrepresented groups face barriers that span systemic issues in recruitment, internal cultural resistance, and lack of dedicated resources.

Systemic and recruitment barriers

A significant challenge is generating a diverse pool of applicants, particularly for senior and specialist roles. This is compounded by geographical constraints; one organisation notes their head office location in Dover means they “don’t get the diverse pool of candidates that we always hope to see” because the area is “very white and working class”. Similarly, the location in Cornwall is problematic as it “is probably the least diverse county”. For some specialist roles, such as “risk and compliance role,” the candidate “pool was relatively limited for but very non diverse very homogeneous pool” (Migrant Help).

The sector has a historical legacy favouring “English speaking, primarily white people... from the Western countries”, resulting in current difficulties filling senior management where it is still “dominated by white middle class” (Andres Gomez de la Torre).

Other systemic barriers include:

Social mobility: Across the charity sector, salaries are often perceived as a significant barrier to entry, creating a “pay barrier” that limits opportunities for people from lower-income backgrounds to work in charities (wider sector observation, ShelterBox). Furthermore, historically, gaining entry to the sector was often achieved through “unpaid internships” which “was kind of really heavily skewed to a certain portion of society” (OnSide).

Education requirements: One leader noted the unfair requirement that candidates “must hold a degree, a bachelor’s degree” even for roles where it may not be necessary, which acts as a barrier to those entering via “unconventional route[s]” (Practical Action).

Progression and internal barriers

While organisations may attract diverse talent, ensuring advancement remains a hurdle. As one leader noted, people are “attracted to the cause and come into the entry level or middle level roles. But we’re not yet at the point where it percolates upward and often” (Migrant Help). The issue is often compounded by a lack of objective progression pathways, with wider sector reflections noting that “there are still elements of ... favouritism, and who you know” within internal recruitment processes — although Trussell (which has worked hard to eliminate this) is not unique in facing these sector wide dynamics. This is all contributing to holding people back. “I can think of numerous examples of brilliant people across the UK sector, really experienced fundraisers, who have hit ceilings from a promotion point of view due to racial bias” (Animals Asia).

Internal resistance and cultural blind spots also present major obstacles:

Cultural resistance: “Boards can also be a factor as EDI isn’t always at the top of their agenda” (OnSide). There is also a barrier when leaders view EDI as a “technical issue rather than as a truly political change” (Andres Gomez de la Torre).

Staff exhaustion/burnout: Working groups are often implemented on a voluntary basis, leading to “enormous workload” and “burn out quicker” (Hivos). As EDI is often considered an add-on, staff are “time poor,” and if it is not on their immediate radar, they are not going to “dedicate time to it” (Practical Action).

Fear of getting it wrong: The social climate outside, including debates around racism or gender, “increases the fear of EDI” (Trussell). People become wary of asking questions or engaging for fear of offense, which hinders education and discussion, leading to a culture where people believe they are “patronising them that they wouldn’t understand this and know this” (ShelterBox).



Questionnaire free text answers

There were two free text questions at the end of the quantitative questionnaire.

Question 1: What improvements could be made to an organisation's EDI efforts?

1 Leadership commitment and Accountability

Respondents called for stronger leadership engagement, accountability, and visible action beyond statements or policies.

2 Representation and Recruitment

Many felt EDI improvements depend on addressing structural barriers to recruitment and senior representation.

3 Strategy, policy, and implementation

Participants wanted clearer objectives, measurable outcomes and policies that translate into practice.

4 Class, socioeconomic and regional inclusion

Class and geography were identified as overlooked aspects of EDI, with barriers rooted in privilege and cost.

5 Disability and accessibility

Respondents said EDI often excludes hidden disabilities and needs better accessibility practices.



Too many people at the top level aren't interested in diversity because they don't want challenge / want to maintain the status quo.



Because the sector is seen internally and externally as 'doing good' it is reluctant to accept that it too has work to do.



EDI in the charity sector is extremely lacking. While people of colour are represented in lower and middle level jobs very few can be seen in senior decision making.



We struggle to recruit racially diverse candidates.



Short term funding makes it hard to recruit and keep staff (from all backgrounds).



Policy does not match with practice in the name of budget or cost efficiency.



Hidden disabilities are rarely addressed. People often struggle in silence.



The sector continues to be dominated by middle-class well-off individuals and very little is being done to change that.



Class isn't talked about enough... masking my working class background has been exhausting.



Personally, I was only able to enter the sector after receiving an MA degree... we must lower the financial barrier to entry.

Question 2: Please include any other comments you would like to include about equity, diversity and inclusion in your organisation or the sector.

1 Structural inequality and representation gaps

Many highlighted persistent racial, gender and class imbalances in leadership and across the sector.

