



# Community Voices

Speaking up for Argyll and the Isles

## Argyll and Bute TSI – Sector Survey Analysis

### Summary

A survey was promoted via ABTSI databases, community group databases, social media, PR and word of mouth, asking people to share their experiences, challenges, and ambitions for the Third Sector in Argyll & Bute to help AB TSI develop a sector wide strategy. An incentive of £250 or half a day's training for a nominated organisation was given.

***“Your view on the Third Sector and how your community should develop is important and will help shape its future!”***

### Key metrics

- The survey was live – 22 September to 17 November 2025
- 181 people filled in the survey
- 14 minutes was the average time spent filling in the survey

### Summary of main topics of the survey:

#### Strengths of the Third Sector

The sector in Argyll and Bute is locally rooted, trusted and responsive. Organisations know their communities well, offer person-centred support, and step in quickly where statutory services cannot. Volunteers and staff are dedicated, creative and collaborative, with strong networks and an ability to innovate despite limited resources.

#### Biggest challenges

The sector is constrained by funding insecurity, volunteer shortages, rising demand and limited staff capacity. Remote rural and island geography add barriers around transport, costs and access to training. Many groups feel undervalued by statutory partners, face slow processes, and struggle with growing governance and compliance requirements.

## Top priorities for the next two years

Organisations aim to:

- Secure sustainable, long-term income
- Recruit and retain volunteers
- Strengthen governance, leadership and systems
- Maintain or expand services for vulnerable groups
- Improve visibility and engagement
- Enhance collaboration with the Council/HSCP and peers
- Support community assets and local economic activity

## How the TSI is performing

Feedback is positive. TSI staff are viewed as supportive and proactive, and helpful funding support. Areas for improvement include greater visibility across remote areas, clearer communication about available services, improved digital tools, and more follow-up after training.

## What the sector wants for the future

The sector wants to be more sustainable, more connected and better recognised. Key aspirations include multi-year funding, stronger collaboration, clearer communication, more local support, shared learning, and a greater collective voice. There is optimism, but also a need for support to cope with rising pressures.

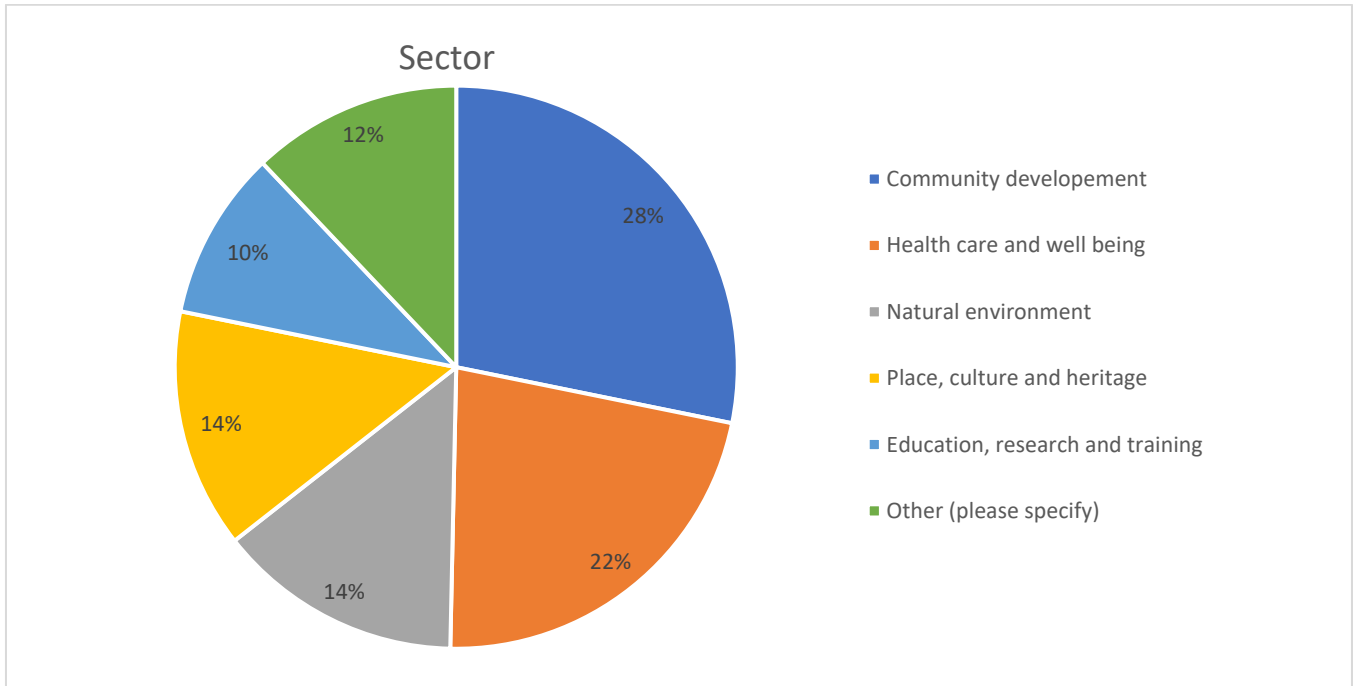
## Implications for the new Third Sector Strategy

