Consultation to Identify Research Priorities in UK Charities and Philanthropy:

Method and Findings

July 2019

Caroline Fiennes, Katherine Cowan

Contact:
Caroline Fiennes
Director, Giving Evidence
caroline.fiennes@giving-evidence.com
+44 7803 954512

Contents

1. *Summary*

There is increasing academic study of charities and philanthropy, both in the UK and elsewhere. And yet in our experience, it is rare to hear operational charities or funders / donors[1] cite, or even talk about, academic research. Hence we suspected that there may be a mismatch between the topics which get researched, and the topics most salient to charities and funders.

The intention of this project was to consult with UK charities and funders, to solicit the topics on which they would most like additional research. The goal is to stimulate research into these areas. Any research topic was in scope, except fundraising: we removed that because (i) it is the most heavily researched area in charities / philanthropy, and hence not overlooked by academics, and (ii) because it was likely to eclipse discussion of everything else. At the same time as studying 'demand' for research, we have studied 'supply' i.e., the existing academic literature about UK charities and philanthropy in a 'sister' project. We are publishing the two studies together: see www.giving-evidence.com/consultation

This consultation used a process based on an established method developed in health research, for eliciting from the people intended to benefit from research (patients, their carers, and their physicians) the topics that on which they would value more research. It was overseen by an Advisory Group from across UK charities and philanthropy. As such, this consultation seems to be unprecedented.

We found that operational charities and funders feel disconnected from academic research. We got the strong impression that charities and funders don't think about research in academic journals very much (if at all). Over half of survey respondents said that they use articles in academic journals 'never' or 'hardly ever'. When they do, they see academic research as something which happens 'over there', separate to them and not relevant to them. This is one of many similar quotes from our participants:

"*It [academic literature] is cleverly written and that language is putting me off right away" … "I read things and they're interesting, but not really relevant or useful"… "Research studies can be so disconnected and irrelevant. They study such tiny populations – whereas what I need is some guidance of what to do*."[i]

The list of top priority questions is mainly about evaluation / measuring impact. Those may of course be fundraising questions in disguise. Nonetheless, evaluation / impact is obviously an enormous concern, and largely perceived by charities as a burden with no value to them, and there seems a great deal which academic research could do to improve practice here, including to make existing research easier to find and use (notably research about the effectiveness of social interventions). The findings reinforce many observations elsewhere[ii] that impact measurement is not helping charities to improve, largely because they are asked for information or causal research which is inappropriate for their size and sophistication – and perhaps academics could be helpful in resolving that problem.

A note about using these findings. Our intention is that the findings be an *input* into academic research agendas, rather than dictating them. We did not expect that *every* important question would surface through this process. For example, we are perfectly aware that people benefit hugely from research and discoveries that they didn't know they needed nor ask for. We do not aim to discourage 'blue sky' research, but do think

[1] For concision, we use the terms 'funder' and 'donor' interchangeably unless specified. We use them to mean people who give money or other support, e.g., individual donors, institutional foundations (endowed or fundraising or community foundations), public sector funders (e.g., local authorities, central government), lottery funders etc.
We use 'charity' to mean operational charity (we are well aware that most foundations are registered as charities).

that the concerns of charities and funders - who are among the groups intended to benefit from research – should be included in future research agendas.

Some questions on this list may be relevant to academics, not for the actual question but for why it is there. For instance, the question "*how effective are the approaches used by funders to monitor and evaluate charities?*" may well arise from frustration at the current situation in which those approaches are not perceived by charities as useful. Yet they could be if they were better directed, and academics maybe able help with that.

We encourage academic researchers to study the list of questions which emerged as top priorities in this process (Table 1 below), and either to conduct research to answer them, or to engage with charities to work to alleviate the problems they signal.

Table 1: The questions that emerged as top priorities

Rank	Question
1	What are the best ways for charities to evaluate long-term outcomes?
Joint 2	How can the less tangible impacts of charities be measured for work where outcomes are hard to quantify?
Joint 2	How can evaluation enable charities to improve what they do, rather than prove they are making a difference?
4	How can qualitative data (e.g., personal stories, case studies) be used to demonstrate impact?
Joint 5	How do grant-makers currently assess their effectiveness? What ways of giving can improve grant effectiveness?
Joint 5	How can impact be captured in a way that is meaningful to intended beneficiaries and other stakeholders?
7	How can impact be measured in a standard way for all charities?
Joint 8	What are the most effective models for charities to generate non-grant revenue to become financially self-sustaining?
Joint 8	What is the value of the charity sector in comparison to the business sector? What are its strengths and unique contributions?
Joint 10	How can charities better communicate the impact of their work to donors, beneficiaries and staff?
Joint 10	What makes for good leadership in the charity sector and does this differ from good leadership in other sectors? How does this vary across different sized organisations?

Rank	Question
Joint 12	How well are charities working with their intended beneficiaries to influence the charity's work?
Joint 12	How can capacity to conduct research be increased in the charity sector to improve their understanding of need and to support robust evaluation of their work?
Joint 14	Does the traditional model of governance in charities still work? What new approaches might deliver greater benefits for intended beneficiaries?
Joint 14	How can charities working on the same issue collaborate to demonstrate the benefit of their combined work?
Joint 14	How do charities undertake research, monitoring and evaluation? (i.e., the actual practice and detail)
Joint 17	How effective are the approaches used by funders to monitor and evaluate charities?
Joint 17	How can charities improve their communication of how their money has been spent?
Joint 17	What aids and hinders collaborations between charities and business?
Joint 17	Which interventions are most effective (or least effective) and why, within a charity sector (i.e., for a specific problem, or specific context)?
Joint 21	What are the barriers and enablers to ensure diversity amongst trustees?
Joint 21	What impact has austerity had on the charity sector?
Joint 23	How can the management of small charities be improved e.g., through outsourcing or sharing back-office functions?
Joint 23	How can evidence about effectiveness guide donors to support the most effective work?

2. Introduction: Purpose and background to the consultation

Though both charities and philanthropy are long-established, until fairly recently there was little academic study of charities and philanthropy. The last 10-15 years or so have seen an increasing amount of it. Indeed, Charity Futures, a think-tank set up to promote thinking about the sustainability and future direction of charities, has launched a new Institute of Charity at the University of Oxford. The Institute aims to provide practical but academically rigorous research that supports a more sustainable future for charities, and hence Charity Futures funded and was heavily involved in this project, in order to guide the initial thinking of the Institute about its research programme.

We made two observations. First, that UK charities and donors / funders relatively infrequently make reference to academic studies. And second, that in the field of medical research, there often is a known and well-documented mismatch between the topics which get researched and the topics which patients, their carers and their primary physicians (i.e., the people whom that research is presumably intended to help) would like researched. An early example of a mismatch was that between available research evidence and the research preferences of consumers about treating osteoarthritis of the knee joint[iii]. Consequently, the James Lind Alliance (JLA) was set up to run structured consultations with patients, their carers and healthcare professionals, on a condition-by-condition basis, to elicit the topics that they would like researched and to prioritise them. The JLA has now run these 'priority setting partnerships' on over 100 conditions and areas of healthcare internationally (such as dementia, Parkinson's, sight loss) and the prioritised lists of research topics which emerge do influence research practice[iv].

We hypothesised that a reason that charities and funders so infrequently refer to academic studies may be because those studies do not cover topics which matter to them.

We therefore felt that there is an opportunity to ensure that academic research into charities and philanthropy focuses more on the issues which are of greatest interest to charities, funders, and donors.

This project set out to elicit from charities, funders, and donors the topics on which they wanted more research / evidence / data / insight, and to have charities, funders, and donors prioritise them. The ultimate goal is to improve the effectiveness of work by charities and donors / funders by creating an evidence-base on the topics which are useful to them. For that, we need to identify the priority topics, and then stimulate production of research into them. The proximate goal of the project was to produce a short list of (10-20) prioritised research topics, to inform future research agendas.

We used an adapted version of the JLA process, employing many of the process steps, and also by involving in the project Katherine Cowan, an experienced independent facilitator who has facilitated over 50 JLA priority setting partnerships and co-authored The James Lind Alliance Guidebook[v] with Professor Sandy Oliver. To our knowledge, this is the first time that the JLA's process for consulting with intended users of research has been used outside of medicine / healthcare (other than variants being used a couple of times in research about veterinary medicine). The JLA itself was not involved in this project.

This document sets out the project stages; then talks through the method used at each stage; then the results at each stage; and finally our conclusions.

3. Scope

The aim of this consultation was to identify the unanswered questions about charities and philanthropy which are considered most important by charities, funders and donors. We aimed to find *researchable* questions. So for example, a question such as 'what is the best charity in Scotland' was out of scope – even though the answer might be useful to some donors - because it cannot be answered through research because it involves so many value judgments. However, a question such as 'which children's hospice in Scotland is the cheapest per capita' would have been in scope.

We were interested in questions about charities' management, governance, effectiveness, etc., not just as recipients of donors' support. In fact, our scope excluded all questions related to fundraising and donor management, since (a) we believe that topic to be reasonably well-researched already (relative to other topics in this sector) and (b) raising funds is so dominant in charities' minds that including it would likely obscure discussion of everything else.

We debated whether to create multiple lists from this project – such as lists prioritised by charities, by funders, etc. We decided against this because the goal is to influence research agendas, and multiple lists may be confusing and reduce the amount of action which arises from the project.

Organisations in scope

We were open to hearing from - and invited input from - the following:

- Statutory entity which funds non-profits (e.g., local authority, central government)
- Institutional foundation (either grant-making or 'operating foundation', i.e., foundations which run their own programmes)
- Individual donor
- Operational non-profit. We took a broad definition here, to include; charities (registered, non-registered and exempt), voluntary and community organisations, community-interest companies, churches and faith-based organisations, funders, foundations, individual donors and social enterprises.
- Advisor or advocate of philanthropy
- Corporate foundation

We did not actively seek input from the following types of participant, other than where those individuals were also in one of the categories above:

- academics, since they have other ways to influence the research agenda
- beneficiaries of charities / non-profits: simply to avoid the process becoming unmanageable
- policy-makers
- impact investors
- think-tanks

Areas of admissible questions included, but were not limited to the following:

Charity	Philanthropy
• Effective mechanisms of management • Management tools, e.g., CRM, finance systems • Methods of recording / measuring outcomes • Pitching for and managing contracts • Roles and values of membership organisations • Handling multiple reporting requirements • Effective mechanisms for safeguarding • HR: recruitment, training, retention • Role and value of celebrity patrons • Ways of hearing and heeding 'beneficiaries' and front-line staff • Ways of assessing and managing risk	• Assessing programme costs and effectiveness • Assessing organisational costs and effectiveness • How to find other donors with shared interests • Reducing costs for grantees and applicants • How to make giving decisions • Methods of collaborating • Ways of supporting charities to improve outcomes • What reporting to ask for (if any)

4. *Method*

Team and funding

The project was managed by Giving Evidence (background on the team is in Appendix 1). It had considerable advisory input from Katherine Cowan, who facilitated the focus groups and workshop and chaired the Advisory Group. Charity Futures was involved in many of the operational decisions.

The consultation was funded by Charity Futures.

Throughout the project, we talked about it on social media and at various events, e.g., Charity Futures' conference which took place on 7th November 2018, and also VSSN-NCVO's annual Voluntary Sector and Volunteering research conference, in London on the 6th and 7th September 2018.

Advisory Group

The consultation was informed by an Advisory Group comprising individuals who were:

- Representative/s of operational charities and non-profits
- Representative/s of private donors, and networks of them
- Representative/s of institutional donors, e.g., foundations, local / central government, and networks of them
- Representative/s of researchers and research institutions*

* Researchers were represented. They were not able to participate in the prioritisation exercise because they already have other mechanisms to influence the research agenda; and this process is to ensure that the final prioritised research questions are those agreed by operational charities, non-profits, funders and donors.

One member of the Advisory Group had been involved in a James Lind Alliance priority setting process before, on sight loss.