2 Intersectionality and overlooked groups

Several participants raised concerns that certain groups — e.g. migrants, LGBTQ+, disabled staff are overlooked in EDI work.

3 Cultural change and lived experience

Respondents urged that EDI be more than policy it requires culture change, humility, and valuing lived experience.

4 Resource constraints and capacity

Smaller organisations described how limited time and funding make EDI hard to sustain meaningfully.

5 Positive practice and progress

A few comments reflected genuine organisational commitment and visible diversity.



There needs to be more inclusion of LGBTQI people in discussions and training.



The sector is heavy white, middle-aged, middle-class women, with children.



Single parents' unique challenges are not understood or accounted for.



Everyone still looks the same (white). Sexism still prevalent. Classism still prevalent.



Because the sector is seen as 'doing good', it hides its own systemic bias.



We are running around in circles trying to keep the service open.



Support around EDI needs to be easy for charities to access.



There needs to be more understanding of lived experience, not just tokenistic representation.



This is truly the most diverse and inclusive organisation I have worked in.

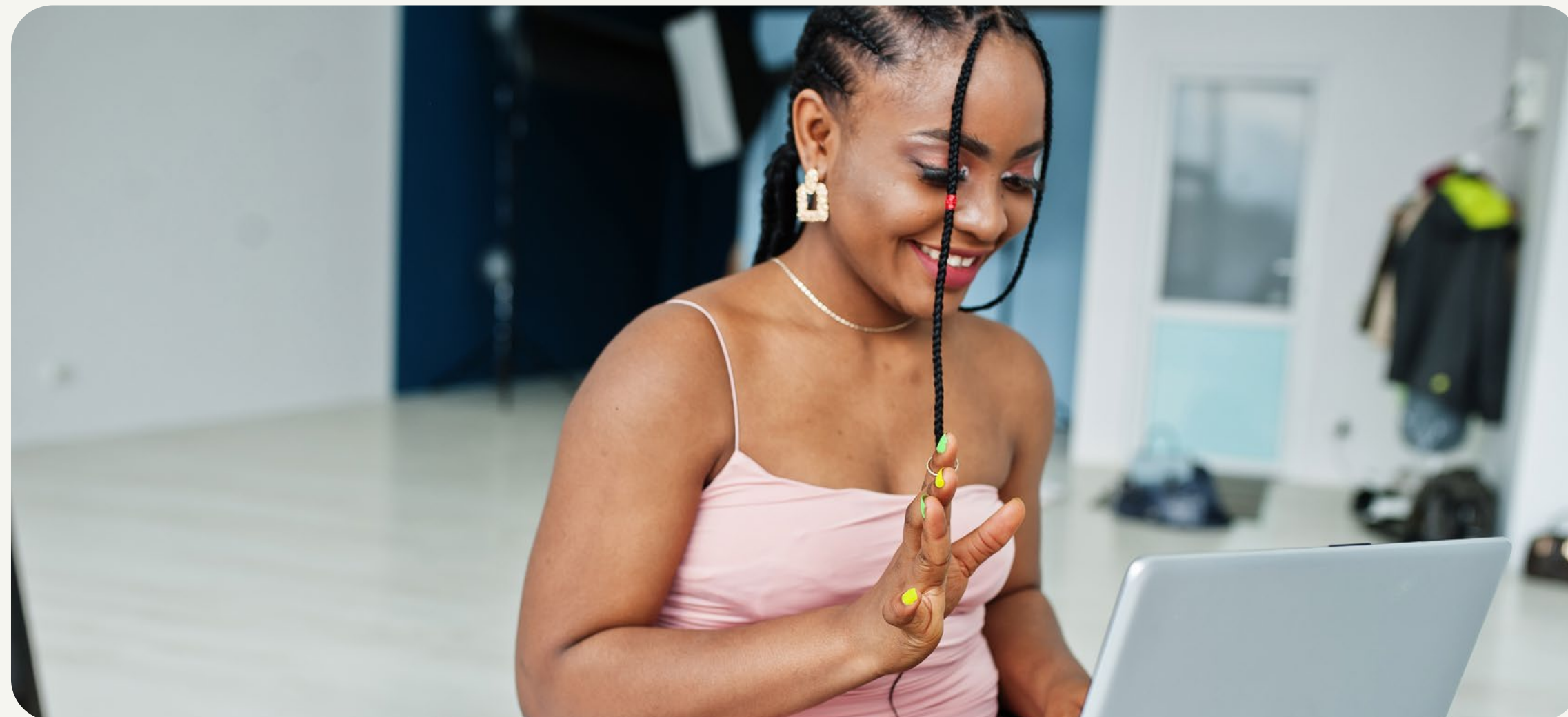


We do what we can, we know we can do more, capacity is a challenge whilst trying to keep the lights on.

