



LINK Covid-19 member survey results: April 2020

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Introduction

Between 2 and 16 April, Scottish Environment LINK members took part in an online survey assessing the impact of the current Covid-19 crisis on their organisations and identified their needs going forward. The aim of this survey was to help members, the Scottish Government, Scottish Natural Heritage and grant funders, including the National Lottery Heritage Fund, to assess the current and near future financial difficulties the current coronavirus crisis is causing for environmental and conservation charities, and how they may be able to assist and support the sector. Between 27 – 30 April, an additional set of questions were posed to Scottish Environment LINK members. These questions arose from discussions with SNH, NLHF and Scottish Government and aim to provide some further details on specific areas in those discussions.

This follows a similar survey by Wildlife and Countryside LINK in London between 20 – 24 March and a parallel survey in Northern Ireland by Northern Ireland Environment LINK. Comparisons between the survey results are made, where helpful.

Key findings

The findings of the survey are very clear. The Covid-19 outbreak is impacting on



- (1) frontline functions in conservation, access and sustainable living;
- (2) scientific and policy work
- (3) the short-term and long-term viability of a significant proportion of the environment sector.

All organisations who completed the survey are affected by the pandemic. All organisations are eating into reserves, some of which are extremely limited. Member organisations with visitor sites / assets with ongoing running costs, that cannot be limited, are particularly impacted with the sudden and complete drop in visitor and activity based revenue. Smaller organisations, run largely by volunteers, are struggling to adapt to home and distance working with limitations on IT and digital services and skills, and communications systems that are under developed for the digital age.

In the short-term, the majority of members surveyed are furloughing staff where they can and business support is being sought. However, challenges in remaining able to function, even at limited capacity. Members are increasingly looking for flexibility from funders, including government, in terms of emergency short term flexible funding, up front payments for fixed costs including salaries, as well as flexibility with deadlines and reporting.

However, the real crunch is expected to arrive in a few months time, when members start operating again, when current support schemes such as furloughing end and when the main income generation seasons of spring and summer have passed. At this point, members will be unable to limit expenditure as they have largely been doing and they will have missed key income generation opportunities that would ordinarily support ongoing costs until next Spring. At this point, capacity in member organisations cannot be guaranteed. Many members are, or will be, assessing drastic action to survive at this point. Some scenario planning of these actions is starting in some organisations now but all are aware that such assessment will need to be made urgently.

There is a clear need for replacement funding, to enable environment NGOs (eNGOs) to ride out the impact of this crisis until revenue and project funding kicks in again in 2021.

100%	of those surveyed are impacted by the crisis
40%	have less than 4 months financial reserves
21%	are at high risk of becoming financially unviable, with 11% having less than 1 month's reserves.
£40 million (minimum)	Indicative level of expected financial losses over the next 12 months in Scotland
3	Main drivers of financial loss relate to drop in membership and donations, loss of income generation ability over the key months and stock market crash impacts on charity investments and on trust and foundation investment based funding
Biggest detrimental impact now	Is the impact of postponed / cancelled events plus the inability to conduct fieldwork or access sites
Biggest impact over the next few months	Are all funding related: the impact of postponed / cancelled events; loss of revenue and reduced access to funding
Biggest impact looking forward	Funding issues from loss of revenue, postponed / cancelled events, reduced access to funding and reduced visitors / members. The impact of access to fieldwork and sites will be significant: with delayed projects and fieldwork and the lack of monitoring data and fieldwork results.
68%	Of respondents identified a need for replacement of project funding and flexibility with deadlines from funders



61%	Wanted to see government maintain momentum on policy and legislation. 57% wanted to see policy and funding to promote access to nature.
68%	Were accessing government or funder support schemes. Of those who were not, lack of capacity or not meeting the criteria were the 2 main reasons why.
72%	Of members are at an early stage of planning for recovery
61%	Have digital or IT needs that are not being met: 7% of those are not digitally equipped at all
Fieldwork deadlines	Are the biggest challenges for fieldwork and survey work under current restrictions. Continuing to support fieldwork over two seasons to make up for a lost year is important
Flexibility Trust Commitment	Were the most important areas where funders could help
Biggest concern	Survival in 6 – 12 months when restrictions and current support schemes end and after the main income generation season has been missed

Responses received

72% of LINK's 39 members responded to this survey and 46% responded to the additional questions. Respondents covered the range of LINK membership: responses are from large and small organisations and for all areas of interests from nature and landscape conservation, species conservation, marine issues, access and heritage.

Members who responded:

RSPB Scotland; Scottish Wild Land Group, National Trust for Scotland, Archaeology Scotland, Scottish Wildlife Trust, Froglife, FIDRA, APRS, WWF Scotland, Scottish Countryside Rangers Association, RZSS, Trees for Life, Buglife, Scottish Wild Beaver Group, Bumblebee Conservation Trust, Soil Association Scotland, Trees for Life, Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust, Cairngorms Campaign, Scottish Farming and Wildlife Advisers' Group, Scottish Badgers, Amphibian and Reptile Conservation, Planning Democracy, Scottish Campaign for National Parks, Ramblers Scotland, Woodland Trust Scotland. Two members submitted two responses.

All members have responded to this survey as organisations operating in Scotland. Answers to the financial loss question have been aggregated to provide an indicative figure at this stage. It does not include feedback from all members and includes some modelling of Scottish income as a proportion of UK income for a number of members. Additional information from members who were unable to respond to the additional questions informs this indicative figure.

