

DECEMBER 2025

Australian Community Boards Wellbeing Report



2025 Australian Community Boards Wellbeing Report

Published by Our Community Pty Ltd
Melbourne Victoria Australia

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ISBN 978-1-876976-99-6

First published November 2025

Acknowledgement of Country

The authors and publishers of this book acknowledge and offer our deep respects to the traditional owners of the lands on which we live, work, play and learn. Sovereignty was never ceded.

We support the reforms outlined in the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

Treaty, Justice, Truth.

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Introduction

Australian research reveals rising stress and burnout rates across workplaces and not-for-profits¹, but until now, there has been almost no national data specifically on the wellbeing of the members of not-for-profit boards.

Board member wellbeing is critical because stressed or disengaged directors can affect organisational sustainability, and the effectiveness of the services NFPs deliver to the community. On a personal level, wellbeing feeds resilience, contributes to happiness, and helps enable people to live their lives to the fullest.

The Annual NFP Board Wellbeing Survey, conducted by the Institute of Community Directors Australia (Community Directors), seeks to change that. This landmark research gives voice to the experiences of over 570 board members across Australia.

The data reveals how governance structures that help to determine workload, compliance and culture directly affect board members' willingness to stay involved, and describes clear pathways for change.

This sector-leading survey is specific to community board members rather than staff. The board members surveyed come from diverse organisational types and sectors, so the survey provides a broad snapshot of governance and wellbeing across Australia's NFP landscape.

The report positions wellbeing not as a personal, individual issue but as a governance and retention concern, reframing how we think about board leadership roles in the community sector. The inclusion of free-text responses from board members makes the findings nuanced and grounded in rich qualitative data.

The data shows that board challenges are not inevitable, and solutions already exist within the sector. Ways to reduce board members' stress are generally well known. However, Australian NFPs vary in size, and the data highlights the need for targeted support rather than a generalised approach.

I hope this report will serve as a baseline for measurement in future years as well as provide practical actions organisations can take in the short term to increase their own sustainability and that of the community sector as a whole.



Adele Stowe-Lindner
Executive Director
Institute of Community Directors Australia

¹ Alistair Carmichael, Roland Dillon, Erin Ferraris and Dr Jemma King, "Supporting resilience and preventing burnout in nonprofits", April 11, 2023, <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/social-sector/our-insights/supporting-resilience-and-preventing-burnout-in-nonprofits>; and Safe Work Australia, *Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace*, February 2024, https://data.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-02/Psychological-health-in-the-workplace_Report_February2024.pdf.

Executive summary

This year's survey results tell a story of very high rates of mission alignment by board members and senior NFP leaders, acknowledgement of high rates of board-related stress, and also an interest in accessing help to support NFP boards reduce that stress.

The results reveal a striking paradox: the average not-for-profit board member rates their personal wellbeing at a decent 7 out of 10, and 75 per cent of board members report confidence in remaining effective in their board roles for another 12 months. Yet at the same time, over two-thirds have previously considered stepping down because of stress or overwhelm.

What leads board members to feel stress and to consider stepping down? Time commitments, governance complexity and interpersonal conflict emerged as leading sources of pressure. Almost one in five board members reported feeling unsafe expressing dissenting views during board discussions, which is a signal of cultural challenges within governance structures.

This data matters because board members are the stewards of mission, accountability and impact in the community sector. Their ability to lead and to support is directly affected by how supported, respected and resourced they feel.

An important protective factor against board member (and staff) burnout is very high engagement with organisational mission. Over half of respondents declared that they never or rarely feel more detached from the NFP mission today than when they started.

Almost 90 per cent of respondents (89 per cent) said they feel alignment with their organisation's mission and this contributes to their sense of wellbeing as a board member.

This report highlights areas of strain and also opportunities for pathways forward. In free-text responses, respondents called for clearer induction processes, the sharing of responsibility among board peers, improved conflict resolution tools, and wellbeing check-ins that feel genuine.

Strong messages from the data include:

- 1) Wellbeing is widely valued yet inconsistently supported over and above compliance requirements**
- 2) Many boards are struggling but some boards report no stress**
- 3) Culture and leadership shape the wellbeing of board members**
- 4) There is a policy gap when it comes to wellbeing, but there is also appetite for changing that**
- 5) Responses to wellbeing challenges must be tailored to individual organisations, to reflect the breadth of the sector.**

By shining a light on the human experiences behind governance roles, this report invites sector leaders and funders to consider wellbeing to be a cornerstone of effective leadership and therefore of organisational sustainability. When board members thrive, the communities they serve stand to benefit the most.

Methodology

The survey was conducted online by Community Directors in July 2025. It was open for one month, and in that time it drew 575 complete responses from board members across a diverse range of organisations.

It was distributed through the Community Directors mailing list, sector networks and social media. Respondents represented a broad spectrum of roles, in organisations ranging in size from tiny (less than \$250,000 revenue) to large (over \$10 million revenue)), and a range of areas, including housing, health, arts and the environment.

While there are more than 600,000 not-for-profit organisations in Australia, only a portion of these have formal boards. The Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC) has around 60,000 charities on its register, many of which are governed by active boards. Formal governance is a requirement for registered charities under ACNC Governance Standards, but not all not-for-profit or community groups (especially very small ones) are required to be registered; nor are all of them likely to have well-functioning boards.

If we estimate that between 60,000 and 100,000 of all these organisations put together have functioning boards, then 575 responses to a survey like this represents a strong and credible response rate. Statistically, garnering over 385 responses allows for general conclusions with a ± 5 per cent margin of error, which means the data represented in the report can be generalised as credible.

This dataset is particularly meaningful because it reflects the voices of engaged board members across a wide range of organisation types, and it highlights trends and pressures being felt right across the community governance landscape.

Community Directors aims to repeat this survey annually so it can provide data to the sector over the long term.

Respondents

The spread of responses reflects the diversity and complexity of Australia’s not-for-profit sector, though the dominance of community-facing sectors is notable.

Organisations working in community development, health and human services made up over 40 per cent of total responses, highlighting that boards in these fields are particularly engaged with conversations about wellbeing. These are also sectors where frontline and vicarious stress may be heightened, making wellbeing a more urgent concern for boards overseeing staff, volunteers and service delivery.

The strong presence of arts, culture, sport and recreation organisations shows wellbeing is a concern not only in high-stakes crisis services but also in sectors where creativity, inclusion and long-term engagement are vital. The results suggest that wellbeing concerns are universal, but its drivers and effects vary by sector, guiding targeted support and training.

