Impact Evaluation:

Strategic Pathways Programme

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Contents

About the author

CHESTER HOWARTH

Chester joined DSC in 2020 as a Researcher, working on DSC's armed forces charities research. He was the lead author on the final two publications in DSC's *Focus On* reports – which analysed armed forces charities' provision of support to families and financial support – and contributes to research on the impact of Covid-19 on charities.

Chester has also worked on DSC's online interactive resources: the *Armed Forces Charities Interactive Database* and the *Cobseo Covid-19 Impact Database.* He led on building these resources and writing the computer programs that keep them up to date, to create a new way of disseminating the latest data on armed forces charities.

Prior to joining DSC, Chester worked as a Research Assistant, supporting projects on child poverty and wellbeing and co-authoring articles for academic journals. He also has experience working as a Freelance Consultant to a group of children's charities and undertaking research with a statutory health organisation.

Acknowledgements

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

GRANT APPLICATION SUPPORT

- Respondents reported receiving support in establishing eligibility criteria and their project's fit to these, advice on making grant applications, and specific feedback on their draft grant applications.

- On a scale of one (not at all satisfied) to ten (completely satisfied), the average level of satisfaction that the Strategic Partners' grant application support met the needs of respondents' project(s) was 8.8.

- Almost all (96.9%) of the respondents felt that the grant application support improved the success of their grant application(s).

- Following their engagement, the vast majority (87.5%) of the respondents had more confidence in applying for grants overall.

- Greater confidence was also reported for aligning projects with the right grant maker (75%), demonstrating impact in a grant application (71.9%), and applying for the right level of funding (71.9%).

- On the other hand, many respondents had about the same level of confidence in preparing research for a grant proposal (37.5%) and making a grant application competitive (32.3%).

- The majority (59.4%) of the respondents accessed assistance from the Strategic Partners for further grant application support.

STRATEGIC SUPPORT AND GUIDANCE

- Respondents to DSC's survey reported receiving strategic support and guidance through an open line of communication with their Strategic Partner, including help with networking, impact reporting, and adapting to a changing environment.

- On a scale of one (not at all satisfied) to ten (completely satisfied), the average level of satisfaction that the strategic support and guidance provided met the needs of respondents' project(s) was 8.8.

- The overwhelming majority (88.1%) of the respondents felt that the strategic support and guidance improved the ability of their project(s) to achieve their goals.

- Following their engagement, greater confidence was reported in particular for knowing where to find additional support (73.8%) and working in collaboration with other armed forces organisations/charities (71.4%).

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- About the same level of confidence was reported in particular for working in collaboration with public sector organisations (53.7%) and creating financial sustainability for future projects (47.6%).

OVERALL CHANGES FOLLOWING ENGAGEMENT WITH THE STRATEGIC PARTNERS

- Over two-thirds of the respondents (70.6%) perceived their professional ability to have improved following their engagement with the Strategic Partners. The remaining respondents (29.4%) perceived their professional ability to have stayed about the same.

- Over half of the respondents (58.8%) perceived their organisation's policies and strategies to have stayed about the same following their engagement with the Strategic Partners. The remaining respondents (41.2%) perceived their organisation's policies and strategies to have improved.

- Over three-quarters (78.4%) of the respondents perceived their relationships with other organisations to have improved following their engagement with the Strategic Partners. Approximately one-fifth (19.6%) perceived their relationships with other organisations to have stayed about the same. Only one respondent perceived their relationships with other organisations to have worsened.

- The overwhelming majority (84.3%) of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the Strategic Partners have provided the tools to improve future projects.

- Just over nine-tenths (92%) of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that accessing support from the Strategic Partners was easy to do.

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INTRODUCTION

AN OVERVIEW OF THE STRATEGIC PATHWAYS PROGRAMME

The Strategic Pathways Programme (SPP) was a national initiative that awarded grants to six organisations, funded by the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust (AFCFT). These organisations are referred to as the Strategic Partners and include the following national organisations: Adferiad Recovery (previously known as Hafal), Cobseo – The Confederation of Service Charities, Combat Stress, Defence Medical Welfare Service (DMWS), the Invictus Games Foundation, and Walking With The Wounded.

These six organisations first received funding in May 2019 (a total of £1,650,752) followed by a continuation grant in August 2020 (a total of £900,067). These grants were intended to enable the Strategic Partners to support the organisations helping armed forces veterans through Positive Pathways Programme projects (also funded by the AFCFT). More specifically, the Strategic Partners were intended to assist through mentoring, guidance, and training.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

This report provides a short impact evaluation of the Strategic Pathways Programme, using the results of an online survey conducted by the Directory of Social Change (DSC) between 14th and 25th February 2022. The respondents to DSC's survey are individuals who engaged with the Strategic Pathways Programme and were invited to take part by Cobseo (one of the Strategic Partners). The research was sponsored by Cobseo, drawing on a grant made by the AFCFT for this purpose. All responses were collected and independently analysed by researchers at DSC.

A total of 51 individuals responded (after removing 12 respondents who started the survey but did not provide any further information). Specifically, there were 32 respondents to the first section on grant application support and 42 respondents to the second section on strategic support and guidance. Each respondent reported having at least one – and up to three – Positive Pathways Programme project(s) that received support. Each project was represented in the survey by only one respondent, except for two projects that were each represented by two different respondents: in these two cases, both sets of responses provided substantively different data and were therefore retained.

Participants in the survey provided responses to closed-ended (for example, multiple-choice or rating scale) questions and open-ended questions (where answers can be provided in respondents' own words). Responses to open-ended questions have been included throughout this report to illustrate points using respondents' own words (where necessary, minor edits have been made to ensure anonymity, grammatical accuracy, and brevity).

Grant application support

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The first section of this report concerns the grant application support provided by the Strategic Partners. The analysis it presents is based on data from 32 respondents who indicated they received grant application support.

To develop an understanding of the nature of the help provided by the Strategic Partners, this section will first explore the types of grant application support that the respondents to DSC's survey reported accessing, alongside participants' motivations for accessing this support.

Attention then turns to the experiences reported by respondents while accessing grant application support: satisfaction with the support provided, the impact on the success of grants applications, and changes in confidence in a range of areas involved in grant applications.

1.2 TYPES OF SUPPORT ACCESSED AND MOTIVATIONS FOR ACCESSING SUPPORT

1.2.1 Types of grant application support accessed

Participants in DSC's survey were invited to provide a brief description of the grant application support they accessed. Some of the responses highlighted the guidance they received from their Strategic Partner before making a formal grant application, in particular with respect to potential applicants' eligibility, for example:

"Pre-application discussion about our eligibility for the fund."

"Zoom/phone conversations to discuss our fit with funding criteria."

Other respondents drew attention to the help with grant applications they received at later stages in reviewing the proposals they had written, which included both general and specific advice, and feedback on the content of the respondents' proposals, for example:

"Initial general advice, followed by specific advice, and finally a review of the proposed submission."

"[My Strategic Partner] was on hand to help and offer patient and consistent support whilst working on multiple drafts with a first-time bid writer."

"[Our Strategic Partner] read some of our answers prior to submitting to check we'd understood the requirements."

This also included those who had sought guidance following an initially unsuccessful grant application to their funder:

"Advice on resubmitting an application after the first one was rejected."

1.2.2 Motivations for accessing grant application support

Turning to the reasons for accessing grant application support from the Strategic Partners, the answers provided by the respondents demonstrated a variety of motivations. Some of the explanations put forward have been reproduced in Box 1.1.

Some of the participants in DSC's survey referred to their intention to minimise or eliminate time spent on applications for grants that would be unlikely to be successful. Others referred to learning more about the process of making grant applications; this included learning more about the focus or requirements of the specific grant-maker to which they are applying for funding.

Elsewhere, respondents drew attention to their relative inexperience in applying for grants. These respondents were motivated to draw upon the expertise of the Strategic Partners in order to maximise their chance of a successful application – and to further ensure, following receipt of a grant, that they met its requirements (for example, regarding impact reporting).

Box 1.1. Respondents' motivations to access grant application support from the Strategic Partners.

To identify if our projects were of interest, so as not to spend undue time on unlikely proposals.

This was our first grant application made to AFCFT [Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust], so it was an opportunity to learn and improve the probability of success. Initial contact encouraged seeking further support.

As a new organisation, we needed support from the initial application for funding throughout the life of the grant. Support was needed to help with the reporting procedures and Impact Hub reporting as these processes were not the easiest to understand.

We wanted to ensure we were able to describe our work in a manner that shows its impact – and why we believe the [support we provide] has an impact on our members' lives.

This was the first large grant that we had ever submitted and we wanted to get it right the first time. As a very young organisation, we valued this support greatly.

This was an opportunity for us to diversify our service.

## 1.3   EXPERIENCES OF ENGAGEMENT WITH GRANT APPLICATION SUPPORT

1.3.1   Satisfaction with the support provided

Respondents were invited to provide a rating of how satisfied they were that the grant application support provided met the needs of the project(s). Responses were given on a scale of one to ten, where one means "not at all satisfied", five means "somewhat satisfied" and ten means "completely satisfied". The (mean) average rating was 8.8, which indicates that, overall, the responses were notably closer to "completely satisfied" than the middle point of the scale, "somewhat satisfied". [1]

Indeed, as shown in Figure 1.1 below, the lowest rating given was seven out of ten, which was endorsed by 12.5% (n=4) of the respondents. Meanwhile, the highest rating given was ten out of ten, which was endorsed by just under half (46.9%, n=15) of the respondents. Indeed, the maximum rating of ten was also the most common response category.

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[1] The mean average refers to the sum of each respondents' rating divided by the number of respondents who provided a rating. The median value, nine, was very similar.

Figure 1.1. Satisfaction that the grant application support provided met the needs of the project(s).
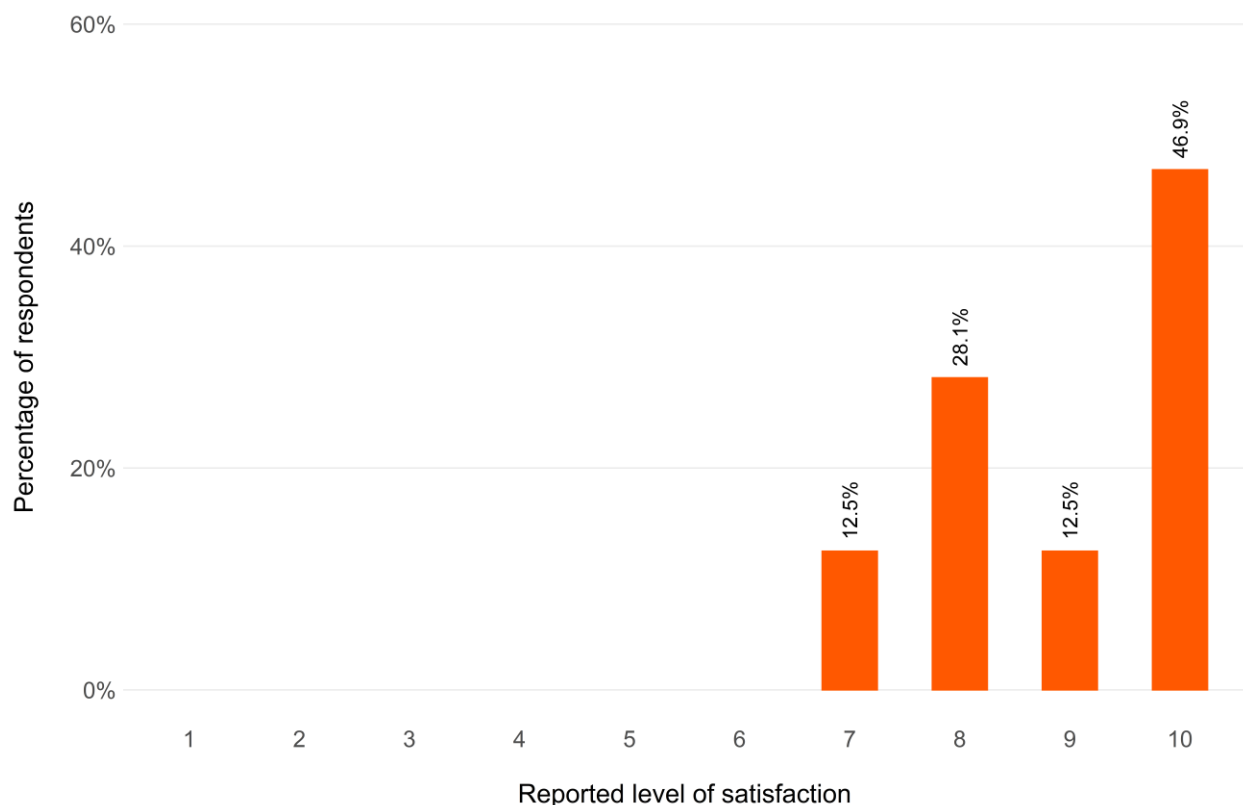
To understand why the respondents reported greater satisfaction levels, they were invited to explain why they did not provide a lower score. A range of responses to this question – highlighting factors such as timeliness, accessibility, organisation, and effectiveness – have been reproduced in Box 1.2.

