

The Charity Commission for Northern Ireland

The Charity Commission for Northern Ireland is the regulator of charities in Northern Ireland, a non-departmental public body sponsored by the Department for Communities.

Our vision

To deliver in partnership with other key stakeholders in the charitable sector “a dynamic and well governed charities sector in which the public has confidence, underpinned by the Commission’s effective delivery of its regulatory role.”

Further information about our aims and activities is available on our website www.charitycommissionni.org.uk

Equality

The Charity Commission for Northern Ireland is committed to equality and diversity in all that we do.

Accessibility

If you have any accessibility requirements please contact us.

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Section 1: Introduction

In November 2020, the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland (the Commission) contracted Cognisense Ltd to conduct research to explore the public's views of the charitable sector in Northern Ireland. This is the second time the Commission has carried out extensive research into levels of public trust and confidence in charities and charity regulation. As the current research was conducted during the COVID-19 crisis it was not possible to completely replicate the earlier research. However, the online survey was designed to, as far as possible, allow comparison with the research conducted in 2016 and benchmarking with similar research carried out by other regulators in Britain, Republic of Ireland and internationally. This research provides crucial information for the charity sector and the public.

Snapshots

In June 2021, the Commission published the first of three snapshot reports to accompany the publication of the full research report. These snapshots are designed to provide a more focussed and accessible overview of a specific element of the research. The first snapshot looked at the overall level of public trust and confidence in charities and in charity regulation. It also looked at the public's perceptions of charities at that point in time. This second snapshot report provides an overview of the main factors which influence the public's trust and confidence in charities, as identified by the research. Knowing what impacts the public's trust and confidence in charities, both positively and negatively, presents charities with the opportunity to review their practices and communications to ensure they maintain the public's trust and confidence and do not undermine it. It is hoped that charities will use this insight into what drives the public's trust and confidence to shape and inform their future planning.

The full research report, including in-depth analysis of the findings and details of the methodology and questions asked, is available in the [Research](#) section of the Commission's website. A third snapshot with suggestions as to how charities might apply what can be learned from the research will be published later.

We would like to thank those members of the public who gave their time to participate in the research.

1.1 Methodology

In order to conduct the research in an efficient and safe manner, Cognisense Ltd administered an online survey.

- 1,500 online surveys were conducted with a representative sample of the population of Northern Ireland in terms of age, sex, social class and geographic location.
- Fieldwork was conducted between 18 January 2021 and 14 February 2021.

Section 2: Drivers of trust and confidence in charities

Members of the public were asked about the factors that are important to them when making a decision on whether to trust charities in Northern Ireland. They were also asked if they knew where to find information about how charities used their funds or how they were managed.

2.1 Findings

Transparency and reporting

For a third of respondents (32%), the factor that was most important when deciding whether to trust charities was that donations/funds raised by charities are used properly, that is in furtherance of the charity's purposes. The next most important factor was that charities have a positive impact on the causes they represent (18%), followed by how transparent charities are about the way they spend donations/funds (16%) and that charities do what they say they will do (16%).

As in 2016, the vast majority (89%) of the public agreed that charities should be transparent about how public donations are spent, with the number who strongly agreed with this increasing to 69 per cent from 61 per cent. A significant majority (86%) also agreed that it is important that charities demonstrate how they benefit the public.

Only 34 per cent of the public reported knowing where to find information about how charities are spending their money, while 42 per cent reported knowing where to find information about how charities are managed.

These findings suggest that the public would benefit from being more aware of the Commission's guidance on how to search the *register of charities* and what information is published on it. Charities would also benefit by directing the public to their entry on the register.

Most important factors for the public when deciding whether to trust charities



32%: spent donations/funds they receive properly



18%: charities have a positive impact on the causes they represent



16%: how transparent charities are about the way they spend donations/funds



16%: charities do what they say they will do

Locality, familiarity and size

In 2016 locality, size and familiarity with a cause were identified as important factors in influencing levels of trust among the public. The 2021 research found that while these factors continued to be influential, the extent to which they influenced trust and confidence had decreased.

Locality was less influential in the 2021 research, with the number who agreed that they trust charities more if they are based in Northern Ireland decreasing to 41 per cent from 48 per cent in 2016. Likewise the number who agreed that they trust charities more if they are providing services within their local community also decreased, down to 60 per cent from 70 per cent in the 2016 survey.

About a third (35%) of the public agreed they trust smaller charities more than big charities, which is also a decrease on the number (47%) who felt this way during the 2016 research.

The number of people (80%) who said they are more likely to trust a charity if they believe in what it is trying to do decreased from 86% per cent in 2016. There were also decreases in the number that agreed they are more likely to trust a charity if they have personal experience of it (down to 70% from 85%) and the number who agreed that if they have heard of a charity they are more likely to trust it (down to 62% from 72%).