Respondents by sector

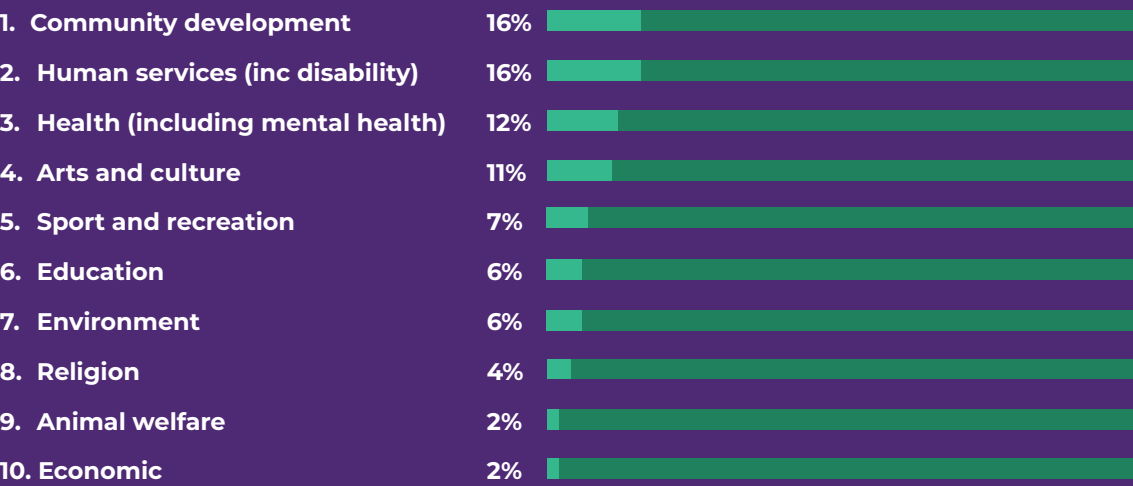
The sector list offered to respondents matched the standard list supplied in the CLASSIE version 4.2 classification list, created by SmartyGrants and used by the ACNC.

CLASSIE is the Classification of Social Sector Initiatives and Entities, a unified taxonomy (or “social change dictionary”) designed to bring consistency to how social sector initiatives and organisations are described, enabling comparative insights, data driven practice, and improved grantmaking across platforms.

Survey respondents represented a wide distribution of sectors: 17 sectors out of the 18 offered.

The sectors most represented were community development and human services (16 per cent each), while those least represented were public affairs and public safety (0.2 per cent each) and international relations, which was not represented at all.

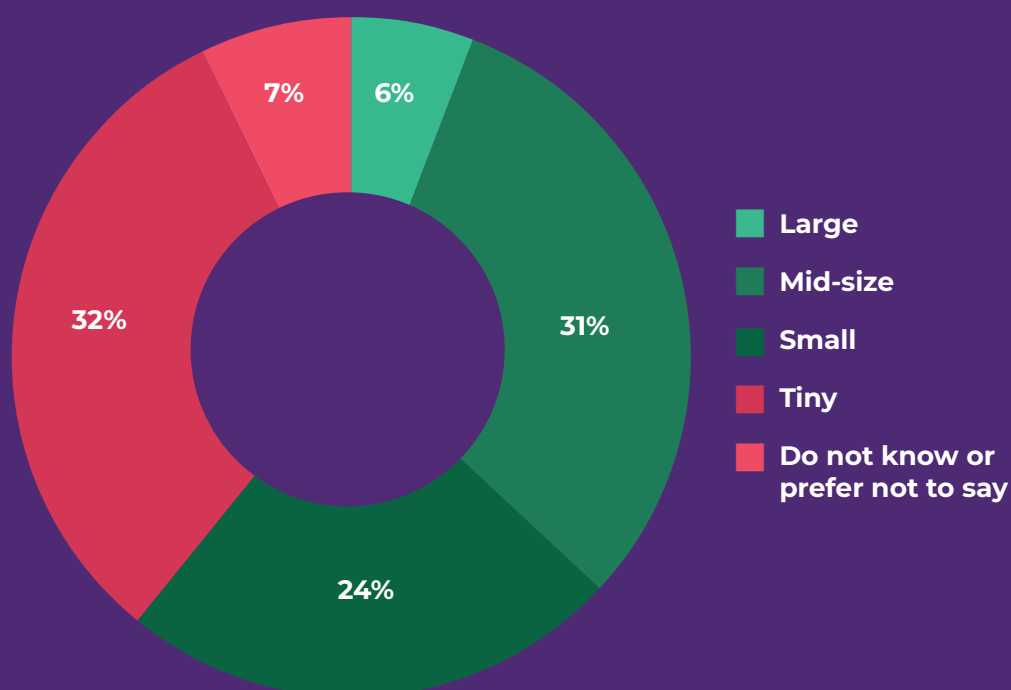
Of the 18 sectors offered, the 10 most represented were:



Respondents by organisation size/annual income

Survey responses reflected a wide range of organisation sizes in the community sector. Just under a third of organisations (32 per cent) were tiny, meaning they had income of less than \$250,000 per year. Almost a quarter of respondents (24 per cent) represented organisations with an income of \$250,000 to \$1 million, which put them in the “small” category. Just under a third of organisations (31 per cent) represented in the survey have income of between \$1 million and \$10 million annually (mid-sized organisations). Organisations with income of more than \$10 million annually made up 7 per cent of responses.

Organisation's annual income	Proportion of respondents
More than \$10 million (large)	6%
\$1 million–\$10 million (mid-size)	31%
\$250,000–\$1 million (small)	24%
Less than \$250,000 (tiny)	32%
Do not know or prefer not to say	7%



When combined, tiny organisations (less than \$250,000 annual income) and small organisations (\$250,000–\$1 million annual income) account for more than half the respondents.

Several free-text responses from board members cited large workloads, weak support structures, and frustration over limited human resources. A quote from the executive director of a small arts and culture organisation illustrates the governance impact of these issues: “I have now worked with three similar organisations as ED and all of them are in the same situation, lack of sufficient funding, resulting in unreasonable expectations of each board/committee in the paid employee (myself). One role resulted in complete burnout for myself. The board did not recognise, acknowledge or take any responsibility for this.”

These kinds of reflections from paid leaders highlights the complexity of governing for wellbeing in an under-resourced organisation.

Mid-sized organisations (\$1–10 million) accounted for almost a third of respondents and they show more variability. Some have in place wellbeing structures such as policies, mental health supports or training, while others do not. Some organisations have enough resources to buffer stresses, while others struggle because the expectations of wellbeing support are greater than their organisations can provide. For example, one respondent from a \$1 million–\$10 million organisation said, “I think there is plenty of support and resources available. The hard part is working how much do we use. It is

particularly hard for small NFPs.” Another respondent experiencing stress said, “Not sure that NFP board member wellbeing is taken as a priority in several boards I have been acquainted with.”

