



Spring Briefing

Charities in 'Protection Mode'

How charities are adapting to a more volatile operating environment

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Foreword from NCVO

Across civil society, voluntary organisations are operating in an environment that is becoming increasingly complex, pressured and unpredictable. While many charities were already dealing with the pressures of rising demand, financial strain, and changing technology, a new and growing issue is making delivering even more challenging.

In Autumn 2025, we explored the impact rising extremism and social division is having on the voluntary sector. As part of that work, we committed to creating further opportunities to convene members and the sector to provide spaces for collaboration and peer-to-peer support on the issue.

With support from our partner, Zurich, we have been able to continue that work. Over the course of April and May, we have spoken with 50 members to hear their experiences. The overriding message was clear: social division is no longer a challenge affecting a small number of organisations, it is becoming a mainstream concern for charities across the sector. The issue isn't just getting more acute, but it's affecting more organisations and in more ways.

There's also now real concern that misinformation, online hostility and intimidation are no longer just the context in which we operate, but are fundamentally reshaping everyday delivery. It is changing how missions are delivered, and where resources are allocated. All at a time when charities are playing a critical role in supporting communities, responding to growing need and helping people navigate increasing uncertainty.

While the number one focus will always be mission delivery, even more time is now spent on managing how it is delivered. It's a fundamental shift in the mindset and approach for many. We're giving this 'new abnormal' a name: "Protection Mode".

Protection Mode reflects how charities are being forced to adapt to, and being distracted by, increasing pressure while trying as hard as possible, against the odds, to support communities and deliver essential work every day.

As this issue continues to grow, our challenge, as a sector, is working together to ensure the structures surrounding charities evolve alongside the environment they are operating within. Because if we don't, ultimately it's communities that will suffer.



Kate Lee OBE

Chief Executive Officer, NCVO

Methodology

This briefing draws on insight gathered through a series of engagement forums and a summit delivered by NCVO in partnership with Zurich during spring 2026.

The engagement brought together 50 charity leaders, trustees, staff and volunteers to explore the operational realities charities are navigating in an increasingly complex and pressured operating environment.

The content of this briefing reflects recurring themes, shared experiences and operational insight emerging throughout the engagement activity rather than a statistically representative view of the sector. All participant quotes have been anonymised.



Managing risk: a changing landscape for charities

Many charities today are finding it harder than ever to keep up with the demands of a challenging environment – both in terms of an increase in need for the services provided, but also from the wider environment. The world they operate in is becoming more difficult to navigate, sometimes described as a “BANI” world that is brittle, anxious, non-linear, and often, incomprehensible.

This isn't just a theory- it's happening every day. Changes in government leadership, funding systems, and how councils are organised are breaking apart the partnerships charities relied on. With money tighter everywhere, gaps appear, and charities are being asked to fill them. But they rarely have access to the resources they need to do this sustainably.

Economic pressures are making it worse. The cost-of-living crisis is hitting both charities and the people they support. Donations are dropping because people don't have as much to give, yet demand for services is increasing. On top of that, inflation is making everything more expensive to deliver.

And these challenges aren't only about money. Charities are facing higher risks to safety and reputation. Economic struggle and rising anxiety in society are creating more tensions. This sometimes leads to incidents involving staff and volunteers or triggers more online abuse. Social media can spread misinformation quickly, putting organisations in the spotlight and forcing them to be more prepared and resilient online.

At Zurich, we recognise that in this environment, managing risk is not only about protection – it is fundamental to enabling charities to survive and thrive. Charities need to not only react to risks as they emerge but to prepare ahead of time. This means better governance, investing in staff, and staying adaptable in a world that changes quickly and in unexpected ways.

That is why our partnership with NCVO is so important. Our sponsorship remains vital in this pivot and will help drive even greater impact across the sector. Our commitment to safeguarding people and supporting effective risk management aligns directly with this work, enabling high-impact, sector-wide change at a time when it is most needed.

