

AI Future Charity Report

Part 1 – Where the Charity Sector is Now

Introduction

“There is so much I don’t understand. I am interested to know what we could or should be using.”

Chat GPT launched in 2022 and, in 2026, companies will invest an estimated £580 billion in AI; double their investment in 2025. Comparing that to the UK Government’s total research budget of £18 billion pa brings home the scale of impact it will have on every aspect of society. In the charity sector it is being used, often quietly, informally and without clear oversight. At the same time, many charities are unsure how relevant AI really is to their mission, how safe it is to use, or what “good” looks like in practice.

Our Future Charity AI Survey March 2026 was designed to inform thinking on where charities are right now: how they are using AI, how they feel about it, what worries them, and what support they believe they need. This report brings together this data, plus Charity Excellence system data and other survey data together with other UK and global, and charity and wider AI analysis and surveys. Details of the findings and data used are referenced in the relevant sections with links to the sources at the end.

This is Future Charity – Part 1, focused on the present. It sets out an evidence-based picture of the charity sector today. Future Charity – Part 2 will build on this and our existing Charity Excellence [AI Ready](#) and [AI Learning](#) programmes to look ahead to what a highly effective charity sector could look like in an AI-enabled world — and what needs to happen now to get there.

“It’s not really resistance. It’s that we don’t know enough yet.”

We are very grateful to the [GSR Foundation](#) whose funding makes our work possible and also others whose work informed our own (scroll to the bottom for these).



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Executive Summary

“Our organisation understands the importance of keeping up with AI, otherwise we risk being left behind.”

AI is widely used, but most use remains informal and early stage, with only a very small minority deploying it strategically or with clear organisational oversight.

Most charities are still at the beginning of their AI journey. Around two thirds describe themselves as exploring or experimenting, while fewer than one in four are implementing approved tools and policies. Fully embedded use remains rare.

Despite this, there is strong pressure to engage. Around six in ten respondents strongly agree that their charity cannot afford to ignore AI. Many feel that falling behind carries risks, even if they are not yet confident about how to proceed.

Public attitudes to charities using AI are cautious and conditional, with research showing around a third of people feel positive, around a quarter feel negative, and the remainder unsure. Acceptance is highest where AI is used to support efficiency or protect funds rather than replace human judgement or make decisions about people.

AI is widely seen by charities as an opportunity, but a risky one. Just over half strongly agree that AI could benefit their charity, alongside widespread concern about data protection, safeguarding and ethics. Data protection stands out as the single greatest concern.

However, a not insignificant percentage of charities do not think AI use is relevant to their work.

The main overall barriers are fear and lack of understanding rather than opposition to technology. Many charities do not yet feel confident about what AI can safely be used for or how to manage the risks.

A key risk is potential damage to the trust that is so key for charities and is likely to become more so in the future. AI use is now widespread, but charities do not yet have the necessary policies and procedures, and oversight to use it safely and well.

Another is the risk of widening gap. A small group of confident, well-resourced (probably large) charities move ahead (probably in fundraising), while a much larger group remains stuck at the level of experimentation, unsure how to progress without increasing risk.

Charities are clear about what they need next: practical, plain-English support, including training, policies, templates and funding to create capacity.

“It feels like standing at the base of a mountain and not knowing which path to take.”

Section 1 – What We Already Know About AI Use in UK Charities

“AI is being used informally, without anyone really talking about it.”

The Charity Digital Skills Report 2025 found that 76% of UK charities were using AI in some form, up from 61% the previous year. However, most of this use was informal and ungoverned, such as individuals using generative AI tools independently. Only 2% of charities reported using AI at a strategic level.

Use varied by size. Almost nine in ten charities with incomes over £1 million reported using AI, compared with around seven in ten smaller charities.

By contrast, the Charity Commission’s *Trust in Charities 2025* research found that only 3% of trustees said their charity was using AI at all, rising to 8% among larger charities. This highlights a significant gap between what is happening operationally and what boards believe is happening. The Charity Commission has also been explicit that trustees remain legally responsible for how AI is used, including risks around data protection, safeguarding, bias and decision-making. AI does not remove or dilute trustee duties.