While it cannot be said for certain, it may be that the global nature of the pandemic has influenced people's views on whether or not they would trust a charity, and it may have promoted a greater outward looking view among the population. What can be said for certain is that, despite these decreases, locality and familiarity continue to be identified by a significant number of the public as key factors which influence their trust in charities.

2.2 Increasing trust and confidence in charities

By drawing on the range of responses provided by the research, some key drivers of overall trust and confidence in charities can be identified. These include:

- providing greater openness and transparency about what they do and how they are managed
- informing the public of how they are regulated
- reviewing their fundraising activities and adopting those the public find less intrusive
- reviewing salaries and bonuses given to senior employees
- explaining why salaries are set at the level they are.

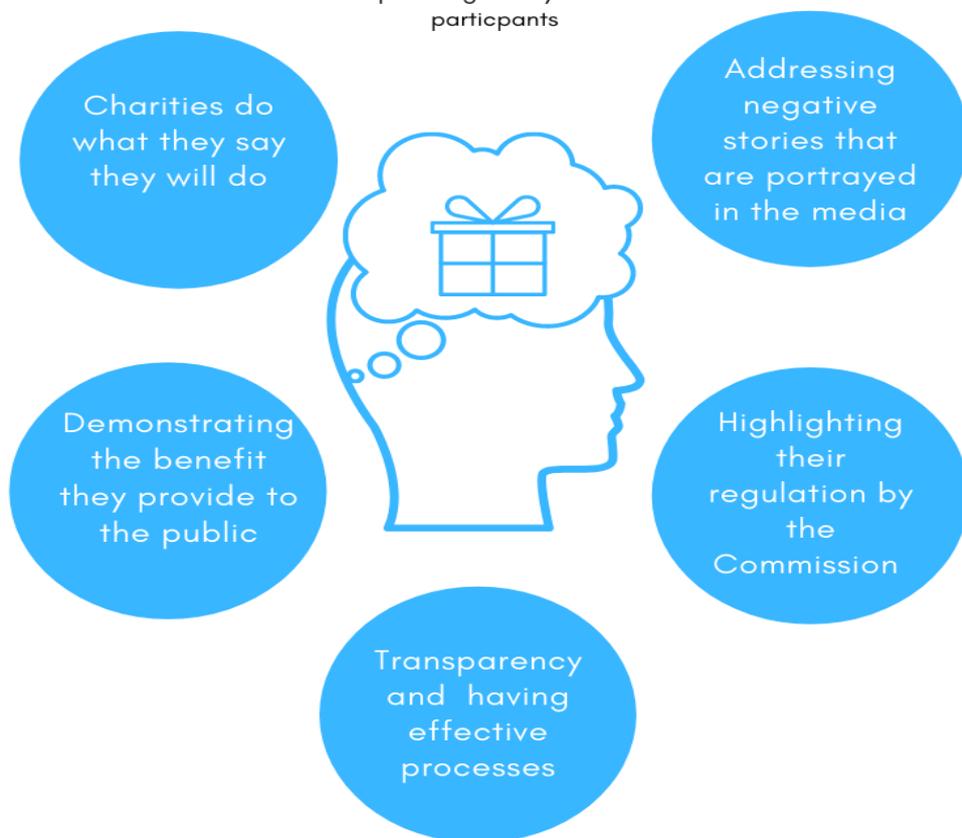
Charities can use information about these key drivers to take practical steps to maintain and increase levels of trust and confidence by, for example:

- doing what they say they will do
- demonstrating the benefit they provide to the public.
- addressing negative stories that are portrayed in the media
- highlighting their regulation by the Commission
- being transparent and demonstrating that they have effective processes and procedures for running the charity, regardless of its size.

Registered charities can achieve many of these practical steps by highlighting and directing beneficiaries, donors and the public to their entry on the *register of charities*.

How can charities maintain and increase levels of trust and confidence?

This research can assist in determining key drivers of overall trust and confidence by examining the range of responses given by research participants



Conclusion

There is little doubt that these are challenging times for charities. It is hoped this research, carried out independently of the Commission, will be a valuable tool for charities across Northern Ireland, providing them with an opportunity to gain further insight into the factors that drive trust and confidence within the general public.

As the charity regulator, the Commission will use this valuable information in shaping our future planning and delivery. In the same way, charities are encouraged to apply these findings to their future development as they strive to grow stronger and smarter following the impact of COVID-19.

The Commission plans to produce a third snapshot report which will suggest how charity trustees can use the research findings to develop practical steps to maintain and increase the public's trust and confidence in their charity and the sector. In the meantime, please do not hesitate to contact the Commission to discuss this report and share your views. We are also keen to hear from anyone with an interest in this research to help identify what information would be most useful, and in what context, for analysis in the future.

For an in-depth study of the research findings, and details of the methodology and questions asked, please refer to the full research report, prepared by Cognisense Ltd, which is available in the [Research](#) section of the Commission's website. A copy of the first snapshot report: [Overall trust and confidence in charities and in charity regulation](#), is also available on the website.

Further information on our activities is available from:

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