Box 1.2. Respondents' reasons for *not* providing a lower rating of the Strategic Partners' grant application support.

Every issue raised was dealt with in a timely, helpful and competent manner. The way in which support was given made it very clear that the Strategic Partner was committed to making our project a success.

We received the full grant applied for with the assistance of Hafal [now Adferiad Recovery] coaching us with the application.

> *The team were accessible and provided all the support and advice we needed. We could not have asked for more.*
>
> *I felt our needs were met, and good feedback was given which enabled us to improve our application.*
>
> *The support was very helpful and instrumental in gaining our successful grant award.*
>
> *The support was well organised and all communications were very clear.*

In addition, to help understand why lower satisfaction levels were reported, the respondents were invited to explain why they did not provide a higher score. As might be anticipated from the high levels of satisfaction noted above, the majority of these responses indicated that the score was either at or close to the maximum of ten.

Nevertheless, some feedback relating to areas for improvement was reported. As shown in Box 1.3 below, these included the perception that the Strategic Partners' advice was contradictory to put into practice, disappointment with the outcomes of acting on the advice that was given, and having not required very much advice.

> **Box 1.3. Respondents' reasons for *not* providing a higher rating of the Strategic Partners' grant application support.**
>
> *The bid writer was asking for a lot of information that would have taken us over the word count; when we stuck to the word count, we were then advised we didn't have enough information on some sections. Although this was a little frustrating, it was resolved in the end.*
>
> *We wanted our project to include the whole of [geographical area] due to some of our delivery being online; we were persuaded by our Strategic Partner to keep our geography of delivery narrow. Having a narrow delivery area meant that when COVID-19 hit we couldn't deliver to more veterans online because it was not in our original brief. This was disappointing advice.*
>
> *Only a small amount of advice was needed.*

1.3.2 Perceived effects on the success of grant applications

DSC's survey asked respondents to indicate whether they feel that the grant application support their project(s) received improved the success of their grant application(s).

As shown in Figure 1.2, almost all (96.9%, n=31) of the respondents did feel the grant application support improved the success of their grant application(s). Only one respondent did not feel the grant application support improved the success of their grant application(s).

Overall, the responses to this question indicate a strong endorsement that the assistance provided by the Strategic Partners improved the perceived success of the participants' grant applications.

Figure 1.2. Perceptions of whether grant application support improved the success of grant application(s).
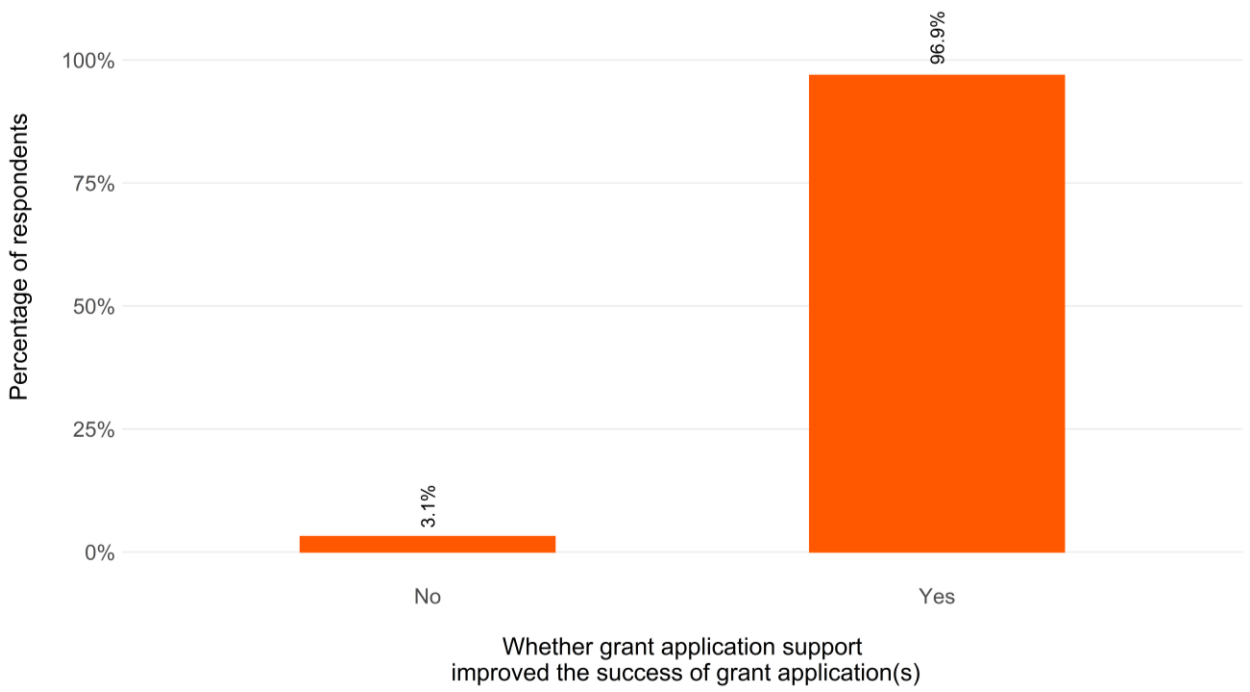
When prompted to explain the reasoning behind their response, various explanations were shared, including adhering to the details required by the funder, making improvements based on critical reading, achieving conciseness, and better understanding the application process. An illustrative range of responses have been reproduced in Box 1.4.

Box 1.4. Respondents' reasons for whether grant application support improved their success.

Advice was based on both an understanding of what the AFCFT [Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust] was looking for and on how best to present the case for support. Therefore, it helped to ensure that

> *the application had the appropriate focus and was presented as effectively as possible.*
>
> *It ensured we provided the level of detail required and included the key information they would require in order to assess the proposal.*
>
> *I am new to grant applications, and it was very useful to have a 'critical friend'.*
>
> *As this was a new and innovative way of delivering grant funding, I was not familiar with some of the methods used during the grant application process, and the guidance of our SPP was key to our success.*
>
> *It gave us confidence that it was worth our time in making the application.*
>
> *My Strategic Partner encouraged me to apply for the [specific project]. I would not have applied to AFCFT again (in that year), as I did not want to appear greedy. I was advised this fund was a different pot of money, so to definitely put in an application [...] I'm very grateful for that guidance!*
>
> *It helped us to ensure we got our ideas across within the limited word count.*
>
> *Having support that could act as a critical friend, testing concepts and hypotheses, and prompting wider thinking most certainly improved the quality of the applications submitted, resulting in regular success.*

1.3.3   Changes in confidence

Participants in the survey were also asked whether they have less, more, or about the same level of confidence in applying for grants overall, following their engagement with the Strategic Partners.

As shown in Figure 1.3, the overwhelming majority (87.5%, n=28) stated they had more confidence in applying for grants overall. Meanwhile, just over one-tenth of the respondents (12.5%, n=4) stated they had about the same level of confidence, and none of the respondents reported less confidence in applying for grants overall.

Figure 1.3. Change in perceived confidence: Applying for grants overall.

Percentage of respondents (y-axis: 0%, 25%, 50%, 75%, 100%)

- Less confidence
- About the same level of confidence: 12.5%
- More confidence: 87.5%

Perceived change in confidence before and after engagement with the Strategic Partners
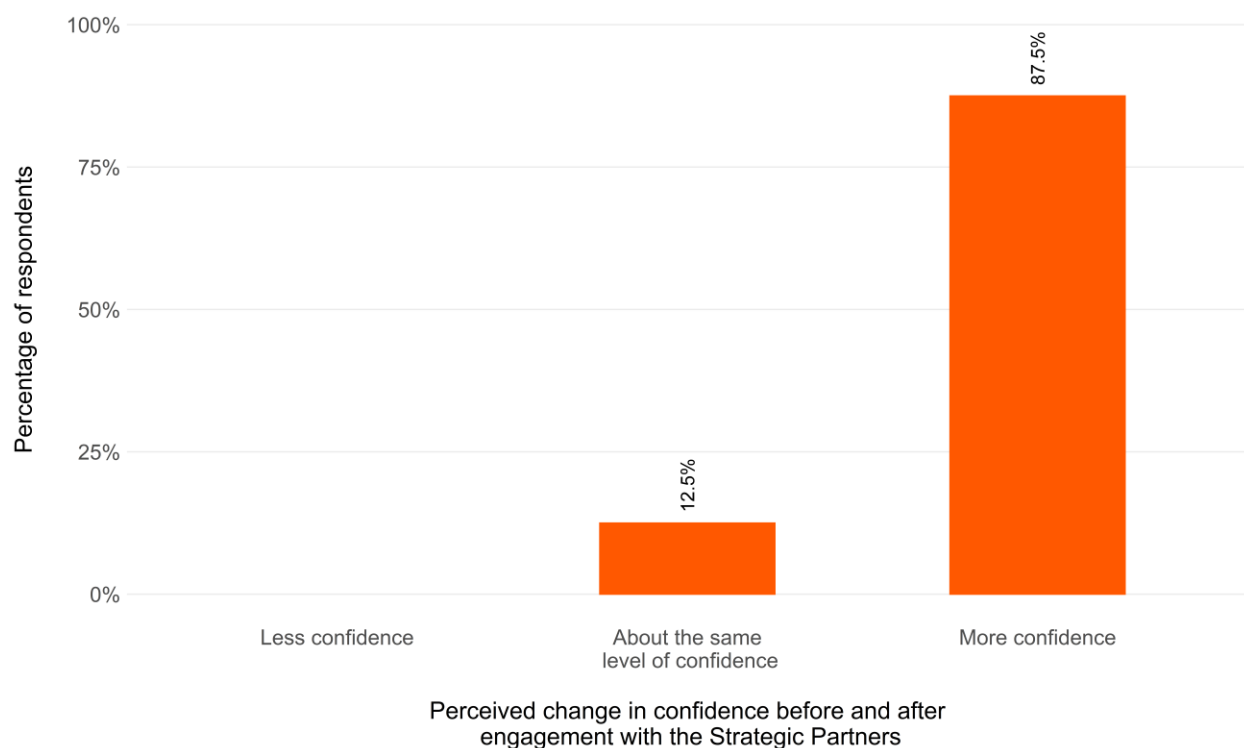
To gain an understanding of the more specific aspects of the grant application process that have been affected by respondents' engagement with the Strategic Partners, DSC asked respondents whether, following their participation, they have less, more, or about the same level of confidence in the following areas:

- Making a grant application competitive
- Demonstrating your organisation's suitability for a grant
- Demonstrating impact in a grant application
- Applying for the right level of funding
- Preparing research for a grant proposal
- Aligning your project with the right grant-maker

Responses to each of these areas are illustrated in Figure 1.4. For each area, respondents most commonly reported feeling more confident following their engagement with the Strategic Partners. In addition, only one respondent (3.1%) indicated they felt less confident in any of the areas included, specifically in demonstrating impact in a grant application.