Different results may have been submitted to the Wildlife and Countryside Link survey, where organisations responded as either England or UK organisations with no differentiation.

A full list of LINK members can be found [here](#).

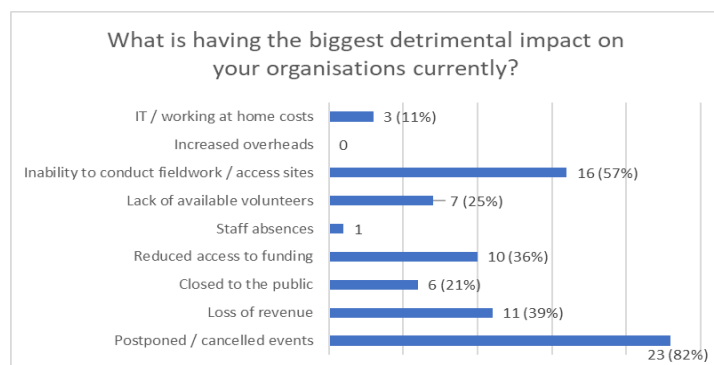


Analyses of responses:

Section 1: the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on ENGOs in Scotland

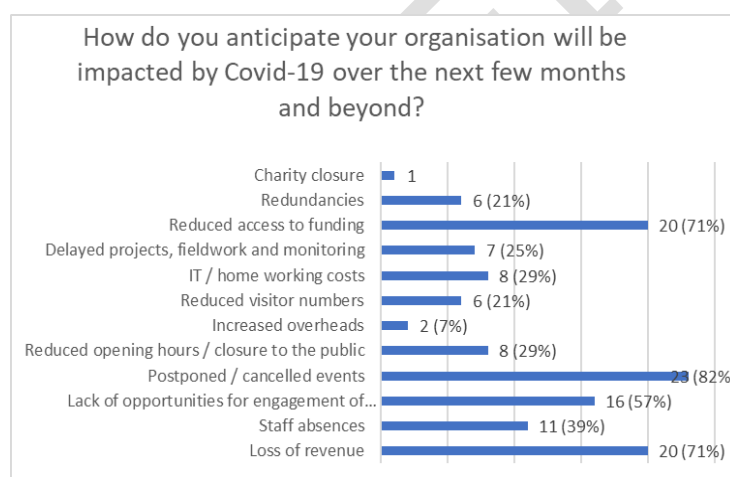
1.1 The current situation

All respondents to the survey are being impacted by the Covid-19 crisis. The short-term hit is on the loss of revenue and funding. Limited financial reserves are being quickly used up and many are worried about the impact 4 – 6 months down the line when financial reserves run out.



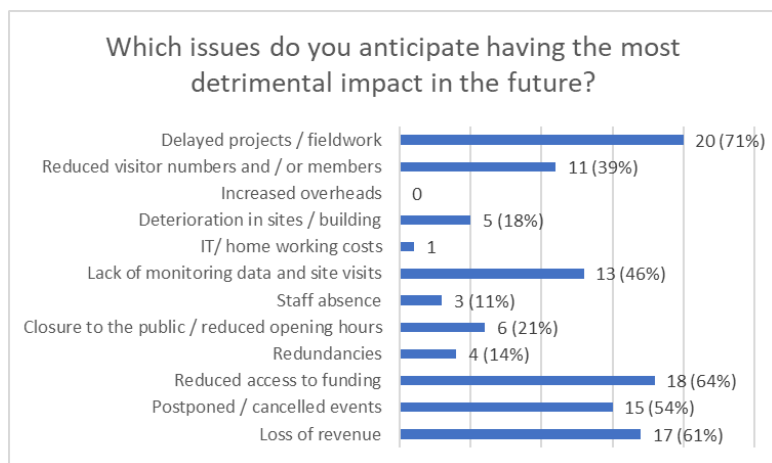
The biggest impact, affecting 82% of respondents is the impact of postponed or cancelled events. The impact of this is largely a financial one, where income derived will not be achieved and funding support cannot be claimed. The second biggest impact today is the lack of access to fieldwork or to sites. This lack of access now is also reflected in future impacts through loss of data and loss of benefits of site work for example.

1.2 Anticipated impacts in summer 2020



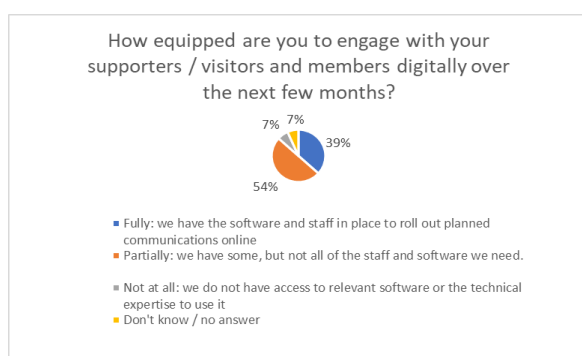
Over the summer, respondents are anticipating the biggest impacts will be the continued impact of postponed / cancelled events (82%), closely followed by loss in revenue and reduced access to funding (71% respectively).

Looking further ahead, 71% see the impact of delayed fieldwork and projects as having the most detrimental effect. Financial concerns are also high, with 64% concerned about reduced access to funding and 61% seeing the loss of revenue having the most detrimental impact at this time.