The survey findings give a list of suggested areas where the TSI could support them, which may be included in the new strategy.

- **Building sustainability** through longer-term funding approaches, stronger funding support, and advocacy for multi-year investment
- **Investing in capacity** - governance, leadership, skills, digital infrastructure, volunteer development and organisational systems
- **Strengthening local presence** with more place-based support, improved access in rural and island areas, and stronger communication mechanisms
- **Enhancing partnership working** between the third sector, Council and HSCP, embedding the sector as an equal partner in planning and service design
- **Creating an enabling environment** where innovation, collaboration and shared resources are encouraged
- **Exploring new models such as an All-Argyll Fund**, ensuring they are designed transparently, with strong local input and work equally across areas.

## 1. Sectors / Organisations

Responses to the question “What sector does your organisation operate in?” are below. Community Development and Health Care and Well Being sectors accounted for 50% of responses.

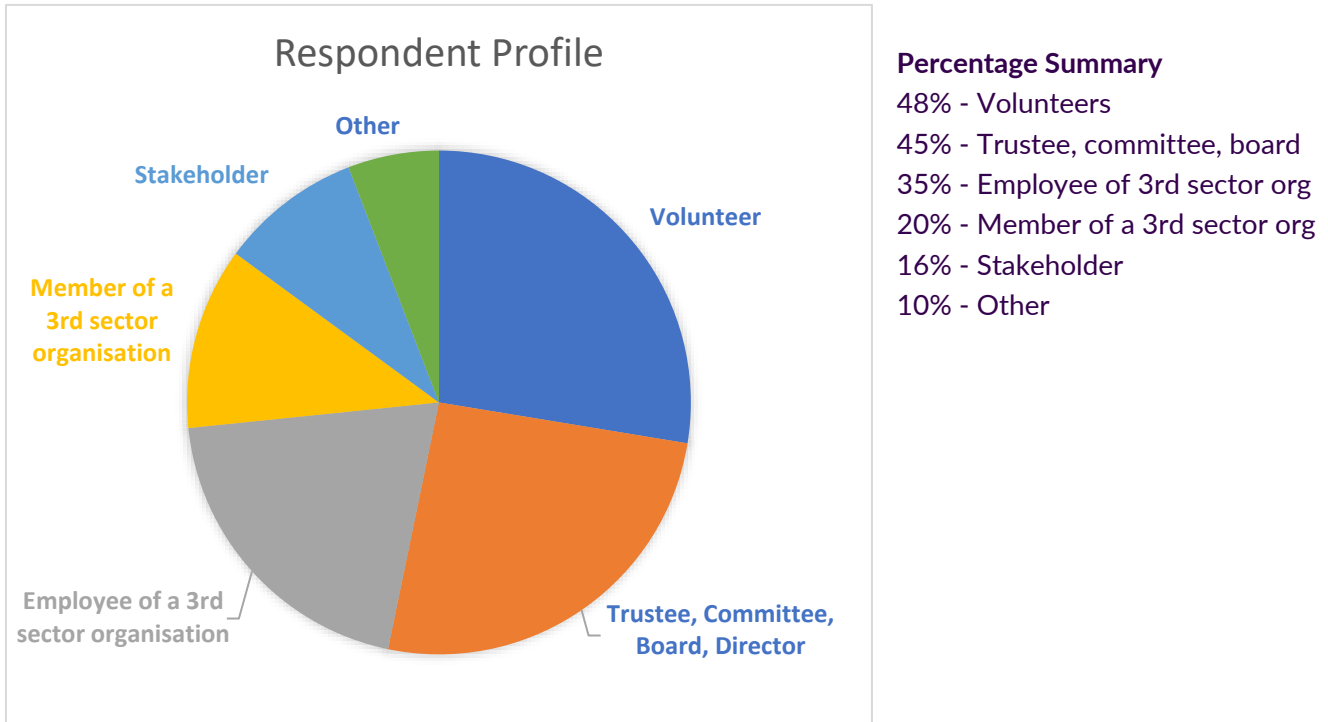


12% of respondents operate in areas not captured by the main sector list, including arts, culture and heritage (such as community radio, libraries, dance, publishing and design), as well as specialist social care and wellbeing services like befriending, Rape Crisis support, elderly care, veterans’ support and animal therapy.