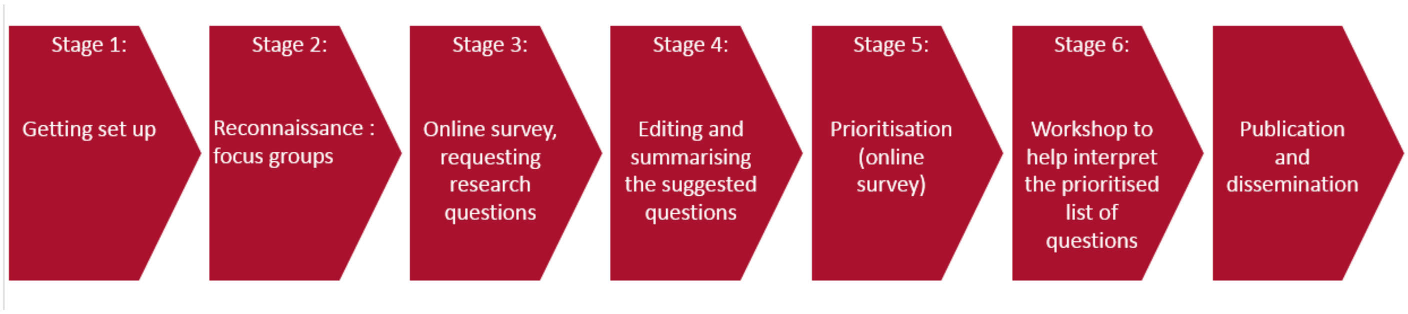
The role of the Advisory Group was to act as a critical friend to the process, to advise on the practical application of the methodology within the charity / philanthropy sector and to support the dissemination of the consultation materials.

All members of the Advisory Group were asked to declare conflicts of interest. We did not find any instances of unacceptable bias or conflicts, and hence did not need to exclude any members on that basis.

The Advisory Group met four times during the project. All its meetings were physical: there were no teleconference meetings of the Advisory Group.

The members are listed in Appendix 2. Various other people were invited to join the Advisory Group but declined: various reasons were cited, mainly volume of work.

Diagram 1: Process overview:



Stage 1: Getting set up

Once the Advisory Group was set up, we finalised and published the protocol for the consultation – which was later amended – and publicised the process through the sector press, our networks and various forms of social media. We agreed the plan for the project, including where we planned to host our focus groups, and set out a detailed timeline.

Step 2: Focus groups

The James Lind Alliance process does not normally include focus groups. We felt that we should run some early in this process as reconnaissance – to see what questions might come up, what unexpected difficulties there might be, and how this consultation process might be seen and understood. The intention was to use this intelligence to inform the subsequent survey and communications about the project.

We held five focus groups in four cities around the UK (two in London, and then one in each of Bradford, Edinburgh and Manchester). We deliberately held a focus group in Bradford to increase the diversity of voices and views included. We also tried to organise a focus group in Cardiff, Wales, but only one person registered an interest in attending the meeting, so it wasn't feasible to pursue a focus group there.

The focus groups aimed to solicit the kinds of questions which charities, private donors and institutional funders struggle with and would like answered. The focus groups were facilitated by Katherine Cowan, were recorded and notes were taken from each. Each was 60-90 minutes in duration. As far as possible, the focus group structure was the same in each city, so as to ensure consistency of responses.

We invited charities, private donors and institutional funders through networks in / near those cities, e.g., the membership bodies of charities and support bodies for them (e.g., NCVO, ACEVO, Councils for Voluntary

Service), the membership bodies of foundations (e.g., the Association of Charitable Foundations), networks of private donors (e.g., The Funding Network, The Philanthropy Workshop, community foundations).

We had a mix of charities and donors in each group. (The participants are described in Appendix 3.)

All focus group conversations were recorded (with participants' permission) for purposes of taking notes and recording the research questions raised.

As discussed further in the Results section below, we found that few participants understood what we meant by 'research topic or research question', or what we meant by 'research or evidence'. We often needed to give examples. This influenced our wording for the surveys which followed.

Step 3: Online request for research questions ('first survey')

We ran an online survey, inviting people to cite "research / evidence / data / insight" which they felt would help them in their work. The briefing explained the kinds of questions that we were interested in, and that we were not looking for questions about fundraising.

The survey simply asked the following questions, plus some demographic questions about the respondent and their organisation (such as age, geographical location, type of organisation).

1. How often do you use the following types of research? (academic research, research by government, impact reports by charities / non-profits about their own work, etc.)
2. If you hardly ever or never use academic research, why is this?
3. What questions about charities and / or giving would you like research to answer? This could be to support the decisions you make or help overcome any challenges you face. (We gave some examples, such as 'What is the best way to inform donors of the real difference a charity or a programme / project has made?')
4. What additional data, evidence or information would help you in your work and why?

We demonstrated our interest in a wide range of topics by stating in the survey that responses were welcome on any topic outside fundraising, and then listing the following examples:

- Governance and management of charities and/or of funders
- Recording, measuring and reporting
- Consulting with staff and the people they reach
- Costs and effectiveness
- Managing grantees and/or applicants
- Decisions about who to give to, how much, and how to give
- Ways of collaborating
- Communicating more effectively
- Approaches to managing risk or uncertainty
- Campaigning and influencing
- Having greater impact
- Sustainability
- Volunteers and peers
- Financial planning and management / future proofing
- Scoping and exploring opportunities in new areas of research

The survey was on Survey Monkey, and open from 9th July - 31st October 2018. It was promoted through email distribution lists, social media (notably Twitter, and LinkedIn), and relevant membership bodies including those represented on the Advisory Group. People were directed to a webpage, which explained the project's purposes and invited them to respond.

Step 4: Editing and summarising the submitted questions

The focus groups produced 66 questions and the survey produced a further 149 questions which charities and donors said that they would like researched.

With support from a data manager who has worked extensively with JLA, Kristina Staley, we removed items from this list which were:

- too broad / off-topic / too hard to understand / not questions (e.g., 'Asian based data', 'volunteers', 'governance')
- relating to causes, not charity / donor related research, or
- about fundraising

We removed duplicates in this list, and combined questions which were very similar. (This has the disadvantage of losing a little granularity, but the major advantage that it avoided the second survey being so long as to deter respondents.) As far as possible, we retained the original wording, though we needed to make a few alterations for clarity, brevity, or because the submission was a statement rather than a question. The project team had oversight of this work and the Advisory Group was consulted on the interpretation and analysis of the data. This produced a list of 49 questions, which went into the second survey (see below).

Table 2: Examples of unique submissions re-worded for clarity or brevity

Original question as submitted in the survey	Re-worded version (used in the second survey)

Research into how effective current charity monitoring and evaluation techniques are	How effective are the approaches used by funders to monitor and evaluate charities?
Governance needs a total reboot, looking at models that allow prudent risk taking, duties around managed shutdowns, the REAL risks and responsibilities of being a company director as well as a trustee....too much governance research and '' best practice'' is based on old models for an old world. Looking at co-op models as a framework to disrupt old fashioned company membership models that are never really about members, just about trustees.	Does the traditional model of governance in charities still work? What new approaches might deliver greater benefits for intended beneficiaries?
research investigating the decline in levels of volunteering as measured by the ONS, e.g., barriers to volunteering, why people stop volunteering, impact of growing care burdens on volunteering	What are the current barriers to volunteering?
Collaboration Private and Third Sector - Shared goals - CSR (+ Why Public sector talk the talk but often only pay lip service to collaboration)	What aids and hinders collaborations between charities and business?

Table 3: Examples of similar submissions which we combined into summary questions for the second survey

Submissions	Summary question
I'd like to see some real documentation and research on where co-production, user voice and community participation has enabled genuine and sustained outcomes	How well are charities working with their intended beneficiaries to influence the charity's work?
How can charities work with their beneficiaries to prioritise amongst needs?	
What are the best ways to consult with beneficiaries? What are people's experiences of being consulted?	
How much do the needs of beneficiaries influence the work of the charity sector?	
How well is co-production in service development working across the charitable sector?	
How well are charities working with their beneficiaries to influence their own work?	

Research about the best way to inform and communicate to donors the real difference a charity or a programme / project has made or intends to make. "Best" in the sense of easy to understand, clear, meaningful, giving the reader information that the reader would not have known.	How can charities better communicate of the impact of their work to donors, beneficiaries and staff?
I'd like charities to provide lots more contexts and perspectives in their reports and blurbs - not just "we have done xyz"; I need to know how xyz fits into the big picture. e.g., it's nice to know three cats are saved, but how many cats need to be saved, could be saved but not saved and why, etc.	
What are the most effective ways to communicate with staff, stakeholders and beneficiaries about what the charity does e.g., using new technology?	
How grant-makers analyse their overall effectiveness	How do grant-makers currently assess their effectiveness? What ways of giving can improve grant effectiveness?
Impact of small -v- large grants	
What is the impact of short-term funding on organisations and being able to sustain project outcomes?	
The benefits of core funding.	
Sustainable organisations undertaking multiple projects developing skills for use in repeating success formulas v short-term projects.	
How could funding practice be adapted to ensure sustainability (e.g., not always looking to fund new projects, longer term funding etc.)?	
What value does unrestricted funding provide (in terms of innovation, sustainability, adaptation to change) above restricted funding?	

Determining whether questions are unanswered

Our original intention was to screen the questions raised in the focus groups and first survey for whether they are still unanswered. The James Lind Alliance has a process for this, which checks them against the existing medical research literature. In medical research, questions can be deemed to be answered if there are robust systematic reviews of multiple sound studies into them. Such systematic reviews are held in well-indexed repositories and hence are relatively straightforward to find.

This is not the case for questions unearthed by this consultation about charities and philanthropy, since few systematic reviews (or sound underlying studies) exist, and the information architecture is so poor that finding existing material is hard. In charities and philanthropy, some questions are partially answered by existing research; few are answered comprehensively. To remove questions on the grounds of being unanswered, we would need to set a hurdle for “answeredness”, and we felt that we could not do so defensibly; the alternative is to arbitrarily remove some questions which is also not defensible. Hence, we did not remove any question on the basis of it being already answered.

Consequently, we decided not to screen for 'unansweredness'. Rather, we took into the prioritisation process all the questions from the focus groups and first survey.

This full list of 49 questions was published by Giving Evidence on its website (and is in Table 1 here).

Step 5: Prioritisation via online survey ('second survey')

We then ran a second online survey, which presented the 49 questions (with their sequence randomised. They are listed in Appendix 8.) It invited any charity or donor / funder to review the list, select the ones of most interest, and finally select the 10 which they would most like prioritised for research. This survey ran in Survey Monkey, was live from 28th October 2018 to 13th January 2019, and was promoted through social media, newsletters run by Charity Futures, Giving Evidence and others, events such as the Association of Charitable Foundation's conference and Charity Futures' conference. It received 123 responses, of which 92 were complete, with respondents submitting their shortlist of up to top 10 priority questions. From this, we shortlisted 24 questions for further discussion and prioritisation: 24 being a manageable number for discussion as well as a logical cut-off point for our list, where large numbers of questions beyond 24 were ranked in joint place.

Step 6: Final workshop

Finally, we ran a workshop to which charities and donors / funders were invited. The original intention was to use that session to bring our key stakeholders together to discuss the shortlist of 24 questions and agree the top 10 priorities for research, using the JLA workshop method. In the event, we had a smaller number of people interested in attending than envisaged, so we ran a workshop to broadly explore, but not further prioritise, the 24 priority questions raised, and to get views from the group about why those might have been suggested, and to explore opinions on the broader lack of interest in engaging. We also used the opportunity to consult the group on what the Oxford institute and other researchers focused on charities and philanthropy could most usefully do.

The workshop was held in Manchester in April 2019, and was attended by nine delegates including seven operational charities and two funders. All participants declared their interests and were given the shortlist of 24 questions to review a week beforehand. The discussion was facilitated by Katherine Cowan and was recorded. The discussion guide is in Appendix 9 .

Step 7: Dissemination of findings

We are hereby publishing the results. Charity Futures and Giving Evidence may also publish the results in other formats.

We will proactively distribute them to the charitable sector, funders and researchers. We envisage that organisations involved in this process, and others including academic and non-academic researchers, will use the prioritised list to inform their choice of research questions in future, and reference the prioritised list when approaching funders and when allocating funding for research themselves.

We will publicise the findings through various channels, including:

- Social media
- Email distribution lists
- Sector press, where possible.

5. Results – overall

Disinterest in and disconnection from academic research

Perhaps the most striking finding was how disconnected some operational charities and funders feel from academic research. Another interpretation is that they are simply unaware of it.

Just over half our survey respondents said that they use academic journal articles 'never' or 'hardly ever'. And that is probably an *under*-statement: our survey was about academic research and so quite probably people who are uninterested in this topic didn't respond at all.[2]

We got the strong impression that many charities and funders don't think about academic research very much (if at all), and when they do, they see academic research as something which happens 'over there', separate to them and not relevant to them. This appeared to manifest itself in two ways. First, we had difficulty getting charities and funders to participate in the process (in the focus groups, surveys and final workshop: though actually recruiting and retaining people in the Advisory Group was straightforward), and hence had few participants at each stage. And second, by many, many quotes throughout the process. Here is a sample of quotes from the survey about academia / academic research:

"It rarely impacts on our work. Bits can be interesting but finding those bits is not easy and often not worth the effort once discovered."