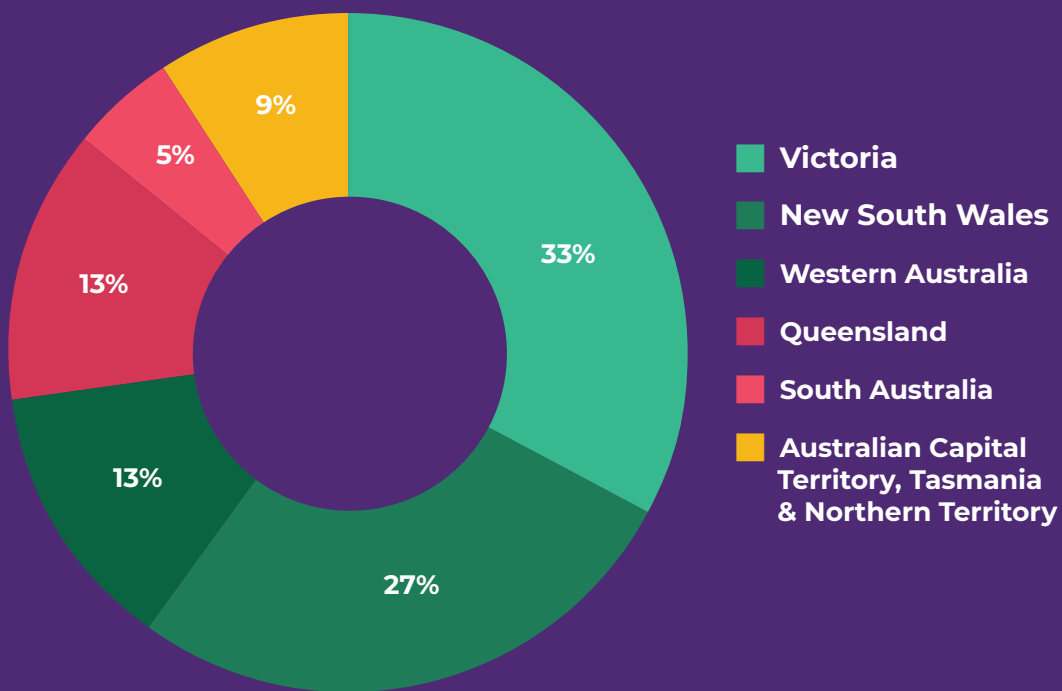
Large organisations (with income over \$10 million) account for just 6 per cent of responses. While they make up a smaller sample, these respondents are more likely in free text to report access to policies, better induction, and clearer role boundaries, all factors that respondents identified as reducing stress. Some of these boards have proactive wellbeing practices and standing items related to mental health; these are far less common in smaller organisations. For example, one respondent, a board member from a very large community development organisation, said their board has “Peer support and meetings include all directors to participate in an equitable discussion.” Another, the deputy chair of a large health organisation, wrote, “Practices include looking out for each other and checking in with each other. Policy for staff is policy for Board. Access to external support services provided.”

Respondents by state or territory

All Australian states and territories were represented in responses to the survey. A third of the respondents were from Victoria, just under a third (27 per cent) from New South Wales, and just over a quarter (26 per cent) from Queensland or Western Australia. The remaining respondents represented all other states and territories between them.

Respondants by state or territory

State or territory	Percentage of respondents
Victoria	33%
New South Wales	27%
Western Australia	13%
Queensland	13%
South Australia	5%
Australian Capital Territory, Tasmania & Northern Territory	9%



Respondents by role

Just under a third (31 per cent) of respondents identified themselves as current general board or committee members. A total of 63 per cent of responses came from people in leadership positions, either executive or non-executive, including the roles of chair, secretary, treasurer and CEO. Just under a third of the total respondents said they were currently in the chair role (31 per cent) and 13 per cent said they were currently CEO or executive director. Other board roles named included secretary and treasurer.

Key findings

1. Value alignment

“I keep coming back because the mission still feels like mine. It’s what makes the stress worth it.”

“The workload is heavy, but our shared purpose keeps me energised and committed.”

The majority of respondents reported a strong connection to their board roles. When asked whether they feel a sense of achievement or fulfilment from serving on a board, 83 per cent agreed or strongly agreed, with only 7 per cent disagreeing.

Similarly, 86 per cent of respondents said they agreed or strongly agreed that they felt aligned with their organisation’s mission, and that this alignment contributed positively to their wellbeing as a board member.

Value alignment is important because it can be considered a protective factor, keeping board members in their roles even though they experience high levels of stress.

83% feel fulfilled by their board service

83%

2. Stress snapshot

“It’s not that the work is bad, it’s that there’s too much of it and never enough people to help.”

“I’ve seriously thought of quitting more than once due to constant pressure and no recognition.”

Sixty-three per cent of respondents reported that their board role had a negative impact on their work–life balance always (2 per cent), often (19 per cent) or sometimes (42 per cent).

Similarly, 72 per cent reported stress related to their responsibilities as a board member, always (3 per cent), often (29 per cent) or sometimes (40 per cent).

It is important to note that in most leadership roles that involve accountability, stress is likely to occur sometimes. It is not necessarily a negative experience if it occurs “sometimes” and is well managed. The indicators for concern are “always” and “often”.

Just over a third of respondents (35 per cent) reported that their board role rarely or never has a negative impact on their work–life balance, and 28 per cent said they rarely or never feel stress related to their board responsibilities. While feeling too much pressure is a common experience, it is not universal and may be mitigated.

63% say work–life balance suffers

63%

3. Wellbeing management snapshot

“I try to look after my mental health, but it often feels like no one else on the board takes it seriously.”

“Wellbeing isn’t a policy, it’s how we work together. Right now, we’re all tired.”

Most respondents (82 per cent) said they can manage their own wellbeing reasonably well. Most reported feeling confident about remaining effective in their role for another 12 months (75 per cent “somewhat confident” or “very confident”), yet 22 per cent lacked confidence in being able to gain access to mental health support.

In many circumstances, board members seem to be unaware of available or possible support options. For example, one chair from a tiny seniors organisation reported, “As President of a member organisation, I absolutely show empathy and try to put things in motion to support other board members, but as for explicit practices or policies there aren’t any!”

A comment from a member of the board of a small human services not-for-profit was in the same vein: “Traditionally, the board has been composed of older members and these are new concepts for them, so it would be helpful to have some ideas or guidance as to how managing board member wellbeing would look in practice.”

82% manage their wellbeing well



82%

4. Board culture and dynamics

“We have a Chair who dominates every meeting – it’s hard to speak up, and harder still to disagree.”

“We are too busy being nice to hold management to account.”

Culture can make or break a board. Encouragingly, over half of the respondents rated their board’s internal relationships as “good” or “excellent,” and 80 per cent felt respected for their identity and values. Psychological safety on NFP boards is encouragingly strong, with 79 per cent of respondents reporting their comfort level in speaking up when they disagreed as good or excellent. However, the perceived ability of boards to manage conflict was lower (48 per cent reported “good”, 17 per cent “excellent”), so this is an area where support could be helpful.

Further to this, the perceived ability to manage conflict constructively varies widely between boards. Thirty-five per cent of respondents identified interpersonal conflict as a key source of stress in their board role. Free-text responses illustrate this variation: some respondents described being able to disagree respectfully and resolve issues, while others reported dominating members, silenced discussion, and unresolved tension.

Often, the role of conflict management falls to the chair. One complimentary respondent wrote, “the importance of having a good chair actually improves the productivity of the board.” The chair’s role was mentioned throughout free-text response in the context of board meetings and stress, either from the point of view of chairs who feel burdened, or from the point of view of board members who want better meetings.

Board members showed their frustration with the chair in comments such as these:

- “remove the current chair who seems to have no idea how to lead”

- “We have a Board Chair who likes to let people know he has a doctorate!”
- “The Chair is keen on having a title so only thinks he has to tightly chair the meeting so not too many questions are asked.”