Data and resource challenges

The inability to effectively measure EDI initiatives makes sustaining them difficult. Metrics are “really hard to come by” (OnSide), and there is a “lack of knowledge” among leaders about how to effectively lead the agenda (Andres Gomez de la Torre). Data collection is hampered by people’s “natural disinclination to complete forms of characteristics”, making it hard to track where organisations are “losing candidates in the system” (OnSide).

Finally, resource constraints mean that EDI roles are often “tacked on to somebody’s role somewhere” (Practical Action), leading to “lack of resources for dedicated EDI roles and advanced training” (Hivos). Across the charity sector, the resource issues often means that when budgetary pressures arise, EDI initiatives are frequently the first to be deprioritised or “fall off” (wider sector observation, Trussell).



Barriers identified

1 Systemic

Degree requirements, social mobility, geographic monocultures and unpaid internships limiting access progression and internal barriers

2 Cultural

Resistance to change, resistance to the concept and idea of inclusion or diversity, fear of getting it wrong and scared of asking questions

3 Operational

Data gaps, under-resourced EDI roles, voluntary unpaid labour in staff networks

4 Emotional labour

Burnout among marginalised staff asked repeatedly to educate others or fix the system

Conclusions

1 Leadership accountability drives maturity

Regular EDI reporting to boards, clear KPIs and budgeted resource create momentum.

2 Policies alone don't change culture

Structural integration into recruitment, appraisal and governance is required to avoid performative inclusion.

3 Diverse leadership enhances organisational awareness

Not through assumed empathy, but because it brings a wider range of perspectives and lived insight into decision-making.

4 Lived-experience involvement strengthens practice

Co-production and consultation panels increase relevance, trust, and community accountability.

5 Collect data and properly resource EDI

Weak demographic data and reliance on unpaid EDI labour threaten continuity and staff wellbeing.

Recommendations

Priority area	Actions
Leadership & governance	Embed EDI KPIs in senior objectives; make EDI a standing board item.
Resourcing	Fund EDI roles and pay lived-experience contributors; avoid volunteer-only models.
Data	Improve demographic data quality and transparency; share progress regularly.
Operational practice	Extend blind recruitment and impact assessments; integrate inclusion into appraisals.
Talent & progression	Develop targeted leadership pathways for under-represented staff and monitor outcomes.
Culture & wellbeing	Recognise emotional labour in EDI work and provide supervision and recovery space.

Overall takeaway

Organisations progress when EDI is treated as a core governance and operational responsibility, not a side initiative. Representation at senior levels amplifies awareness, but sustainable inclusion requires systems, accountability and care.

Limitations

As with every research study, this study had limitations. One limitation is that, although the study examined diversity and inclusion in charities and non-profits across the UK and Europe, most respondents to the quantitative questionnaire were from the UK (83.2%). A reason for this could be our reach as organisations: although Oxford HR is a global organisation, Charity People is UK-based.

Additionally, a reason for the discrepancy in qualitative responses between the UK and Europe could be that for some European countries, tracking and measuring demographic data is not routine and doesn't happen in the same way as it does in the UK.

If we were to do the study again, we would put more effort into attracting more responses from mainland Europe. This could be achieved through targeted email campaigns and social media posts (LinkedIn).

Another limitation of this research study is that sometimes, people are more likely to complete questionnaires and participate in studies when they are interested in the topic. This is called self-selection bias and can be overcome by using a random sampling method in any follow-up research studies.

Ideas for further research

While the current study provides valuable insights into diversity demographics within senior leadership roles in the charity sector, future research could broaden the scope to include perspectives from individuals at different organisational levels.

Conducting semi-structured interviews with staff in mid-level and entry-level positions would help capture a more comprehensive understanding of diversity experiences across the sector. This approach could reveal variations in career progression, inclusion practices, and the barriers employees face at different stages, offering a more nuanced picture of systemic challenges and opportunities for improvement.

Additionally, other research areas can include topics such as wellbeing and resilience, job satisfaction and motivation within the sector.