1.3 Impact of increased reliance on digital and IT infrastructure

Members have mixed levels of IT and digital capacity and needs. Those who invested in digital systems are better placed to continue contact with members and supporters and to support home working. These members cross the range of organisation sizes and interests.



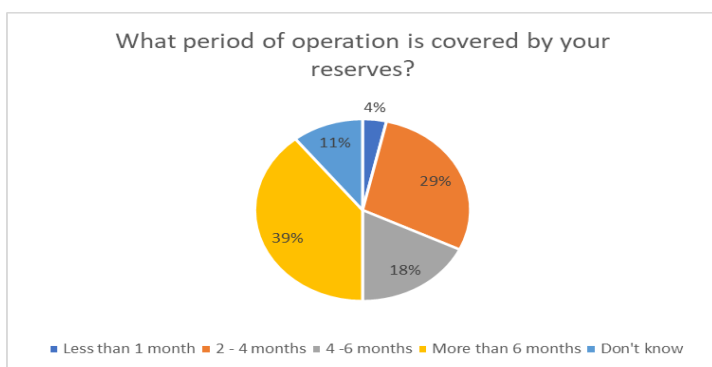
However the majority of members (54%) only have partial digital and IT infrastructure in place. Two member organisations do not have the digital and IT infrastructure in place: these are small organisations run by volunteers.

1.4 The scale of the financial risk facing eNGOs in Scotland

Members were asked to assess the level of risk they were facing in terms of long term viability as a result of the current crisis. Three organisations are facing high risk of financial collapse where without major financial intervention they will cease to be able to operate. These organisations have high running costs and are very dependent on visitor income for survival. This is hugely concerning for the sector and the areas of work that they have been able to deliver up to now. The percentage of organisations facing the same level of risk in the Wildlife and Countryside survey was slightly higher.



When asked how long the organisation could survive on financial reserves, again the picture is grim:



Nine (33%) members have less than 4 months of reserves. This compares to 18% in the Wildlife and Countryside LINK survey. Again in Scotland, these members include large and small organisations and between them cover all fields of work within LINK.

The percentage of members unable to operate past 6 months on current reserves rises to 46% of respondents. This is the same as the percentage in the Wildlife and Countryside LINK survey, where 45% of respondents had 6 months or less in financial reserves.

This response, if correct, will have a significant and serious impact on the ability of Scotland to deliver on our environmental and well being ambitions.

1.5 Income sources pre Covid-19

Income sources for members before the Covid-19 crisis impact began are varied. This is a widely used tactic in our sector to spread financial risk. However, it is clear that the crisis has impacted on most of these income sources. This is limiting the levels of finance available in the current crisis and beyond. 94% of respondents receive income from membership and donations, with legacies and corporate support also important. These figures do not reflect proportions of income from each source.

The Covid crisis has impacted severely on five of these nine income sources:

- corporate support has decreased because of the halt in corporate activity,
- income generated by fieldwork / survey and income generated by visitors, event and activities have all ceased completely during a period when generation through these mechanisms is usually maximised

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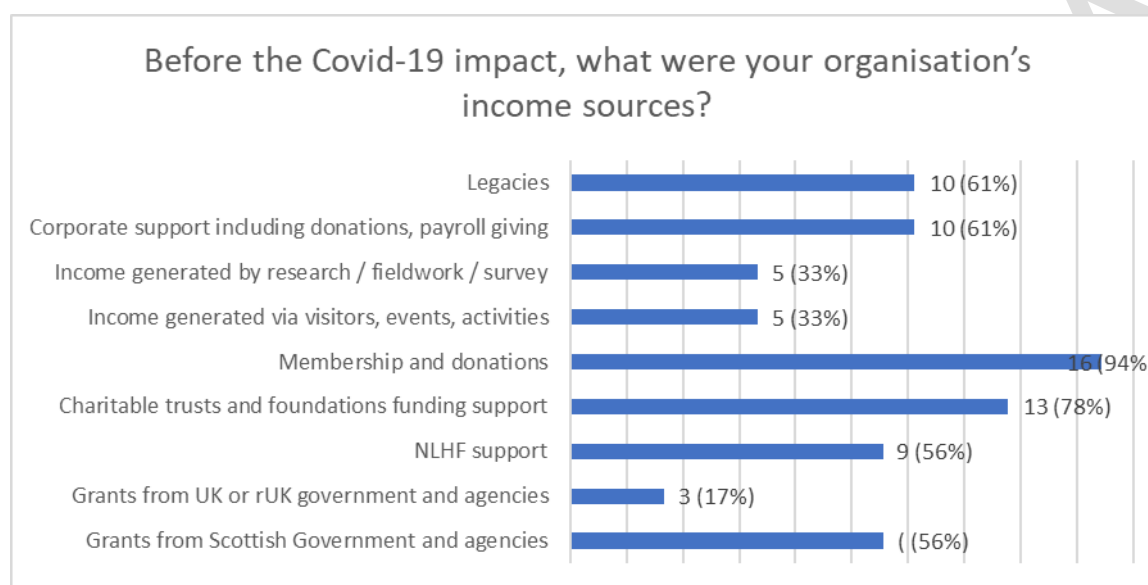
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- membership and donations have decreased as people cut spending and make savings.
- charitable trusts and foundations have severely limited income where their income is based on business generated income. Conversations with some of these funders indicate that they expect no or very low income to be available for distribution in the next 12 – 24 months.