Finding: In the charity sector, AI use is already common, but strategic awareness and governance are lagging. This gap forms the backdrop for the survey findings that follow.

Section 2 – Charity Sector AI Readiness

This section draws on the Charity Excellence Sector Data Store, a real-time benchmarking system based on thousands of anonymised charity self-assessments. Unlike attitude surveys, this data focuses on whether charities have specific governance, risk and operational controls in place.

It tracks 14 metrics, with results presented using a six-month rolling average, providing a stable picture of sector-level readiness over time. This report used data extracts from early 2025 and 2026. Each metric is rated using a RAG framework:

- Red: most charities have taken few or no steps.
- Amber: partial progress, with significant gaps.
- Green: most charities have the control in place.

As of March 2026, overall, AI readiness across the sector was moderate but improving from a very low base. Progress was uneven, with operational controls developing faster than strategic governance.

Red. All three board-level AI governance controls remained rated Red:

- Strategy - assessing AI's broader organisational and societal impact.
- Allocating AI responsibility to a lead trustee/committee to ensure effective oversight.
- Ensuring everyone is aware of, and is trained, supported and complies with our AI procedures.

A Red rating means most charities have yet to take meaningful action. This aligns closely with Charity Commission data indicating very low trustee awareness of AI use.

"We haven't formally discussed AI at a Trustee meeting yet."

Amber. Operational measures such as:

- Staff/volunteer AI training.
- AI-specific risk assessments.
- AI-related policies.

Were consistently rated Amber, indicating growing but incomplete adoption.

"People are already using it day to day, but it's not really acknowledged and there are no guardrails."

Green. The most mature practices had improved to a green rating, including:

- Security and compliance in using AI systems.
- Safeguarding AI-enabled meetings.
- Human review of AI-generated funding bids.

Since March 2025:

- Red-rated controls had reduced.
- Green-rated controls had tripled, albeit only very recently in 2026.

Improvements were strongest in data protection measures, including DPIAs and policies addressing misinformation and deepfakes. Only one area — strategic assessment of AI's societal impact — had declined slightly.

Finding: The sector is improving how it manages immediate, practical risks, but is struggling to embed AI into management and governance. Successfully adapting to an AI enabled world requires people to be supported and trained, and an holistic approach to revising procedures and embedding new best practice. Consequently, this represents a significant risk, not only to individual charities but also overall trust in the sector.

Resources and Help.

- Charity Excellence [AI Ready](#) runs automatically when completing [Health Check questionnaires](#) and connect users to a wide range of AI help, resources, toolkits and policies.
- Trustees and Management can also complete the free Charity Excellence Learning [Trustees and Management online AI courses](#).

Section 3 – How Charities View AI Today

“If we fail to appreciate this and to make training available, the digital skills gap will look like a crack in the pavement compared to what’s coming.”

This section is based on Charity Excellence 2026 survey responses to questions asking respondents how their charity views AI. What they said:

- Around 61% strongly agreed that their charity cannot afford to be left behind.
- Just over 50% strongly agreed that AI is a major opportunity.

“It has been transformative in the way that I work, breaking the blank page and helping me organise my thoughts.”

Most respondents do not see AI as “just another technology”. Instead, it is viewed as something potentially transformative. However:

- Around 17% strongly disagreed that AI is relevant to their work.

Finding: Just over half see AI as a major opportunity they can’t afford to miss out on, but a significant minority do not consider it relevant to their work.

Charity perceptions of AI-generated imagery

Charities are generally cautious and uneasy about using AI-generated imagery, despite some experimentation. Research by The Saltways, found that 55% of charities had no plans to use AI-generated images. While a minority use them occasionally or regularly, a notable proportion reported trying AI imagery and then stopping, suggesting that ethical, reputational or practical concerns outweighed benefits once tested.

The research highlights a clear values tension: over three-quarters of respondents agree that authentic imagery is essential for trust, yet a smaller proportion still use AI images, often driven by cost, speed or safeguarding pressures. Knowledge gaps are significant, with only around one-third reporting a strong

understanding of how AI image generation works, and over half of organisations using AI imagery not consistently labelling it, raising concerns about transparency and public trust.

