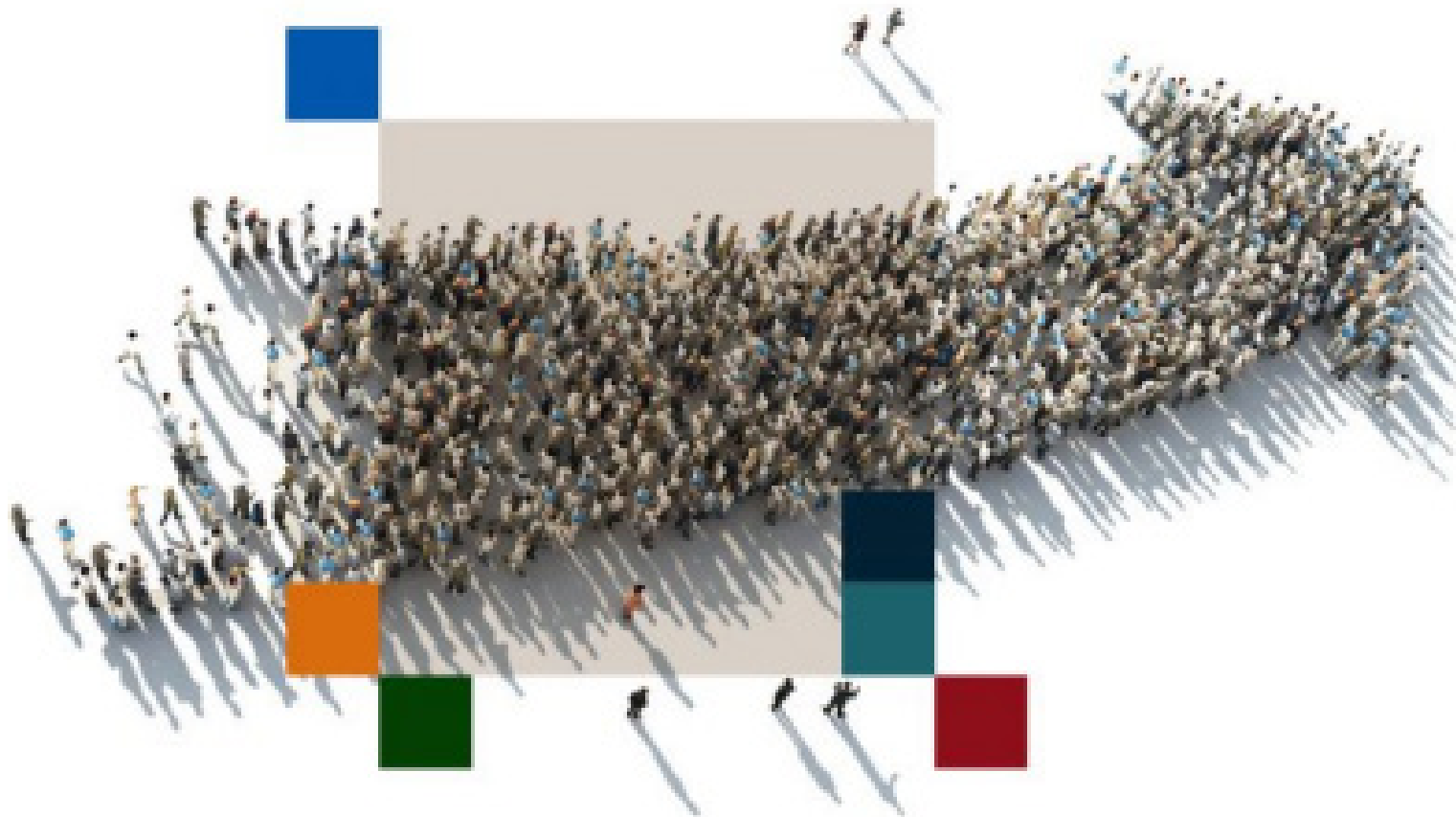


How people used Benefacts

Final public survey results



How people use Benefacts.ie

Benefacts.ie was launched by the Minister for Public Expenditure & Reform Paschal Donohoe TD in May 2016. Read his remarks here. As we prepare to take down the website on 14th February, we report here on the uses to which our free public database of Ireland's social economy was put and by whom.

Since benefacts.ie went live, traffic to the website has tripled. 2017 saw a total of 52,500 users and nearly 300,000 page views, with users typically spending three and a half minutes per session on the website. In 2021, users had grown to 148,250 with 550,000 unique page views and typical visitor sessions of two minutes ten seconds, indicating that many more people were using the site and they had developed a clearer sense of what they were looking for.