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The area for which respondents most commonly indicated they had more confidence was in demonstrating their organisation's suitability for a grant, for which 87.5% (n=28) of the respondents stated they had more confidence.

A large percentage of the respondents also indicated they felt more confident in aligning their project with the right grant maker (75%, n=24), demonstrating impact in a grant application (71.9%, n=23), and applying for the right level of funding (71.9%, n=23).

Meanwhile, across these different areas, a comparatively high percentage of the respondents reported having about the same level of confidence concerning preparing research for a grant proposal (37.5%, n=12) and making a grant application competitive (32.3%, n=10).

Figure 1.4. Change in perceived confidence: Specific elements of the grant application process.

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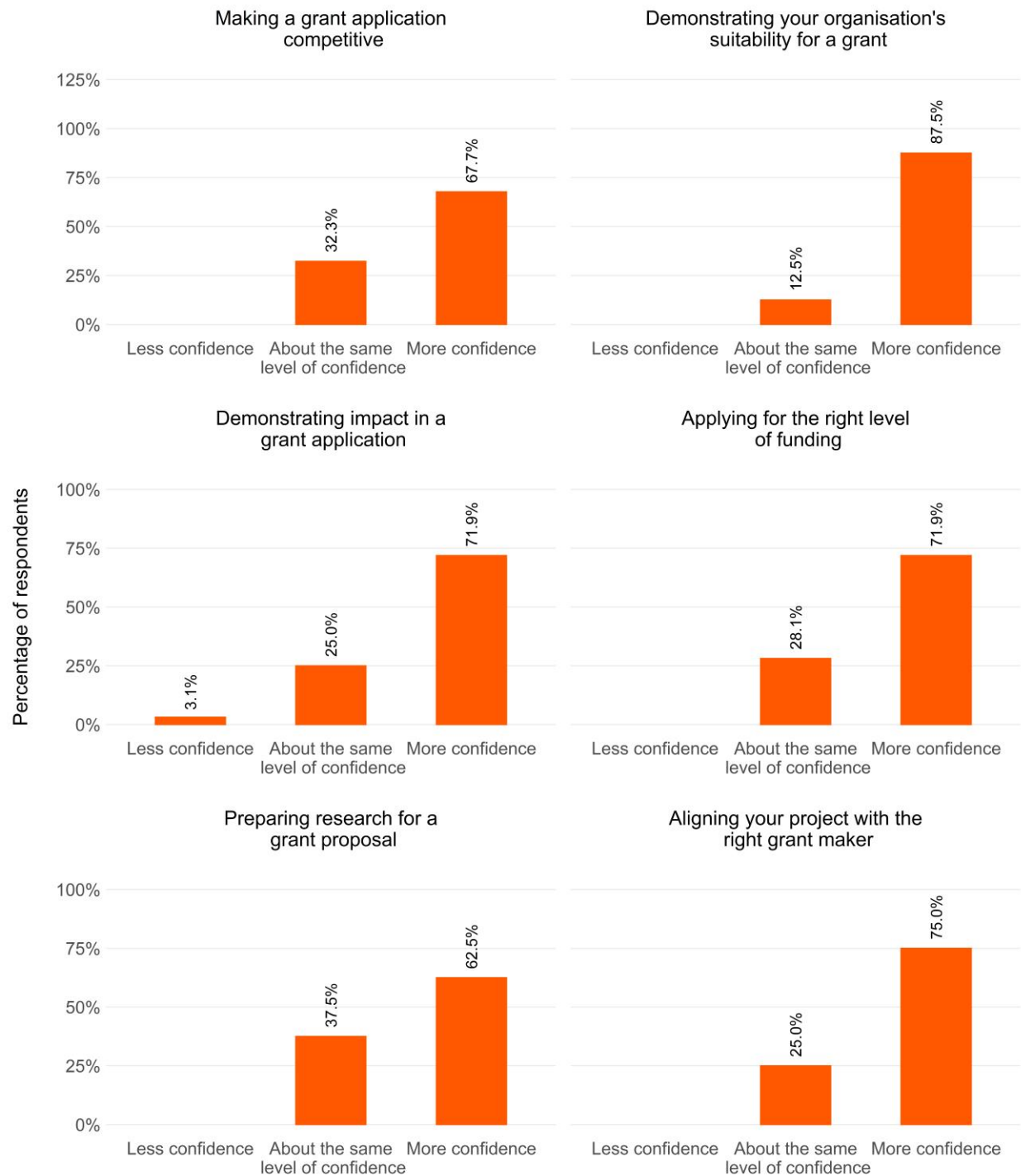
1.4 ACCESSING FURTHER SUPPORT

Following their initial experience with the grant application support provided by the Strategic Partners, the majority (59.4%, n=19) of the respondents indicated they had subsequently accessed assistance for further grant applications, and a significant minority indicated they had not (40.6%, n=13). These results are illustrated in Figure 1.5.

Figure 1.5. Whether support for subsequent grant applications was accessed.

This bar chart shows percentage of respondents for whether subsequent grant application support was accessed. "No" bar is at 40.6% and "Yes" bar is at 59.4%.
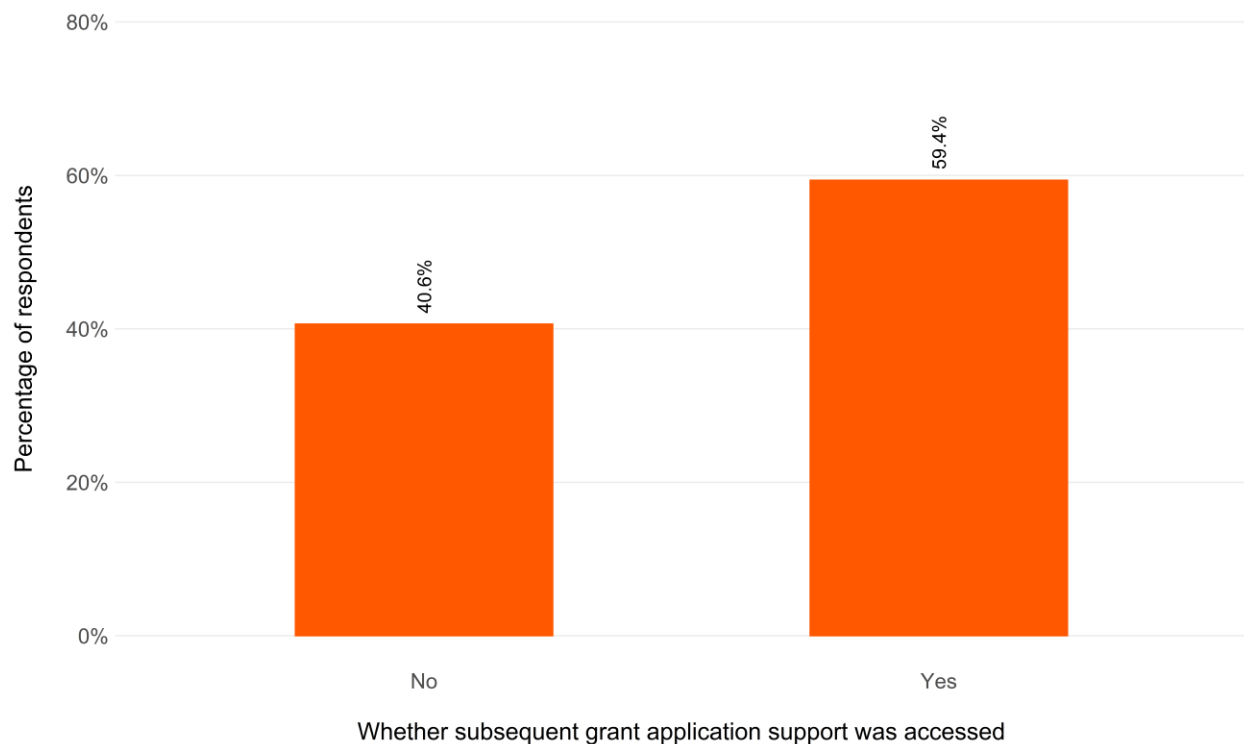
Strategic support and guidance

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The second section of this report concerns the provision of strategic support and guidance. The analysis it presents is based on the responses from 42 survey participants who indicated that their project(s) received this type of support.

To develop an understanding of the nature of this assistance, this section will first explore the types of strategic support and guidance that were reported by the participants in DSC's survey – and the motivations they described for seeking out this assistance.

Following this, the experiences respondents had in accessing strategic support and guidance are discussed: satisfaction that the support provided met the needs of the project, the impact on the ability of projects to meet their goals, and changes in confidence in several areas related to project delivery.

2.2 TYPES OF SUPPORT ACCESSED AND MOTIVATIONS FOR ACCESSING SUPPORT

2.2.1 Types of strategic support and guidance accessed

One prominent theme in the types of strategic support and guidance described was networking with other organisations; for several respondents, this also provided an opportunity for shared problem solving and the dissemination of best practices. Similarly, a number of responses described how their Strategic Partner enabled them to get in contact to ask questions and discuss how to resolve issues if and when they arose.

Another key theme was assistance with impact assessment: responses suggested this was a compulsory element for Positive Pathways Programme grantees and required the use of an 'Impact Hub'. Therefore, respondents reported receiving guidance on undertaking impact assessment (for example, choosing what or how much to measure) and on the practicalities of using the Impact Hub.

In light of changes in circumstances relating to the COVID-19 pandemic, participants in DSC's survey drew attention to the support and guidance they received to appropriately make changes – beyond their initial grant proposal – to the project(s) being delivered, or how to report any delays resulting from this.

To demonstrate some of the themes outlined above, Box 2.1 draws on several examples from respondents' answers.

Box 2.1. Types of strategic support and guidance received from the Strategic Partners.

Monthly video conferencing. Quarterly visits to monitor progress. Encouragement to network with other agencies and charities.

Support and guidance were focused on four areas: impact assessment, especially the use of the well-being index; changing objectives and timescales in the light of the pandemic; recruiting participants; and training.

We received a lot of support: advice on advertising and promoting our project; guidance on gathering and recording impact data; training sessions and networking.

We received support regarding impact measures and support and understanding advice about how to report delays with the project due to COVID-19 constraints.

The team at Hafal [now Adferiad Recovery] linked us to further initiatives across Wales that could support the individuals we were working with and helped support further intervention and choice. They also held regular forums online where we could come together and sound out ideas and resolutions.

We received a small amount of support in 2021 when we needed to change how our project was delivered – due to the impact of the pandemic on project partners (who pulled out) – and other challenges posed by restrictions.

Guidance and signposting to funding opportunities, networking and with reporting, as well as advising on veteran engagement and newsletter distribution.

We've had a real person on the end of the phone to bounce ideas off in order to resolve issues and find solutions and support us with applying for variation requests in the correct way.