Findings: A substantial number of charities appear to perceive AI imagery use as unethical, although the public view is more nuanced (below). Use of AI imagery by charities needs to be informed by understanding of the Public's perception and evolving AI imagery good practice.

Resources and Help. Charity Excellence has published guides to both [AI Imagery Ethics Best Practice](#) and how to [Charity Trust and Authenticity in an AI Enabled World](#).

Section 4 – Perceived Attitudes of Key Stakeholders

“Most of our volunteers are retired, so there is a lot of uncertainty and nervousness about AI.”

This section is based on Charity Excellence survey questions that invited respondents to rate how different groups feel about their organisation using AI. What respondents perceived:

- Management teams are the most positive, with nearly half strongly supportive.
- Trustees and staff are broadly positive but cautious.
- Volunteers and beneficiaries are more divided, with around one in five perceived as strongly opposed.

Finding: Support for AI is uneven and often values-driven. Successful adoption will require support and training for people - change management not just technology.

Resources and Help. Charity Excellence Learning offers [11 free online AI courses](#) that require not previous AI knowledge and are suitable for everyone in a charity.

“Grant makers strongly advocated against the use of AI. This seemed to be a uniform view across the funders.”

Section 5 – How the Public Perceive Charity AI Use

“The marketing and comms team are keen to ensure that our authentic voice is not lost and that public trust remains high.”

This section draws on multiple strands of evidence, including Charity Tracker, CAF and the University of East Anglia, each answering a slightly different question about public attitudes. Together, these sources

provide a rounded picture of public and donor, as well as the wider trust environment charities operate within.

A public that is cautious, not hostile

The clearest UK charity-specific evidence comes from Charity Tracker's Public Perceptions research. This shows that public opinion on charities using AI is divided but not polarised.

- 36% of UK adults say they feel positive about charities using AI
- 27% feel negative
- 37% say they are unsure

This split suggests that most people are still forming their views, rather than holding fixed opinions. Acceptance is strongly linked to familiarity: older people and those with little personal experience of AI are consistently less comfortable with its use. The overall picture is not one of rejection, but of conditional acceptance.

Strong support for “protective” and back-office uses

Public support increases sharply when AI is used for purposes that are easy to understand and clearly beneficial. According to Charity Tracker:

- 64% of people say it is acceptable for charities to use AI to detect fraud and scams
- 53% are comfortable with AI being used for administrative tasks, such as scheduling or financial planning

These uses are generally seen as protecting charitable funds or supporting staff, rather than replacing people or changing the nature of charitable relationships. This mirrors findings from CAF's international research, where efficiency and helping more people were consistently among the most positively rated benefits of charities using AI.

Sharp drop in trust when AI affects human decisions

Public comfort falls away most sharply when AI is perceived to influence who gets help. Charity Tracker found that:

- 38% of respondents think it is unacceptable for charities to use AI to help decide who receives support
- 33% think this is acceptable

Opposition is strongest among older people, with 46% of those aged over 55 opposed to AI being used in decisions about allocating support.

The concern here is not the technology itself, but its role in high-stakes, human-centred judgement, where empathy, discretion and accountability are expected to remain central. This aligns closely with CAF's UK focus groups, where participants repeatedly emphasised that AI should be used alongside humans, not instead of them.

Data, privacy and “loss of the human touch”

Across all studies, concerns about data and human connection are persistent. Charity Tracker found that:

- Only 13% of people are comfortable with sensitive personal data being used in AI systems
- 36% cite data security risks as a key concern
- 35% worry about losing the human element of charity work
- 31% are concerned about serious mistakes being made

These concerns closely reflect themes seen in the charity sector survey itself, suggesting alignment between public unease and internal charity caution. CAF's research reinforces this, showing that in the UK, people are almost twice as likely to prioritise workforce reduction as a risk compared with data breaches (34% versus 18%), highlighting sensitivity around job losses and erosion of personal connection.