Several organisations focus on community infrastructure: community halls, councils, events, outdoor access, festivals and foodbanks. Others work with children, families and young people, or in environmental campaigning and climate action. Sports, recreation, employability and personal development also feature.

## 2. Respondent Profile

Unsurprisingly, the largest groups responding were volunteers and members of the organisation in a trustee, committee or board member capacity.



10% of respondents who gave more detail in the “other” category had roles ranging from community leadership positions, such as community councillors, directors, chief executives and team leaders, to operational roles including nurses, community learning workers, archivists and campaigning organisers.

Several people identified simply as community members, long-term residents, or individuals who want to support their area, while others noted they are self-employed and running community groups. A few mentioned being former board members or holding roles linked to public services such as child poverty coordination.

### 3. Strengths and Challenges

Q2 We want to know what the key issues are currently faced by the sector locally. What do you see as your key strengths, and what are the main challenges you face?

Overall, the sector is viewed as highly capable, particularly in areas relating to community connection and adaptability. Respondents highlighted that third sector organisations excel at empowering local communities, communicating effectively, and working constructively alongside the public sector. These strengths reflect the sector’s local connections and its ability to respond quickly to changing needs.

However, the data also shows challenges. The sector had less positive comments around its ability to contribute to improving some social outcomes, such as employability or health. These may reflect structural constraints, including limited staffing, funding uncertainty, pressure on volunteer capacity, and gaps in specialist skills.

The results suggest that while the sector is valued for its agility and community leadership, it continues to face pressures that limit its ability for growth and sustainable impact.

#### Key Strengths

<b>Good local knowledge &amp; community trust</b>	Organisations understand their communities, are embedded locally, and “punch above their weight”.
<b>Dedicated volunteers &amp; staff commitment</b>	Many have highly dedicated volunteers or small teams who are passionate, skilled and resilient.
<b>Ability to adapt quickly</b>	Flexible, creative, responsive. Especially in crisis or when statutory services withdraw.
<b>Collaboration &amp; partnerships</b>	Good networking, partnership working with schools, health, social care, and other local bodies.
<b>Person-centred support</b>	Many offer tailored services, relational support, trauma-informed practice and community-based activities.
<b>Innovative &amp; opportunity-seeking</b>	Organisations are proactive, resourceful and often able to develop new projects with limited resources.

#### Key Challenges

<b>Funding insecurity (the most comments)</b>	Short-term grants, competitive funding environment, reduced donations, costly reporting requirements.
<b>Volunteer shortages &amp; fatigue</b>	Difficulty recruiting volunteers, ageing volunteer base, over-reliance on a few individuals.
<b>Capacity pressures</b>	Not enough staff, too much bureaucracy, limited admin/finance/HR support, time spent fundraising instead of delivering.
<b>Rising demand &amp; complex needs</b>	Statutory cuts mean the third sector is expected to plug growing gaps (health, transport, social care, mental health).
<b>Geographical barriers</b>	Rurality, islands, poor transport, dispersed communities, high travel costs, isolation.
<b>Challenging relationships with statutory partners</b>	Lack of collaboration, slow processes, poor communication, unrealistic expectations, “words not action”.
<b>Infrastructure challenges</b>	Ageing buildings, high utilities, difficulty accessing contractors, limited space, expensive maintenance.
<b>Governance &amp; compliance burden</b>	Increasing regulation deters volunteers and soaks up organisational time.