2.2.2 Motivations for accessing strategic support and guidance

With respect to the motivations for accessing strategic support and guidance reported by the respondents, a range of examples have been reproduced in Box 2.2. A number of the respondents stated that engagement with the Strategic Pathways Programme was a requirement of their receiving a Positive Pathways Programme grant.

Other motivations for accessing support included aiming to ensure that all of the requirements of the grant were met; for example, several respondents stated they were looking for help and advice in preparing for and using the Impact Hub.

A further theme was ensuring that the project achieved the highest standards possible in order to maximise its effects on beneficiaries or to help secure future funding. Some of the respondents also highlighted training for staff and volunteers who were less experienced in working with armed forces veterans.

Box 2.2. Respondents' motivations for accessing strategic support and guidance.

To ensure we were well connected to the overall programme and to provide the best service for beneficiaries.

We appointed a new member of staff at the start of the contract who benefited from the guidance provided. In addition, the restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic meant that we didn't have the usual opportunities to visit and network.

Creative leads and volunteers lacked experience working with veterans, so training to provide both awareness and know where to get additional information/support was important.

For support and guidance with grant management and promotion of the programme. Also, for help with accessing the Impact hub, although the online guidance was excellent and self-explanatory.

Ensuring the standard of the [support] service being provided meet the criteria required by the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust funding.

This was our first veteran-focused programme so we were seeking general advice.

This was a criterion of the funding we were applying for – an innovative way of engaging charities which I had not experienced before.

It's rare to have this opportunity and amazing resource available – to us, it was a no-brainer.

To work as quickly and efficiently as possible and to stand the best chance possible of securing funds for my charity.

## 2.3 EXPERIENCES OF ENGAGEMENT WITH STRATEGIC SUPPORT AND GUIDANCE

2.3.1 Satisfaction with the support provided

Respondents were invited to provide a rating on a scale of one to ten – where one means "not at all satisfied", five means "somewhat satisfied" and ten means "completely satisfied" – how satisfied they were that the strategic support and guidance provided met the needs of their project(s).

The (mean) average rating was 8.8, which indicates that the responses were, on average, closer to "completely satisfied" than the middle point of the scale, "somewhat satisfied".

However, it is important to note the degree of variation in ratings: as shown in Figure 2.1, the lowest rating given was three out of ten, endorsed by 4.8% (n=2) of the respondents. In contrast, the highest – and most common – rating given was ten out of ten, endorsed by over half (57.1%, n=24) of the respondents.

Figure 2.1. Satisfaction that the strategic support and guidance provided met the needs of the project(s).
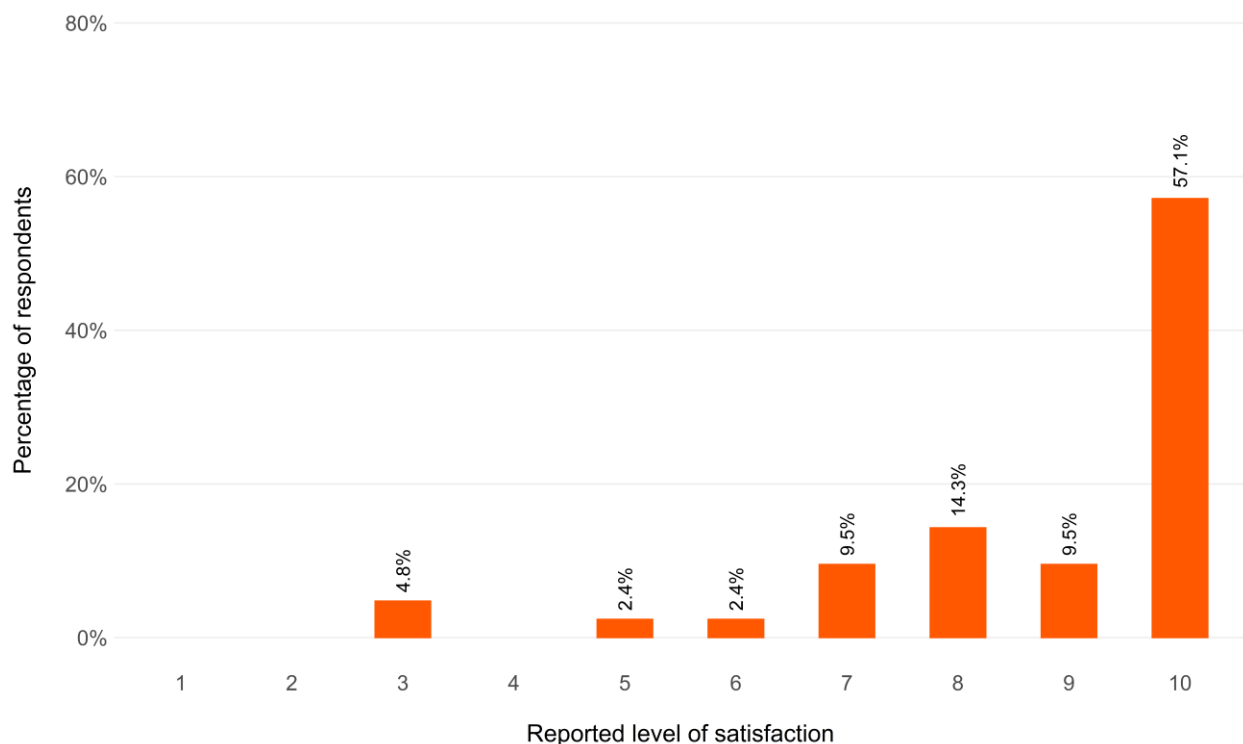
To develop an understanding of what aspects of the strategic support and guidance provided drove respondents to indicate greater levels of satisfaction (that is, a higher score), respondents were invited to describe why they did not provide a lower score.

A range of responses to this question – including themes such as the quality and perceived benefits of the support, the accessibility of the Strategic Partners for their advice, and the management of the Programme overall – have been reproduced in Box 2.3.

Box 2.3. Respondents' reasons for not providing a lower rating of the Strategic Partners' strategic support and guidance.

Our Strategic Partner was available to us and supportive whenever we needed her individually. Her advice and guidance were first-rate.

I have felt extremely supported throughout the programme.

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The process has been extremely well managed.

The support given by the Strategic Partner was critical in offering variety to those we support, as you cannot give an 'out of the box' solution.

The strategic support and guidance we received [...] helped raise awareness of the programme and up-skill staff.

We value the assistance around reporting, networking and advice and guidance we received.

[My Strategic Partner] has been excellent in passing on information and responding to our comments/questions.

The ease of contact and support offered is second to none.

To complement this, DSC's survey also aimed to understand what drove respondents to report lower levels of satisfaction with their engagement with the Strategic Partners' strategic support and guidance. To this end, respondents were invited to describe why they did not provide a higher score.

Excluding respondents who reported that their score could not have been higher, as they gave the maximum available, several illustrative responses have been reproduced in Box 2.4.

Box 2.4. Respondents' reasons for not providing a higher rating of the Strategic Partners' strategic support and guidance.

We did try to engage with our Strategic Partner on three occasions [...] and their failure to respond to our requests for dialogue was certainly not impartial or fair.

Speed, but not the effectiveness, of the response has been slowed by other priorities.

I would like to see more collaborative working encouraged by the Strategic Partner to encourage funded organisations to work together.

I don't think the role played by the strategic support partner has added any value to our programme.
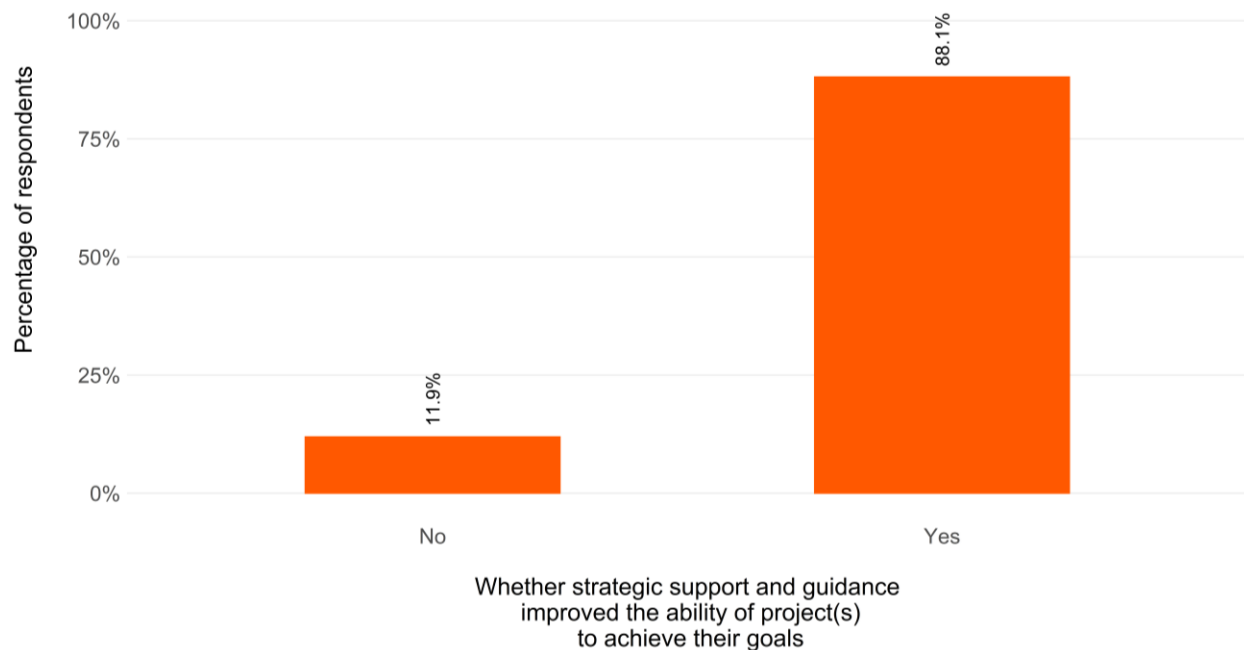
2.3.2 Perceived effects on the ability of projects to meet their goals

Respondents were also asked to indicate whether they feel that the strategic support and guidance that their project(s) received improved the ability of their project(s) to achieve their goals. Responses to this question are shown in Figure 2.2.

Just under nine-tenths of the respondents (88.1%, n=37) did feel that the strategic support and guidance improved the ability of their project(s) to achieve their goals. On the other hand, just over one-tenth of the respondents (11.9%, n=5) did not feel that the strategic support and guidance improved the ability of their project(s) to achieve their goals.

Figure 2.2. Whether strategic support and guidance improved the ability of the project(s) to achieve their goals.

Overall, engagement with strategic support and guidance improved the ability of project(s) to achieve their goals, as perceived by the respondents, but with areas for improvement among a

minority of respondents. When prompted to explain the reasoning behind their response, various explanations were provided.

As shown in Box 2.5, a number of respondents provided reasons why the strategic support and guidance did improve the ability of the project(s) to achieve their goals. Emerging themes include the networking and collaborative work that followed from their engagement with the Strategic Partners, and the advice they had been provided with, such as on the flexibility of the support delivered by the projects or on developing targets.

Box 2.5. Respondents' explanations for why strategic support and guidance did improve the ability of the project(s) to achieve their goals.

It added some cross-pollination with other organisations that enabled uptake.

Being connected to other providers and staying informed helped staff to provide a better service for beneficiaries.

Other charities were suggested that we could work collaboratively with, which is now in progress.

They addressed my concerns regarding extensive paperwork for monitoring tools by suggesting alternative means of monitoring the programme.

We feel we achieved more because of this great partnership as we had many network meetings and always a person to talk to as often as possible, whether we had problems or wanted to share our successes. We were able to do this, and this helped us to be more successful.