The chair of a mid-sized, low-stress human services organisation reflected on their own role in a way that demonstrates best practice regarding culture: “We are a non for profit with 10 unpaid Directors. They are committed Directors and whilst we sometimes disagree, we have a policy that it is not personal and always leave the board showing respect for each other. As Chair, if there appears to be unrest, I will meet privately with those Directors to resolve those issues. I do address the expectations of behaviour with new Directors and so far have not encountered any problems. I call to order any out of line comments made to other Directors. We are a happy lot who work toward the comfort of the residents we represent.”

80% feel their values are respected

80%

5. Governance and compliance pressures

“Managing compliance is taking over from the mission”

“Governance feels like a maze. I didn’t realise how much compliance and risk we’re responsible for.”

When respondents used free text to identify five pressures that contributed to board stress and role strain, the following themes emerged:

- **Time commitments (58%)**

Balancing board responsibilities with work, family, and personal demands.

- **Governance complexity (48%)**

Navigating compliance, regulatory expectations, and organisational oversight without sufficient training or clarity.

- **Interpersonal conflict (35%)**

Tension on the board.

- **Other factors (28%)**

Including unbalanced workloads, lack of support, unrealistic expectations, financial stress, and the emotional toll of managing staff conflict or governance failures.

The complexity of governance and compliance requirements affects wellbeing, with a quarter of respondents (25 per cent) agreeing that it often or always affects their role satisfaction, and a further 38 per cent reporting that it sometimes does. In free text, respondents nominated workload imbalance, unclear expectations, and under-resourced organisations as factors undermining board effectiveness and personal wellbeing. The ex-chair of one small human services organisation said, “Governance is important, but sometimes there’s more than necessary to the point of creating work that distracts from other important matters. And we actually have several people who are well-versed in governance, but they’re divided on how much is too much.”

“I just said that we don’t need mental health support. But we do need assistance in protecting board members from ever increasing regulation and associated liability risks. To the extent there are mental health issues on boards that issue is a key root cause. Fix the problem not the symptoms.”

6. Support systems

“We just need help to act on it”

“We’ve got great people but no structure. No induction, no conflict policy. Everything’s made up on the fly.”

The organisations of only around one in six respondents (16 per cent) have a wellbeing strategy, and just 13 per cent include wellbeing as a standing agenda item. While boards commonly meet basic legal requirements, proactive and structured wellbeing initiatives such as employee assistance programs (EAPs) and mental health policies remain less common.

Respondents were asked whether their board has explicit practices or policies to support the wellbeing of its members, and they were given the opportunity to respond with free text. One respondent candidly explained the connection between systems, governance, compliance and their own wellbeing as they understood it: “The problem is not for the Board or Organisation to fix. The problem is a function of a society that seems not to value volunteerism and a bunch of governments who keep increasing complexity (and I feel legal liability) to the extent that I intend to get out of such positions as soon as I can.”

Only 16% of organisations have a wellbeing strategy

16%



7. Wellbeing governance

“We tick the safety boxes, but wellbeing isn’t on the agenda – literally.”

“We need help to turn awareness into action. Everyone agrees it matters, but no one knows what to do next.”

While 54 per cent of respondents reported they have strong or very strong awareness of their legal responsibilities to manage workplace health and safety as aspects of governance, 45 per cent reported having moderate, low or no awareness, highlighting room for improvement. Less than half (49 per cent) felt they had received adequate induction, which is where such information should be provided.

When asked about how their boards currently governed for the mental health and wellbeing of staff and volunteers, respondents nominated as many of the provided activities and practices as they wished.

Compliance related activities

- **73%** – We execute our legal obligations towards health and safety at work
- **56%** – We review incident reports regarding workplace health and safety, including mental health
- **58%** – We have a risk register covering known hazards, risks and planned implementation of preventative measures
- **53%** – We implement actions to support accessibility, diversity, equity and inclusion
- **43%** – We have policies including mental health and wellbeing policies
- **31%** – We implement required adjustments for returning staff or volunteers

Proactive wellbeing practices

- **31%** – We identify wellbeing initiatives that are making a positive impact
- **16%** – We have a wellbeing strategy or plan
- **15%** – We review levels of mental health-related absenteeism
- **13%** – Wellbeing is a standing item on the board agenda

This list highlights that legal compliance and risk management dominate wellbeing efforts, with over 30 per cent of respondents answering affirmatively to each of these options, while proactive wellbeing planning and cultural practices remain limited, with under a third of respondents affirming that their organisations carry out these practices. This reactivity may protect organisations legally but does little to prevent burnout or build long-term sustainability.

The high level of self-reported board awareness regarding its legal obligation towards work health and safety suggests that board members recognise their legal responsibilities in relation to work health and safety, including psychosocial risks. However, a gap seems to exist between knowing and doing, particularly in implementing proactive wellbeing measures. Boards may understand their obligations, but without the tools, time or culture to act on them, that awareness may not translate into meaningful proactive wellbeing activity, and this remains a risk.

When asked whether it would be valuable for their organisation to receive help to manage board, staff and volunteer wellbeing, only 18 per cent responded that this kind of help would not be valuable. Of those who responded that it would be valuable, 58 per cent said it would be somewhat valuable, and 24 per cent said it would be extremely valuable.

When invited to share free-text ideas for improving wellbeing among board members, 58 per cent of respondents shared at least one suggestion. These included flexible meeting formats, peer support, mental health training, and a cultural shift toward psychological safety. Some called for better chairs; others asked for practical resources, mentoring, and time for reflection. One respondent put it plainly: “We all know wellbeing matters. We just need help to act on it.”

Respondents were also invited to provide free-text answers to the question “What strategies or resources would most help improve your wellbeing as a board member?” The top three themes that emerged were:

- 1) support systems
- 2) better meeting management
- 3) wellbeing and mental health strategies.

45% lack awareness of workplace health and safety responsibilities



45%

Insights from qualitative data

In total, three questions in the survey invited free-text responses:

- Would you recommend additional wellbeing-focused initiatives for NFP boards? If so, what would they be?
- What strategies or resources would most help improve your wellbeing as a board member?
- Is there anything else you would like to share on the topic of board member wellbeing?

The following table captures the top 20 most common words used in answers by respondents, and the context in which they appeared. (Words such as “the” and “and” are excluded.) The most common words provide a picture of what is top-of-mind for board members.

The words represent respondents' experience of governance in practice. They reveal the language board members naturally use to describe their experiences, frustrations and priorities. Together, they provide a concise snapshot of the key drivers of board wellbeing, from practical governance pressures such as compliance, time and role clarity to cultural factors such as leadership, support and psychological safety.

Top 20 most common words used in answers by respondents

Word	Common context in responses
Board	Often in reference to overall effectiveness, responsibilities or culture.
Members	Discussed in terms of contribution levels, commitment and peer relationships.
Wellbeing	Usually linked to workload, governance pressures, and whether formal policies exist.
Governance	Raised in the context of responsibilities, compliance, and board–management boundaries.
Compliance	Seen as time-intensive and often overwhelming for volunteer boards.
Support	Mentioned both positively (peer support) and negatively (lack of formal structures).
Time	Tied to meeting frequency, preparation demands, and the strain of balancing commitments.
Policy/Policies	Commonly about absence of explicit wellbeing policies or governance frameworks.

continued...