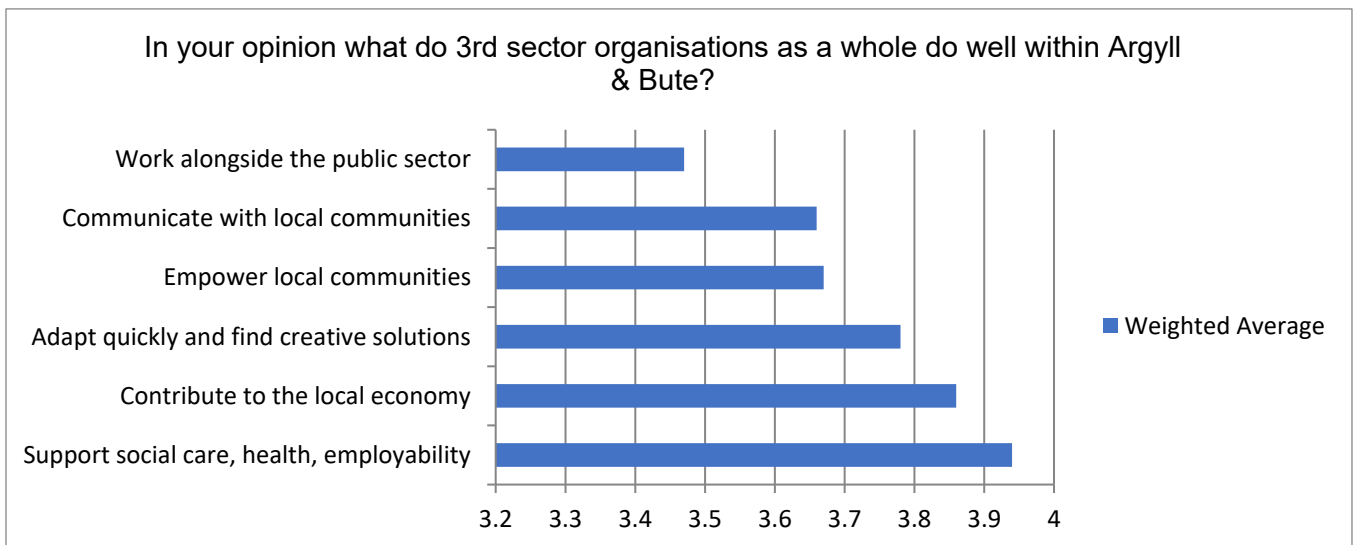
## 4. What the sector does well

### Q3 In your opinion what do 3rd sector organisations do well within Argyll & Bute?

Open-text comments indicate strong consensus around what distinguishes the third sector locally. Respondents described the sector as community-driven, innovative, and deeply committed to improving quality of life. A number of strengths emerged repeatedly:

- Responsiveness: Organisations “step in quickly” where statutory services are stretched or absent.
- Local knowledge: Staff and volunteers understand their communities and tailor support accordingly.
- Strong relationships: The sector is seen as approachable, trusted and collaborative, particularly in rural and island communities.
- Holistic support: Many groups provide person-centred, wraparound support that statutory services cannot deliver.
- Creativity and problem-solving: The sector regularly develops new initiatives, pilots new ideas and adapts with limited resources.

These insights reinforce the sector’s identity as a critical infrastructure of care, inclusion and community resilience across Argyll and Bute.



## 5. Organisational Priorities & Challenges

Q4: What are your organisation's key priorities over the next 2 years?

Q5: What are the main challenges you face in achieving them?

### Priorities

A mix of practical and strategic needs were highlighted. Recurring themes included:

- **Sustainable income.** Reducing reliance on short-term grants, building long-term financial resilience.
- **Volunteer recruitment and retention.** And expand membership.
- **Strengthening organisational set up.** Improving governance, becoming SCIOs, and developing more efficient structures and systems.
- **Maintaining & expanding services, improving geographic reach.** Particularly for vulnerable groups, children, families, carers and isolated residents. Reduce waiting lists. Ensure fair access across rural and island communities. Improving **community wellbeing, social inclusion and mental health support** is repeatedly highlighted.
- **Community assets.** Developing, upgrading or securing community assets such as halls, archives, woodland, piers, cathedrals, libraries and outdoor facilities. Place-based ambitions, including implementing Local Place Plans, protecting biodiversity, supporting climate and nature initiatives, and delivering regeneration projects, feature strongly.
- **Improve collaboration** with the Council/HSCP and other partners
- **Improve comms,** visibility and awareness. Find better ways to engage.
- **Support local economy.** Building community wealth and local economic activity; supporting employability and skills; boosting digital inclusion; and protecting and enhancing local infrastructure and services.

### Challenges

Challenges largely mirror the priorities.