[The Strategic Partners] offered the critical intervention and advice from their vast knowledge to help support those individuals requesting support and offered the flexibility to change some of the interventions to suit the individual.

It showed the importance of targeting support and setting clear goals, which everyone involved in administering our organisation has fully endorsed.

I was given advice about a grant variation to ensure that veterans were supported during COVID-19.

Without it, it would have been very difficult for a new member of staff, working in isolation, to have made connections.

On the other hand, some of the respondents provided reasons why the strategic support and guidance did not improve the ability of the project(s) to achieve their goals, as illustrated in Box 2.6. These respondents stated that their projects would have achieved their goals irrespective of the strategic support and guidance, or that there was a perceived lack of input from their Strategic Partner(s), including with respect to specific issues raised.

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Box 2.6. Respondents' explanations for why strategic support and guidance did not improve the ability of the project(s) to achieve their goals.

Not really – we would have achieved our goals anyway.

I have not received any advice or input on developing projects or on ways to resolve issues.

With regards to the advice given on the possible transfer of funds to a different location – these concerns were not discussed in any meaningful way. The online workshops were nice to have but did not materially add to our project – and at times were time-consuming.

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2.3.3   Changes in confidence

Having considered the overall satisfaction with the Strategic Partners' strategic support and guidance, this section now turns to more specific potential outcomes of engagement with this aspect of support. Survey respondents were asked whether, following their participation, they have less, more, or about the same level of confidence in the following areas:

- Working in collaboration with other armed forces organisations/charities
- Working in collaboration with public sector organisations (such as Local Authorities)
- Designing projects that take veterans' mental health into consideration
- Knowing where to find additional support
- Obtaining funding for future projects
- Creating financial sustainability for future projects

Figure 2.3 shows, for each of these different elements, the percentage of respondents reporting they have less confidence, about the same level of confidence, or more confidence following their engagement with strategic support and guidance.
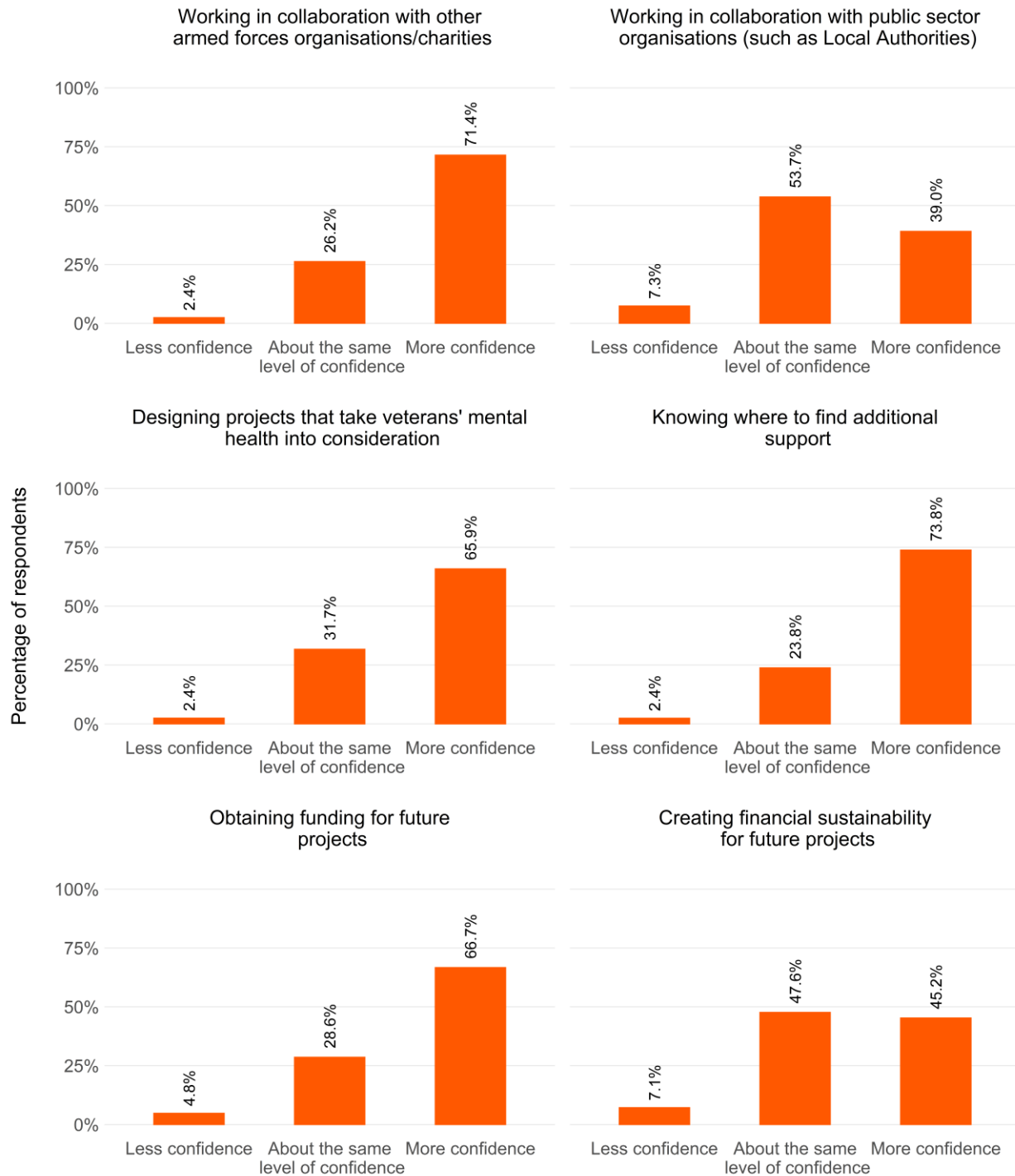
The items for which the greatest percentage of respondents reported having less confidence were working in collaboration with public sector organisations (such as Local Authorities) and creating financial sustainability for future projects (7.1%, n=3 for each).

When looking at where respondents reported having about the same level of confidence, 53.7% (n=22) of the respondents had about the same level of confidence in working in collaboration with public sector organisations (such as Local Authorities), whilst 47.6% (n=20) of the respondents had about the same level of confidence in creating financial sustainability for future projects.

In contrast, the two items for which the greatest percentages of respondents felt more confidence following their engagement with the Strategic Partners were knowing where to find additional support (73.8%, n=31) and working in collaboration with other armed forces organisations/charities (71.4%, n=30).

Overall, more than half of the respondents reported having more confidence in four out of the six areas described above: that is, working in collaboration with other armed forces organisations/charities, designing projects that take veterans' mental health into consideration, knowing where to find additional support, and obtaining funding for future projects.

Figure 2.3. Change in perceived confidence: specific aspects of strategic support and guidance.

Working in collaboration with other armed forces organisations/charities

- Less confidence: 2.4%
- About the same level of confidence: 26.2%
- More confidence: 71.4%

Working in collaboration with public sector organisations (such as Local Authorities)

- Less confidence: 7.3%
- About the same level of confidence: 53.7%
- More confidence: 39.0%

Designing projects that take veterans' mental health into consideration

- Less confidence: 2.4%
- About the same level of confidence: 31.7%
- More confidence: 65.9%

Knowing where to find additional support

- Less confidence: 2.4%
- About the same level of confidence: 23.8%
- More confidence: 73.8%

Obtaining funding for future projects

- Less confidence: 4.8%
- About the same level of confidence: 28.6%
- More confidence: 66.7%

Creating financial sustainability for future projects

- Less confidence: 7.1%
- About the same level of confidence: 47.6%
- More confidence: 45.2%

Percentage of respondents

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Overall changes following engagement with the Strategic Partners

3.1   INTRODUCTION

This section of the report concerns respondents' overall engagement with the Strategic Pathways Programme (SPP). The first three parts focus on respondents' perceived changes in professional ability, organisational policies or strategies, and relationships with other organisations, respectively.

This section then looks to the potential future impacts of engagement with the Strategic Partners: specifically, whether participants now have the tools to improve future projects. In the concluding part of this section, respondents' reports of the ease of accessing support from the Strategic Partners are presented.

3.2   PROFESSIONAL ABILITY

Turning first to the relationship between professional ability and engagement with the Strategic Partners. DSC asked participants in the survey to consider their professional ability (to be interpreted by respondents as appropriate to the context of their work or role) before and after engagement with the Strategic Partners.

As shown in Figure 3.1 below, over two-thirds of the respondents (70.6%, n=36) reported an improvement in how they perceived their professional ability, following their engagement with the Strategic Partners. On the other hand, just under one-third of the respondents (29.4%, n=15) indicated that their perceived professional ability had stayed about the same.

Figure 3.1. Perceived change in professional ability before and after engagement with the Strategic Partners.
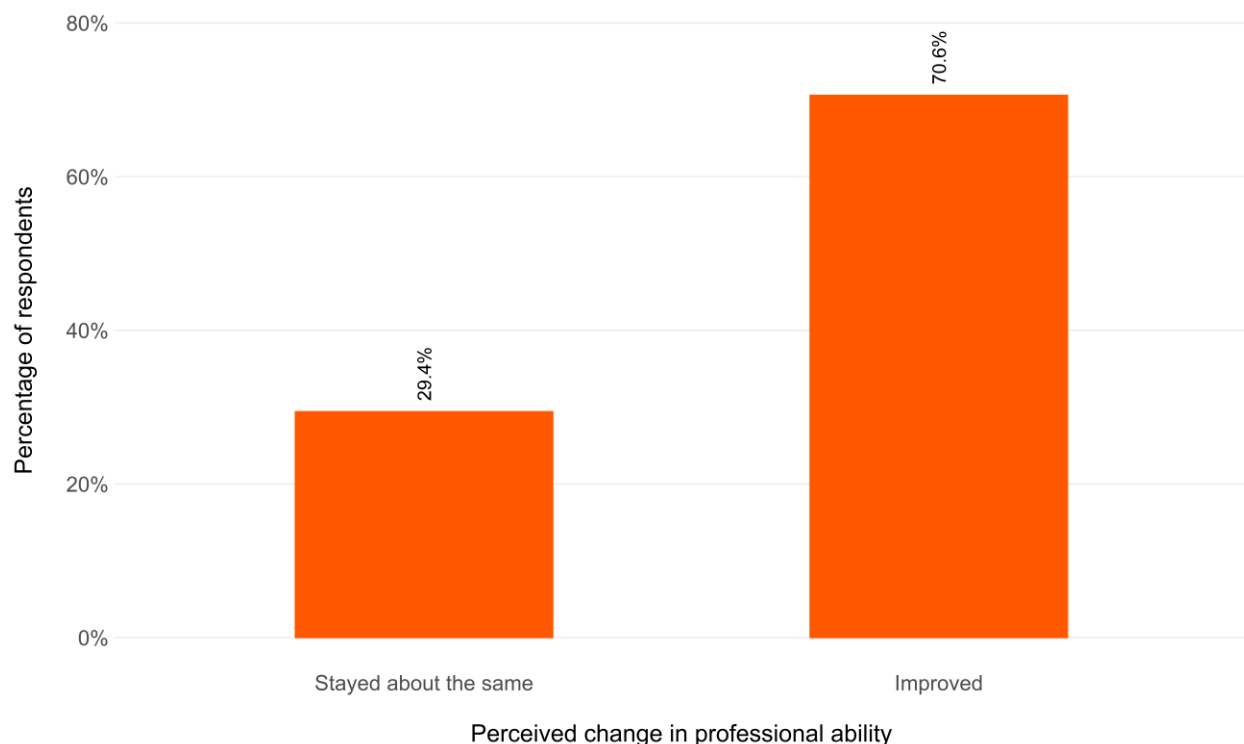
Respondents were invited to briefly explain the reasoning behind their response to this question. As expected from the significant minority of respondents who indicated that their professional ability had stayed about the same, a prominent theme in the responses was that their engagement with the Strategic Partners had not – or had not been expected to – increase their professional ability. Some such responses can be found in Box 3.1.