This leaves government and agency support and NLHF support as the remaining sources of funding support least affected. Unless member organisations are already in receipt of these, these are now also inaccessible.

This highlights even more the key finding and the impending risk to the sector that member organisation will be facing a crunch point in the medium to longer term as these pressures start to impact.



1.6 Estimated financial costs / losses as a result of Covid-19

Estimated financial losses from those members who responded for Scottish operations are around £5 million for the next 12 months.. Their estimated losses range from £10,000 to £2 million. However, not all members were able to respond and we know that there is an additional expected loss across the sector of at least £35 million . It is fair to say that on present evidence the sector as a whole is probably looking at a minimum of a .£40 million financial loss over the next 12 months. These indicative figures serve merely as marks in the sand at this point in time, built on many assumptions.

1.7 Main drivers of financial loss

It follows that a key driver in immediate income loss across the majority of members is currently the decrease in memberships and donations. Income generation ability and loss of planned income through closed schemes are also key drivers across the members and will start to impact severely in the next few months. However, where organisations rely on visitor income for a significant proposition of total income, the impact is business critical. This is currently the known case for 3 members.

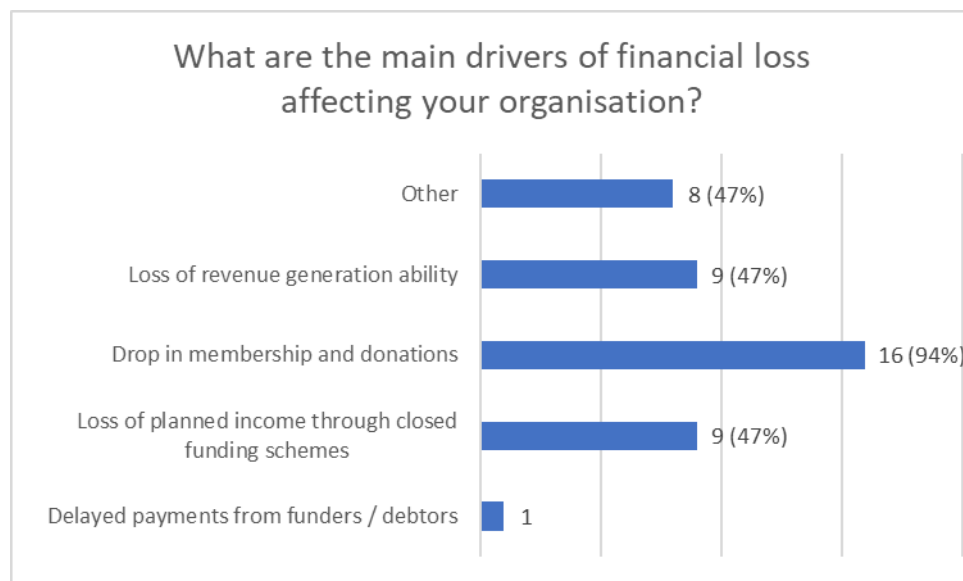
Other drivers listed included reduced income from investments, a major drop off in corporate support due to contraction in the economy and reduced funding from charitable trusts and foundations due to effect of stock market crash on their investments. Other drivers noted were the possibility of a negative LINK is a Scottish Charity (SC000296) and a Scottish Company Limited by guarantee (SC250899), core funded by Membership Subscriptions and by grants from Scottish Natural Heritage, Scottish Government and Charitable Trusts.

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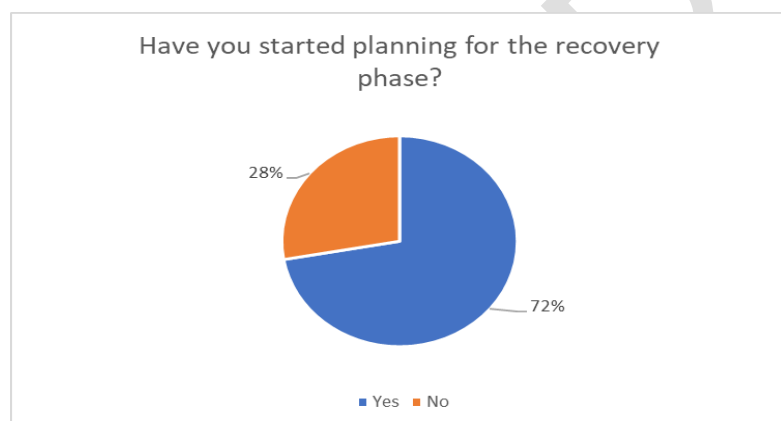
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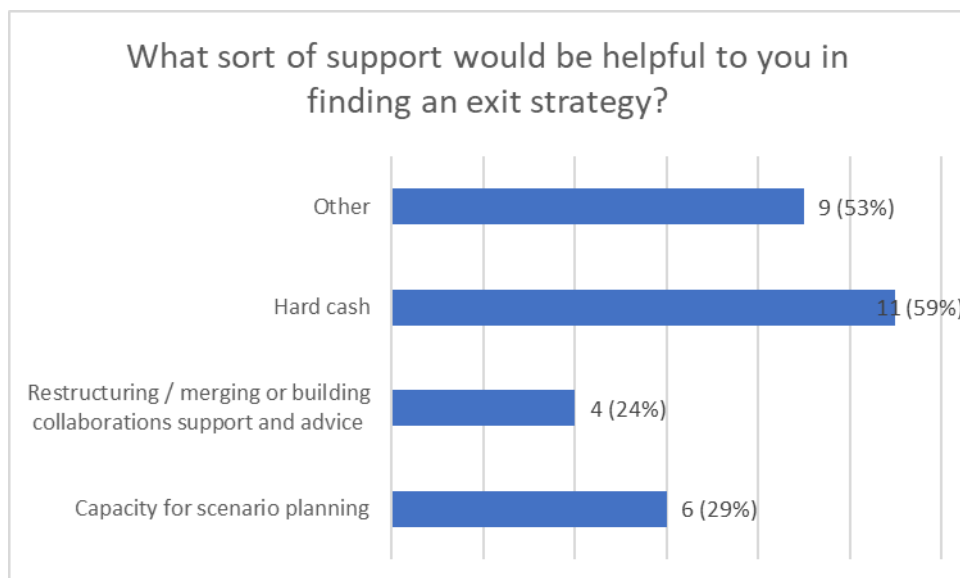
impact on full-cost recovery contributions and increased competition to funding so planned applications less likely to be successful. Refocusing of longer term grant schemes is also causing concern (see below).