- **Accessing long-term funding.** Financial uncertainty affects organisations' ability to plan, retain staff, invest in development and cover rising operational costs such as energy, travel and building maintenance.
- **Limited capacity and increasing demand for services.** Volunteer fatigue, difficulty recruiting new volunteers or board members, and too few people doing too much work. Small staff teams are overstretched, and administration, fundraising and governance often fall on the same individuals.
- **Barriers created by public sector processes.** Communication difficulties, lack of collaboration with the Council/HSCP, slow planning processes, and perceived resistance to change. Rurality intensifies challenges: long travel distances, unreliable transport links, higher costs, and difficulty accessing training or specialist services.
- **Skills gaps.** Fundraising, governance, digital skills
- **Lack of suitable premises.**
- **Engaging some groups.** Isolated residents, older people, families facing poverty
- **Wider economic pressures.** Staff recruitment, ageing demographic, community depopulation.

These findings underscore the need for greater sustainability, capacity-building support, and better mechanisms for collaboration across the sector.

## 6. Experience of TSI Services

Q 6 Have you used A&B TSI's services? **72% Yes, 28% No**

Q 7 If you have used the TSI's services how would you describe your experience of the following?

72 % of respondents have used the TSI services, and overall feedback was positive.

Weighted averages indicate particularly **high satisfaction** with:

- **Regular networks** (Adults Health and Wellbeing Network, Children, Social Enterprise)
- **Funding management** via bespoke fund management portal (Communities Mental Health and Wellbeing Fund, ABCAN seed fund and CLLD resilience fund)
- **Voice and advocacy** (representation of the sector on local statutory bodies, regional and national level)
- **Knowledge and training** (workshops on key issues)

Slightly lower satisfaction with, but still with positive averages:

- **Building capacity** via direct support (funding and grants advice, business planning, strategy review, HR advice, governance support, fundraising tools etc)
- **Direct services** (volunteering listings & support, online learning portal, community directory, online resources hub, Inveraray training facility, jobs page etc)

**Comments** made can be summarised into the following themes:

- Respondents praised **“helpful”, “proactive” and “supportive” local TSI staff**, several individuals are mentioned by name for providing invaluable guidance, particularly around business development, funding and governance.
- The Inveraray Hub is highlighted as a high-quality resource.
- Several organisations/respondents say they have **not used most services**, often due to lack of time, not knowing what is available, or because services feel irrelevant to their type of work (e.g., community councils or specialist groups).
- **Online tools improvements.** Some users noted that the online funding portal can be “glitchy” or “difficult to navigate”, and that some training feels too basic. Follow-up after training could be improved. Directories or online tools could be more user-friendly.
- **TSI plays a “vital strategic role”** in giving the third sector a collective voice, facilitating collaboration, and highlighting opportunities.

Although largely positive, the comments highlight opportunities for the TSI to improve visibility, extend reach into rural areas, and streamline some processes. The more negative comments focused on improving digital tools and follow-up, limited awareness or uptake of some services.

Overall, respondents see the TSI as a valuable partner and support mechanism.

## 7. Future Vision for the Sector

### Q 9 In an ideal world what would be your **ambitions for the whole sector** in Argyll & Bute in the future?

*“To be recognised for the service it provides and to receive basic funding to be able to run those services. Looking out for and applying for funding constantly is exhausting, unsettling and detracts precious time from the work that needs to be done to run the service”*

- **Properly funded, recognised, and treated as an equal partner** by government and statutory services.
- **Secure, multi-year funding** that allows staff retention and long term planning.
- **Better collaboration**, share information and reduced duplication across organisations & public sector.
- **Greater visibility and public understanding** of the sector’s value, and stronger collective voice.
- **Reduce reliance on volunteers** and ensuring professional, resilient, community-rooted services

### Q 10 How could the **TSI best support** the sector’s future growth and resilience?

*“TSI’s best contribution is to act as a connector, enabler, and advocate—strengthening the sector’s skills, sustainability, and influence so it can adapt and thrive long term.”*

- Act as a **strong connector, advocate and enabler**.
- Helps orgs with **funding** through signposting, hands-on support with applications, strategic funding advice, and lobbying government for multi-year investment.
- **Amplify the sector’s collective voice**, influence policy, and recognised by statutory services.
- Strengthening **collaboration, networking and coordination** across organisations - including linking similar groups, reducing duplication, facilitating partnerships, and organising regular forums.
- More **face-to-face local support**, more staff on the ground, help with governance, leadership, volunteer recruitment, and sharing best practice.
- Improving **communication infrastructure** is another priority: making directories easier to use, providing clearer information, developing hubs or digital platforms, and promoting the work of local organisations.