Box 3.1. Respondents' explanations for perceiving no change in their professional ability.

My ability is the same. My networks may have increased by a couple of contacts.

I don't think we've received any support that would improve our professional ability as a result of engagement with the strategic pathways programme.

I have a better working knowledge of how to record project information.

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I wouldn't suggest the support we received had any significant impact upon our professional ability [...] Our Strategic Partner helped support us in using reporting tools used by the AFCFT [Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust] which we were not familiar with.

Our lack of experience came in making grant applications, not in the professional running of our programmes.

Whilst I believe that my core capabilities are broadly the same as before engagement with the Strategic Partners [...] there is no doubt that the engagement has refined my approach in the armed forces third sector.

Nevertheless, various positive impacts were referenced among those who felt that their professional ability had improved. These included improved professional competencies in coordinating projects, writing applications for grants, networking effectively, and thinking creatively. Amongst other themes present in the data, several responses related to professional awareness of alternative provision of support and the particular needs of the armed forces community.

Illustrative examples have been drawn from the responses provided, presented in Box 3.2.

Box 3.2. Respondents' explanations for perceiving an improvement in their professional ability.

Greater knowledge of the way the Armed Forces Covenant process grant applications.

The SPP has played a very significant role both directly and indirectly in developing competence and facilitating networking.

Having the support of the Strategic Partner has helped improve my confidence and ability to coordinate further projects.

We have a greater awareness of the veterans' community and other services within it.

Application writing and knowledge of funding strategies have improved.

Professionally we have grown as a result of [input from our Strategic Partner] and we now know how to perform certain tasks and also make the most of our networking.

3.3   ORGANISATIONAL POLICIES AND STRATEGIES

DSC also asked respondents to consider their organisation's policies and strategies before and after their engagement with the Strategic Partners.

As shown in Figure 3.2 below, just over two-fifths of the respondents (41.2%, n=21) reported that their organisation's policies and strategies had improved following their engagement with the Strategic Partners. The remaining respondents – approximately three-fifths (58.8%, n=30) – indicated that their organisation's policies and strategies had stayed about the same.

Figure 3.2. Perceived change in organisational policies and strategies before and after engagement with the Strategic Partners.
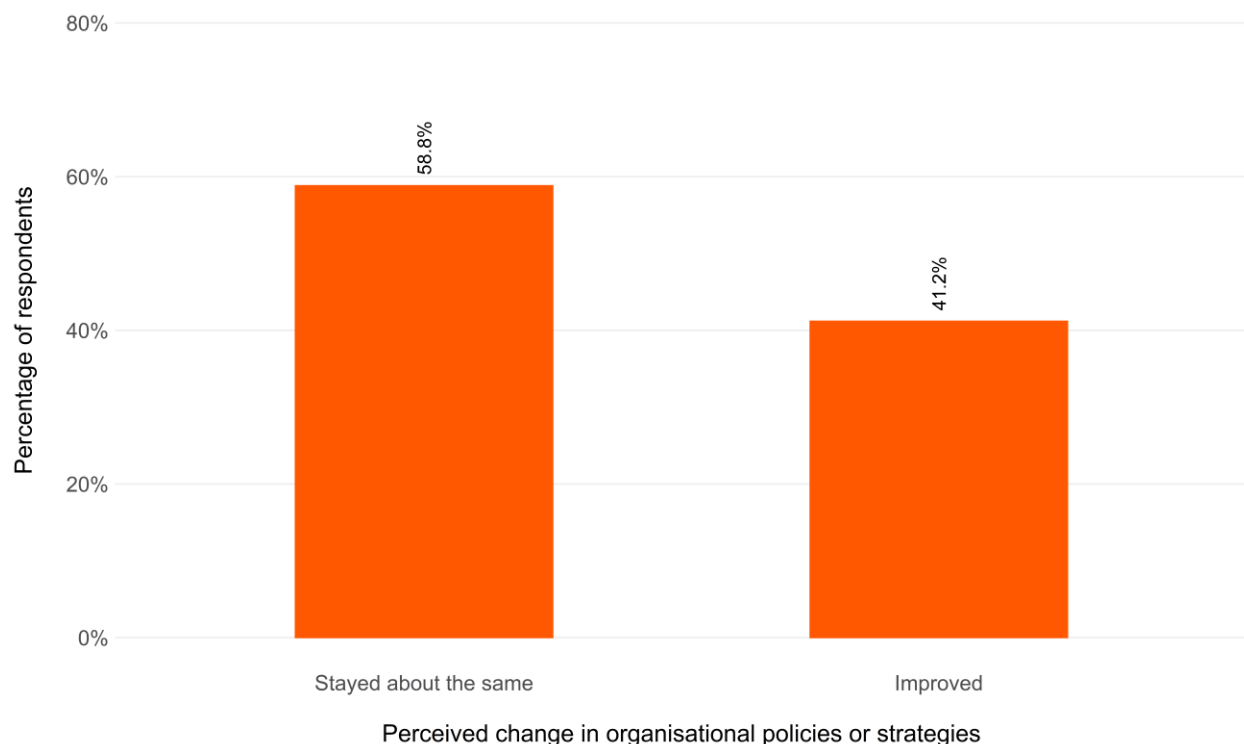
Respondents were invited to briefly explain the reasoning behind their response. As a majority of the respondents to this question stated that their organisation's policies and strategies had stayed about the same, many of the explanations reiterated that their policies and strategies have remained unchanged.

It might also be noted that some of the respondents highlighted they did not perceive their engagement with the Strategic Partners to be of relevance to their organisation's policies or strategies, as shown in Box 3.3.

<div style="background:#7a1f7a; color:#fff; padding:10px; text-align:center;">

Box 3.3. Respondents' explanations for perceiving no change in their organisation's policies or strategies.

</div>

This was not part of the project or engagement.

We feel we didn't access any support with policies or strategies. But we know the support was there, if needed.

We had no need to make any changes and did not receive any advice to.

By contrast, the remaining responses drew attention to a mixture of general and specific changes to their organisation's policies and strategies.

Themes discussed here – some of which are reproduced in Box 3.4 – included adding policies to cover novel or unanticipated issues, reviewing existing policies (for example, on the practicalities of more flexible project delivery, or to include mental health training), and developing new and existing strategies (for example, to increase provision or reach).

<div style="background:#7a1f7a; color:#fff; padding:10px; text-align:center;">

Box 3.4. Respondents' explanations for perceiving an improvement in their organisation's policies or strategies.

</div>

We've considered some of the training available – in terms of reporting and wellbeing of participants – and adjusted some of our processes and practice.

Additional policies have been compiled to cover issues we hadn't originally thought of.

It has been important to make sure relevant policies are in place and we have had to look closer at our strategies going forward.

Greater awareness has allowed us to review how our services are delivered within the veteran community.

We have been able to offer our service delivery team enhanced training such as the Combat Stress Mental Health online training module.

They have helped shape some of our procedures to help give the flexibility of support required for this project.

Our policies were already in place [...] but our strategies have become much more focused and targeted, which has helped drive our organisation and allowed its expansion.

Strategy wise, we have increased our ambition in terms of reach, and our Strategic partner has supported us.

3.4 RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER ORGANISATIONS

The third element of change that DSC asked respondents to consider was their relationships with other organisations. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they had worsened, stayed about the same, or improved, before and after their engagement with the Strategic Partners.

As shown in Figure 3.3 below, over three-quarters of the respondents (78.4%, n=40) indicated that their relationships with other organisations had improved following their engagement with the Strategic Partners.

Meanwhile, approximately one-fifth of the respondents (19.6%, n=10) reported that their relationships with other organisations had stayed about the same. Finally, only one of the respondents stated that their relationships with other organisations had worsened.

Figure 3.3. Perceived change in relationships with other organisations before and after engagement with the Strategic Partners.

Perceived change in relationships with other organisations
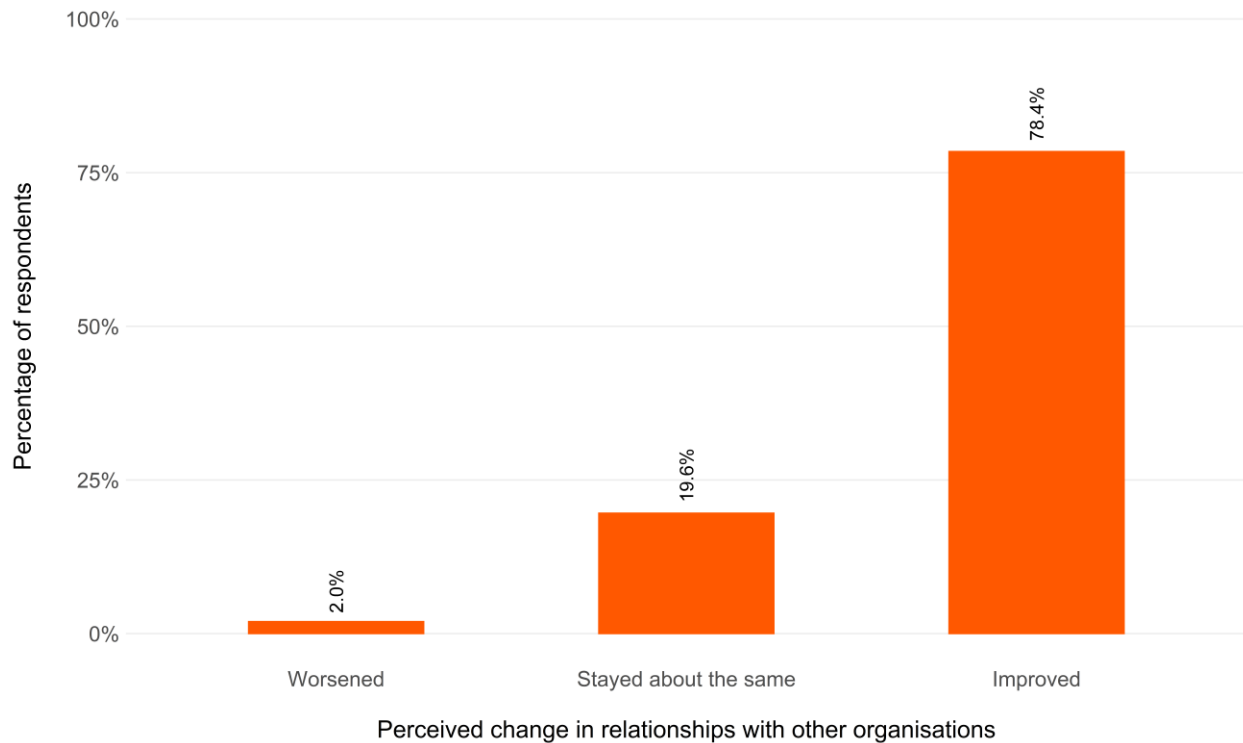
Respondents were invited to briefly explain the reasoning behind their responses. Several responses related to positive changes resulting from respondents' engagement with the Strategic Partners. These included increased networking, which for some participants resulted in opportunities for funding of new projects, new collaborative working relationships, referrals between organisations, and greater signposting. Some of the respondents explicitly drew attention to the effect of these changes on the outcomes for their beneficiaries in the armed forces community.

Example responses highlighting positive changes in relationships with other organisations can be found in Box 3.5.

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Box 3.5. Respondents' explanations for perceiving an improvement in their relationships with other organisations.