Trust depends more on *who* than on technology

The UK Government's Public Attitudes to Data and AI Tracker Survey (Wave 4) is not charity-specific, but it provides important context for understanding trust. The survey shows that public willingness to share data and accept AI use depends far more on trust in the organisation involved than on technical safeguards alone. Trust varies sharply by institution:

- The NHS is trusted by 85%
- Academic researchers by 76%
- Government by 38%
- Social media companies by 33%

The implication for charities is clear: institutional trust matters enormously. Public acceptance of AI use is likely to depend on whether a charity is perceived as acting in the public's best interests and being accountable, rather than on claims about efficiency or innovation.

The tracker also shows widespread AI use in everyday life — six in ten people report using AI chatbots recently — but seven in ten say they know little or nothing about how AI systems are trained. This combination of use without understanding helps explain why concern often outweighs confidence.

AI imagery and the risk to authenticity

Research into AI-generated imagery highlights a specific reputational risk. A study by the University of East Anglia warns that AI-generated images can act as an “AI shortcut” to empathy, potentially undermining trust rather than strengthening it. Public reactions to AI imagery are divided:

- Around 40% find it acceptable
- 31% find it unacceptable

The concern is not just about disclosure, but about authenticity and representation. Research suggests that heavy reliance on synthetic imagery can spark suspicion, shift attention away from real experiences, and weaken emotional connection — particularly in sensitive or trust-dependent campaigns. An AI generated cartoon of Santa Claus for a Christmas poster is probably unlikely to create a significant response but an emotional image that appears hyper realistic may well do so, even if it is marked as AI generated. Equally, use of AI imagery by causes that are perceived to be linked to ethical AI issues, such as the environment or art, will be more likely to be contentious.

What this tells us about public expectations

Across all sources, a consistent picture emerges:

- The public is not opposed to charities using AI.
- Acceptance is conditional and context-dependent - who uses it, what they do with it and how they do that.
- There is strong permission for AI to support efficiency, protect funds and reduce fraud.
- There is much less tolerance for AI replacing human judgement, shaping narratives about vulnerable people, or operating without transparency.

Findings: Charities that are clear about why they are using AI, where humans remain in control, and how data is protected are far more likely to retain confidence. But trust also depends on a range of other factors, so it’s important that charities understand the context within which they are working.

Section 6 – Barriers to AI Adoption

“Objections to AI aren’t just resistance, they often highlight real risks.”

The key barriers identified:

- Lack of understanding and fear of the unknown.
- Data protection and safeguarding concerns.
- Ethical and environmental worries.
- Loss of human connection.
- Time, funding and capacity constraints.

More than a third rated data protection risks at the highest level of concern.

“It’s not resistance, it’s fear of the unknown and not knowing how to use it safely.”

Finding: Resistance is often rational and thoughtful, not anti-technology. At sector level we need to provide the information and tools to give charities confidence and charities need to support and train their people.

Section 7 – What Support Charities Say They Need

“We need training in plain English, not tech jargon.”

This section is based on open-text survey responses asking what support would help charities make better use of AI. What charities are asking for:

- Practical, role-specific training
- Clear guidance on safe and ethical use
- Ready-to-use policies and templates
- Funding and time to create capacity

Finding: Charities need practical support, guidance and tools that meet their needs.

“Time and capacity are the real problem, not willingness.”

Resources and Help.

- **Training.** Trustees and Management can also complete the free Charity Excellence Learning [Trustees and Management online AI courses](#).
- **Best Practice.** Charity Excellence [AI Ready](#) runs automatically when completing [Health Check questionnaires](#) and connect users to a wide range of AI help, resources, toolkits and policies.
- **Policies.** [60+ policies can be downloaded](#) by logging in to Charity Excellence; where appropriate, policies have been updated to reflect AI requirements.

- **Funding.** There is very little UK AI funding for non-profits. We will launch a tech and innovation funding list soon of funders who may well be open to an AI application.

Section 8 – Areas of Interest for AI Use

This section is based on survey ratings of interest in different AI applications. Interest levels varied sharply across the AI options that were rated.