Word	Common context in responses
Chair	Often linked to leadership style, meeting management and conflict resolution.
Role	Focused on clarity of responsibilities and understanding of governance versus operations.
Conflict	Primarily about interpersonal tensions, dominance, and lack of resolution processes.
Meetings	Referenced in terms of frequency, efficiency, and quality of discussion.
Leadership	Connected to how well the board functions, often influenced by the chair.
Training	Seen as needed for governance skills, induction, and leadership capacity.
Responsibilities	Highlighted in terms of workload, risk and accountability.
Workload	Frequently tied to small boards or uneven contributions among members.
Culture	Related to board dynamics, openness and respect.
Risk	Discussed as a governance responsibility and in connection with compliance.
Development	Usually in terms of professional development for directors and board capability.
Clarity	About role clarity, expectations, and communication.

The tone of many responses gave an impression of stress and urgency, and many free-text responses drew on the same themes across a number of questions, suggesting respondents were experiencing a combination of inter-related stress factors. For example: “You don’t realise going in how stressful it can be especially alongside paid work when there’s no governance, and training costs are so high and the committee refuse to support with training as they see no value. It’s very stressful especially as a person with disabilities and who works hard on boards.”

Free-text responses highlighted that the place of wellbeing in perceptions of governance responsibilities is mixed. For example, one board member from a low-stress mid-sized organisation said the following would be helpful: “Training about the value of wellbeing (and what it means) to both staff and board. Resources that provide leads on free or inexpensive initiatives that NFPs can access to support wellbeing within the team. Training session on how to identify wellbeing issues for Board and senior leadership.”

In contrast, a respondent from another low-stress mid-sized organisation said, “In the real world, I don’t believe this is or can be a priority for NFP boards such as ours.”

Implications for the NFP sector

The data paints a picture of community sector boards, in the main, under significant emotional and structural strain, with real risks to governance quality and board member retention.

Over one-third of respondents said stress or overwhelm had led them to consider stepping down, and 17 per cent said they had felt this way frequently. If left unaddressed, these patterns may lead to a revolving door of volunteers and the erosion of organisational memory and leadership continuity.

However, it is important to note that over a quarter of respondents (28 per cent) report experiencing no stress or only rare stress from their board role. This offers opportunities for peer learning: when it comes to key stressors such as interpersonal conflict, time commitments, meeting quality, induction and governance complexity, what are these boards implementing that can provide an example for others in the sector to follow?

Patterns of risk

The most common wellbeing pressures cited by respondents were time demands, governance complexity, and interpersonal conflict, and these were compounded by poor role clarity and lack of support. In free-text responses, board members described feeling overworked, under-resourced, and at times unrecognised. One respondent said, “I’m overworking due to others not meeting their time commitments,” while another noted, “We have too few board members, which means shouldering a huge load.”

These findings point to a sector-wide structural challenge. The strain is not evenly distributed and weighs heavily on boards with fewer members, weak induction, or limited support systems. The boards experiencing little to no stress show that solutions are possible and replicable. There is a clear opportunity to identify practices common to these lower-stress boards (efficient meetings, strong chairs, clear role boundaries, shared workload) and adapt them as sector guidance.

This highlights a critical tension: while most board members understand what is expected of them, they are not always given the tools or support to meet those expectations. Governance demands are affecting wellbeing for nearly two-thirds of respondents, and this signals a pressing need to rethink how board members are supported from day one and throughout their service on the topic of compliance.

Regarding work-life balance, it appears that respondents view their board role as part of the “work” category of work-life balance, as evening meetings and pressure from accountability seem like work. However, most NFP board members are not remunerated for their role, which most often takes place outside of work hours. There is a case for considering whether it is appropriate to pay the members of specific NFP board, in recognition of the work required. Remuneration may alleviate the negative impact of NFP board work on work-life balance. On the other hand, there is also a case to be made that NFP board work is an expression of civic contribution and therefore it should not be remunerated.

Patterns of resilience

Survey respondents showed a strong appetite for change in relation to board wellbeing, which is a sign of resilience. Most respondents said they would value external help to improve wellbeing, signalling that while boards recognise the importance of this issue, many feel ill-equipped to tackle it alone. This presents an opportunity for funders, peak bodies and support organisations to step in with practical tools, training and targeted support.

Crucially, a majority of board members reported high levels of mission alignment and personal fulfilment in their roles. This intrinsic motivation is a powerful protective factor against burnout, and it is a reminder that with the right systems and culture in place, board service can be both sustainable and meaningful.

Ensuring the wellbeing of board members in the context of their board roles is an ethical issue, but it is also a governance one. Ensuring people's wellbeing is vital if organisations are to retain those people. Retention, in turn, helps to promote and protect the values at the heart of community organisations.

Data comparison

The 10 per cent of respondents reporting no board stress show some differences from those reporting high-stress boards. Comparing these two data sets enables us to identify which practices are more often associated with positive wellbeing and should therefore be considered for duplication across other organisations.

Profile of low-stress boards

- **Size:** They are proportionally slightly more likely to be small or medium-sized organisations, much more likely to be large organisations, and much less likely to be tiny organisations.²
- **Sectors:** Low-stress boards are proportionally more represented in crisis-intensive areas like human services and community development (21 per cent of respondents from low-stress boards are in community development, whereas community development accounts for 16 per cent of overall responses). Low-stress boards are less likely to be in the arts and culture sector (this sector accounts for 8 per cent of respondents from low-stress boards).
- **Leadership style:** Chairs on these boards are described in free text as “inclusive”, “clear” and “efficient”, with respondents emphasising facilitation than control.

Vignette 1: The low stress board

“Board Chairs have a responsibility to ensure that they create a space for everyone to contribute equally and be heard with respect. Unfortunately, many Chairs don't come with this training, or even awareness and knowledge.”

– Survey respondent

This low-stress, mid sized arts board shows that good culture, strong leadership, the right training and efficient processes can keep stress low without the need for extra funding or headcount.

Practices and culture of low-stress boards

- They more often report structured inductions and clear setting of expectations at the start of board service.

² For definitions of organisational size in terms of annual income, see page 9.

- They tend to have efficient meeting practices, including shorter meetings, tighter agendas, and clear delegation of work.
- They report fewer incidents of interpersonal conflict and higher perceived psychological safety, with chairs seen as active in managing culture.
- They are more likely to have formal policies on role boundaries and conflict management, which prevents or reduces stress from blurred lines between governance and operational functions.

Factors affecting board stress levels

Comparing low- and high-stress boards suggests that low-stress boards benefit from proactive governance, strong chair leadership, and structured systems. Sharing these practices supports sector-wide learning and improvement.

Induction is key – only 35 per cent of respondents from high-stress boards say they have a strong induction, compared with 68 per cent from low-stress boards.

Overall, respondents consistently identified time pressure as their top stressor, with over half (58 per cent) citing the challenge of balancing governance responsibilities with work, family and other commitments.

Establishing role clarity requires setting out how much time a board member is expected to dedicate to their role, and 35 per cent of respondents from high-stress boards say they are clear about roles, whereas for those from low-stress boards the figure is 85 per cent.