"It's not clear enough - it tends to be produced for a hypothesis rather than as a useful tool for the VCS"

"Often hard to find the info that is directly relevant to the work I am doing, because buried in big document, technical terminology, national data or too theoretical."

"No link to reality, they have never fundraised before and it shows."

The topics raised

Impact measurement

The list of top 24 questions is dominated by questions about evaluation / measuring impact, how to measure impact, how to use impact measurement data to improve effectiveness, and to communicate better with external audiences, notably funders. That topic accounts for all of the top seven questions; eight of the top 10 questions; and 14 of the top 24. (Workshop participant: "*Impact is obviously worrying people tremendously. There's huge pressure… It's been overblown and people are worried*.")

---

[2] Interestingly, though half use academic research *in journals* 'never' or 'hardly ever', over 75% report using 'research by academics published elsewhere 'sometimes' or 'often'. Survey responses must be treated with caution because sometimes respondents don't understand the topic or questions. But assuming that these results are valid, this is interesting for two reasons. First, the 'supply' study found that most (64%) of the research output of the UK academic centres specialising in charities and philanthropy is published outside academic journals – so, simply on a volume basis, one would expect material outside journals to be used more. That study also found that the academic journal literature is coded badly so very hard to navigate – so it is hardly surprising if practitioners don't find and use what they need. And second, it speaks to the issue about academic journals not being designed or suitable for non-academics (by virtue of often being pay-walled, and written in academic language unfamiliar to the layperson. In other words, academic journal articles are written for academics: they're not designed to be used by others.)

Although fundraising was out of scope for this project, it is clear that 'demonstrating' impact is central to the considerable pressure that charities feel when asking for funding. In other words, these questions about evaluation / measuring impact may be fundraising questions in disguise. This list may reflect the vulnerability and fragility that many charities feel.

One question on the list is perhaps the giveaway. In joint 17th place is this:

> "*How effective are the approaches used by funders to monitor and evaluate charities?*"

This question may be on the list because of curiosity – or perhaps exasperation – at the workload of funder-instigated monitoring and evaluation, and wondering whether it all achieves anything.

Two questions in the top 24 are linked, and give a clue as to some work that academics could usefully do:

- *How can capacity to conduct research be increased in the charity sector to improve their understanding of need and to support robust evaluation of their work?* (joint 12th)
- *Which interventions are most effective (or least effective) and why, within a charity sector (i.e., for a specific problem, or specific context)?* (joint 17th)

The first question assumes that charities should be producing '*robust evaluation of their work'.* We would dispute this, for reasons given elsewhere[vi]: it would be better if most charities were USERS of research rather than trying to be PRODUCERS of research. The second question is about using research – how to *use* the existing research – in social sciences and elsewhere – to identify effective interventions. There is often existing research that pertains to the effectiveness of interventions that charities might run, but little culture or norm about using it. If charities knew how to answer the second question – how to find, apply and *use* relevant existing research – they would not need to *produce* more and would not need more 'capacity' to do so. Academics can certainly help charities (and funders) to find and *use* what already exists.

This is an example of a question pointing to work that academics can usefully do, even if it is not answering the stated question. That phenomenon is discussed later in this report.

That latter question – '*Which interventions are most effective'* – seems central to a charity's effectiveness. One workshop participant commented on the issue of who gets to determine whether something has worked. Some disciplines use 'goal attainment scaling', first introduced in the 1960s in a mental health setting. It is "a method of scoring the extent to which patient's individual goals are achieved in the course of intervention. In effect, each patient has their own outcome measure, but this is scored in a standardised way as to allow statistical analysis." There is "emerging evidence that goals are more likely to be achieved if patients are involved in setting them. Moreover, there is also evidence that GAS has positive therapeutic value in encouraging the patients to reach their goals".[vii] A workshop participant described this as a barrier to using academic research: "The researcher may look at reducing blood pressure, but what the patient wants is to be able to walk the dog again." This is not insurmountable, and can sometimes simply be a communication issue.

Related to identifying interventions' effectiveness is the issue of making sure that research is findable. From the workshop: "we talk about doing a pilot, but somebody might have done that already". There is a problem both with charities being able to find each other's research (because there is no repository for it, nor indexing system which makes it discoverable through search), and with charities being able to find relevant academic research (because of paywalls and it using language which they don't know). This issue of 'information architecture' came up at our workshop, and is one that academics could address. {Our sister study of the existing academic research into charities and philanthropy found that it does not use keywords in a consistent way. This impedes even academics from finding the relevant academic literature. Some other disciplines have solved this by having a more defined way of using keywords for indexing[3].}

Effectiveness

One question asked about "the value of the charity sector in comparison to the business sector". The workshop group interpreted this as being about the value**S** of the charity sector, i.e., what is unique about its approach and what difference does that make. For instance, we have privately heard claims that voluntary organisations can work more effectively with families whose children may be taken into care, or with prisoners, precisely because they are outside the statutory system and hence not regarded as a threat by the people they are intended to support. Those values could also be proximity to the beneficiary, responsiveness.

Beneficiaries

Beneficiaries arise in three questions: about capturing impact in way that is 'meaningful' for them; documenting how charities work with them to influence what the charity does; and whether 'new approaches' in governance might be beneficial for them. One might have expected other questions here, e.g., around how best to engage beneficiaries, how to reach groups which the charity is not currently reaching, how to manage the tension/s between what beneficiaries need and what funders will fund[4].

Funding practices

Interestingly, a couple of questions on the final list relate not to effectiveness of charities but to the effectiveness of funders:

> "*How do grant-makers currently assess their effectiveness? What ways of giving can improve grant effectiveness?*" (this question emerged in joint 5th place)

The effectiveness of funder practice has yet to really be scrutinised. So it is interesting that it emerged so high up this list. One of us (Caroline Fiennes) recently published an article in the scientific journal *Nature*[viii] calling for more research to guide donors in terms of which practices are most effective in which circumstances, i.e., answering precisely the second part of this first question. It is conceivable (and was suggested) that perhaps some funders do have such analysis but just don't publish it: indeed, we know of

---

[3] Collating key research in a new field of study can include developing a specialised bibliometric database (such as for UK-focused health and social care studies) to hold content which is not indexed in larger commercial databases (Cooper et al. 2015), adding an essential term to an existing thesaurus as was done with MEDLINE to better identify randomised controlled trials (LeFebvre 1994), professional indexing of studies in bibliographic databases as seen with the Australian Education Index (Hider 2017), and semi-automatic classifying of studies, as reported for animal health and welfare studies (Gautret et al. 2017). Given the inconsistency of keywords currently applied to academic studies, identification of academic studies to populate a database could be accelerated through using Microsoft Academic, although this would miss grey literature.

[4] Interestingly, when the charity GiveDirectly lists its values, the first one is 'recipients first', e.g., here: https://givedirectly.recruiterbox.com/jobs/fk0jlnl/

one such unpublished analysis. Charities realised that perhaps funders (self-)censor research which doesn't flatter them: one workshop participant talked of having done an assessment of a funder at that funder's behest, "*if it's not wholly glowing, they don't publish it. The list of 20 recommendations gets knocked down to just ten*."

It is perhaps surprising that there weren't further, more specific questions about this topic, e.g., around the costs created by restrictions on funding. One workshop participant summed it up:

> "*We have multiple funding streams… A lot of time and effort is spent reporting (on them all). That is all time that can't come back to spend with people*".

One workshop participant commented on the role of fear in this list. Demonstrating impact is about raising money which they saw as driven by a "desperation to survive" (and retain their jobs), as are collaborations.

Using this list

As mentioned, some of the questions raised are not research questions as such which researchers would address, but rather they indicate topics where researchers might look to understand why that issue arises – or why it still arises. For instance, the top question:

> *"What are the best ways for charities to evaluate long-term outcomes?"*

Let's for now leave aside the question of who does that evaluation (the question assumes that the evaluation is done by the charity itself, but we could avoid the concerns about that by re-framing this question as "What are the best ways to evaluate charities' long-term outcomes?"). This question is about social science research methods, and suitable methods are known. Either you do a trial long enough to observe the eventual outcomes[5]. Or you identify intermediate 'marker outcomes', the presence of which predicts the final outcome. On the latter, academic research can be very helpful - and is really the sole way to identify reliable intermediate outcomes for particular desired final outcomes – though great care is needed because sometimes sensible-sounding intermediate outcomes in fact *contra-indicate* the desired final outcomes.[6] [ix]

Other questions speak to frustrations in the sector - which certainly need to be resolved, but which are not research questions as such. For instance:

> "*How can evaluation enable charities to improve what they do, rather than prove [that] they are making a difference?*"

This question seems to be born of frustration that charities are required to spend considerable time on evaluation but only use it to 'prove' a point to external audiences rather than (also) using it internally to improve. Actually, this question may indicate a suspicion of a widespread problem that much 'evaluation / impact measurement' work is devised and required by funders, really as a compliance / accountability exercise, and is not designed to be useful to the operational charity. It is quite possible (and is Giving

---

[5] For example, this medical study followed participants for 20 years: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/29451393, and did this study about partner violence: https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2003-06685-014

[6] There was an instance of this with hormone-replacement therapy. It was thought to reduce risk of heart attack. When analysed against intermediate markers, that looked to be case – but when analysed eventually against actual heart attacks, it was found to increase the risk dramatically.

Evidence's stated view) that most operational charities should not be producing evaluation / impact measurement at all: they do not have the skills, funds, incentives or even sample size[7] to do so well. Academics can perhaps influence this practice.

> *"How can impact be measured in a standard way for all charities?"*

The answer is that this is almost certainly impossible. Though medicine has done an amazing job of creating metrics to compare diverse medical interventions (using Quality-Adjusted Life-Years or Disability-Adjusted Life-Years), it seems most unlikely that anybody would create units which pertain across *all charities* – homelessness, tiger conservation, heritage preservation, etc. This question probably comes from the real fact that funders do need to decide between dissimilar work – and hence charities do get compared with others whose work is very different to theirs – and perhaps some rigorous guidance would be useful. This is sometimes called 'cause selection': all new donors do it, as do some established donors when reviewing their work. Again, perhaps academic research might be able to help[8].

Some of the questions are relatively straightforward to answer, such as:

> *"How do charities undertake research, monitoring and evaluation?"*

Some answers to this are known, e.g., a 2013 study[x] by Dr Jenny Harlock about 'how the UK third sector is measuring its performance and impact', and a survey / observational study would not be technically complicated.

Other questions are much more complicated, such as:

> *"What makes for good leadership in the charity sector?"*

Answering this would require defining a clear outcome (dependent variable), i.e., definition of what success looks like for the charity or charities in the study, and that is not trivial.

Of course, the charity sector is extremely varied – from tiny organisations with no paid staff, to foundations with an endowment of £25 billion[xi]. Some people wondered whether this heterogeneity prevents meaningful study of 'charities'. We suspect that it doesn't: business schools and economists study businesses, which vary much more in scope and scale.

Topics which were not raised

There are some remarkable omissions from the final 24 questions, in terms of topics which seem important to how charities and funders operate. Most noticeable is the small number of questions about running the charity / internal issues: most of the list is about communicating with outsiders, notably funders.

---

[7] For example, of the 199 assessments conducted by the UK Ministry of Justice Data Lab up until the end of 2019 (the most recent data available at the time of writing), 134 produced results that were statistically insignificant because the sample provided was too small to reliably see the programme's effect.

[8] The Effective Altruism community recommends prioritising causes based on how important, neglected, and tractable they are. An example discussion is at: https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/74oJS32C6CZRC4Zp5/the-important-neglected-tractable-framework-needs-to-be

That list contains no questions about any of the following issues – which are clearly important and mainly relate to internal management. (Some of these topics were raised during the process e.g., in focus groups or the first survey, but did not make it to the final list after the second survey.)

- HR management: recruitment, structuring compensation, retention, managing performance. Neither relating to staff, volunteers or trustees.
- Finance: nothing related to (for example) whether and when to take on debt or how to manage it, about managing allocation of risk in contracts, nothing about social impact bonds, calculating the full cost of work, negotiating contracts, whether / when to walk away from contracts (e.g., if the funding is inadequate for the work requested). This omission is particularly remarkable given how many charities are involved in commissioning processes, which involve determining prices for services and negotiating contracts.
- Ethics of research, e.g., around human subjects (academia has very well-established rules and procedures for doing research 'on people', such as Ethics Review Boards); about 'extracting' data from beneficiaries without providing anything useful back to them; or about the best ways of having (intended) beneficiaries determine the outcomes which matter to them and which should be researched. This is surprising in view of requirements of the new GDPR.
- Governance only occupied two questions of the 24 ("does the traditional model of governance in charities still work? What new approaches might deliver greater benefits for intended beneficiaries" and "what are the barriers and enablers to ensure diversity amongst trustees?") One might have expected more questions, and of more detail, e.g., which models work best in which circumstances, how allocation of roles between staff and trustees (and other volunteers) affects decisions and performance, whether and when diversity affects decisions and performance, whether and when having donors on the board affects decisions and performance.
- Understanding the location, nature and cause of need.
- Environmental issues.
- Influencing policy.