“Benefacts has managed to achieve in seven years what it has taken decades in the UK and other larger jurisdictions to achieve: a centralised, consistent and accurate database of the organisational base of Irish civil society. It is a real shame (and short sighted) that the Irish state does not see fit to continue funding this work, a decision I imagine will have negative consequences for our understanding of how communities have or have not responded to the pandemic.”

Sentiment

In the last two weeks of January we ran our third users survey. Visitors were asked to describe themselves in terms of their role and to explain the reasons for their use of benefacts.ie. We asked them to describe what they used the data for, and how much they trusted it. That question – on trust in the data on benefacts.ie – was compared with responses to similar surveys from 2018 and 2020. The final question related to alternative sources of data, information and analysis once Benefacts is wound up.

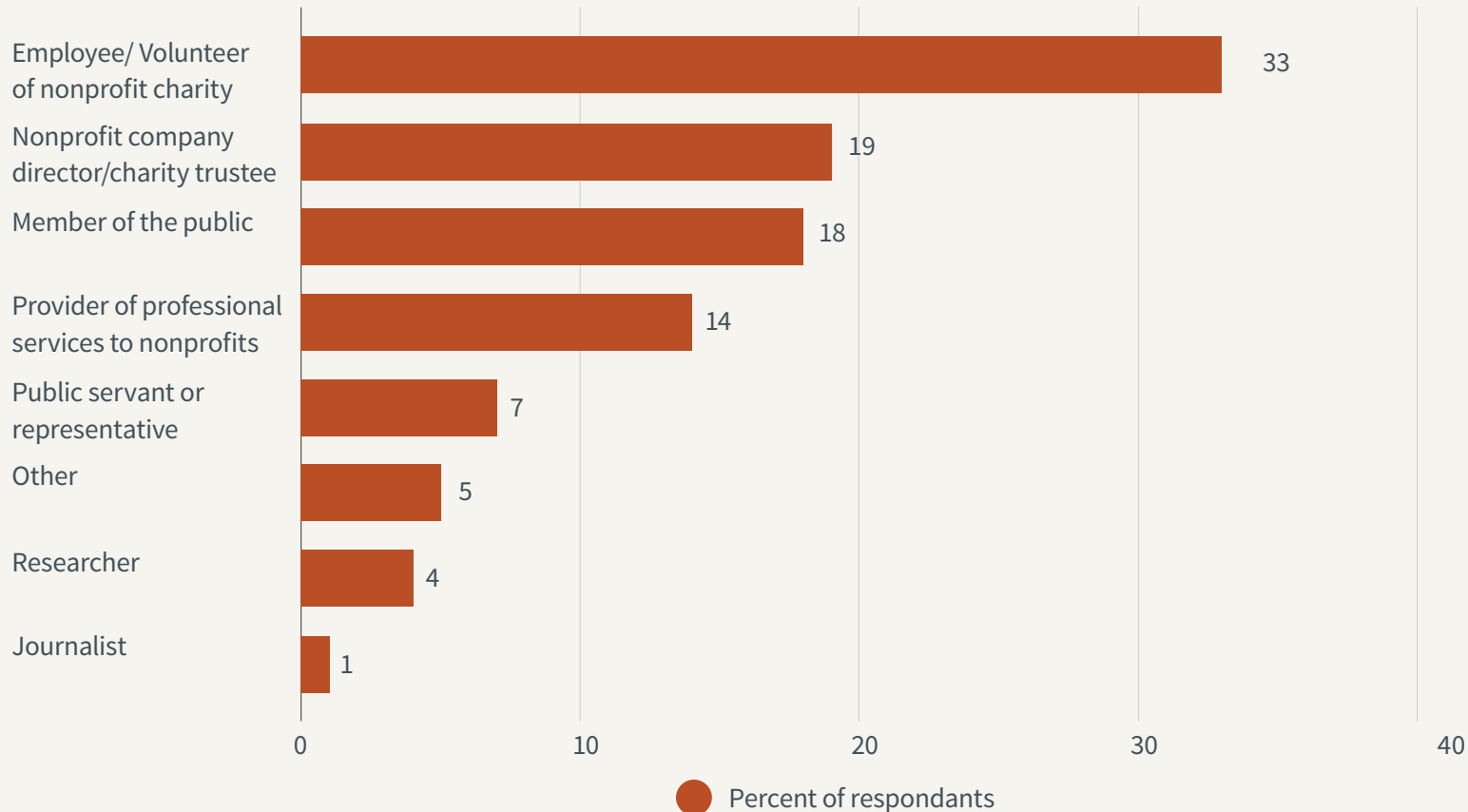
Besides answering the specific questions posed in the survey, 88 respondents answered this question: “From your own perspective, what has been Benefacts contribution to making Irish nonprofits more accessible and more transparent?” The full list of their answers is attached.