Board conflict is clearly a factor in the stress levels of board members: 51 per cent of respondents from high-stress boards reported that a cause of high stress is interpersonal conflicts, compared with 29 per cent from low-stress boards.

Among the 71 free-text mentions of meetings, 37 respondents suggested that poor meetings were a factor in the stress they experienced as board members. Free-text suggestions for improvement included “succinct papers received one week before meeting”, “better structure around meetings and timely distribution of information”, “on time meetings”, “less packed agendas to reduce stress” and “Keep meetings short and follow through actions.”

Factors affecting board stress levels

Factor	High stress boards 	Low stress boards 
Induction	Often ad hoc or absent	Structured, clear expectations set from the outset
Meetings	Long, unstructured; work spills outside meetings	Short, efficient, agenda focused
Conflict	Higher tension	Chair actively manages dynamics
Role clarity	Boundaries between governance and operations unclear	Policies and codes reinforce boundaries
Organisation size	High stress is over-represented in tiny boards	Low stress is more common in large organisations
Chair style	Mixed or critical feedback	Described as inclusive, clear, and efficient

Stress and support by organisation size

The survey data shows a relationship between organisation size³ and the prevalence of board stress, mainly that the *drivers* of stress differ.

Mid-sized organisations report the highest stress levels, often due to governance complexity, workload imbalances, and inconsistent support structures.

Smaller organisations report moderate stress, often tied to capacity limitations, fewer board members, and informal practices.

Large organisations experience stress at similar rates to smaller boards, but the stress is more frequently linked to cultural issues, such as interpersonal conflict or unskilled chairs, rather than workload.

The table on page 00 compares stress levels and common characteristics across organisation sizes, highlighting where different types of boards succeed and struggle.

Vignette 2: The overloaded small board – risk under strain

“Board stress exacerbated by limited resources and frustrated efforts to achieve mission in a grant-dependent environment when shrinking funds are available.

“In a vibrant, active organisation it is easier to recruit additional Board personnel, reducing the workload, increasing diversity and skill, this reducing stress of existing Board members. Also enables better induction, professional development, policy review. Stress derived from disenchantment, disillusionment and frustration lead to resignations, compounding the problem.”

– Survey respondent

A small community service board illustrates how capacity issues and lack of succession planning create long-term risk to governance continuity.

A snapshot of what higher and lower stress boards look like across different sized organisations can help to establish what we might be aiming for on boards with positive wellbeing among board members. The data suggests that tailored approaches to wellbeing are necessary, depending on an organisation’s size, as different stressors and support needs emerge at each level.

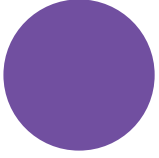
Small and tiny organisations face moderate stress, and around one-third of respondents from these organisations report high stress. Their main challenges relate to capacity and resourcing, including limited induction processes, uneven workload distribution, and the absence of formal wellbeing policies. However, when boards have clear expectations, good conflict management, and efficient meetings, they tend to report lower stress, even without formal wellbeing strategies.

Large organisations show a lower overall stress profile, with no respondents from these organisations reporting constant stress, though about one-third still report feeling stressed often. Formal wellbeing policies are often absent, but boards may benefit from broader organisational supports for staff, such as employee assistance programs. Where stress does occur, it is often linked to interpersonal dynamics, unskilled chairs, or structural issues in governance rather than resourcing problems. These boards are likely to need support in navigating complexity and maintaining a healthy governance culture rather than resourcing the basics.

Overall, mid-size organisational boards exhibit the least stress, less than large and small or tiny organisations, with just over a quarter of respondents indicating frequent stress. This group still demonstrates stress. It often lacks formal wellbeing structures and grapples with governance complexity, uneven task sharing, and conflict resolution. The chair’s influence is pivotal, acting sometimes as a stress buffer and at other times as a source of tension.

³ For definitions of organisational size in terms of annual income, see page 9.

Organisation size and stress level – snapshot

Organisation Size	Stress levels	High-stress boards: common traits 	Low-stress boards: common traits 
 Tiny (< \$250k) (32% of respondents)	 34% report stress <i>always or often</i>  25% report stress <i>rarely or never</i>	 21% report adequate induction  88% have no wellbeing policy  46% have good or excellent ability to manage conflict  Report frequent workload imbalance	 91% understand their responsibilities as a board member  76% have good or excellent ability to manage conflict Report efficient meetings, clear expectations
 Small (\$250k–\$1m) (24% of respondents)	 35% report stress <i>always or often</i>  27% report stress <i>never</i>	 61% have an adequate induction  93% do not have a wellbeing policy  41% have good or excellent ability to manage conflict  Report a need for better support systems	 95% have adequate induction  55% have a wellbeing policy  85% have good or excellent ability to manage conflict Report effective meeting management
 Mid-sized (\$1m–10m) (31% of respondents)	 29% report stress <i>always/often</i>  24% report <i>no or rare stress</i>	 73% have adequate induction  60% report governance complexity as top stressor, closely followed by 59% reporting interpersonal conflict as the highest stressor  94% do not have a wellbeing policy  Mixed attitude to the chair – some cited chair as part of the problem  Common sources of stress include uneven workloads and time pressure	 73% have adequate induction  14% have a wellbeing policy  29% mention in free text that flexible meetings are helpful  Chair is often seen as a positive influence  Peer support is seen to be used and helpful
 Large (> \$10m) (6% of respondents)	 35% report stress <i>often (none report experiencing it always)</i>  38% report <i>low or no stress</i>	 54% have adequate induction  85% do not have a wellbeing policy  69% have good or excellent ability to manage conflict  Conflict, agenda-pushing chairs, or culture clashes contribute to stress	 53% have adequate induction  None report having a wellbeing policy. Some say they consider them unnecessary; some boards benefit from staff policies, e.g. employee assistance programs  76% have good or excellent ability to manage conflict  91% are confident in managing wellbeing and 83% confident in managing staff wellbeing

Peer support and flexible meeting arrangements are frequently requested and would be valued.

A key differentiator of lower stress and higher stress boards across the organisational sizes is adequate induction. Overall, lower stress boards are generally much more likely to have a strong induction than higher stress boards. A second key difference is that lower stress boards report better conflict management than higher stress boards.

Stress and board roles

Survey results show that stress is not evenly distributed across board roles. Board members in leadership positions, particularly chairs, report the highest stress levels, reflecting the combined demands of governance, conflict management and strategic oversight. One respondent, the

chair of a mid-size organisation, said, “I am overworking due to others not meeting their time commitments, so any policies in this space would need to balance this dynamic.” The role of chair was also named by those sitting in other roles. One respondent said, in the context of the importance of the chair’s role to board culture, “No Leadership! Meetings are micromanaged no discussion about crucial matters.”

Secretaries and treasurers also experience elevated stress, often linked to compliance and workload expectations. General board members report slightly lower stress, though challenges related to role clarity, culture and time commitments remain significant.

The table below compares stress prevalence and common support needs by role, highlighting where targeted interventions can have the greatest impact.