There was nothing about whether / when to collaborate. Collaboration is on the list of 24 questions only (i) about what aids and hinders it (which is a good question, but not about whether to do it) and (ii) about collaborating to demonstrate impact.

Of course, there are questions which may be important to answer which were not raised by this process – and which one could not expect to be raised by a consultative process. By analogy, (probably) nobody asked for randomised controlled trials to be invented as a way to avoid selection bias, and yet they have been enormously useful in many fields. Nobody asked physicists to explore the structure of the atom, and yet our lives would be vastly poorer if we didn't know about electrons. Cancer patients are treated with treatments created at CERN[xii], as an entirely unexpected side-product of subatomic research. Farmers in Western Kenya did not ask for the creation of behavioural economics, and yet it has helped them increase their crop yields at no additional cost[xiii].

As well as areas where research would be useful even if nobody asks for it, the Advisory Group raised the issue of 'sleeping dragons', i.e., topics on which more research and insight is *necessary* even if nobody asks for it: issues where having insufficient understanding could turn out to be dangerous. Safeguarding may be one such.

We did not expect that *every* important question would surface through this process. Hence the findings should be an *input* into academic research agendas, rather than dictating them. This is about bringing in additional voices to the discussion about research agendas, not overriding or replacing existing voices.

The focus groups, whose purpose was mainly reconnaissance, raised some unexpected points. Those included:

- questions where the answer is already known, but just not known to the people speaking. That implies that Charity Futures / somebody could usefully broaden awareness of those answers, i.e., dissemination or training.
- issues where the answer isn't to produce research but rather to DO something, e.g., enable access to some government-held (anonymised) datasets, e.g., around prisoners, health data.
- also some questions emerged which are rather broad, e.g., how to improve relationships between chairs and boards. Much material already exists about that in other sectors, even if not specific to the charity world.

6. *Results – by project stage*

We now go into more detail on the results of the focus group and surveys:

Findings from the focus groups

A key finding from the focus groups was that participants didn't really understand when we asked 'what research' they would like. This seemed to be because 'research' isn't something that respondents think about much at all, and hence don't have very clear opinions about. Rather, we needed to talk about 'research / evidence / data / insight'. This fed directly into the wording of the survey. (This reconnaissance was precisely the purpose of the focus groups.)

Below is a summary of research topics suggested in the focus groups. The quotes are direct quotes from the discussion.

a. Governance and management

- Small charities: on how to improve governance, the best method to track impact, and how to encourage / enable capacity building:

"Smaller charities are phenomenal at delivering social impact. What they are not so good at is the governance, the setting up, the managing, the processes, the evaluation - but the delivery is phenomenal. How do we get rid of processes and procedures that are not needed? How do we streamline charities? How do we get charities to be impact driven?"

- Financial sustainability: Issues include funding, small organisations competing with larger ones;
- Diversity: How to increase the contribution of ethnic minorities in charity key roles, e.g., trustees and board members:

"We need to hear their voices [ethnic minorities in Bradford] - because they are a marginalised community. That, for me, is a research priority around accessibility."

- Comparative evaluation: How to undertake effective comparative evaluation. [This is interesting, because for many circumstances, we do know technically 'how to do these'. The issue is probably rather getting interest, funding and involvement in them];
- Priorities for work: How to identify the biggest priority/ies for research and intervention within a particular sector:

[Funder]: *"What is the thing that adds the greatest value to the evidence base [in particular sectors]? I would like an output from some of this work [this research] to help give me some direction about some of the specific things that I can add value to. That would make me feel a lot happier about my job, and I think it would be valuable to others."*

- What different models of management are there in charities? Evidence about the different ways to run an organisation;
- How to prove the effectiveness of a charity's intervention, as well as all of its governance and processes:

"To understand not just 'is the thing you're [a charity] doing good', but also how you're operating a grant, because those things in the criteria that commissioners look at are just as important."

- Reporting: How to improve reporting from charities to funders. Understanding why so few charities report back to funders. [Comment that apparently only ~50-70% of charities actually report back to their funders - recent research by Wolfson had shown that].
- What is the impact of poor governance on small charities - and their intended beneficiaries?
- Where do small charities get their advice and what is its quality?

b. Collaboration with others in the same field / networking

- How can charities best collaborate?

"Some way of bringing together evidence so that you can have a more planned approach of the intervention you are offering would be helpful…there is something around the value of convening charities that funders can have….that would be really valuable as we're all there in our own bubbles doing our own things and we don't collaborate enough."

- How can you change the climate / culture to enable collaboration?
  How can charities better share evidence within their field? An evidence synthesis to help charities benchmark themselves against others, to understand what works, what doesn't work;

"Often you're not sure where you sit in the world. We're just out there doing stuff - there's nothing bringing us together."

- How do different charities in the same field consult with other charities doing similar things? What are the incentives to do so?
- Is there value in convening charities and enabling them to collaborate, and how best can this be done? How to measure the benefit of collaboration as opposed to working alone;
- A need to improve philanthropy by corporations, and communication between charities and corporations. How to get companies to improve their charity / philanthropic work? (e.g., education)

c. Value / role of charity sector

- What is the value of the charity sector to society and the economy and what is the best way to communicate that to people (public, funders, government)? Reinforce the value of the charity sector as a whole;

"The research that tends to come out around charities is great for charities, but not necessarily great for representing the value of charity to the average person on the street."

- What is the role of the charity sector as it sits alongside other sectors within civil society?
- A comparison between the cost effectiveness and waste between charities and private businesses, to demonstrate the value of the sector;
- If there are no interventions - what is the cost to society? *(Context for why this person was talking about this: That 'counterfactual' might show the amazing value to society of these charities' work and hence boost public confidence in charities).* What is the social cost of not intervening?

"Get an understanding of where the value of those charitable interventions is...and I think that would do a lot to positively reinforce what we already know - which is that the charitable sector has an amazing influence on society and stopping people falling through cracks."

d. Issues for specific communities

- How the arts culture can support and help the NHS and individuals with mental health issues;

"Mental health and the profound effect the arts has on health and wellbeing is an area that has been around for the last 20 years. Having medics take the plunge and give the benefit of the doubt to see how Arts can benefit health and wellbeing is a massive area - especially now that the CCGs have come in."

- The importance of religion and culture on community practice and attitudes;

"There is no evidence or no data to show about the general knowledge of religion within the communities. So for example when they talk about Muslims, they link everyone in the same way - but there are different sects within those. Their [different religions] cultural, social, psychological, health needs are so different. There is zero evidence."

- To what extent does discrimination / bias affect funding decisions? (speaking about non-white people, and people outside London applying for funding).

e. Recording, monitoring and reporting

- Can we develop valid, robust and simple ways of evaluating programmes on an ongoing basis that are grounded in beneficiaries' views and outcomes?
- What are the key principles for good quality impact assessment?
- New models to evaluate treatment options that are not randomised controlled trials, but that will still generate high quality evidence (including social science methods, adaptive trials etc.);
- How to coordinate the dissemination of research;

"I think for most interventions; I think if you can have an overview of the need for the various interventions... what's best for each situation... I think that would be incredibly useful. But I guess some of it already happens... I don't think there is a lack of research as such. It's coordinating the dissemination and integration of multidisciplinary teams"

- How can charities better do process evaluations as well as / instead of impact evaluations?

f. Contracting with local government and other public agencies

- What are the best ways to generate evidence to gain local government funding?
- What are the best ways to support charities with commissioning?

"There is a capacity gap in raising awareness of the value of research with local authorities"

- How do charities perceive the commissioning processes – what works and how can it be replicated? (or possibly this is a training need).

g. Consultation with staff and beneficiaries

- Could academic research provide an external lens on how staff and beneficiaries are consulted?
- What are the best ways to consult with beneficiaries?

"How best to ensure that people's voice informs what we do...I think there is a lot of good work out there and it could just be that research is needed to pull all the evidence together and make the connections?"

- Research on the effectiveness of consultation and people's experiences of it, including how to deal with challenging consultation results, the purpose of consultation and what is or isn't appropriate;

"Everyone's consulted, but no one listens…. Democracy for the sake of it isn't appropriate"

- How do charities use anecdotal evidence and instinct in the development of their services? Should this evidence be used differently? What is the value, role and impact of different consultation approaches?
- How to take care of the people working in charities?

"...the operational staff in small charities struggle with governance. Some operational staff have never had an appraisal and never get supervision."

- Longitudinal research on people who start volunteering at school age and how that follows through into adult participation in charity.

h. General research

- What is the long-term impact of particular interventions, and how best can this be captured?
- How to quantify the impact of preventative work;
- Research to demonstrate the value of narrative data from the charity sector:

"Our sector collects a huge amount of narrative evidence (storytelling, case studies and people's personal testament) - our membership has volumes of information that is underestimated and badly understood - not only by funders and commissioners - but by the world!"

- What research is going to be useful to charities in the future (e.g., what are they going to have to know in order to adapt to a world of more automation, AI, etc.?)? One part of this was: *"What is charity to millennials?"*
- Can / should / how can charities or academics have access to important data, e.g., education or police data that exists in government, but is not in the public domain?
- The public image of the third sector:

"We are being criticised by the public's view of the third sector, but we don't have any collective voice or collective evidence that can come out and give the positive side...so there is a continually negative focus [in the press] rather than positive focus...we stand to lose public trust increasingly as we go forward."

- Impact of short-term funding
- What is effective leadership in this sector?
- How to be accountable to beneficiaries?
- Research on how charities can build resilience and develop agility.

Results of the first survey (eliciting research questions)

The most striking result of the survey was that so few people completed it: only 51 respondents. This is despite the fact that many people tweeted and re-tweeted about it, it was on LinkedIn and in the newsletters of ACF, ACEVO, NCVO and others. Thus masses of people saw it and had the opportunity to respond.

We don't regard this low response as any kind of failure, but rather an interesting finding. Clearly, many people chose not to respond. We don't *know* why. Our guess – based on what we heard in the focus groups – is that charities and funders didn't reply because they don't think that (academic) research is at all relevant to them. They appear not to think about it at all. So it is not even worth completing a survey about.

The breakdown of survey respondents is in Appendix 6.

The survey asked respondents how frequently they used different types of research. Amongst the comments that respondents made about why they rarely used academic research, they most often commented that the findings are:

- Hard to find amongst all the information that is out there
- Hard to access, either because journals are difficult to get hold of, or articles too expensive to download
- Hard to understand because they are written in a technical language

Many commented that they do not have time to track this information down or read long, complex papers when there are so many other demands in their working day. They value having plain English summaries that highlight the key issues for them.

When they do read academic papers, the survey respondents commented that the findings are often overly theoretical and not grounded in the reality of working in a charity and therefore of little practical relevance. Furthermore, it seems that studies often involve big national charities so that the findings are not immediately transferable to other types of organisation, or that studies take so long, that the policy and political context may well have changed, making the results no longer relevant. Respondents value help with interpreting the findings to understand what the concrete recommendations might be.

Results of the second survey (prioritising research questions)

The result of the second survey is the prioritised list of questions, shown in Table 1, and the breakdown of the respondent types is at Appendix 7.

7. Discussion of findings, limitations of the study, and implications

i) Limitations

This study invited various types of people to contribute, either online or in person. We can say nothing about the views of people who did not respond. There are two groups of non-respondents:

- People whom our invitation to contribute did not reach. This is the classic problem that some people are 'hard to reach' by conventional means. Though we worked very hard and proactively, e.g., contacting many organisations individually and inviting their participation, and going through many networks, inevitably our resources were finite and so some people will not have seen the invitation. We have no idea about whether the people whose views we did hear represent also the people from whom we did not hear.

- People who did see the invitation but declined to respond. An example, as mentioned, is that we had no interest for a focus group in Wales, despite writing individually to at least two dozen organisations there.

It is unlikely that the people who responded represent all donors and charities. Hence quite probably there are views that we did not hear, and we acknowledge that.