Charities have always been strong and innovative, but the foundations they stand on are perhaps not as solid as they used to be. By understanding today's challenges and sharing knowledge, they can keep adapting. That way, they'll stay ready to provide the crucial support communities depend on.



Jesper Glasius

Senior Strategic Risk Consultant



How charities are adapting to a more volatile and pressured operating environment

Charities across the UK are now operating in what we're calling "Protection Mode"

Leaders told us they are having to adapt to a more volatile, uncertain and pressured operating environment that is reshaping how organisations lead, deliver services, engage publicly and support their people.

Rising demand, financial pressure, misinformation, online hostility, political uncertainty and rapid technological change are no longer isolated challenges. For many organisations, they are becoming part of everyday operational reality.

Across a series of engagement forums and a summit delivered in partnership with Zurich, charities described increasing amounts of leadership attention, organisational capacity and resource being absorbed by resilience, safeguarding, workforce wellbeing, crisis preparedness and organisational protection activity.

Many organisations also described becoming more cautious around visibility, communications and public engagement because of concerns around hostility, reputational challenge and staff safety.

Participants spoke openly about the operational and human impact of sustained pressure, including leadership exhaustion, workforce strain and the growing hidden cost of resilience.

At the same time, organisations shared examples of collaboration, peer support and practical innovation in response to increasingly complex conditions.

“

Protection activity is no longer sitting alongside delivery. It is reshaping delivery itself. ”

“

Charities are no longer operating /around risk. Increasingly, they are operating through it. ”

Five key insights emerged consistently throughout this work

1

Protection Mode is an operational reality

Risk management, safeguarding, organisational resilience and crisis preparedness are becoming embedded into day-to-day operations.

2

Visibility is a risk

Concerns around hostility, reputational challenge and staff safety are changing how organisations engage publicly.

3

Leaders are navigating increasing ambiguity

Many leaders described fewer straightforward or risk-free decisions around public engagement, organisational values and organisational risk.

4

The hidden operational cost is growing

Organisational capacity is increasingly being absorbed by resilience activity that is often ongoing, resource-intensive and difficult to fund.

5

Resilience requires investment

As the operating environment continues to evolve, the ability of charities to deliver impact will increasingly depend not only on the strength of their missions, but on the resilience structures surrounding them.

Supporting civil society to operate safely, confidently and sustainably is becoming fundamental to the future strength of communities and society itself.



1

Protection Mode is becoming operational reality

How overlapping pressures are reshaping the day-to-day reality of charity operations

Charities are operating in an environment shaped by increasing volatility, pressure and uncertainty.

Rising demand, financial strain, misinformation, online hostility, political uncertainty and rapid technological change are no longer isolated challenges. What many organisations are experiencing is a growing overlap of operational, reputational and workforce pressures becoming embedded within day-to-day operations.

In 2025, NCVO identified rising hostility and extremism as growing risks affecting parts of civil society, particularly organisations working on politicised issues. Continued engagement across the sector has since highlighted how these pressures have become broader, more interconnected and increasingly operational in nature.

The continued prominence of this issue is reflected in recent media coverage and sector research. A report published by Jim Coe and Natasha Adams in May 2026, *Towards Meaningful Action*, found growing concern across charities and NGOs about the impact of rising far-right authoritarianism and social division.

Protection activity is increasingly shaping how organisations operate. Risk management is influencing communications, governance, safeguarding, workforce planning and service delivery in ways many charities had not previously experienced.

Activities once considered routine, including public events, campaigning, fundraising and online engagement, now often require significantly greater oversight, planning and risk assessment.

Many organisations described balancing difficult tensions between visibility, safety, advocacy and organisational resilience while continuing to respond to growing demand.

“
Nowhere isn't affected: it's everywhere... this is my whole job now.
”



Rapid technological change is adding a further layer of complexity. Artificial intelligence (AI), misinformation and digital acceleration were repeatedly highlighted as increasing both opportunity and organisational vulnerability, particularly around the speed and scale at which harmful or misleading content can spread online.