1.8 Recovery planning and exit strategies



72% of members are planning for recovery from the crisis, although of these, all are at an early stage. The current priority is the focus on cashflow, staff furlough and immediate contingency. However, the barriers members are facing with planning include a lack of staff capacity and needing a clearer steer on exit arrangements to lock down. Immediate and ongoing work includes active consideration of fundraising strategies to at least achieve 50% of expected income and moving nearly all activity on-line. This however is not generating revenue.



When asked about the sort of support that would be helpful, almost 60% specified cash support to organisations, often to prevent staff losses. Aside from this type of support, more details of the social distancing that will be in place following lockdown would make planning recovery phase activities easier. Comments included needing advice on social distancing in offices and meetings and on public transport so that meeting the public face to face could be planned. Within the current guidance, it is impossible to deliver some core work which involves staff and volunteers working in close confines for extended periods of time.

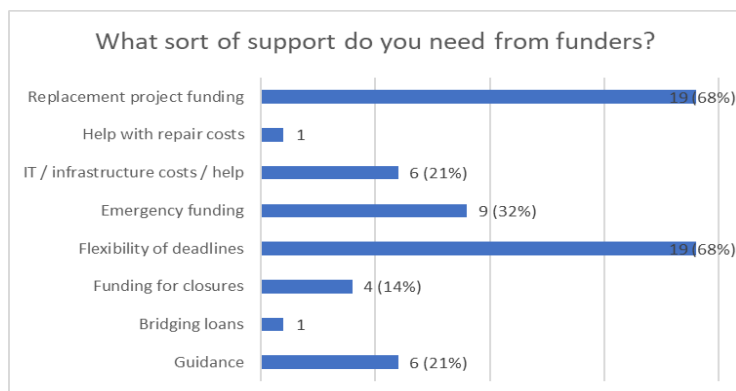
Other support identified included help in marketing activities to enable members to reach wider audiences. Concerns were also raised on the need to open grant programmes focused on other priorities than Covid19 and protecting those grant programmes that were prioritising the environment pre Covid to meet the climate emergency and nature crisis, which are both still happening. Clarity on future funding schemes such as Agri-Environment Scheme and Peatland Action was also identified as important. Members are also seeking reassurance that funders remain committed to these issues and offer understanding and flexibility (see below).

Section 2: Help needed from funders

Help from environmental funders and government will clearly be crucial to enable eNGOs to weather this crisis and come out the other side. 68% of respondents identified two clear priorities on the support from grant providers that would be most helpful to them. These were:

- (a) for funders to provide flexibility in the deadlines and outcomes expected from projects and work which they are funding. Some projects may need to be deferred for a year, without penalties, to enable work to be carried out at the right time of year
- (b) for grant providers to offer replacement funding for both projects where funding has dried up and to help cover lost revenues lost through closures around the virus, plus emergency funding for organisations that are struggling.