We can speculate as to why so few people chose to respond. Perhaps they feel that academic research / evidence is too far away from them / not relevant enough to warrant their time. Perhaps they feel that they get all that they need from think-tanks and other charities, such as the Institute of Voluntary Action Research. Perhaps they have 'research fatigue'.[ii])

ii) Topicality of the topics raised

It may of course be the case that the set of topics raised partly reflects the topics of the day, and that the set would change if the exercise were repeated in, say, 24 months' time. For instance, one of the top 24 questions relates to 'austerity', the term given to the budget programme initiated in 2010 by the UK government in response to the financial crisis of 2008. Though the effects of the consequent austerity are still evident, one can reasonably expect its significance to fade over time.

It is also probably the case that the precise wording of our communications inviting respondents would have influenced who responded: people who feel strongly about those 'buzzwords' may have responded, and others turned off by it.

Equally, the set of issues in the long list taken into prioritisation (the 49 questions) is different from the set of 24 questions which were prioritised. We do not (and cannot) know why other questions were not prioritised. We can speculate that they are viewed by the group as less important, or again perhaps their precise wording influenced the response.

iii) Academic research

The most notable finding is that this project is designed to inform *academic* research about charities and philanthropy, but we found that many charities and donors seem to find academic research irrelevant to them.

Clearly this implies that there is a job of work for the academic community to connect with practitioners and make itself heard and relevant. This is hard: academics are mainly incentivised and rewarded for publication in 'high-impact-factor' journals (i.e., journals read by other academics), rather than for changing anything on the ground. Academics get rewarded for the extent to which they 'change the discourse in their discipline': you change it around the way that microcredit works, you get something; you change it around the way that lending more broadly works, you get more; you change the whole of economics by showing that many predictions of its main theses simply aren't true, and you get a Nobel Prize. Arguably, academia is about *understanding* phenomena and problems; it's not fundamentally about *solving* problems[xiv].

Working with practitioners is optional - and, for many, therefore a luxury - and hence few do it. This creates the accusation that academia is an echo chamber.

That said, it may be that these responses related only to academic papers, not to the other activities (e.g., engagement activities such as conferences) which academics also run and which charities and others appear to value.

The funding for UK universities is changing somewhat to reward real-world 'impact' (and quality of teaching).

The issue for us, in this sector, is not how to *change* academic incentives, but rather how to best leverage academic activity *given the current incentives*.

iv) Requests for 'things' that one might build

In the focus groups and surveys (but not the final list of 24 questions) were several 'requests' which are not research-able questions, but rather are 'things' that somebody might create. For instance, a database of evaluations, or 'a map' of which charities are doing what (in Scotland), or 'a way to search… who else is delivering a service using x or focusing on y'. These are not research questions as such. The 'things' which they are asking to be built could be built by non-academics: for example, as 360Giving is doing; or PubMed, a database of medical studies is maintained by the US National Institutes of Health, a public agency (and sort-of academic institution). Or they could be built by academic institutions, in the way that the searchable database of which clinical trials which should have been published have actually been published is built by the University of Oxford.

That list of buildable 'things' (mainly information, or information architecture) could / should be used by the various academic institutions interested in charities / philanthropy, and also membership bodies and others.

v) Asking questions to which the answers are already known

There were quite a few requests for things that already exist / answers which are already known. One focus group participant wanted an evaluation of IATI (the International Aid Transparency Initiative) and didn't seem to know that decent evaluation already exists (so we sent it to them.) There were lots of requests for methods of measuring impact - and those methods already exist - and have done for decades.

There is thus clearly an issue with (i) charities' awareness of research methods, and (ii) dissemination / findability of existing research.

Again, those findings are not 'research questions' as such, but academic institutions may wish to act on them, e.g., by running trainings about research methods, and doing more on making research findable and usable.

vi) Expressions of problems in the sector

Several questions seemed to be born of frustration at various problems, such as the different perceptions / concerns of delivery charities vs. funders. For example, "what can be done to improve the frequency and quality of reporting to donors / funder" from grantees; or charity governance "needs a total reboot"; or 'how can funders be persuaded to value qualitative data'. That latter, for example, is probably code for '*please* can funders be persuaded to value qualitative data'.

With these questions, researchers may be able to provide research / data to alleviate the underlying problems which create these frustrations.

For example, we saw that charities are frustrated at what they perceive to be unreasonable or ridiculous requests from funders for impact information. This is a known problem - arising sometimes from one party having a better understanding of what constitutes evidence of impact; sometimes from ignorance on both sides; and sometimes from genuine differences in priorities, e.g., a public sector funder just may need reports quarterly, even if the charity's results don't appear that fast. In some of these cases, better understanding of what impact is and how to measure different types of impact (i)would be useful, and (ii)could be enabled by academics.

8. Conclusion

This study seems to be unprecedented in terms of asking charities and funders – some key intended users and beneficiaries of research about charities and philanthropy – what they would like to know. Their answers were predominately about impact measurement and effectiveness, both of operational charities and also about funding practices. The questions raised and prioritised reflect the concerns at the specific time that we asked: asking again in, say, 24 months' time may produce a slightly different list.

It was also clear that charities and funders seem to make little use of academic research. This is a considerable challenge to the academic community.

We urge academics to consider the list of priority questions presented here. Equally, we urge people who fund research to heed this list and the topics that have surfaced through this process. Many items on our list are not 'research questions' as such and would take some work to be turned into them, and / or they signal a problem in the sector which academics could usefully explore or ameliorate. They all represent requests and concerns of charities where they would like more academic focus.

Appendices

Appendix 1: About the Authors and Charity Futures

Charity Futures is an independent think-tank set up to promote thinking about the sustainability and future direction of charities. It funded this research as part of its work to establish a research centre in Oxford. The Oxford Institute of Charity (OIC) was launched on May 15th, 2019 and is being established at New College, Oxford. The funding has already been secured for the building and a fundraising initiative has been set up to raise an endowment of £30m to fund the researchers and the research programme.

In advance of the establishment of the OIC, Charity Futures was keen to establish what the research priorities of the charity sector were in order to guide the initial thinking of the Institute about its research programme. The OIC aims to provide practical but academically rigorous research that supports a more sustainable future for charity and so working with both academics and with charities is important for the Institute.

The research programme led by Giving Evidence – comprising both this study of 'demand' and the sister study of the existing 'supply' of research – is therefore a crucial foundation for the evolution of this initiative.

Giving Evidence works to enable giving based on sound evidence. Our work has two parts: consulting and campaigning. They are closely connected, in that client work often raises, refines or tests ideas on which we campaign. Both draw significantly on how evidence is produced, organised, and used in medicine.

Caroline Fiennes founded Giving Evidence and is one of the few people whose work has featured in both *OK!* Magazine and the scientific journal *Nature*. Now an FT columnist, she worked for several years in commercial strategy consulting, and has 15 years' experience in making non-profits more effective and advising major donors around the world. She has led strategy reviews and analysis for a wide range of foundations, in various continents and on various issues. Caroline was an award-winning charity CEO, and her book *It Ain't What You Give* was described in the press as 'the Freakonomics of the charity sector… a tour de force'. Caroline speaks often on TV and radio, has taught at Yale and Cambridge Universities and through TED, and is a prize-winning philanthropy advisor.

Katherine Cowan is an experienced consultant and facilitator, with a background in market and social research. She has a particular interest in the mechanics of public participation in decision-making processes. She has been a key contributor to the development of the James Lind Alliance method for involving patients, carers and healthcare professionals in setting priorities for health research. She is co-author of the James Lind Alliance Guidebook, and has facilitated around 40 Priority Setting Partnerships in the UK and internationally. She has wide experience of in-depth interviewing, focus group facilitation, survey design, qualitative and quantitative analysis and evaluation.

Appendix 2: The Advisory Group

Charities:

Michael Cooke – Give Directly

Véronique Jochum – NCVO

Matthew Reed – Marie Curie

Michele Acton – (then at) Fight for Sight

Private donors:

Fran Perrin – The Indigo Trust and The Philanthropy Workshop

Marcelle Speller – formerly of Local Giving

Rob Williamson – Northumberland Community Foundation

Grant Gordon – Reekimlane Foundation

Tom Hall – UBS

Institutional Funders:

Keiran Goddard – Association of Charitable Foundations

Sara Llewellin – Barrow Cadbury Foundation

Tom Leftwich – UK government Office of Civil Society

Danielle Walker-Palmour – Friends Provident Foundation

Jane Leek – Porticus

Academics / Researchers:

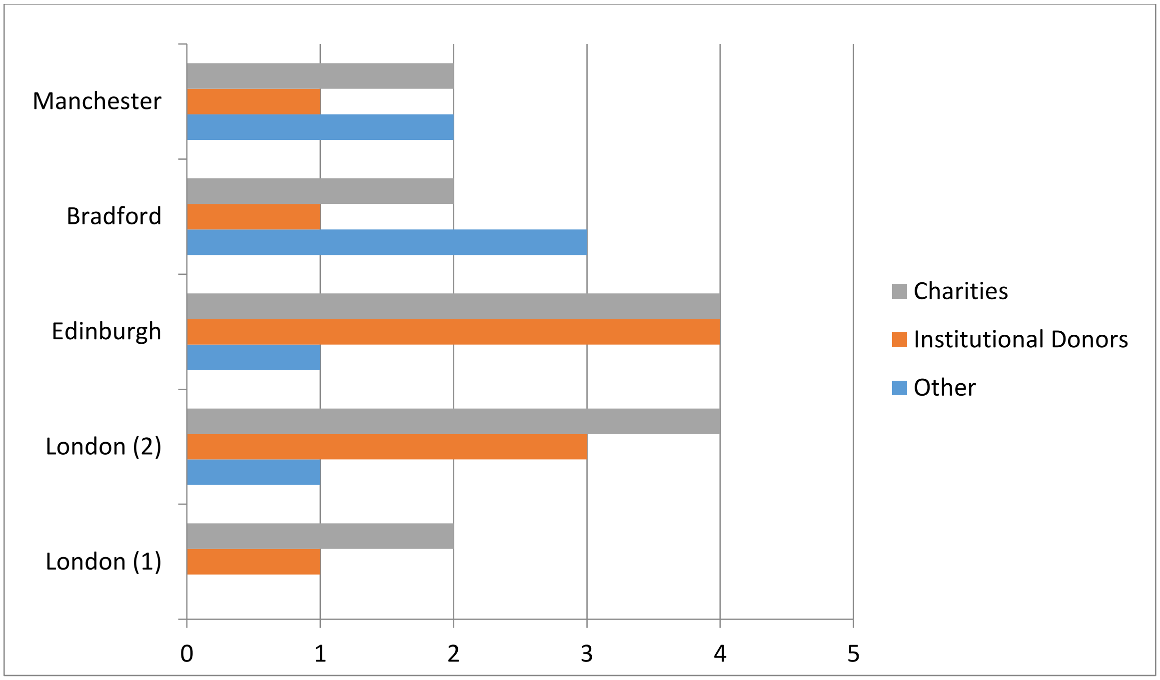
Rob Macmillan – Sheffield Hallam University

John Mohan – Third Sector Research Centre, Birmingham

Carolyn Cordery – Aston Business School

Adrian Sargeant – The Philanthropy Centre (withdrew himself from the Group in January 2019).

Appendix 3: Focus Groups Participants



Appendix 4: First Survey Questions

The first survey contained only four questions (plus demographic questions, the responses to which are in Appendix 5). They were about the frequency with which respondents use various types of research, and what additional research would help them. Based on our findings in the focus groups, we used several terms to describe 'research': also using "data, evidence or information".