One participant reflected:

“AI as a tool is designed to help our productivity... but what it is also doing is helping the productivity of bad actors.”

Participants also spoke openly about anxiety, exhaustion and leadership fatigue linked to prolonged operational pressure and uncertainty.

Protection Mode should not be understood as organisations stepping back from their purpose. It reflects a sector adapting in real time while continuing to support communities and deliver impact in increasingly complex conditions.



2

Visibility itself is increasingly being treated as a risk

Why public engagement, visibility and organisational voice are becoming increasingly complex to navigate

Charities are navigating growing tension around visibility, public engagement and organisational voice.

Many organisations described becoming more cautious about how visible they are, how publicly they communicate and how they engage on contested or high-profile issues.

Some spoke about reducing public communications, limiting online activity, scaling back events or avoiding unnecessary visibility because of concerns around hostility, reputational exposure or staff safety.

For many organisations, visibility itself is becoming an operational consideration.

Communications, campaigning and public engagement decisions are increasingly shaped not only by mission and impact, but also by organisational resilience, workforce wellbeing and reputational risk.

Several organisations also highlighted growing uncertainty around how charities should engage within an increasingly polarised and fast-moving public environment, particularly where legal, political or reputational considerations intersect.

Participants reflected on concerns such as:

- when speaking publicly may increase organisational risk
- how to respond to misinformation without amplifying it
- whether silence itself carries reputational implications
- how to engage politically while remaining compliant and trusted

One panel member reflected:

“In trying to do the right thing, you were amplifying that message.”

“
**Organisations
are becoming
quieter, scared
of attack.**
”



Rapid technological change and AI-driven misinformation were also highlighted as increasing the pace and complexity of reputational challenge, particularly where misleading content can spread quickly online.

Several organisations also reflected on the potential long-term implications for civil society if charities increasingly feel unable to operate visibly and confidently within public life.

Participants spoke about concerns around:

- growing organisational caution
- reduced visibility for marginalised communities
- misinformation or hostility going unchallenged
- declining confidence in public participation and engagement

One participant reflected:

“They are just disappearing and not wanting to be a visible presence.”

For many charities, visibility is no longer simply a communications consideration. It is becoming a strategic and operational issue that increasingly shapes how organisations engage publicly, advocate for communities and build trust.



3

Leaders are navigating increasing ambiguity

How leaders and trustees are navigating increasingly interconnected and unpredictable decisions

For many charity leaders, today's operating environment is becoming harder to navigate with certainty.

Across the discussions, organisations repeatedly described managing situations where there are no straightforward or risk-free decisions. Questions around public engagement, political neutrality, organisational values and reputational risk are becoming increasingly complex to navigate, particularly where legal, political and social pressures intersect.

Participants described difficult questions such as:

- when should an organisation speak publicly on contested issues?
- how should charities respond to misinformation or hostility?
- how should organisations balance staff expectations with organisational risk?
- when does caution become silence?

Several organisations reflected that issues once managed within individual teams are now escalating more regularly into leadership and governance spaces because of their operational, reputational or workforce implications.

Many of the pressures organisations are navigating no longer fit neatly within traditional categories of organisational risk. Reputational, operational, digital and workforce pressures are increasingly interconnected and capable of escalating rapidly.

Participants also highlighted uncertainty around AI governance and organisational readiness, particularly as technological risks continue to evolve quickly.

One participant summarised this pressure as:

“You don't know what you don't know, but you have to take the risk seriously.”



Leaders also spoke about the challenge of balancing organisational caution with visibility, advocacy and mission delivery. Some organisations reflected that overly risk-averse approaches may reduce exposure in the short term, but could also limit public engagement, influence and community connection over time.

Throughout the discussions, organisations consistently highlighted the importance of clearer frameworks, stronger governance support and opportunities for peer learning to help leaders navigate increasing complexity with greater confidence.