No relationships with the sector before. Training provided by SPP and the Armed Forces Network has opened networking opportunities, as has the PPP networking sessions led by COBSEO. They have helped us to bid successfully as a delivery partner in the Veterans Positive Pathways Programme project.

Networking calls have introduced projects to each other. Although not all of the projects actively engaged in these, the ones that did have been very proactive and keen for collaborative working. Our project is currently working in close partnership with over six other projects that we met on the networking calls.

Our Strategic Partner has shared great networks which allow us to collaborate with others to support individuals' needs and signpost to other services.

Regular online Teams meetings and referrals between groups became quite slick and ultimately improved veterans' quality of life.

[Our Strategic Partner] connected us with another organisation that we previously had no contact with, resulting in two successful Veterans Positive Pathways Programme grants. We were so impressed with our SP that we joined Cobseo.

On the other hand, some of the respondents noted that there had not been a universal commitment to collaboration among the other organisations also engaging with the Strategic Partners, nor the opportunity to have the support and engagement of other organisations.

To capture some of the reasons for perceiving no change in (or a worsening of) relationships with other organisations, illustrative examples have been reproduced in Box 3.6.

Box 3.6. Respondents' explanations for perceiving a worsening or no change in their relationships with other organisations.

The local authority AFC steering groups and also the activities and drive shown by the AFC's regional liaison officer has been the key determinant of relationships with other orgs, rather than the SPP.

I was directed to another organisation to help with my programme. However, despite reaching out, I received little support from them. I have also noted a reluctance from other organisations to support

3.5   TOOLS TO IMPROVE FUTURE PROJECTS

To help illuminate whether participants in the survey felt there would be any lasting effects of their engagement with the Strategic Partners, DSC asked the respondents to indicate how far they agreed or disagreed that engagement with the Strategic Partners has provided the tools to improve future projects. The distribution of responses to this question is illustrated in Figure 3.4.

The overwhelming majority (84.3%, n=43) of the respondents indicated they agreed or strongly agreed that engagement with the Strategic Partners has provided the tools to improve future projects. Specifically, just over half of the respondents (54.9%, n=28) strongly agreed – making this the most common response category – and almost one-third of the respondents (29.4%, n=15) agreed.

On the other hand, a small but notable minority of the respondents (15.7%, n=8) reported they either disagreed with the statement – that is, they did not feel that their engagement with the Strategic Partners provided them with the tools to improve future projects – or took a neutral position.

Figure 3.4. Extent of agreement that SPP has provided tools to improve future projects.
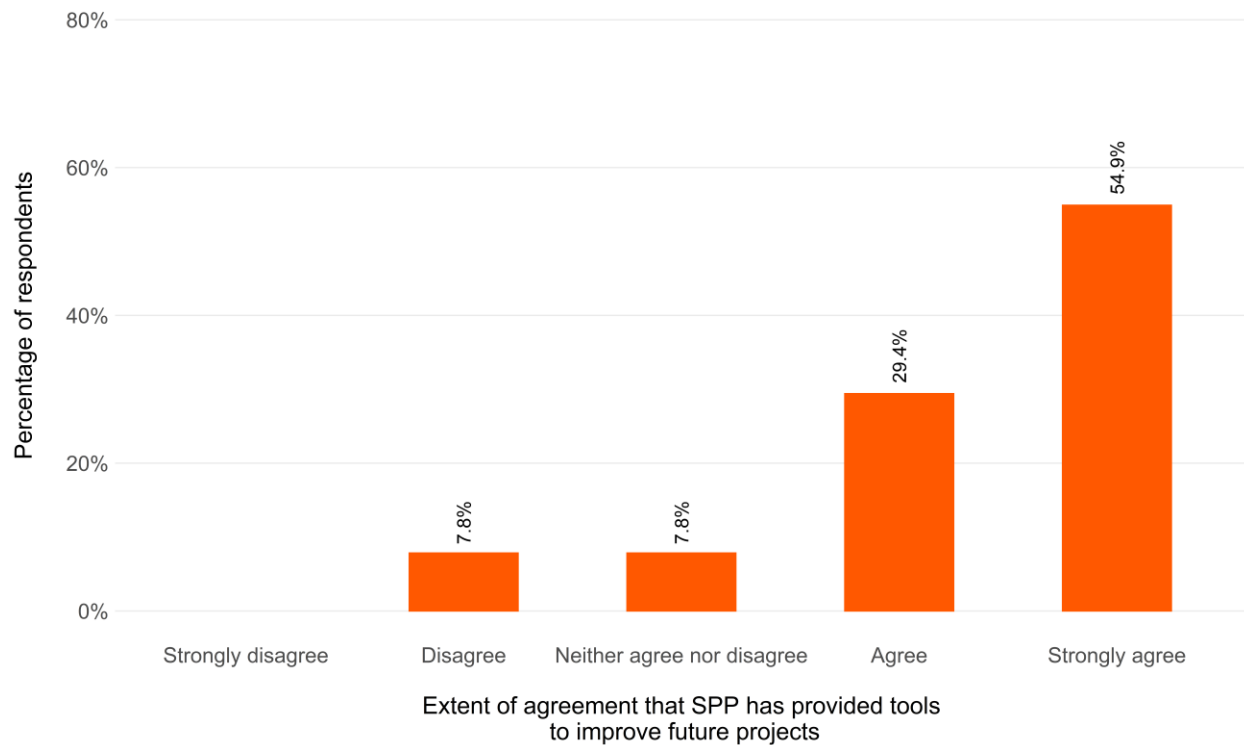

3.6 EASE OF ACCESSING SUPPORT

The final element in this section concerns the ease of accessing support: respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that accessing support from the Strategic Partners was easy to do.

Overall, just over nine-tenths (92%, n=46) of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that accessing support from the Strategic Partners was easy to do. Specifically, almost two-thirds of the respondents (62%, n=31) strongly agreed and just under one-third of the respondents (30%, n=15) agreed with the statement.

On the other hand, a minority of the respondents took a neutral position (6%, n=3) or disagreed (2%, n=1) that accessing support from the Strategic Partners was easy to do. None of the respondents strongly disagreed that accessing support from the Strategic Partners was easy to do.

**Figure 3.5. Extent of agreement that accessing support from the Strategic Partners was easy to do.**
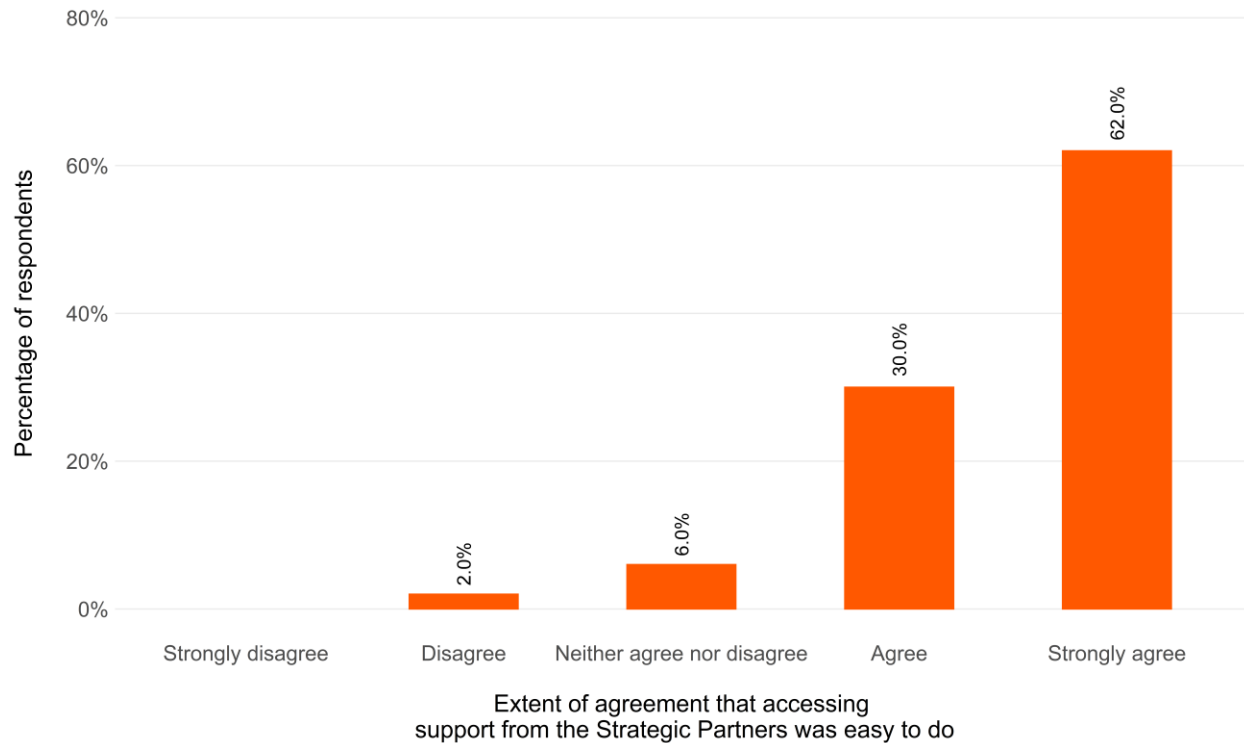
Also relating to the theme of access, participants were invited to indicate where they had heard about the support available from the Strategic Partners. Responses to this question are shown in Figure 3.6.

The most common source through which respondents heard about the support available from the Strategic Partners was the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust (AFCFT), reported by 66.7% (n=31) of the respondents.

This was followed by those who heard about the support available from the Strategic Partners through Cobseo – The Confederation of Service Charities, reported by 22.2% (n=15) of the respondents.

A smaller percentage of the respondents had heard about the support available from the Strategic Partners through other beneficiaries of the Programme (6.7%, n=3) or through the Programme's website (4.4%, n=1).

Figure 3.6. Where respondents heard about the support available from the Strategic Partners.
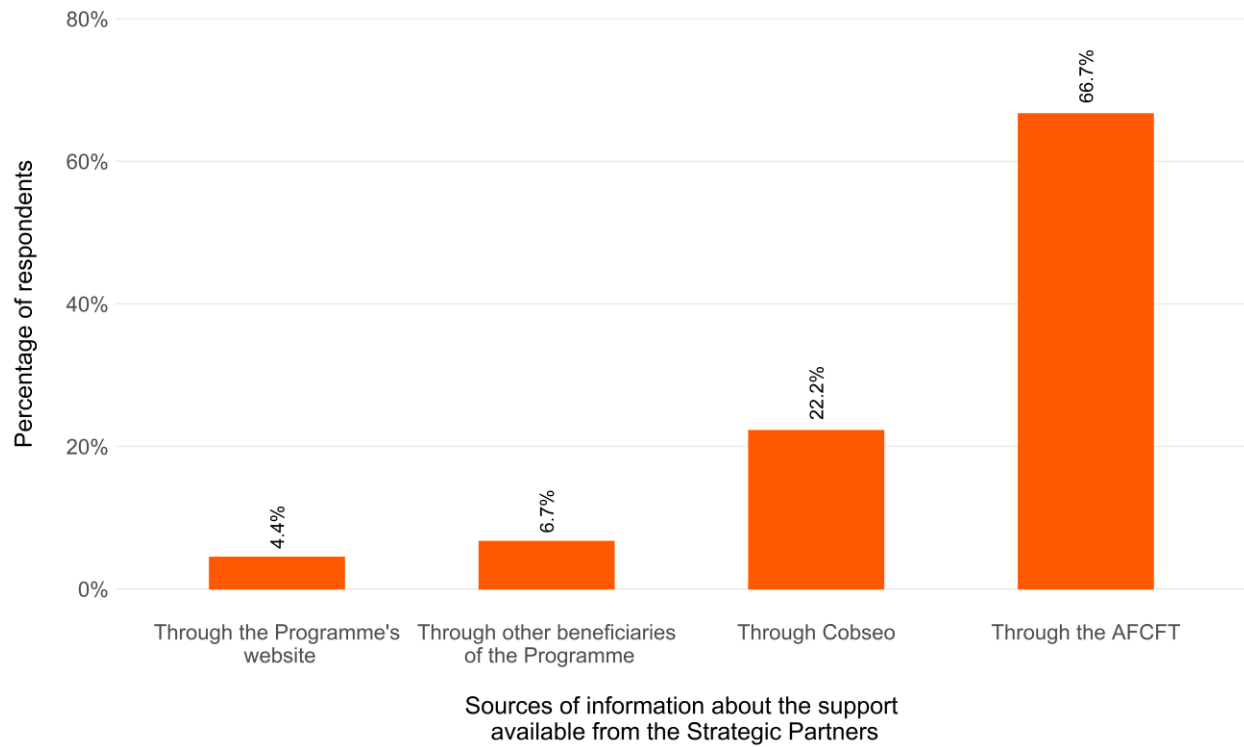
Conclusions and recommendations

The Strategic Pathways Programme (SPP) aimed to provide mentoring, guidance and training to projects supporting armed forces veterans within the Positive Pathways Programme.