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Annex

Job Level vs Sexual Orientation

Job Level	Sexual Orientation	Count
Director/ Head of Department	Bisexual	4
	Gay man	3
	Gay woman / lesbian	2
	Heterosexual or straight	87
	Pansexual	1
	Prefer not to say	4
	Queer	2
	Total	103
Entry-level/Early career (coordinator, assistant, trainee)	Bisexual	2
	Heterosexual or straight	6
	Prefer not to say	1
	Total	9
Executive/C-Suite (CEO, CTO, CFO)	Bisexual	2
	Gay man	4
	Gay woman / lesbian	2
	Heterosexual or straight	78
	Pansexual	2
	Prefer not to say	1
	Total	89

Job Level	Sexual Orientation	Count
Manager/Team Lead	Asexual	1
	Bisexual	4
	Gay man	1
	Gay woman / lesbian	1
	Heterosexual or straight	56
	Queer	6
	Total	69
	Mid-level/ Experienced professional (specialist, officer, advisor)	Bisexual
Gay man		2
Gay woman / lesbian		1
Heterosexual or straight		42
Prefer not to say		1
Queer		2
Total	50	
Other	Gay man	1
	Heterosexual or straight	9
	Pansexual	1
	Total	11

Job Level	Sexual Orientation	Count
Self Employed/ Freelancer	Bisexual	1
	Gay man	1
	Heterosexual or straight	17
	Queer	1
	Total	20
Senior level (senior manager, senior consultant)	Bisexual	5
	Gay man	2
	Gay woman / lesbian	3
	Heterosexual or straight	53
	Pansexual	2
	Prefer not to say	4
	Queer	2
	(blank)	1
Total	72	
Grand Total	423	

Job Level vs Gender

Job Level	Sexual Orientation	Count
Director/ Head of Department	Man	27
	Non-binary / third gender	1
	Woman	75
	Total	103
Entry-level/Early career (coordinator, assistant, trainee)	Man	2
	Woman	7
	Total	9
Executive/C-Suite (CEO, CTO, CFO)	Man	40
	Woman	49
	Total	89
Manager/Team Lead	Man	9
	Non-binary / third gender	2
	Woman	58
	Total	69
Mid-level/ Experienced professional (specialist, officer, advisor)	Man	7
	Non-binary / third gender	2
	Woman	41
	Total	50

Job Level	Sexual Orientation	Count
Other	Man	3
	Woman	8
	Total	11
Self Employed/ Freelancer	Man	7
	Non-binary / third gender	1
	Woman	12
	Total	20
Senior level (senior manager, senior consultant)	Man	15
	Prefer not to say	1
	Woman	56
	Total	72
	Grand Total	423

Job Level vs Ethnicity

Job Level	Sexual Orientation	Count	Job Level	Sexual Orientation	Count	Job Level	Sexual Orientation	Count
Director/ Head of Department	Black (e.g., African, Caribbean, Afro-European etc.)	8	Manager/Team Lead	Black (e.g., African, Caribbean, Afro-European etc.)	3	Self Employed/ Freelancer	Mixed / Multiple backgrounds	1
	East Asian (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Korean etc.)	1		East Asian (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Korean etc.)	1		Other (please specify)	1
	Middle Eastern / North African	1		Middle Eastern / North African	1		Roma or Traveller	2
	Middle Eastern / North African, Mixed / Multiple backgrounds	1		Mixed / Multiple backgrounds	4		South American (Brazilian, Columbian, Peruvian etc.)	1
	Mixed / Multiple backgrounds	7		Other (please specify)	2		White (e.g., British, Spanish, Russian, etc.)	15
	Other (please specify)	1		South American (Brazilian, Columbian, Peruvian etc.)	1	Senior level (senior manager, senior consultant)	Black (e.g., African, Caribbean, Afro-European etc.)	4
	South Asian (e.g., Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi etc.)	6		South Asian (e.g., Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi etc.)	5		Mixed / Multiple backgrounds	3
White (e.g., British, Spanish, Russian, etc.)	78	White (e.g., British, Spanish, Russian, etc.)	52	Other (please specify)	4			
Entry-level/ Early career (coordinator, assistant, trainee)	Black (e.g., African, Caribbean, Afro-European etc.)	1	Mid-level/ Experienced professional (specialist, officer, advisor)	Black (e.g., African, Caribbean, Afro-European etc.)	4		Prefer not to say	1
	South Asian (e.g., Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi etc.)	2		Middle Eastern / North African	1		South Asian (e.g., Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi etc.)	9
	White (e.g., British, Spanish, Russian, etc.)	6		Other (please specify)	1	White (e.g., British, Spanish, Russian, etc.)	51	
Executive/C-Suite (CEO, CTO, CFO)	Black (e.g., African, Caribbean, Afro-European etc.)	2		South American (Brazilian, Columbian, Peruvian etc.)	1			
	Middle Eastern / North African	3		South Asian (e.g., Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi etc.)	2			
	Mixed / Multiple backgrounds	4	White (e.g., British, Spanish, Russian, etc.)	41				
	Other (please specify)	1	Other	Black (e.g., African, Caribbean, Afro-European etc.)	1			
	South Asian (e.g., Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi etc.)	6		Middle Eastern / North African	1			
White (e.g., British, Spanish, Russian, etc.)	73	Mixed / Multiple backgrounds		1				
			White (e.g., British, Spanish, Russian, etc.)	8				



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