### Q 13 Is there anything else you’d like to share that could help shape ABTSI’s future direction or services, and make your organisation’s path more sustainable?

*“It would be helpful for ABTSI to continue strengthening its advocacy role with the Council and HSCP, ensuring the value of preventative third sector services is recognised in strategic planning and commissioning.”*

*“The role of the area TSI support advisors is pivotal in providing our committee with support this year to explore funding, expansion and priorities.”*

There are no bullet points as the answers covered the same ground as the information above.

#### **Summary of this section**

Responses around future needs paint a picture of a sector that wants to be more connected, more sustainable and better resourced. They are keen for A&B TSI to act as a connector, advocate and enabler.

The sector is asking for

- Long-term funding stability
- Recognition, appreciation, influence
- Stronger collaboration and communication
- More local, place-based support
- Practical, hands-on help with funding, governance and volunteers
- More ABTSI presence on the ground

Respondents expressed optimism about the sector’s potential but emphasised that without structural changes, particularly around funding and collaboration, the sector will struggle to meet rising community needs.

## 8. All-Argyll Fund

Q 11 Would you support an “All Argyll” fund being created?



Q 12 How might this work best for your community or organisation?

The idea of a shared All-Argyll Fund received **support** from respondents. Many saw it as a practical way to:

- Simplify access to funding
- Reduce time spent on grant applications
- Create a fairer and more transparent process
- Support smaller or rural groups who traditionally struggle to access funding
- Encourage collaboration instead of competition

There were some concerns about governance, decision-making processes and ensuring equitable distribution across areas and organisation sizes. However, the overall sentiment suggests that a centralised fund could

significantly strengthen resilience across the sector, provided it is well-designed, locally informed, and transparent.

## Positives

### Easier access to funding and support

- Provide simpler, more streamlined access
- Reduce the no. of constant grant applications
- Cover core costs, focus on services
- Offer multi-year, reliable support
- Help smaller groups that fall through the gaps

### Shared resources and collaboration

Organisations see value in:

- Access to shared services (HR, legal, training, transport, digital tools)
- Sharing equipment, knowledge, and expertise
- Partnerships across Argyll
- Learning from other communities
- Joint applications and collaborative projects

### Better transport and accessibility

- Minibus hire
- Travel for volunteers & isolated people
- Access across rural and island areas
- More equitable participation

Several comments that affordable transport alone would transform their service.

### Support for local projects

- Support capital projects
- Develop themed networks (e.g. environment, arts, youth, halls)
- Support island-mainland learning exchanges
- Create more consistent services across Argyll
- Enable growth into new areas

### Local knowledge and connection

- Managed by people who understand Argyll
- A connected network for learning and shared problem-solving
- A “hub style” model enabling outreach across multiple communities

## Concerns

### One-size-fits-all approaches

- Overlook local differences
- Favour larger towns or bigger organisations
- Miss the unique needs of islands and remote areas

### Lack of clarity on how it would work

- They need more detail before they can judge
- They worry about governance, equity and distribution

### Competition and inequality

- Funds being dominated by “strongest voices”
- Some areas benefiting more than others
- Risk of undermining local funds or local priorities

### Suitability for local or niche organisations

Organisations that operate in just one locality or have very specific missions, question:

- Whether they would fit
  - The fund would be relevant
  - Lose out to Argyll-wide projects
- Small island groups feel especially vulnerable.

## 9. Recommendations

Based on the survey findings, the following recommendations emerge:

- **Strengthen core capacity-building support** across governance, finance, workforce development, digital tools and impact measurement.
- **Develop a coordinated approach to shared services**, with HR, bookkeeping, digital support and evaluation systems - areas where demand is highest.
- **Enhance strategic voice and representation**, ensuring third sector perspectives influence local and regional planning.
- **Improve funding stability** by advocating for longer-term contracts, multi-year funding and simplified application processes.
- **Continue to expand and promote the TSI's training, networking and partnership-building work**, which respondents value highly.
- **Pilot and refine the proposed All-Argyll Fund**, ensuring robust governance and fair regional allocation.
- **Increase TSI outreach** into rural and island communities, ensuring equitable access to support.
- **Invest in digital infrastructure and skills**, enabling organisations to operate more efficiently and evidence their impact.
- **Support volunteer recruitment and retention strategies**, particularly in remote areas where volunteer fatigue is a major risk.