Responses were anonymous and they were analysed for us by Dr Ronán Conroy, Professor Emeritus, RCSI University of Medicine & Health Sciences. There were 153 responses to the survey, and these are his findings.

A third (33%) of respondents were employees or volunteers from a nonprofit or charitable organisation, and just under twenty percent (19%) were directors or nonprofit organisations or trustees of a charity. The other frequently-occurring roles were members of the general public (18%) and provider of professional services to nonprofits (14%). Almost a quarter of respondents (22%) visited the site once a week or more, and just under sixty percent (58%) visited once a month or more.

“Publishing and maintaining a database of nonprofits – both registered as charities and not – was an invaluable resource. The wealth of information, from company status to finances and trustees was so useful in promoting transparency to the public, the state and the sector, as well as vital when conducting sector research.”

Respondents' Role

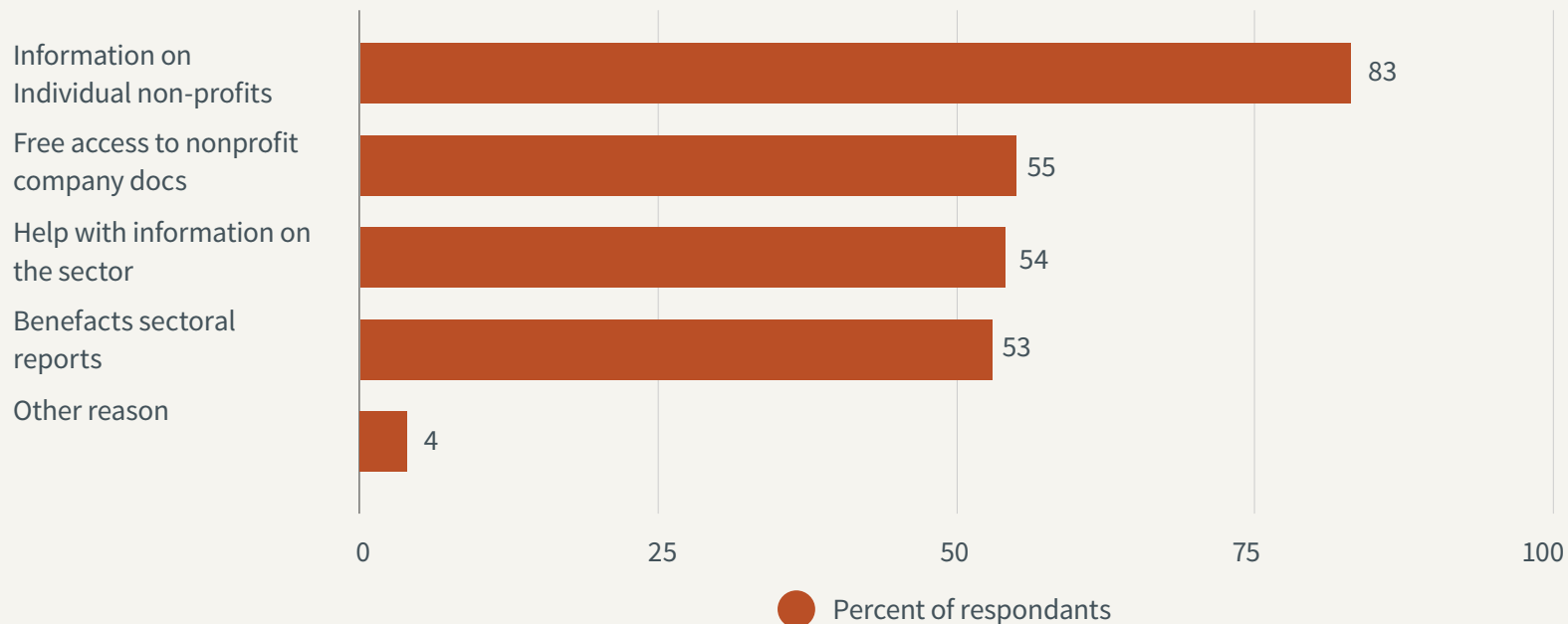


More than eighty percent of respondents reported visiting to obtain information on individual nonprofit organisations (83%) and more than half cited free access to nonprofit company documents (55%), with a similar number looking for information on the sector (54%). Half of the respondents visited looking for Benefacts sectoral reports (53%).