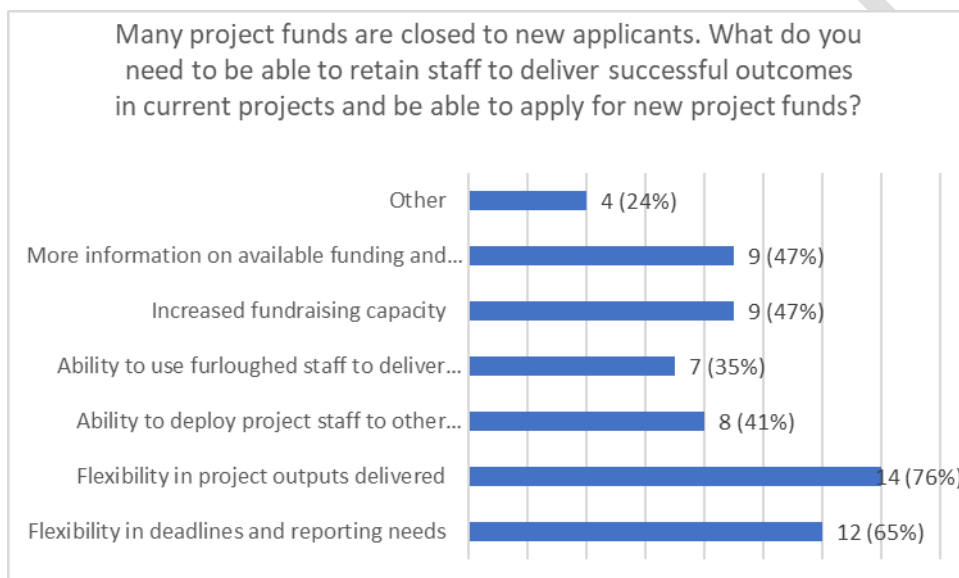
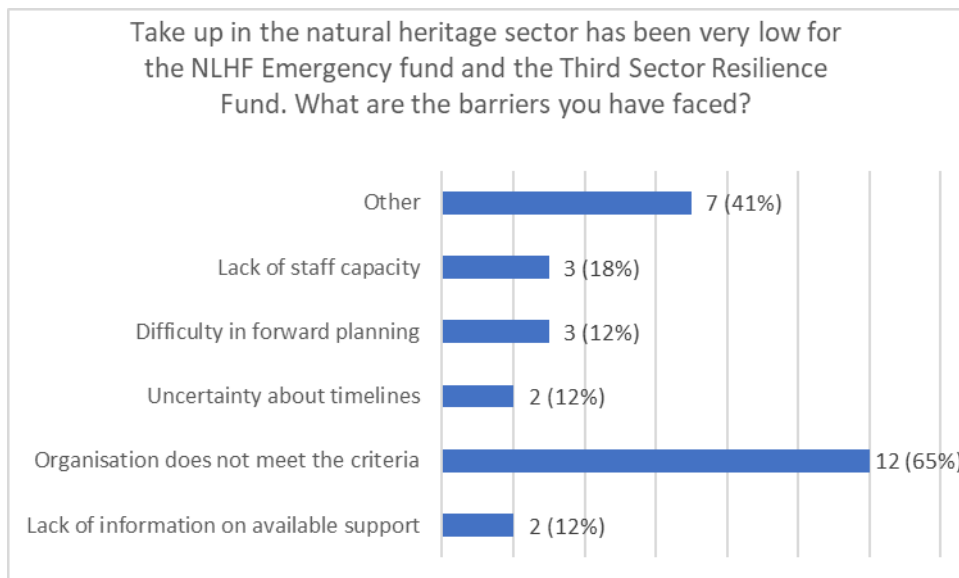
Overall, replacement funding is the top issue where organisations feel that funders could help them in this crisis.



2.1 Emergency funding take up and project funding

Take up of two specific funds was explored: the NLHF Heritage Emergency Fund and the Third Sector Resilience Fund. It was widely acknowledged that these funds were not geared towards eNGOs, which was a large part of why applications had been so low. In terms of eligibility, a specific challenge raised is that the short term 4 month window does not represent the true cash flow impact of the significant income already lost since March due to Covid-19. With staff on furlough and limited staff capacity, members are prioritising applications to funds with better chance of success. At the current time, 3 member organisations have applied to the Third Sector Resilience Fund and 3 have applied to the NLHF Emergency Fund.

Our members recognise that these funds are, rightly, geared towards organisations in short-term crisis. However, there are very high levels of concern that, as a result, the very significant medium and longer term impacts on environmental organisations could be overlooked. Furthermore, some of the larger organisations, whilst severely impacted, have a degree of resilience and are actively not applying to these funds in order to preserve the vital lifeline support for smaller heritage organisations. They note however that there remains a real risk hanging over some larger projects, often landscape scale partnership projects that deliver against Government objectives. Some of these, funded by NHLF, are in severe difficulty and the larger organisations do not have the resources to 'bail' them out with additional cash. Any solutions for these projects will require more than flexibility over claims and timescales.



When asked about wider support from NLHF, 78% of members agreed that wider support would be helpful with the transition required when restrictions are lifted.

They specified a number of specific areas, where support would be useful:

Operational	Project
Staff salary and Full cost recovery of operational costs to retain staff and organisational viability given that there will be a slow to return to 'normal' affecting ability to raise income. Anything to help cashflow basically	Support for projects that need to be delivered in a different way to usual, particularly projects that had previously been able to self-fund via income generation models which are not viable in the short to medium term due to Covid-19 restrictions eg citizen science
End of restrictions and end of furlough may not	Funds to support larger projects badly impacted.