This report has presented the results of a short, online evaluation survey with a sample of individuals representing projects that engaged with a Strategic Partner. It focused on the experiences and outcomes of the project overall, as well as those related to grant application support and strategic support and guidance in particular.

4.1 GRANT APPLICATION SUPPORT

Regarding grant application support, the types of assistance provided to the participants in DSC's survey included help in establishing eligibility criteria and their project's fit to these, advice on making grant applications, and specific feedback on their draft grant applications.

The overall level of satisfaction that the Strategic Partners' grant application support met the needs of the projects was high: on a scale of one (not at all satisfied) to ten (completely satisfied), the average was just under nine and none of the respondents provided a rating below seven. Drivers behind high levels of satisfaction with the grant application support included its timeliness, accessibility, organisation, and effectiveness.

Moreover, all except one of the respondents perceived that the grant application support improved the success of their grant application(s). Reasons behind perceptions of improved success included adhering to the details required by the funder, making improvements based on critical reading, achieving conciseness, and better understanding the application process.

When considering the change in their level of confidence after they received support from the Strategic Partners, the overwhelming majority (87.5%) of the respondents said that they felt they had more confidence in applying for grants overall. More than half of the respondents also felt more confident in a range of more specific areas, especially with respect to demonstrating their organisation's suitability for a grant (87.5%) and aligning their project with the right grant maker (75%).

On the other hand, over one-third (37.5%) of the respondents felt that they had about the same level of confidence in preparing research for a grant proposal. Similarly, almost one-third (32.3%) of the respondents reported that they had about the same level of confidence in making a grant application competitive.

4.2   STRATEGIC SUPPORT AND GUIDANCE

With respect to the types of strategic support and guidance provided by the Strategic Partners, several themes were identified. These included having an open line of communication to discuss matters with their Strategic Partner, facilitating networking with other organisations, guidance on impact reporting, and adapting to the changing environment arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Overall, satisfaction that the Strategic Partners' strategic support and guidance met the needs of the projects was high: on a scale of one (not at all satisfied) to ten (completely satisfied), the average was just under nine and over half of the respondents were completely satisfied. The aspects of the strategic support and guidance which drove higher levels of satisfaction included the quality and perceived benefits of the support, the accessibility of the Strategic Partners for their advice, and the management of the Programme overall.

Nevertheless, high levels of satisfaction were not shared by every respondent, with 7.2% being somewhat satisfied or less than somewhat satisfied. Experiences related to the strategic support and guidance which drove lower levels of satisfaction included the perception that the Strategic Partners' advice was contradictory to put into practice, disappointment with the outcomes of acting on the advice that was given and having not required very much advice.

When asked whether the strategic support and guidance provided by the Strategic Partners improved the ability of the respondents' project(s) to achieve their goals, the overwhelming majority (88.1%) indicated that it had helped their projects achieve their goals – only 11.9% of the respondents reported that it had not helped their projects achieve their goals.

Explanations for why the strategic support and guidance had – or had not – improved the ability of their project(s) to meet their goals highlighted several strengths and limitations. The focus on networking (which has led to reports of outcomes such as sharing best practices and enhanced collaboration), and the specifics of the advice and guidance provided were reported as strengths. Meanwhile, weaknesses included an absence of advice or input to develop projects or solve problems, and the time commitments involved. Taken together, this may suggest different experiences with different Strategic Partners, or varying expectations of participation.

When considering the change in their level of confidence following strategic support and guidance from the Strategic Partners, more than half of the respondents felt they had more confidence in working in collaboration with other armed forces organisations/charities,

designing projects that take veterans' mental health into consideration, knowing where to find additional support, and obtaining funding for future projects.

On the other hand, with respect to working in collaboration with public sector organisations (such as Local Authorities) and in creating financial sustainability for future projects, the respondents were more likely to report having about the same level of confidence than having more confidence.

4.3   OVERALL CHANGES FOLLOWING ENGAGEMENT WITH THE STRATEGIC PARTNERS

Following their engagement with the Strategic Partners, over two-thirds (70.6%) of the respondents reported an improvement in how they perceived their professional ability. Reasons given for this perception included improved professional competencies in writing applications for grants, networking effectively, and professional awareness of the armed forces community.

Meanwhile, more than half (58.8%) of the respondents stated their organisational policies and strategies stayed about the same following their engagement with the Strategic Partners: for many respondents, this was not part of their engagement. Nevertheless, explanations for an improvement in policies or strategies (reported by 41.2% of the respondents) included adding policies to cover new issues, strengthening existing policies (for example, to include mental health training), and developing new and existing strategies (for example, to increase provision or reach).

Over three-quarters (78.4%) of the respondents perceived that their relationships with other organisations had improved following their engagement with the Strategic Partners. Reasons for this included increased networking, new collaborative working relationships, and referrals between organisations. However, 19.6% reported their relationships with other organisations had stayed about the same, and one stated that they had worsened, for reasons such as a lack of commitment to collaboration among the other organisations or not having the opportunity for support and engagement from other organisations.

The overwhelming majority (84.3%) of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their engagement with the Strategic Partners has provided the tools to improve future projects, with over half (54.9%) of the respondents stating that they strongly agreed. Only 15.6% of the respondents took a neutral position or disagreed – and none of the respondents strongly disagreed.

Finally, over nine-tenths (92%) of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that accessing support from the Strategic Partners was easy to do. A minority of the respondents took a neutral position (6%) or disagreed (2%) that accessing support from the Strategic Partners was

easy to do. None of the respondents strongly disagreed that accessing support from the Strategic Partners was easy to do.

4.4   RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the evidence provided by the participants in this research, DSC makes the following recommendations going forwards:

■ **Re-engage with participating individuals and organisations to evaluate how learning from the Programme has been applied.** Respondents to this survey largely felt that they had gained confidence in a range of areas and acquired tools that may improve future projects. Revisiting the participants in the future may help illuminate any lasting changes and the effects they have had.

■ **Continue to engage in mentoring and guidance with the individuals and organisations that engaged with the Strategic Partners.** A key theme in this research was the value many respondents attributed to the relationships they had built with the Strategic Partners, in particular the open line of communication which they felt enabled them to ask questions and get advice when needed.

■ **Continue to facilitate networking between organisations.** Another prominent theme in this research was the benefits of networking between organisations. Based on the responses provided, this should be as efficient as possible and might focus on helping solve problems, generating referral and signposting pathways, and fostering collaborative working relationships.

■ **Ensure that all those engaging with and delivering support are fully informed about the nature and scope of the assistance available.** Responses to this survey suggest varying experiences and expectations. Greater information may help create a clear, shared understanding about what is and what is not expected from engagement with future programmes.

■ **Generate data for impact evaluation throughout the life of future programmes**. This research has provided valuable insights into respondents' experiences of their engagement with the Strategic Partners, and their perceptions of any changes. Future work might consider taking measurements at both the outset and the end of future programmes to understand change over time. Objective metrics may also provide a complement to participants' attitudes and perceptions.

4.5   CLOSING REMARKS

In summary, this research provides strong evidence that the Strategic Partners' grant application support largely met the needs of the projects that they were assisting, and that the Strategic Partners' input helped improve the success of their grant application(s). The results also reveal greater levels of confidence in making grant applications overall. Perceived

improvements in confidence were further observed across specific elements of the grant application process; but, in these specific areas, there was generally a slightly greater perception of no change in confidence.

This research also provides evidence that the strategic support and guidance provided met the needs of most of the projects assisted. In addition, the Strategic Partners' input helped many projects to achieve their goals. There was evidence of greater confidence in knowing where to find additional support, working in collaboration with other armed forces organisations/charities, designing projects that take veterans' mental health into consideration, and obtaining funding for future projects – but less so for working in collaboration with public sector organisations and creating financial sustainability for future projects.

More broadly, engagement with the Strategic Partners typically led to a perceived improvement in respondents' relationships with other organisations and, to a slightly lesser extent, their professional ability. Organisational policies and strategies were generally perceived to have stayed about the same after engaging with the Strategic Partners. Looking to the future, the results provide evidence that, for most of the respondents in DSC's survey, engagement with the Strategic Partners has provided the tools to improve future projects.

About the Directory of Social Change (DSC)

At the Directory of Social Change (DSC), we believe that the world is made better by people coming together to serve their communities and each other. For us, an independent voluntary sector is at the heart of that social change and we exist to support charities, voluntary organisations and community groups in the work they do. Our role is to:

- provide practical information on a range of topics from fundraising to project management in both our printed publications and e-books;

- offer training through public courses, events and in-house services;

- research funders and maintain a subscription database, Funds Online, with details on funding from grant-making charities, companies and government sources;

- offer bespoke research to voluntary sector organisations in order to evaluate projects, identify new opportunities and help make sense of existing data;

- stimulate debate and campaign on key issues that affect the voluntary sector, particularly to champion the concerns of smaller charities.

To find out more about DSC, visit us online at www.dsc.org.uk, or get in touch with us via research@dsc.org.uk to see how DSC's research can help you and your organisation.

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About DSC's research

DSC undertakes bespoke and commissioned research and evaluation work for a wide range of charities and organisations. Our research and consultancy service includes:

- strategic advice for grant-makers, charities and companies;
- sector surveys, such as membership surveys of charities and funders;
- impact evaluation of giving by large grant-makers and companies;
- topical research on sector developments and sub-sectoral analysis;
- case studies, highlighting the work of our clients and other organisations in an accessible way.

Our bespoke and commissioned research is led by the needs of our clients, but our policy work also informs our research for the benefit of the wider voluntary sector. This policy work includes campaigns such as Everybody Benefits, which raises awareness of the benefit of charities and the voluntary sector, and the recent #NeverMoreNeeded campaign, which highlighted the vital work of charities during the COVID-19 pandemic and the crucial support they themselves needed during the crisis.

An important part of our work is providing research, insight and evidence on UK armed forces charities. This award-winning research (DSC received the 2021 Forces in Mind Trust Research Award) funded by Forces in Mind Trust, is used by policymakers, government and charities alike. DSC is now recognised as the premier source of research and information on charities that support the armed forces community, and our evidence to Cobseo (The Confederation of Service Charities) on how the sector needed state assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic led to the government providing financial support to armed forces charities in 2020.