Role	% reporting high stress	% reporting low or no stress	Key stress drivers	Common support needs
Chair (31% of respondents)	52%	24%	Time pressure, governance complexity, conflict management, leadership expectations	Chair training and peer support from other chairs, conflict resolution tools, stronger induction for board members
Secretary (12% of respondents)	40%	36%	Interpersonal conflict, high administrative workload, governance complexity	Templates to manage workload, governance training tailored to small and mid-size NFPs, acknowledgement of unique role pressures
Treasurer (8% of respondents)	40%	32%	Time commitment, financial sustainability of the organisation, feeling isolated in the role	Induction specific to financial oversight, remuneration or recognition for workload, mental health training, time flexibility
General board member (31% of respondents)	34%	41%	Interpersonal conflict, ambiguity in expectations or role description, overload caused by lack of staff support	Clear induction, flexible meeting formats (especially hybrid or online), mental health training

Of all the roles, chairs are the most consistently stressed and often feel isolated. Secretaries and treasurers experience stress from compliance and operational expectations, suggesting a need for role-specific tools and resources. For general board members, stress is lower and is more often linked to role clarity, culture and workload distribution rather than the strategic or compliance burden carried by leadership positions.

The data suggests that wellbeing support cannot be “one size fits all.” Targeted interventions, such as leadership training for chairs, compliance and process support for secretaries and treasurers, and induction and culture-building for general members, will have the greatest impact.

Board culture

When board members don't feel comfortable speaking out in dissent, board culture and effectiveness can be diminished, but the 2025 Board Wellbeing Survey data shows that such discomfort is not strongly predictive of whether a board member plans to remain in their role.

Vignette 3: **The Silent Room – board culture and stress**

“I feel like I can't ask questions I need to ask be able to fulfil my duties, not getting information I need to be able to fulfil my duties.”

– Survey respondent

A board member from a small arts and culture organisation highlights the governance impact of a culture that does not promote speaking up.

Most respondents said they do feel comfortable sharing their thoughts when they disagree at a board meeting. One said, for example, “We are always able to share thoughts and concerns with the president/ they are not dismissed but debated. We are able to be an apology without prejudice. We keep in contact with members health and welfare.”

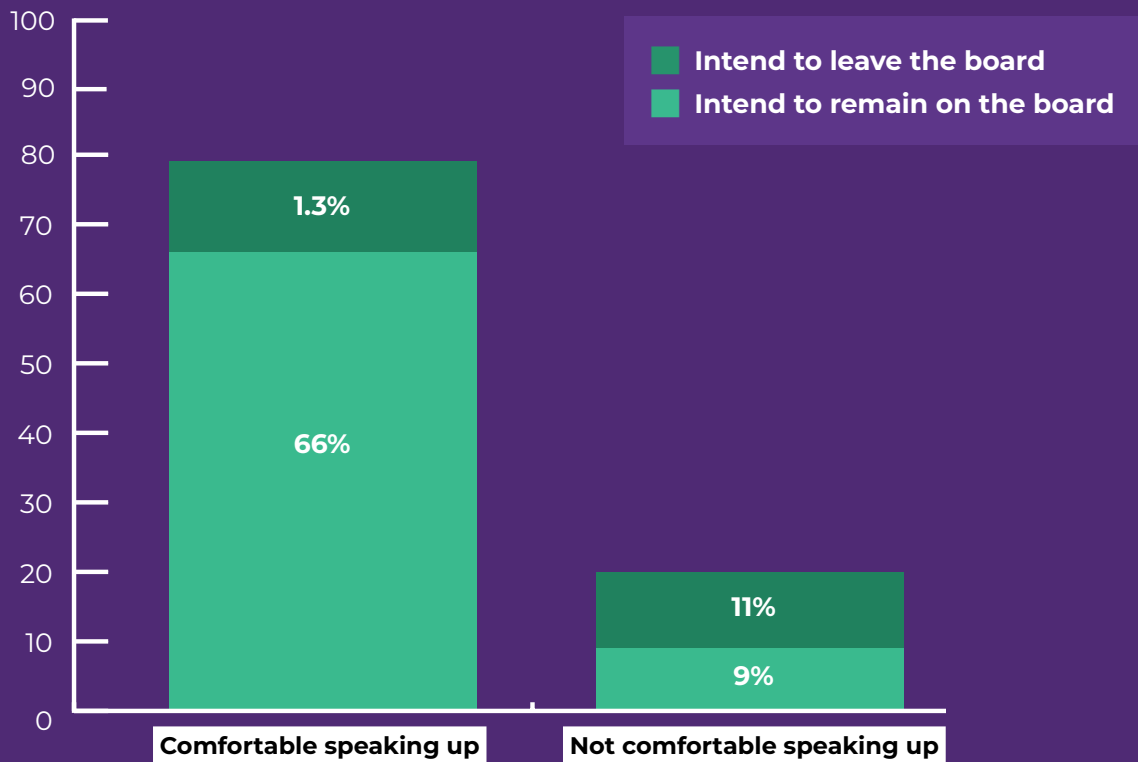
This response highlights the protective role of a positive board culture in board well-being.

Among the 20 per cent of respondents who said they do not feel comfortable speaking up when they have dissenting views, 11 per cent said they cannot commit to remaining on the board for the next 12 months, while 9 per cent still intend to stay. In a field in which many say that succession planning and lack of volunteers ready to take on board roles is a significant stressor, losing even a few board members to lack of psychological safety is a problem.

Among those who said they cannot commit to remaining in their role, responses were evenly split: 13 per cent said they do feel comfortable speaking up, while 11 per cent said they do not. For example, one respondent said they do not feel confident remaining in their role in the coming 12 months, and they explained in free text the stress they face: “Dominating board members who have been elevated to a position of authority. Who give many hours to the organise but want to control everything. In such a landscape I do not feel heard.”

This suggests that while confidence to express dissent remains vital for ethical governance and decision-making, other stressors may be more influential in board member retention. Boards should continue to invest in building psychologically safe cultures, but should also address the issues that contribute to burnout.

Comfort level speaking up compared with intention to leave the board



Most respondents reported a supportive board environment:

- 80 per cent said they felt respected for their identity and values
- 77 per cent rated board relationships as “good” or “excellent”
- 66 per cent agreed that their board managed internal conflict constructively.

These are encouraging signs of psychological safety. However, interpersonal conflict still emerged as a stressor for 35 per cent of respondents, indicating that even in respectful environments, conflict may not be well managed.

This gap suggests that psychological safety is more than just permission to speak up. It depends on how that dissent is received, processed and resolved. Boards may need to go beyond encouraging open

dialogue and invest in conflict resolution training, establishing clearer expectations, and developing leadership to reduce the emotional toll of unresolved tension.

Of those who reported that interpersonal conflict on the board is a key stressor, just under two-thirds said they are confident that they will remain on the board for another 12 months, leaving the remaining third neutral at best and very unconfident at worst. This suggests that this stressor has a significant influence on board members’ decision to leave a board or remain.

Of those who reported that interpersonal conflict on the board is a key stressor, under half (43 per cent) said the ability of the board to manage conflict within the board constructively is good or excellent, leaving significant room for training and intervention.

Recommendations

Boards need structured inductions, flexible ways of working, support to manage conflict, the right policies and clear role expectations to promote wellbeing among board members and, by extension, organisational staff.