1. How often do you use the following types of research?

For each, select; often, sometimes, hardly ever, never, or don't know:

- Academic research published in journals
- Other reports by charities / non-profits / think-tanks
- Research by academics but not published in journals (e.g., in books, blogs, think-pieces)
- Research by government
- Research by industry / companies / the private sector
- Impact reports by charities / non-profits about their own work
- Opinion polls / research by polling agencies or market research agencies
- Other Research

2. If you hardly ever or never use academic research, why is this?

3. What questions about charities and / or giving would you like research to answer?

This could be to support the decisions you make or help overcome challenges you face. For example you may have questions like:

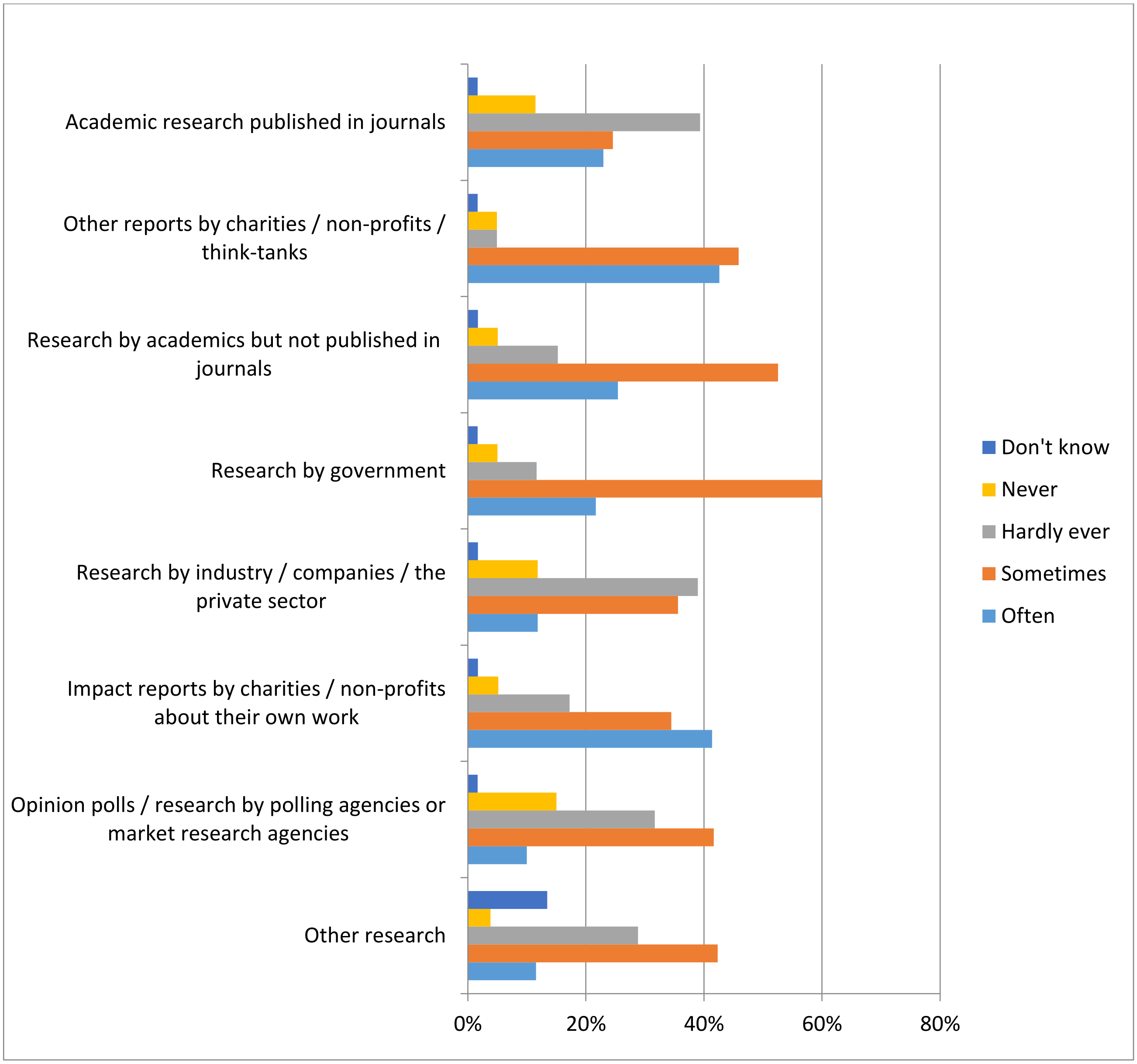
- *What is the best way to inform donors of the real difference a charity or a programme / project has made?*
- *How can charities and NGOs develop sustainable business models that include a revenue generating social enterprise?*
- *What are that best ways to capture the less tangible impacts of charities that cannot be easily measured?*

4. What additional data, evidence or information would help you in your work and why?

Appendix 5: First Survey Answers

1. How often do you use the following types of research?

Academic research is used very little - though not as rarely as research by industry:



2. If you hardly ever or never use academic research, why is this?

The following are verbatim quotes taken from survey responses:

Lack of time; googling for the 'right' evidence supporting my case rather than really diving into an academic discussion with all its pros and cons.

Access is a big issue – academic journals are often pay-walled and paying for access isn't a priority for us. Awareness is another: because I'm not regularly looking at these publications, I'm not aware of what's being published and when. The other thing is time. I'd quite like to spend more time reading research, and searching for relevant research on academia.edu or whatever, but it's difficult to find the time.

It rarely impacts on our work. Bits can be interesting but finding those bits is not easy and often not worth the effort once discovered.

We have not been required to at this stage of our journey. Also I prefer to get my sector knowledge from other sources such as RSA website, short animation videos, TED Talks and such like. I prefer to receive my information through non-written (or not too word heavy means), academic research is usually presented in long written papers, which for a non-researcher is too long to take time out to read properly.

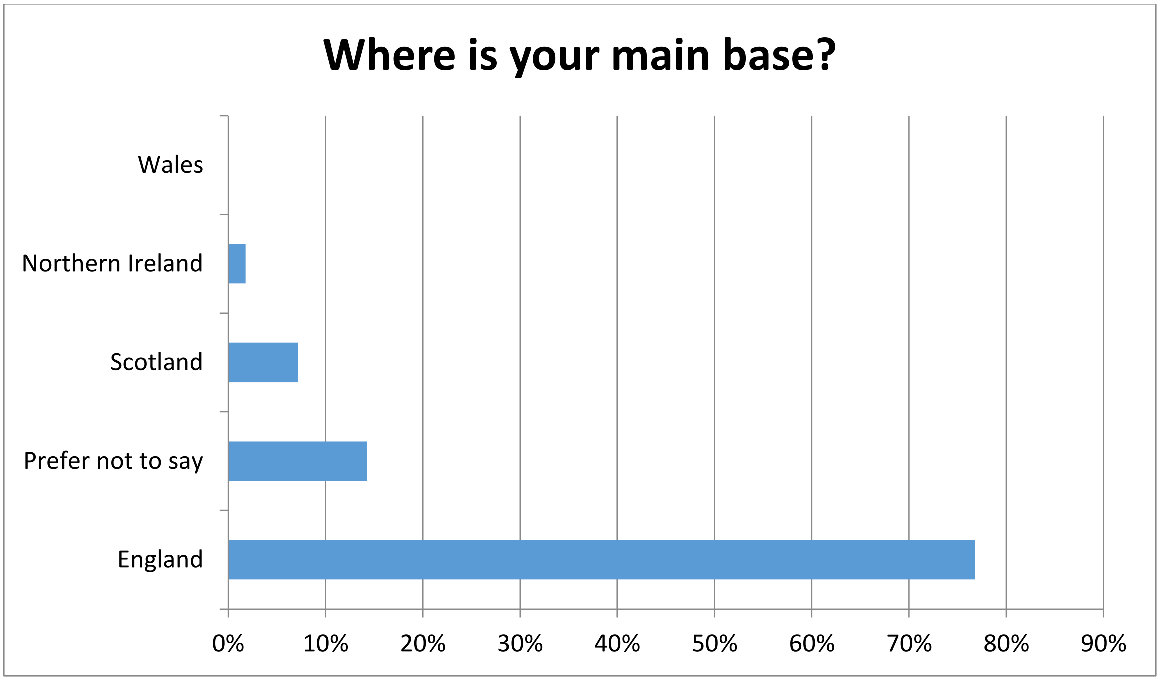
Expensive to access JSTOR and other publications.

I find that most of the research is very academic and doesn't reflect the reality of charities day to day. I also find the research is sometimes out of date when published. Things can happen very quickly in the charity sector and the research doesn't always reflect this.

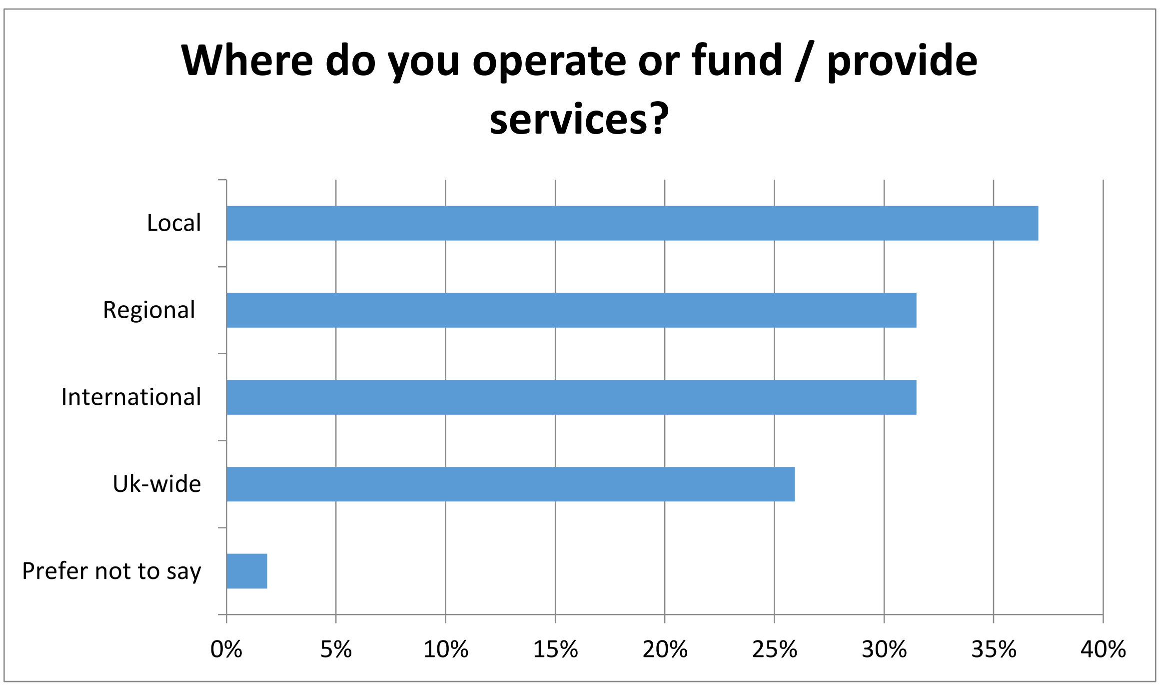
No link to reality, they never fundraised before and it shows.

Appendix 6: First Survey: Respondent Breakdown

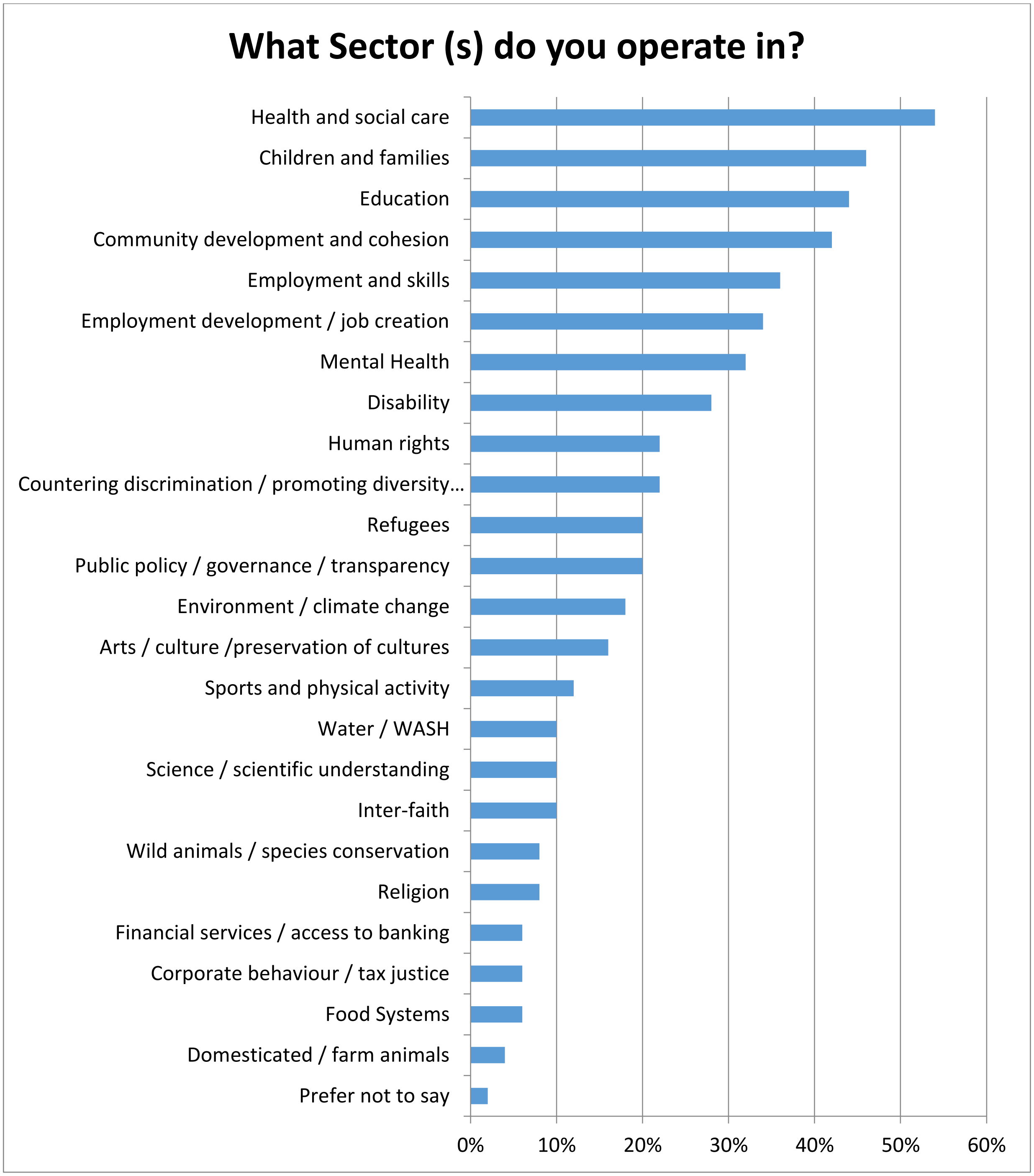
Charity or other voluntary organisation (e.g., CIC) running programmes	40.35%	23
Philanthropic foundation	15.79%	9
Other	15.79%	9
Individual donor	10.53%	6
Philanthropic advisor or advocate of philanthropy	5.26%	3
Community or faith-based organisation	3.51%	2
Prefer not to say	3.51%	2
Statutory entity which funds non- profits	3.51%	2
Impact Investor	1.75%	1