Leadership in today's environment increasingly requires organisations to navigate ambiguity, competing pressures and fast-moving risk in ways many charities have not previously experienced at this scale or pace.

4

The hidden operational cost is growing

The growing leadership, workforce and financial impact of operating in sustained uncertainty

For many charities, the pressures shaping today's operating environment are creating a growing hidden operational cost.

Across the discussions, organisations described increasing amounts of leadership attention, organisational capacity and resource being absorbed by resilience, risk management and organisational protection activity.

Activities once considered peripheral are becoming embedded into routine operations, including crisis preparedness, safeguarding, reputational monitoring, governance oversight, workforce wellbeing and cyber resilience.

One participant reflected:

| “These risks are occupying the SLT agenda.”

Participants spoke openly about the impact on leadership teams, staff and organisational decision-making.

Many described operating in environments where risks evolve quickly, information changes rapidly and decisions feel harder to navigate confidently. Others reflected on slower decision-making, increased caution and growing pressure on trustees and leadership teams to respond to increasingly interconnected risks.

Alongside operational pressures, organisations consistently highlighted the emotional impact of working under sustained uncertainty and strain.

Participants spoke about anxiety, exhaustion and leadership fatigue linked to prolonged operational pressure, increasing hostility and growing demand for support.

One participant described:

| “It's always been difficult and now it's even more difficult; I get this sense of exhaustion.”

“
**Firefighting,
not strategic
thinking.**”



Organisations also highlighted the growing financial and operational cost of maintaining resilience.

This includes:

- security and safeguarding measures
- cyber resilience and digital protection
- legal and governance support
- communications monitoring and crisis response
- workforce training and wellbeing support
- additional risk assessment and scenario planning

Several organisations also reflected on the challenge of building AI capability and governance approaches while continuing to manage existing operational pressures.

Many participants highlighted concern that these resilience activities are becoming increasingly essential, but are often difficult to fund directly, particularly for smaller organisations operating with limited infrastructure and capacity.

A recurring theme throughout the discussions was the tension between responding to immediate operational pressures and maintaining long-term strategic focus.

For many organisations, the hidden cost of Protection Mode is not linked to a single issue or incident. It is the cumulative impact of sustained operational pressure across leadership, workforce wellbeing, governance, communications and organisational resilience.

5

Resilience now requires investment

Why resilience, preparedness
and organisational support are
becoming increasingly critical
across civil society

Responding to increasing operational complexity requires more than short-term crisis management. Many reflected that resilience, preparedness and organisational sustainability are becoming increasingly essential to how charities operate, support communities and deliver impact.

Participants described growing recognition that areas once considered additional or reactive, including cyber resilience, workforce wellbeing, safeguarding, governance support and crisis preparedness, are now becoming core organisational requirements.

Many organisations reflected that the resources available to support this work are becoming increasingly constrained.

Several participants described a widening gap between the scale of operational pressures charities are navigating and the capacity, infrastructure and funding available to respond sustainably.

One participant reflected:

“Work is needed more than ever, yet funding is less available.”

Participants also highlighted concern that many resilience-related activities remain difficult to fund directly, particularly for smaller organisations with limited operational capacity.

Alongside financial pressures, organisations consistently highlighted the importance of practical support, shared learning and stronger collaboration across civil society.

Participants spoke about the value of:

- peer support and leadership networks
- practical governance and risk guidance
- crisis communications support
- AI and digital capability building
- opportunities for shared learning across the sector

“
There’s a slow squeeze on resources, capacity and sustainability.
”

Several organisations also reflected that resilience increasingly needs to be approached collectively rather than organisation by organisation.

One participant reflected:

“There’s a lot more appetite for people to work together.”

Throughout the engagement, organisations consistently highlighted that charities cannot continue absorbing increasing operational pressure invisibly and indefinitely.