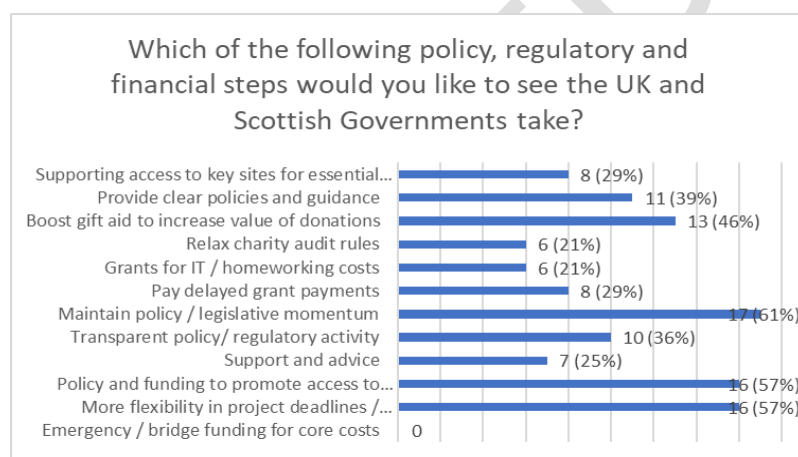


coincide and that would cause a lot of problems in relation to funding to keep organisations afloat and operating.	particularly if they involve smaller partners and deliver against Govt targets, eg landscape scale projects. which cannot be rescued by large eNGOs using their own resources.
In addition to emergency funding, there will be a need to look beyond the immediate crisis requirements, particularly in relation to continuity of mainstream grant programmes.	An extension to timescales for projects, plus early payment of awards
Funding to help support resumption of activity and cover unanticipated costs e.g. vandalism, fly tipping and fires.	Additional financial support for existing and projects going through their development phase because of difficulty in finding match funding. Longer term, interest free loans for projects that have future revenue generating potential would also be helpful.
Training and new ways of networking	Funding to support development of new activity

Section 3: Help needed from Government

3.1 Assistance needed from government

61% of respondents identified that, for them in meeting their charitable objectives, the most important priority for government was to maintain policy and legislative momentum. This reflects a clear concern that while 2020 was building up to be a super year for climate and nature, the pandemic has called a halt to some of that momentum with the postponement of key international events and vital domestic legislation.



The next most important priority for government with 57% of respondents, is to provide more flexibility with project deadlines and requirements and also funding to promote access to nature. Many organisations are also very concerned about funding drying up for next year, or being critically delayed. Multiple organisations reported that application processes have been postponed. This could dramatically affect revenue for next year and impact the organisations' ability to carry out time critical environmental work, much of which is seasonally dependant. A key concern from many members is that the environment part of the third sector is being left behind: while the focus to date has, understandably, been on front-line charities, providing immediate assistance to citizens. The third sector has evolved to provide a much wider range of public services, including access to and protection of nature, which is proving to be

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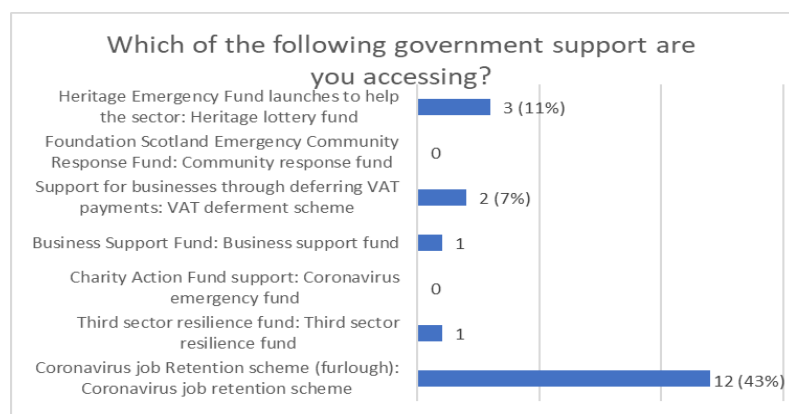
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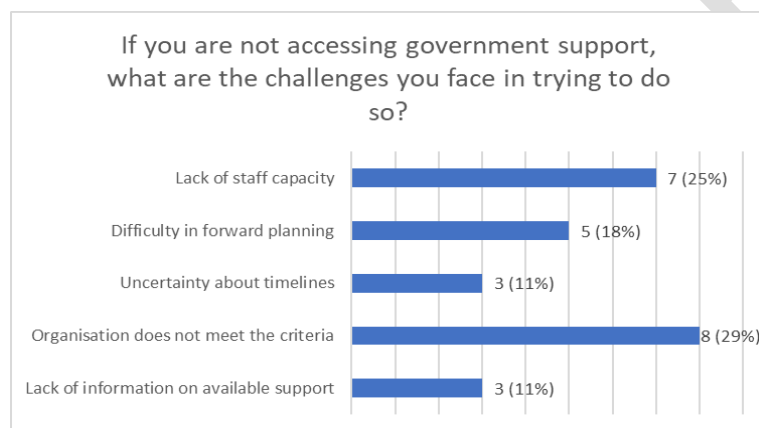
vital in the current crisis. The organisations providing this type of service are now at risk due to event and site closures, but without the safety net of tax-payer support, or the potential to borrow against assets or future profits.

A bolder approach is needed to stabilise the sector at this point and to ensure it survives the current shutdown, and can return to equilibrium. There is a sense in the sector that the big crunch will come six months to a year or so from now.

This is in contrast to results from the Wildfire and Countryside LINK survey, where the majority of respondents identified their top priority as emergency funding for core costs, in particular staffing.



When asked which government supported schemes they were accessing, 46% of respondents were not using any of them. Of those who were using schemes, 43% were using the furlough scheme.



The most frequent barriers to organisations not using any government supported schemes, were either that their organisations did not meet the criteria or they had insufficient staff capacity to be able to investigate and apply for them.

3.2 Concerns on getting outside during the lockdown

Enabling people to access nature during this crisis is important to our members and is also increasingly important to people across Scotland. However concerns were raised through this survey on access to nature. Concerns were raised on ensuring the Scottish Outdoor Access Code was applied and used appropriately during the crisis by landowners/managers and walkers, through a major public awareness campaign to supplement the current approach of press releases and media interviews.