N=56 responses



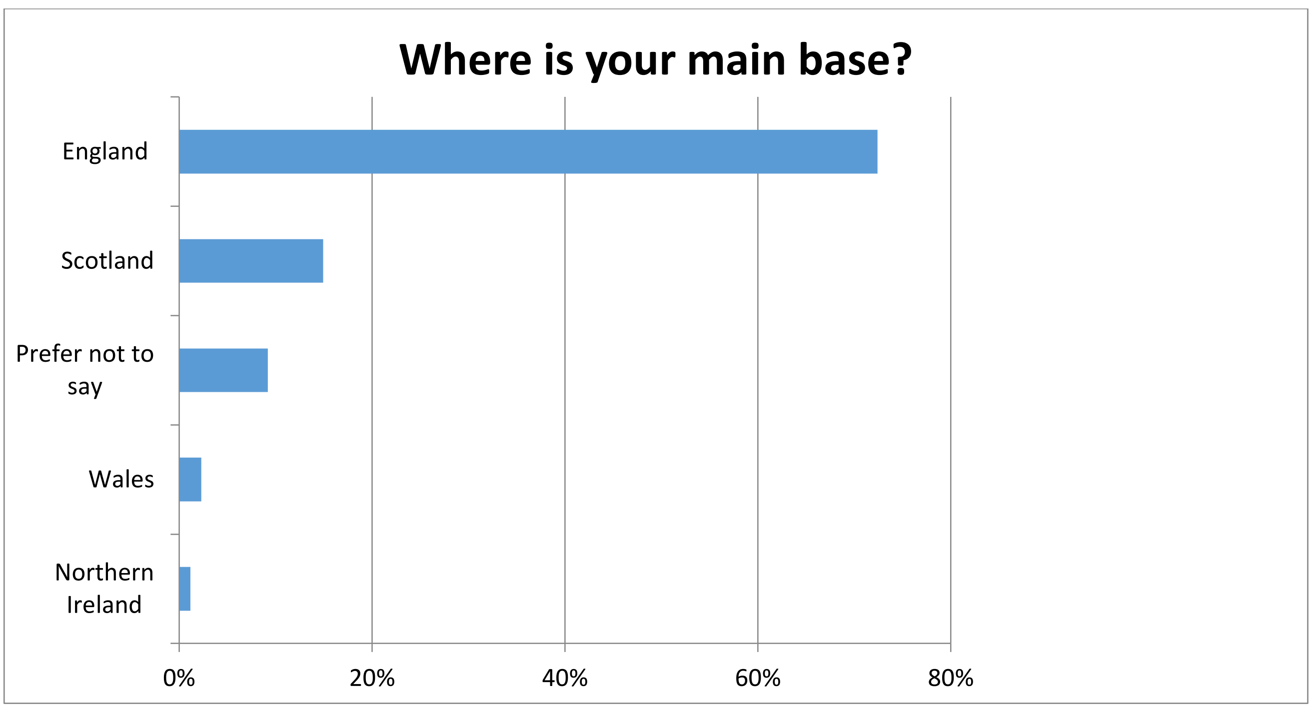
N=54 responses



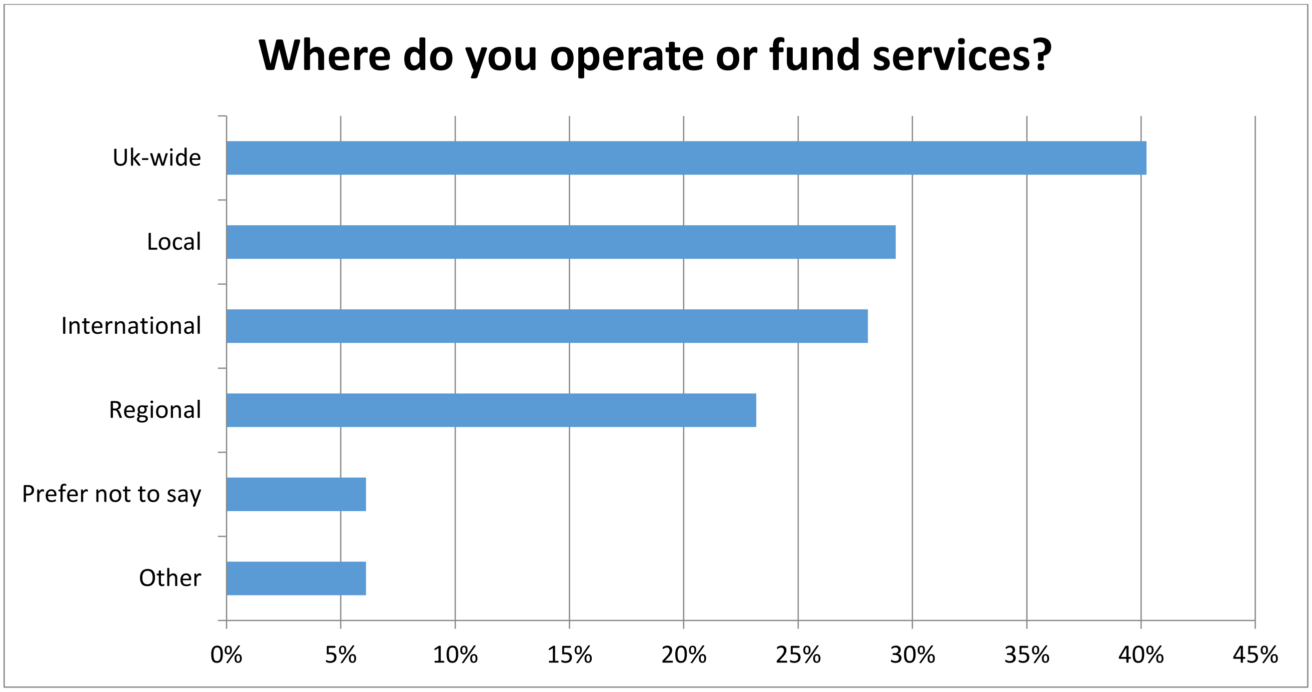
What Sector (s) do you operate in?
Health and social care
Children and families
Education
Community development and cohesion
Employment and skills
Employment development / job creation
Mental Health
Disability
Human rights
Countering discrimination / promoting diversity...
Refugees
Public policy / governance / transparency
Environment / climate change
Arts / culture /preservation of cultures
Sports and physical activity
Water / WASH
Science / scientific understanding
Inter-faith
Wild animals / species conservation
Religion
Financial services / access to banking
Corporate behaviour / tax justice
Food Systems
Domesticated / farm animals
Prefer not to say
0%
10%
20%
30%
40%
50%
60%

Appendix 7: Second Survey: Respondent breakdown

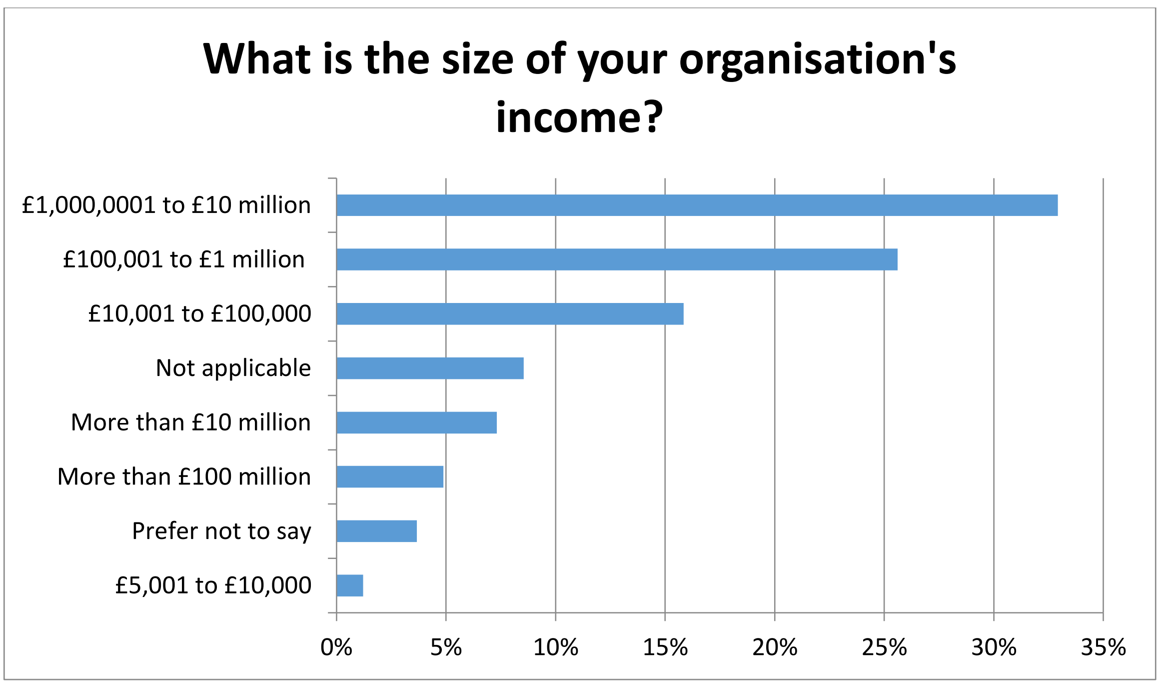
Charity or other voluntary organisation (e.g., CIC) running programmes	44.72%	55
Individual donor	18.70%	23
Philanthropic foundation	13.01%	16
Other	9.76%	12
Philanthropic advisor or advocate of philanthropy	7.32%	9
Community or faith-based organisation	1.63%	2
Corporate foundation	1.63%	2
Impact investor	1.63%	2
Statutory entity which funds non-profits	0.81%	1
Prefer not to say	0.81%	1
TOTAL		**123**