“Benefacts has made the whole sector more transparent. It has also made it much easier to communicate with others about the sector – policy-makers, the general public & the wider sector itself. It has created new perspectives, unearthed new insights and done so in a very accessible and easy to navigate way. The end of the Benefacts project is a huge loss to the sector and wider Irish society. We were only really beginning to see the beginnings of its long-term impact.”

Reason for visits to benefacts.ie

Respondents could specify multiple reasons.

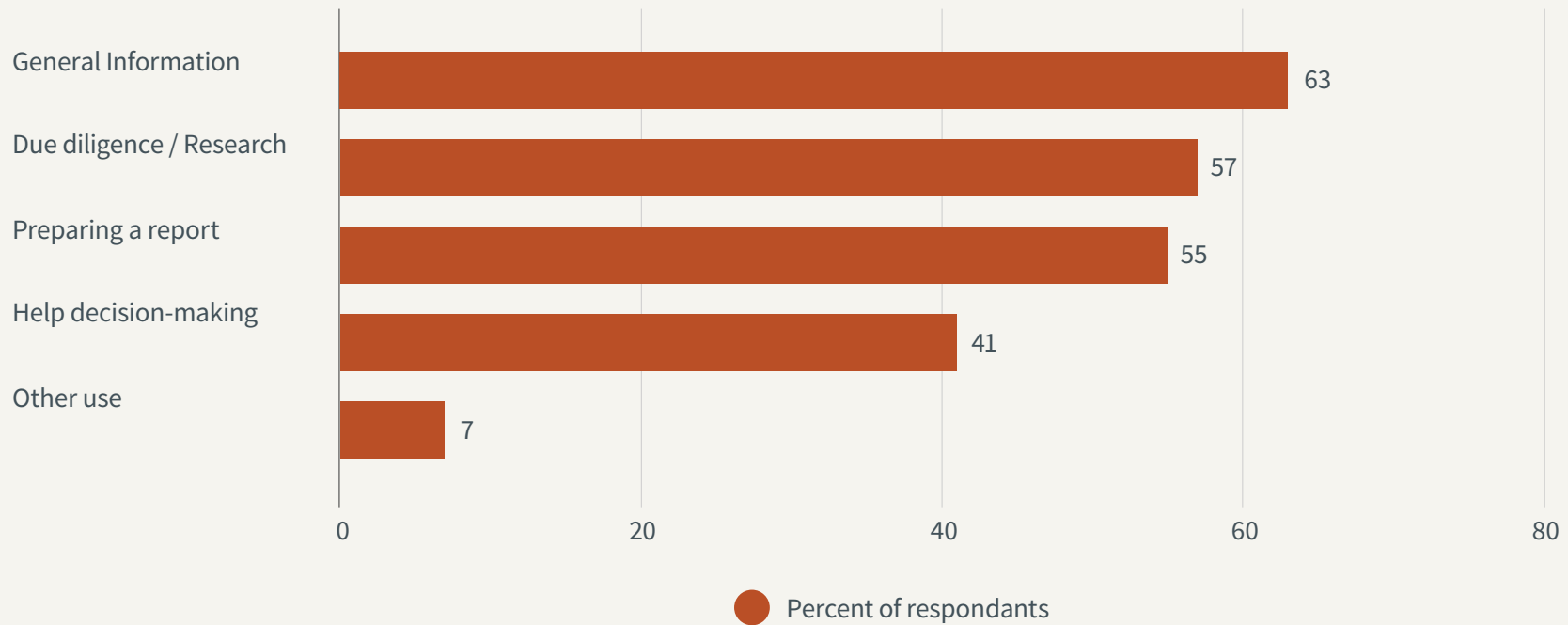


Almost two thirds specified general information (63%). The commonest specific uses were due diligence research (57%) and report preparation (55%), with 41% specifying help in decision-making.

“A one-stop-shop for up-to-date and reliable research and insights on the sector while providing a unique perspective on the sector’s many issues and challenges. The loss of the Benefacts service will weaken charities’ ability to tell their financial story and will hinder their ability to be sustainable organisations.”

How the website was used

Respondents could specify multiple uses.



The reported level of trust in Benefacts' data was high, with 94% of respondents trusting it absolutely (62%) or a lot (32%). We examined level of trust by the role of respondent, confining it to the four major categories of role. There was no significant variation in trust level between these categories.