3.3 Fieldwork and site access

Of the 50% of members whose fieldwork is supported by SNH or JNCC, all believed that SNH (JNCC was not mentioned) was being as flexible as they could be. This flexibility is very much welcomed and has enabled members to retain funded staff despite project disruption.



However, whilst flexibility is very important, and the opportunity to pause and delay appreciated, it does not solve all the issues members are facing. Two key areas of concern were highlighted by respondents:

- (a) Where the support provided by SNH covers only a small proportion of the monitoring project's essential operating costs, the lions share would ordinarily be funded through participant fees, in line with charity trading rules. The sharp drop in paying participants in 2020 due to covid-19 has resulted in a serious short fall in the funds and volunteers required to undertake monitoring and survey work.
- (b) In many cases work is linked to the flowering / breeding season which cannot be delayed, and which impacts on results with a 'skipped' year. If, in turn, because of a missed season, projects have to be continued for an additional year, flexibility alone is not enough as costs will be considerably increased.

Beyond fieldwork, several members raised significant concerns that although SNH provides funding for surveys with the public that aid in monitoring sites for some rare species, general grant funding from SNH that should have started the 1st of April has been significantly delayed with no recent updates on how they hope to support organisations. Delays in confirmation of grant funding and a request to resubmit funding applications has caused capacity and scenario planning issues for several members.

In terms of flexibility for field work now specific comments and suggestions included:

Move funding into next financial year and ring fence it
Flexibility to carry over work to a new season, and flexibility around budgets, - increasing financial support to meet additional costs involved.
Allow surveying by contractors and staff if social distancing is maintained
Accept that there will be very little fieldwork activity in these circumstances
Ensure that organisations are supported if these surveys aren't able to take place right now, or that monitoring is done with fewer people so that sites still get visited
Extend application deadlines
Delay projects for a year while we make up for lost surveying and practical work time.
Provide clarity as much as flexibility: there have been some differences in interpretation of government guidelines

And when restrictions begin to be lifted:

Organisations need the ability, and confidence from funders, to prioritise use of limited staff resources using their judgement and individual circumstances
Re-open any ring-fenced funds for applications
Provide and update advice on running events safely under new circumstances
Build capacity and confidence as a lot of momentum in projects has been lost.
Allow surveys to take place with fewer members of the public to ensure a safe distance is maintained by all.
Support planned surveys postponed due to Covid: we have a lot of catching up to do, especially because lockdown has been during peak field work season.



Section 3: message from LINK

This survey paints a clear picture of the severe impact of the covid-19 crisis on a significant proportion of the environmental NGO sector in Scotland. While major short-term shocks are impacting on members, most are dealing with these by cutting expenditure as much as possible, most often through uptake of the furlough scheme. While this provides some short-term relief, not all expenditure can be halted and for organisations where costs continue for upkeep of premises and collections for example, members are spending financial reserves. The biggest concern however is the looming longer-term trouble in the next 6- 12 months, if current crashes in funding, membership, revenue and charitable giving are not quickly reversed.

Our sector tends not to hold large cash reserves. Income is instead invested directly into frontline science, conservation and support for public engagement with nature. All of these functions are at risk at exactly the wrong moment, with activities curtailed, sudden and significant drops in income and missed peak seasons for on the ground work and income generation.

2020 was meant to be a super year for the environment across the world and in Scotland in particular. Scotland was hosting key international events on climate and biodiversity and was providing political leadership on climate and nature ambitions. 2020 was also meant to be the year for action towards the climate emergency and nature crisis to be ramped up to limit the impact of both on the world according to the IPCC, IPBES, the President of the EU and Scotland's First Minister. The pandemic has underlined how important nature is to people for physical and mental health and how underinvestment in protection of nature and reversing climate change leaves us increasingly vulnerable to pandemics and catastrophic environmental events like flooding. It is imperative that the momentum on these is not lost: the Scottish Government, its environment agencies and the environmental NGOs must be at full strength to bring this work back on track with ambition and speed.

Today, people need nature more than ever before. Even before the pandemic, the rise of non-communicable disease meant that our "natural health service" was more important than ever. We must help people continue to experience the joy and solace of nature responsibly. The pandemic has brought people closer to nature in our urban areas with clearer birdsong and clearer skies. And this connection with nature on daily exercise routines is helping to keep people safe and well.

This is also the time when nature needs us more than ever. Without the ongoing work of LINK member organisations continuing to strive to protect Scotland's nature, land and seascapes, the fight against the nature crisis will be lost. There is however increasing concern in the eNGO sector, and beyond, that while the climate emergency and nature crisis have not gone away, the drive towards tackling them has dissipated as a result of the pandemic. This is understandable. It is equally imperative, however, that action towards these global issues must be maintained and renewed.

In the weeks and months ahead, LINK and our members will work together to help each other through the crisis, to keep policy and practical action for climate and nature on track and to motivate others to experience nature, benefit from that connection and work with us to conserve it for future generations. Targeted, swift and effective financial support from Government and our funders can help us maintain the momentum and progress we were making together towards solving the nature and climate emergencies.

Of course, the health and livelihoods of Scotland's people require urgent and immediate investment to enable our nation to recover. We have produced and are sharing this report because we know that nature



and our members can play a vital role in that recovery and because this short-term emergency must not exacerbate the long-term climate and nature crises, which themselves still require urgent action.

We hope these findings are helpful.

Contact details

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