Chairs and CEOs can foster psychological safety and model wellbeing-focused leadership. Funders and peak bodies should treat board wellbeing as vital to organisational health and support initiatives that help boards maintain it.

The most straightforward recommendations for specific roles to implement are the following:

- 1. Boards:** Make wellbeing a standing agenda item; ensure strong inductions.
- 2. Chairs:** Run meetings that make space for all voices, are appropriately flexible in location, move through an agenda and end on time.
- 3. Funders:** Recognise board wellbeing as essential infrastructure.

Further recommendations include practical actions in response to the stress-inducing problems identified by respondents.

Time commitments

PROBLEM:

Board members consistently identified time pressure as a top stressor. Long and unstructured meetings contribute to fatigue and disengagement.

RECOMMENDATION: Boards should adopt more efficient meeting structures, prioritise

agenda discipline, set a time allocation for each agenda item, and establish and communicate the time commitment expected of each meeting attendee.

PROBLEM:

New directors often step into their roles without a clear understanding of time expectations or responsibilities, which contributes to early burnout and role dissatisfaction.

RECOMMENDATION: Boards should provide structured inductions that set realistic time commitments and clarify expectations from the outset.

PROBLEM:

Board members need ongoing skill development so they can work effectively within their time constraints and feel confident in their contributions.

RECOMMENDATION: Offer flexible, on-demand, affordable and role-specific governance training to equip board members and chairs to lead confidently.

Governance complexity

PROBLEM:

Board members identify governance complexity, particularly navigating compliance and regulatory requirements, as a key source of stress.

RECOMMENDATION: Boards should promote access to practical compliance tools and create a shared understanding of governance obligations.

PROBLEM:

Board members lack confidence in their ability to meet governance requirements because they have insufficient training.

RECOMMENDATION: Boards should prioritise structured and role-specific learning opportunities for all directors to strengthen governance knowledge and confidence.

PROBLEM:

Leadership roles such as chairs, treasurers and secretaries face additional complexity yet lack targeted support, which leads to a reduction in reported wellbeing.

RECOMMENDATION: Develop role-specific governance resources and peer support opportunities to help chairs, treasurers and secretaries to navigate compliance and leadership demands. Consider mentoring programs and communities of practice to build confidence, share strategies, and reduce isolation in high-pressure roles.

Interpersonal conflict

PROBLEM:

Board members identify interpersonal conflict as a key stressor in their board roles. The ability to manage conflict constructively is varied, leaving significant room for improvement.

RECOMMENDATION: Boards should communicate clear behavioural expectations and implement processes for managing conflict constructively. There is also a need for increased access to conflict management training and leadership development.

Board workload and recognition

PROBLEM:

Lack of recognition of the contribution and workload of board members can lead to reduced wellbeing.

RECOMMENDATION: Funders, governments and sector leaders should recognise the human cost of volunteer governance. They should support initiatives that reduce the burden on individual directors and “pay what it takes”.

PROBLEM:

Uneven workloads lead to frustration for board members who carry more than their share of the load.

RECOMMENDATION: Boards should formalise expectations of contributions and accountability to create fairness and prevent overload. This can be done through a strong induction program and strong succession planning.

Support for wellbeing governance on NFP boards

To support the recommendations made in this report, the Institute of Community Directors Australia offers affordable sector leadership training and free practical tools and training that make wellbeing a realistic priority rather than an aspirational idea.

These resources and training have been tailor-made for the NFP sector in response to the real-life experience of Australian NFP boards. Community Directors offers:

01

relevant, practical and affordable training, tools, help sheets and templates on running better meetings

02

comprehensive board induction packs, policy templates, and online learning modules to help new directors understand their role, their responsibilities and the culture of governance from day one

03

a free Policy Bank that includes examples of mental health, safe workplace, and wellbeing-focused policies that boards can adapt and adopt

04

flexible, on-demand and affordable governance, skills and leadership training

05

the Diploma of Governance, a nationally recognised qualification designed for NFP leaders. It provides directors with the skills, frameworks and practical knowledge needed to navigate complex governance requirements with confidence and clarity.

06

practical, relevant and affordable leadership training, including the NFP Leadership Certificate, chairs specialist course, secretaries specialist course, and treasurers specialist course, written resources on chairing well, and guidance on building a safe, productive culture on the board. Our webinars give leaders a place to connect and learn from others.

07

support for managing conflict within boards. This includes “Tips for resolving conflict”, a help sheet that explains the escalation pathways of boardroom conflict and outlines practical steps chairs can take. A dedicated webinar, “Conflict Resolution”, provides tools for turning disagreements into productive conversations and preventing escalation. Sample policies, including dispute resolution and conflict of interest templates, provide boards with a formal framework for managing disputes or potential conflicts.

08

the Board Health Check tool, which helps assess the board’s performance in areas such as trust, communication and shared purpose

09

a Code of Conduct and working agreement templates to help boards set fair expectations of contributions and accountability

10

training and resources on the implementation of wellbeing

Conclusion

While the vast majority of board members who responded to the Institute of Community Directors' survey reported alignment with their organisation's mission, a significant number are overwhelmed, disengaged, or considering stepping down because of stress. These are not individual failings but a reflection of unmet structural needs.

Poor inductions, long, unstructured meetings, unclear roles and unmanaged conflict are among the issues that directly affect the ability of boards to function effectively. When board members burn out, so do organisational memory and capacity.

The data demonstrates that board leadership carries both deep reward and real pressure.

The good news is that wellbeing challenges are not inevitable. Boards that set clear expectations, support chairs, and adopt proactive practices, including structured inductions, efficient meetings, and wellbeing check-ins, are seeing reduced stress among their members.

Funders and policy-makers have a role to play. Recognising board wellbeing as critical infrastructure, much like digital tools or financial systems, will allow the sector to thrive.

With appropriate support, practical tools, and shared commitment to cultural health, boards can create conditions where leadership is sustainable and fulfilling. The Institute of Community Directors Australia, among other types of support organisations, is helping to make that shift possible.

Notes



ourcommunity.com.au
Where not-for-profits go for help

OurCommunity.com.au

Our Community is a world-leading social enterprise that provides advice, connections, training and easy-to-use tech tools for people and organisations working to build stronger communities.

The Our Community group of enterprises are:



CommunityDirectors.com.au

The Institute of Community Directors Australia is the leading governance and leadership network for members of Australian not-for-profit and government boards, and their senior staff.



FundingCentre.com.au

The Funding Centre is Australia's smartest grants database and fundraising capacity building website.



GiveNow.com.au

GiveNow is Australia's first and best giving platform, providing donations, ticketing and membership services for Australian not-for-profits.



SmartyGrants.com.au

SmartyGrants delivers software, data science and grantmaking intelligence for funders.



OCHouse.com.au

Our Community House is a green and creative co-working space for the social sector in Melbourne, Victoria.



SmartyFile.com.au

SmartyFile is a red tape-busting data-storage and data-sharing tool for not-for-profits and other grant applicants.



Institute of Grants Management

A hub for tools, research, innovation, and professional development for grantmakers.



Succession Media

A news service for Australia's not-for-profit sector including *The Community Advocate*.



Our Community International

Taking the Australian-born grantmaking revolution to the UK, Europe and beyond.