Previous surveys had used an additional category for level of trust – A moderate amount. To compare trust levels between surveys, we recategorised responses as 'absolutely', 'a lot' and 'less' – the latter category pooling all responses indicating a lower level of trust.

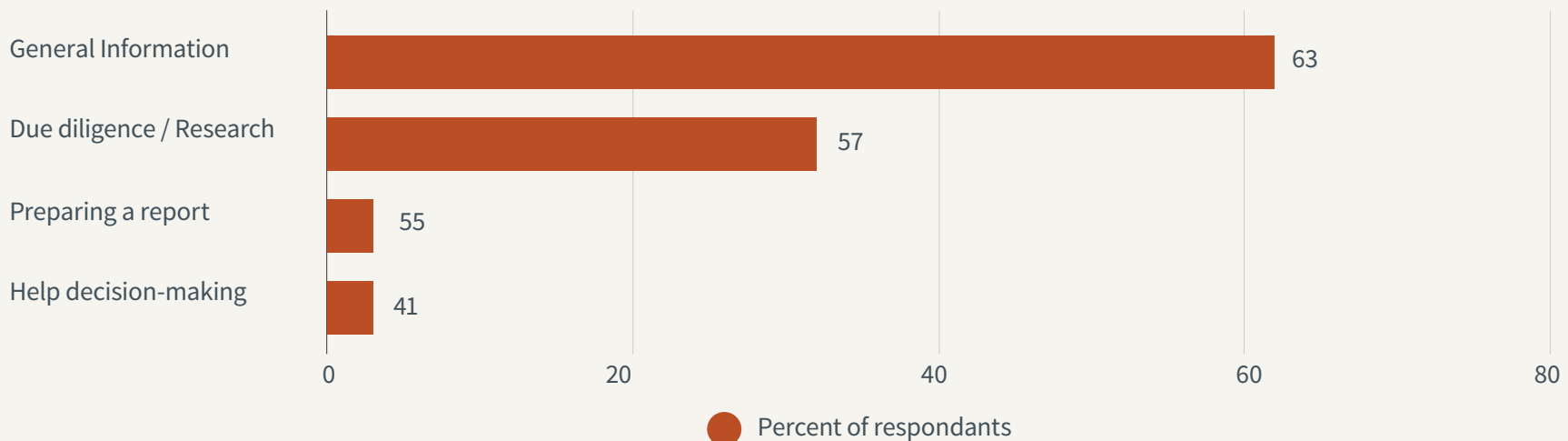
An analysis of variance by ranks showed no significant difference in trust levels between the survey years.

Not all respondents were aware of Benefacts reports (15%). Excluding these, of the 130 respondents who were aware of the reports 62% valued the reports highly and a further 8% found some of them useful.

“Benefacts has also helped lift all boats and increasingly professionalise the sector by providing insight into best practice.”

“Reliable, well-presented data. The connecting up of data sources and insights to where government funding goes is very valuable. Lots of anecdotal evidence when it comes to charities and non-profit sector as a whole. Very little concrete analysis, so the Benefacts evidence-based reports are a breath of fresh air.”