Practical, familiar tools such as AI bots like Copilot, AI within email and spreadsheets, and data security and cyber protection attracted consistently high interest, probably reflecting their visibility, low barrier to entry and personal productivity benefits.

By contrast, several options generated much more polarised responses, with significant numbers rating them very highly and others very low. These include creating simple custom bots using an organisation's own data, using AI within CRMs or client databases, creating a whole-organisation information and decision system, and creating advanced agentic AI. For some respondents, particularly those in larger or more digitally mature organisations, these options represent the next logical step. For others, the same options raise immediate concerns about data protection, safeguarding, governance, accountability and loss of human control.

“Agentic AI looks like a pot of poison for people-centred organisations.”

The most advanced options are also the least well understood. Many respondents indicated they were unsure what these terms mean in practice or associated them with AI acting autonomously rather than as a support tool.

Findings. This aligns with findings elsewhere in the report showing that knowledge gaps, rather than hostility, underpin much of the sector's caution.

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[Trust in Charities 2025](#): Charity Commission for England and Wales

[Charities and Artificial Intelligence](#) – Trustee Guidance: Charity Commission for England and Wales

[AI adoption among charities shows no sign of slowing down](#): Zoe Amar, *Civil Society*, March 2026

Charity Tracker Public Perceptions research, a UK-wide survey of 3,000 adults conducted in December 2025 and reported by [Civil Society in February 2026](#), which focused specifically on charities' use of AI.

Charities Aid Foundation (CAF) [international research into public views on charities using AI](#), based on over 6,000 respondents across 10 countries, with additional UK focus groups.

[UK Government Public Attitudes to Data and AI Tracker Survey](#) (Wave 4), published by DSIT in December 2024, which provides context on public trust in AI and data use (but is not charity-specific).

University of East Anglia – [Public Perceptions of AI Imagery](#).

The Saltways, [AI-Generated Imagery in the Charity Sector](#), February 2026.

Methodology

This report brings together multiple sources of evidence to build a rounded picture of where the charity sector is today in relation to AI. No single dataset is treated as definitive; instead, findings are triangulated across surveys, sector benchmarking and external research. However, there are an estimated 0.5m UK non-profits, comprising some 1 million staff and 13 million volunteers, spanning a very wide range of causes and ranging in size from micro charities (under £10k pa) to huge charities more than £100 million pa.

The core primary data comes from the Future Charity AI Survey 2026, an online survey of over 220 respondents from UK charities of different sizes and roles, including trustees, managers, staff and volunteers. This survey provides insight into current AI use, attitudes, perceived barriers, support needs and areas of interest.

To understand organisational readiness rather than attitudes alone, the report also draws on data from the Charity Excellence Sector Data Store, which tracks 14 AI metrics with aggregated data from thousands of anonymised charity self-assessments. This benchmarking data focuses on whether charities have specific AI governance, risk and operational controls in place, and is presented using a six-month rolling average to show sector-level trends over time.

Survey and benchmarking findings are placed in context using external sector and public research, including the Charity Digital Skills Report 2025, Charity Commission for England and Wales research and guidance, public perception research from Charity Tracker and the Charities Aid Foundation, and specialist studies such as The Saltways' research on AI-generated imagery. These sources are used to validate patterns, highlight gaps, and reflect how charities are perceived by donors and the wider public.

Percentages are used throughout to aid readability. Where Likert scales are reported, analysis focuses on clear patterns (such as strong agreement or concern) rather than statistical precision. Qualitative comments are summarised into themes rather than quoted directly.

Limitations

- The Future Charity AI Survey is self-selecting and not statistically representative of all UK charities.
- Charity Excellence benchmarking data is based on self-assessment rather than independent audit.
- Public attitude research varies in scope, and not all sources are charity-specific.

Collectively, we think that the evidence provides a robust, indicative view of the sector, suitable for understanding current maturity, confidence and risk but not for making precise population-level claims.

Ethics Note

The Charity Excellence AI Survey Agent was used in adducing and analysing data but under the direction and control of a human.