As the operating environment continues to evolve, participants reflected on the importance of ensuring charities have the resilience, confidence and support needed to continue operating visibly, sustainably and safely within public life.

For many organisations, resilience is no longer simply about responding to crisis. It is becoming fundamental to sustaining civil society’s ability to support communities, build trust and deliver long-term impact.



Closing reflection

Why strengthening the future resilience of civil society matters far beyond the sector itself

Charities cannot continue absorbing increasing operational pressure invisibly and indefinitely.

Across this work, organisations described growing complexity, rising demand, workforce strain, reputational pressure and increasing operational uncertainty. But they also demonstrated resilience, adaptability and a strong commitment to continuing to support communities through increasingly challenging conditions.

What emerged throughout the discussions was not simply a picture of organisations responding to isolated risks or moments of crisis. It reflected a broader operational shift across civil society.

Protection activity is no longer sitting alongside delivery. It is reshaping delivery itself.

As the operating environment continues to evolve, resilience, organisational confidence and the ability to adapt sustainably are becoming increasingly critical to how charities operate, engage publicly and deliver impact.

Because while the pressures facing civil society are evolving, so too is the importance of the role charities play in supporting communities, responding to growing need and holding people and communities together through increasing uncertainty.

“
The structures surrounding charities must evolve too.”

What charities need next

Across this work, organisations consistently highlighted the need for:

-  stronger resilience infrastructure
-  sustainable investment, not just short-term adaptation
-  leadership support for navigating ambiguity
-  practical governance and risk support
-  AI and digital capability building
-  crisis communications preparedness
-  peer learning and cross-sector collaboration

Because charities cannot continue absorbing increasing operational pressure invisibly and indefinitely.

And while the pressures facing civil society are evolving, so too is the importance of the role charities play in supporting communities, responding to growing need and holding people and communities together through increasing uncertainty.

As NCVO develops and delivers its new strategy, the insights in this briefing will help inform how we continue to support charities to navigate an increasingly complex operating environment. The challenges explored in this briefing will continue to evolve, and so will our response.

NCVO is committed to **listening, learning and working alongside charities** to strengthen resilience across the sector.

Help and guidance

Organisations consistently highlighted the importance of practical, accessible support to help charities navigate increasing operational complexity. We have curated a collection of the support currently available on [this webpage](#), which will be updated regularly as more support becomes available.

The following areas emerged repeatedly throughout the engagement:

Organisational resilience and risk management

- organisational risk frameworks
- scenario planning and incident response
- safeguarding and workforce protection
- operational continuity planning
- cyber resilience and digital safety

Governance and leadership support

- trustee development and governance capability
- practical decision-making frameworks
- political engagement and neutrality guidance
- leadership support during periods of uncertainty
- navigating interconnected operational risks

Crisis communications and reputation management

- crisis communications planning
 - media handling and response
 - misinformation and disinformation response
 - reputational risk management
 - online engagement and escalation management
-

Workforce wellbeing and psychological safety

- trauma-informed workforce support
 - burnout and wellbeing resources
 - leadership resilience support
 - psychologically safe workplace guidance
-

Digital resilience, AI and cyber capability

- cyber security and digital protection
 - AI governance and responsible adoption
 - misinformation and synthetic content response
 - online safeguarding and data protection
 - digital literacy and organisational readiness
-

Collaboration, networks and shared learning

- peer support networks
 - confidential leadership spaces
 - shared operational learning
 - cross-sector collaboration
 - communities of practice and knowledge sharing
-

Charities increasingly need access not only to guidance and expertise, but also to the infrastructure, networks and support needed to operate confidently and sustainably within a more complex environment.

Bibliography and further reading

This briefing paper draws on engagement activity delivered by NCVO in partnership with Zurich, alongside wider sector research, media reporting and operational insight relating to organisational resilience, workforce wellbeing, misinformation, safeguarding, public trust and the changing operating environment facing charities across the UK.

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