Trust in Benefacts Data

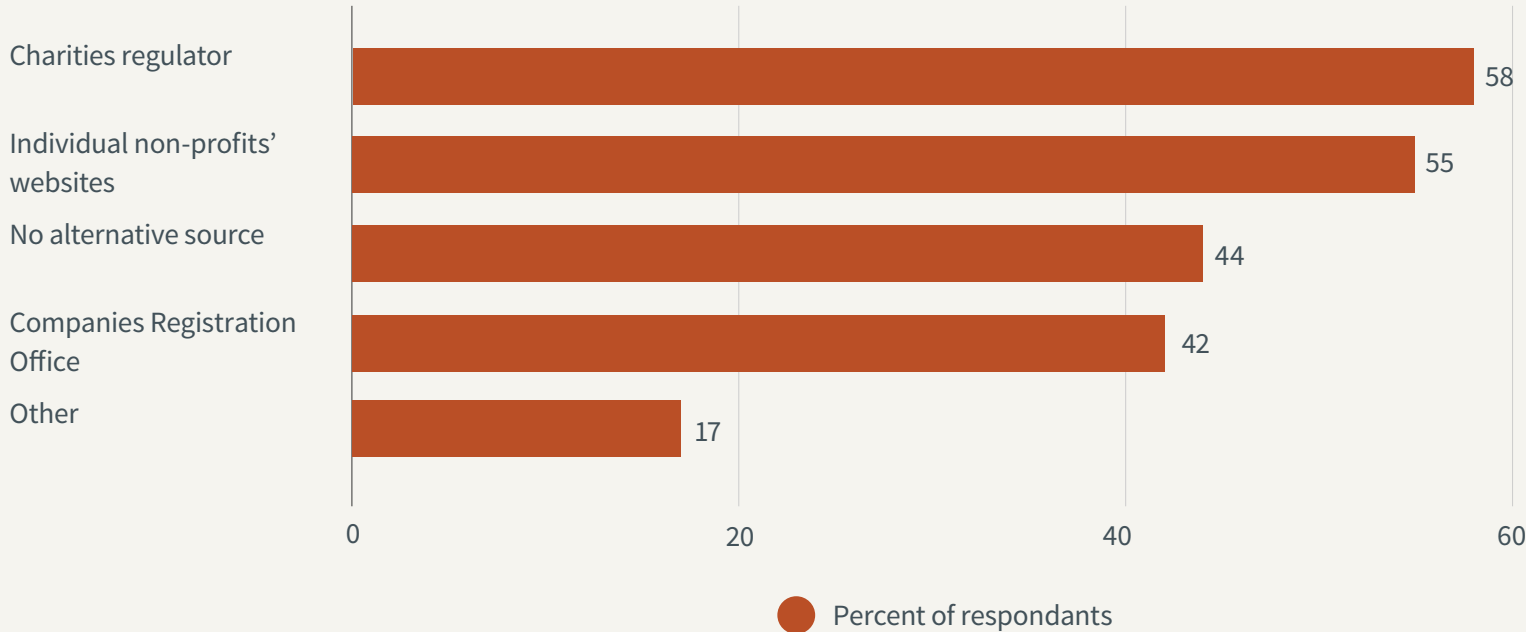


It is significant that 44% reported that they had no alternative source for at least some of the information on the Benefacts site. A third of respondents indicated that they would have to draw data from three or even four different sources in the absence of Benefacts data (33%) and a further 22% selected two data sources. Of those who reported having to use some source of information other than the ones specified in the survey, many of the 26 responses reflected dissatisfaction with the alternatives, with comments such as “there is no decent alternative!” and “Data will take much longer to find and access”.

“Benefacts made the information available. When it’s gone there will be no way of knowing what’s going on. Turning the lights out on transparency, frankly.”

Alternatives to benefacts.ie

Respondents could select more than one option



Benefacts.ie's contribution to making the sector more transparent and more accessible

We have grouped peoples' free text answers using these headings.

1. Benefacts gave convenient access to nonprofit data (31 respondents)
2. Benefacts provided high quality data facilitating comparisons and analysis (29 respondents)
3. Benefacts facilitated decision-making (including donations) and research (9 respondents)
4. Benefacts built public understand of the entire sector (10 respondents)
5. Benefacts had no or limited value (9 respondents)

What's clear from the responses we have received is that Benefacts was used by a wide variety of people involved in the nonprofit sector, who used it for a variety of purposes.

A recurring theme in the survey answers was that by integrating information in an easily-searchable format, Benefacts made the work of these people much more efficient, as reflected in the average time spent on the site. While users can access information by collating searches of multiple sites, it is striking that almost half reported that there was no alternative source for some or all the information they needed.

Thanks to all those who participated in this and earlier surveys, and who attended our events and contributed to our work. Having set out to make the entire body of civil society organisations in Ireland more digitally accessible, we take some comfort from this feedback. We hope the effort and ingenuity involved has not been wasted and that we leave the sector in more recognizable shape than we found it.

Respondent - answers

From your own perspective, what has been Benefacts contribution to making Irish nonprofits more accessible and more transparent?

Benefacts gave convenient access to nonprofit data

- Easily searchable company information
 - Data transparent, complete, cross-referenced and easily accessible.
 - You provide a one-stop shop giving a joined-up view which is a very useful resource.
 - Open data in a centralised place. Some charities publish good info, some you'd have to cobble together from the CRO data. It was very useful to have a central source for the data.
 - The website is easy to navigate and has helped me to do my job more efficiently. I am really disappointed that it's going.
 - Demonstrating the value of having up to date financial information, including documents which normally cost to download with the CRO. Very often financial information is not available on charity or NFP websites.
 - It provides a one stop shop for critical information on non-profits.
- The information was digestible, beautifully presented and accurate – it gave a complete picture of the whole sector, not just registered charities.
 - It provided essential insights into the structure, mission and purpose of not for profit organisations.
 - Reliable information in one easy-to-access place.
 - It had all the data in the one place.
 - The fact that the figure been checked and guidance delivered to organisations made a difference. It is brilliant to find all relevant information in one place.
 - Clarity, access to knowledge in the sector.
 - Availability and provision of information.
 - Information not easily available elsewhere.
 - Quick access to information at no cost.
 - Giving the public access to how non profits are run & governed & informing voluntary organisations as to how best to follow governance. Making data accessible and open.