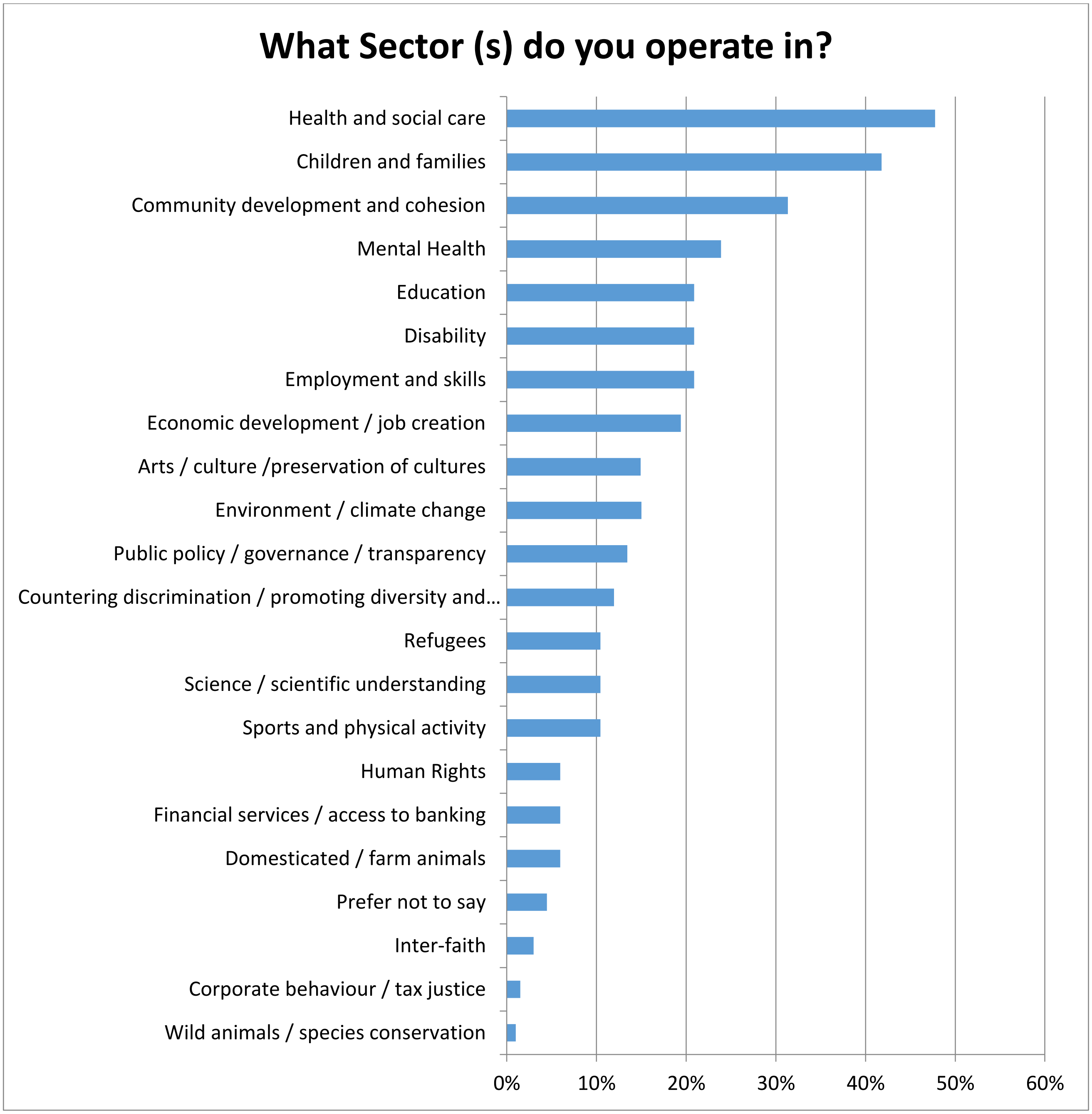
N= 87


Where do you operate or fund services?
Uk-wide
Local
International
Regional
Prefer not to say
Other
0%
5%
10%
15%
20%
25%
30%
35%
40%
45%

N=82


What is the size of your organisation's income?
£1,000,0001 to £10 million
£100,001 to £1 million
£10,001 to £100,000
Not applicable
More than £10 million
More than £100 million
Prefer not to say
£5,001 to £10,000
0%
5%
10%
15%
20%
25%
30%
35%

N=82


What Sector (s) do you operate in?
Health and social care
Children and families
Community development and cohesion
Mental Health
Education
Disability
Employment and skills
Economic development / job creation
Arts / culture /preservation of cultures
Environment / climate change
Public policy / governance / transparency
Countering discrimination / promoting diversity and...
Refugees
Science / scientific understanding
Sports and physical activity
Human Rights
Financial services / access to banking
Domesticated / farm animals
Prefer not to say
Inter-faith
Corporate behaviour / tax justice
Wild animals / species conservation
0%
10%
20%
30%
40%
50%
60%

N= 67

Appendix 8: The 49 questions taken into the second survey to be prioritised

A1: How many grantees report to their funders and how can the frequency and quality of this reporting be improved?

A2: How effective are the approaches used by funders to monitor and evaluate charities?

C1: How can charities improve their communication of how their money has been spent?

C2: How can charities better communicate of the impact of their work to donors, beneficiaries and staff?

E1: How do grant-makers currently assess their effectiveness? What ways of giving can improve grant effectiveness?

E2: What is the impact of giving contracts once held by charities to commercial entities?

F1: What models of finance work best for capital acquisitions and investments by charities?

G1: How can the governance of small charities be improved and how does this influence sustainability and the management of staff?

G2: Does the traditional model of governance in charities still work? What new approaches might deliver greater benefits for intended beneficiaries?

G3: How can the management of small charities be improved e.g., through outsourcing or sharing back-office functions?

G4: What are the barriers and enablers to ensure diversity amongst trustees?

G5: How does governance influence the impact of charities?

G6: What models of charity management create most benefit for intended beneficiaries?

I1: How can qualitative data (e.g., personal stories, case studies) be used to demonstrate impact?

I2: How can the less tangible impacts of charities be measured for work where outcomes are hard to quantify?

I3: How can impact be measured across different charities?

I4: How can impact be captured in a way that is meaningful to intended beneficiaries and other stakeholders?

I5: What are the best ways for charities to evaluate long-term outcomes?

I6: How can evaluation enable charities to improve what they do, rather than prove they are making a difference?

I7: How can charities working on the same issue collaborate to demonstrate the benefit of their combined work?

I8: How do charities undertake research, monitoring and evaluation? (i.e., the actual practice and detail)

L1: What are the barriers and enablers to effective collaborations between charities?

L2: What are the benefits of collaboration between charities, and with other types of organisation?

L3: What aids and hinders collaborations between charities and business?

L4: How well are charities working with their intended beneficiaries to influence their own work?

T1: Does the cost to grantees of complying with monitoring requirements outweigh the benefits? How could this be improved?

N1: How can charities best use social media to engage and retain donors?

S1: What are the barriers and enablers to charities becoming financially self-sustaining?

S2: What are the most effective alternative business models for charities to enable them to become financially self-sustaining?

V1: What are the current barriers to volunteering?

V2: What role does social media play in forming networks to support social action?

V3: Does volunteering at school age affect the likelihood of adults engaging in charity work?

W1: How can evidence about effectiveness guide donors to support the most effective work?

W2: Are grant-givers biased? If so, in what ways, and how can that be avoided?

W3: What is the effect of non-financial donations to charities? What types of non-financial donations work best and in what circumstances?

W4: What models of procurement are appropriate for the charity sector?

W5: How can high net-worth individuals from diverse communities (e.g., Southern Asians) be encouraged to donate to charities in the UK? What are the benefits to them?

O1: What training / support do charities need to develop their capacity to respond to commissioners?

O2: How can capacity to conduct research be increased in the charity sector to improve their understanding of need and to support robust evaluation of their work?

O3: What is the impact of the founders of new charities? How well do they reflect need rather than their individual interests?

O4: How can charities develop resilience and agility to respond to changes (such the impact of new digital technology)?

O5: What is the typical development pathway of a charity? Can organisations be given stage appropriate advice at each step? (e.g., from small voluntary organisation to an organisation with a Trustee Board, or from a social enterprise to social business and development fund?)

Q1: What impact has austerity had on the charity sector?

Q2: What is the impact of complying with the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI), both in the countries receiving aid and in the UK?

Q3: How do legal obligations affect people who become Trustees?

Q4: What makes for good leadership in the charity sector and does this differ from good leadership in other sectors? How does this vary across different sized organisations?

Q5: What is the value of the charity sector in comparison to the business sector? What are its strengths and unique contributions?

Q6: How do foundations decide their geographic scope?

Q7: What causes a charity to change from one kind of organisation to another (e.g., from service delivery to campaigning)?

Q8: Which interventions are most effective (or least effective) and why, within a charity sector (i.e., for a specific problem, or specific context)?

Appendix 9: Topic guide for final workshop

Introductions from:

- Katherine Cowan: housekeeping, agenda, purpose (including the original plan and why we changed), format
- Caroline Fiennes: background to the project, scope (e.g., not fundraising), what we did, results (who took part and where the questions came from)

The top 24 questions (in ranked order) were circulated to the group before with a note asking them to familiarise themselves with them.

DISCUSSION 1: Reactions to the process

Introduction [15m]

- About the focus group
    - Semi-structured discussion
    - What we'll cover
    - Timing
- Confidentiality
    - Reporting – no names will be included, and no individual will be identifiable in our reporting
    - How this will inform our consultation reporting
- Permission to record
- Ways of working
    - Explaining the facilitator's role – to manage the discussion and ensure everyone has a chance to contribute
    - Having as natural a discussion as possible, while addressing the key questions for our consultation
    - Ensuring people only speak one at a time
    - Permission for facilitator to interrupt in order to bring in anyone who we've not heard from

- Introductions
    - Who you are, your organisation and / or role?

Reflecting on the prioritised questions [45m]

- What are your overarching impressions of the 24 questions that were prioritised?
    - What do you think about the topics that are covered?
    - To what extent do these priorities match with your priorities for research?
    - Are you surprised by the inclusion of any of these topics or questions in a list of priorities for charity / philanthropy research?
- What do you think these questions tell us about the charity sector and its evidence needs?
    - *[Probe particularly for reactions to the top 10]*
- Looking at the top 10, what do these questions mean to you?

- Why do you think these were prioritised?
- Why are there so many questions about impact?
- If they were answered and the evidence / findings were made available, how would you see charities and donors using that information? What difference would this make for you?

Engagement with the priority setting project [40m]

- This is the first time that this model of consultation and prioritisation has been applied to charity and philanthropy research. What are your thoughts about the usefulness of such a project?
- It has been a challenge to engage charities and donors in the process – why do you think that is?
  - *[Probe for thoughts about each stage of the process*:
  - *Consultation to ask people their questions / evidence needs*
  - *Online survey to choose priority questions generated by the sector*
  - *Workshop to further prioritise and agree a shared shortlist]*
- *Should* charities and donors have a role in shaping research agendas about charity / philanthropy?
- What does the response to the project tell us about charities and research?
  - To what extent do charities and donors seek out research?
  - How do they currently use it?
  - How would you describe the charity sector's level of understanding of research?
  - What is the relationship between the academic research sector and charities / donors?
- What can the project team learn from this experience?

Anything to add?

DISCUSSION 2: Reactions to the concept of the proposed Institute of Charity

Stephen Bubb to introduce and explain the Oxford Institute of Charity.

- We're interested to know your reactions to what you've just heard about the idea of the Institute of Charity
- Do you ever go to events or read documents / updates from the other research centres, e.g., by the University of Kent, or of St Andrews or from the Marshall Institute at LSE?
  - If so, what and why, and what do you think of them?
  - If not, why not?
- What do you hope that the Institute might achieve for you?
- What difference could it make to the work of your charity?
- How can the Institute engage with you and involve charities and donors in its work?
  - *[Probe for events, newsletters, training e.g., about finding and using research evidence, 'surgeries' to help you find evidence that's relevant to you, having you second somebody into the Institute to learn to do research]*
- What are the barriers and enablers?

- What should the Institute / and also other researchers bear in mind when talking about research to charities and donors (including consulting them on what to research, and sharing research with them)?
- Given the sector engagement struggle this project has faced, what else should the Institute bear in mind?

Anything else to add?

Thanks and end.

References

---

[i] Workshop participants

[ii] E.g., https://www.thinknpc.org/resource-hub/making-an-impact/; *Demonstrating Impact: Current Practice Amongst Social Purpose Organisations in the Republic of Ireland*, The Wheel (2011)

[iii] https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(00)02351-5/fulltext

[iv] http://www.jla.nihr.ac.uk/making-a-difference/funded-research.htm

[v] http://www.jla.nihr.ac.uk/jla-guidebook/

[vi] E.g., https://giving-evidence.com/2016/03/07/oops/

[vii] https://www.kcl.ac.uk/cicelysaunders/attachments/tools-gas-practical-guide.pdf

[viii] https://www.nature.com/polopoly_fs/1.22100!/menu/main/topColumns/topLeftColumn/pdf/546187a.pdf

[ix] https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/jul/15/bad-science-studies-show-we-get-things-wrong

[x] https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/generic/tsrc/documents/tsrc/working-papers/working-paper-106.pdf

[xi] https://apps.charitycommission.gov.uk/Accounts/Ends83/0000210183_AC_20180930_E_C.pdf

[xii] https://home.cern/news/news/knowledge-sharing/using-cern-magnet-technology-innovative-cancer-treatment

[xiii] https://www.povertyactionlab.org/evaluation/nudging-farmers-use-fertilizer-experimental-evidence-kenya

[xiv] For example, see: https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2018/aug/09/a-phd-should-be-about-improving-society-not-chasing-academic-kudos

http://theconversation.com/academics-can-change-the-world-if-they-stop-talking-only-to-their-peers-55713;

https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/why-is-academic-writing-so-academic;

https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2013/nov/13/academic-job-changing-flexibility-university