- It collated information in ways no one had before and encouraged transparency.
- Shine a light on the levels of funding received by NGOs.
- Opens up the sector to ensure more accountability and transparency.
- The fact that this information is obtainable, thus these sectors can be [Albers] accountable.
- Transparency.
- Transparency, information to show where is lacking in the sector, facts and figures for assignments Trusted site / information being centrally located and accessible.
- Providing information in a single place and making it freely available without any charges.
- It is great to find all that information in one place.
- Shows clear and searchable information on non profits.
- Information to the public on the NFP sector in Ireland.
- Facts.
- It is a specifically dedicated source for information on not-for-profits

Benefacts provided high quality data facilitating comparisons and analysis

- The accessibility to Irish nonprofits information has been exceptionally valuable. I have been able to review similar organisation's audited accounts, compare and contrast against our operations and gain very valuable information in terms of strategic planning for my organisation.
- Everything is in one place, due diligence has been carried out before publishing.
- Being able to very quickly & easily drill down into individual charities & get a clear picture of the charities we are looking at partnering it & also see what other charities are doing & learn from them. Very disappointing it will no longer be available. Gave a broader picture than CRA.
- Clearly a necessary resource that should be provided by someone – be it Benefacts or the public sector. My question is that Benefacts was able to provide this service for good value, and without the same bureaucratic constraints. Seems quite short sighted to withdraw funding.

- A single point of access to information on the third sector and 2) the fact of all third sector organisations being included The transparency is needed and useful.
- Benefacts has managed to achieve in seven years what it has taken decades in the UK and other larger jurisdictions to achieve: a centralised, consistent and accurate database of the organisational base of Irish civil society. It is a real shame (and short sighted) that the Irish state does not see fit to continue funding this work, a decision I imagine will have negative consequences for our understanding of how communities have or have not responded to the pandemic. You should be very proud of yourselves.
- It has also helped lift all boats and increasingly professionalize the sector by providing insight into best practice Increasing 3rd sector transparency.
- While the Charities Regulator's site contains useful information about registered charities, other than Benefacts, there is nowhere similar to obtain information about non-profit CLGs.
- The Benefacts site was easy to navigate and provided access to a wide range of information in a single site. I suspect nonprofits were more careful in producing information knowing it would be readily accessible on Benefacts.
- Making up to date information on the community & voluntary sector easily accessible to the general public. Assists in the area of accountability & transparency.
- As a volunteer director in a charity it's the only reliable of information and it has been very valuable. I hope that this decision can be changed and Benefacts stay.
- Providing reliable information and insight into the non-profit sector.
- I found it presented information clearly using the dashboard format. I like its use of arrows to indicate changes and the currency of its date. I also like its philosophy and ethos. I thank Benefacts for its work to present information clearly, simply and well using accessible language.
- Linking cliques on boards to clarify what was happening with a number of charities in Waterford and beyond. Up to date reports.

- Benefacts has been hugely beneficial in getting up to date information on learning how to ensure that due diligence should be done. Coming from a non profit point of view small community groups cannot afford to pay everytime they need to access information from places like the CRO.
- Exactly that...making information more accessible and transparent...and free Benchmarking.
- Simple: it made the information available. When it's gone there will be no way of knowing what's going on. Turning the lights out on transparency, frankly.
- Although benefacts repository of charitable organisation financial and governance data is good, making the CRO repository free access would be better.
- All information about charities was in the public domain. Thus ensuring full transparency and accountability of public money Hugely beneficial in providing clarity and allowing for transparency
- Easy access to non profits information, saving time and chasing up busy organisations.
- Open disclosure of financial records.
- Bringing the information together in one place.

- The publication of annual accounts. The details on Trustees. Details on income.
- It was very accessible and easy to use – I will miss it a lot. I thought the support of philanthropic funding was an interesting partnership too.

Benefacts facilitated decision-making (including donations) and research

- I only discovered Benefacts due to my need to locate a research site for a PhD program.
- I view it as essential in making decisions on where to contribute. I am really disappointed hearing that it will no longer be available.
- Publishing and maintaining a database of nonprofits, both registered as charities and not was an invaluable resource. The wealth of information from company status, to finances and trustees was so useful in promoting transparency to the public, the state and the sector, as well as vital when conducting sector research.
- Easy access to dataset related to the sector, this is both for research purposes to support own decision-making, but also to understand the landscape of the sector (e.g. applying methodologies like SWOT analysis in the strategy development process).

- It has hugely helped in due diligence checks on organisations (especially ones not on the Charities Regulator site). Hugely transparent and vital to good grant-making.
- I have developed a module on Active Citizenship for students at third level. Benefacts would be a critical source of information and data for this module.
- I, a not-for-profit sector consultant, used it not quite daily but a few times every week. I also constantly signposted people to it as a reliable source of information on the sector. I found it especially useful for those entities that did not have charitable status. I am gutted by this announcement. I feel it was only scratching the surface of what it would have been possible with the data. Is there truly no way to salvage things?
- Insights and verifiable data on a significant sector. I conducted some research on the NFP sector in 2008 and there was an absence of data.
- The ability to find information easily on charitable trusts and organisations has been helpful in identifying potential sources of funding.

Benefacts built public understand of the entire sector

- Highlighting the value of NGO, community, and voluntary sector. A massive loss, like Combat Poverty was in 2007. Short sighted government. Interesting that just as employment services are being essentially privatised, a bastion of data on NGO services and community is closed. The push to social enterprise is a creeping capitalization of community, privatisation by stealth.
- Benefacts has made the whole sector more transparent. It has also made it much easier to communicate with others about the sector – policy-makers, the general public & the wider sector itself. It has created new perspectives, unearthed new insights and done so in a very accessible and easy to navigate way. The end of the Benefacts project is a huge loss to the sector and wider Irish society. We were only really beginning to see the beginnings of its long-term impact.
- It has been a single place to find all information in the public domain without which it would have been impossible to have had access to everything about the sector as a whole and individual charities, CLGs and unincorporated orgs both in the overviews and individually.

- Invaluable resource adding to the ecosystem of non-profits, helping with general information about non-profits that is not available anywhere else.
- The depth of information contained in reports has been of immense value plus the fact that all the info is publicly available helps increase trust and confidence in the sector.
- Reliable, well presented data. The connecting up of data sources and insights to where government funding goes is very valuable. Lots of anecdotal when it comes to charities and non-profit sector as a whole. Very little concrete analysis, so the Benefacts evidence based reports are a breath of fresh air.
- Put a spotlight on the need for easily accessible and reliable information on the sector 2. Presented information in a very user-friendly format 3. Through activation on the resource provided the opportunity to reflect on and build an understanding of what information resources are key for the ongoing support and development of good practice and knowledge of the sector. 4. A composite source of information – efficiencies for the sector.
- A one stop shop for up to date and reliable research and insights on the sector while providing a unique perspective on the sector's many issues and challenges. The loss of the Benefacts service will weaken charities ability to tell their financial story and will hinder their ability to be sustainable organisations.
- I want to live in a democratically accountable society where information on organisations provided on this site is open and accessible to all, particularly if the organisation receives funding from taxpayers.
- It is the only resource of its kind in Ireland that has the most thorough information available. The search function allows you to quickly check an organisation's status and legal standing- the Charities regulator does not list all unless they have an RCN number, having no access to records for CLG's etc will be a huge loss. Sectoral reports were excellent benchmarking tools.

Benefacts had no or limited value

- There never was a requirement for Benefacts. The database should be maintained by the Charities regulator. Benefacts represented a waste of money on duplication.
- The questions on this survey appear to be biased, considering this is supposed to be a data analytics organisation. The contribution appears minimal. Most of what benefacts does can be executed using AI and machine learning programmes on top of the fact that it is an unnecessary cost where the data is available openly.
- Very little. In fact, I find the transparency relating to Benefacts undermines its claim to promote transparency.
- Unreasonable cost to the taxpayer
- The database and reports Benefacts provided could and should be a basic function of the Charities Regulator.
- The irony of such a question when there's arguably little transparency about your own informal non-tendered government funded inception.
- I hope this service will continue in another guise but see no reason for the high cost base around Benefacts. It was a really expensive model that I understand why the Government backed away from it, hard to justify. The what was good but the "how" was bad.
- Minimal – wished you'd published your own accounts in SORP format too – seems odd that you don't.
- Not known

Benefacts

Benefacts makes the work of Irish nonprofits more transparent and more accessible.

You are welcome to quote from and re-use information in this report: please acknowledge Benefacts as the source.