

London Trees and Woodland Skills Survey Report 2023



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2023 Report



This report has been produced by the London Tree Officers Association (LTOA) and Parks for London. It has been funded by the Trees Call to Action Fund, a fund developed by Defra in partnership with the Forestry Commission and delivered by the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

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Acknowledgements:
DEFRA, National Lottery Heritage Fund, Forestry Commission, GLA,
and survey respondents.

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Foreword

The survey was the first of its kind to seek the perspectives on the skills relating to trees and woodlands from London-based individuals and organisations working within the arboriculture sector.

Initiated from the preconception that there is a skills gap, the survey was designed to provide an insight into the experiences of those managing London's urban forest by asking a range of questions relating to the perceived demand on services, and to specifying skills needed now and in the future.

The authors believe that arboriculture and urban forestry skills are essential to the success of creating and maintaining a healthy and sustainable urban forest in London and consider this report to be a useful tool for those with the capacity to make desirable and necessary changes to achieve this objective.

Introduction

It's been nearly four years since the 2019 Horticultural Sector Skills Survey report on arboriculture highlighted that skills and labour were a key concern for the industry. Since then, several nationwide initiatives have been created to start addressing the skills gaps, upskill existing staff, and bring new entrants into the workforce. Few of these, however, have focused specifically on Greater London and the additional intricacies of managing trees and woodland in urban areas.

Despite the subject getting considerably airtime anecdotally, as yet there has been no dedicated research undertaken of the specific challenges facing those involved in tree and woodland management and maintenance in Greater London. This gap in evidence and insight has made it more challenging for sector organisations to develop, fund, and deliver tangible initiatives.

This survey, which has been funded by the Trees Call to Action Fund and delivered as part of the London Urban Forest Partnership, was designed to address this gap in knowledge and help support partners take action to address skill gaps and promote tree and woodland skills to a new generation. It will hopefully inform partners work with sector bodies, training providers, and employers to lever support for arboriculture skills and support initiatives to meet the needs of London's current shortages. As well as examining the current skills situation it also looks at the anticipated future skills landscape along with thoughts on what sort of initiatives could help address them.

Methodology

Data was captured by a survey of those working in tree and woodland management and maintenance in Greater London that ran between mid-December 2022 and mid-January 2023. The questions built on previous skills surveys including the 2019 Horticulture Sector Skills Survey : Arboriculture sub-sector report and was designed in collaboration between the LTOA, Parks for London, and the GLA. It was disseminated by LTOA, Parks for London, and London Urban Forest Plan partners online through emails, newsletters, and on social media.

The survey yielded 78 responses, the majority of which came from those working within London local authorities but also some from other organisations including private contractors, consultants, housing associations, and charities. This possibly reflects the fact that London local authorities are the primary audience of both LTOA and Parks for London, but also that despite considerable effort and collaboration there are still a number of those involved in tree and woodland management and maintenance outside of local authorities who are not captured within our networks, or those of the wider London Urban Forest Partnership. Exploring, reaching, and understanding the barriers of those that do not historically engage should be a priority for partners following this report.

Executive Summary

This report highlights and explores some of the challenges experienced by those in tree and woodland management and maintenance when it comes to skills, recruitment, and retention.

As well as highlighting the challenges, this report also sets out some next steps for sector organisations to explore and drive forward. The findings show the broad range of skills and responsibilities that those already involved in tree and woodland management and maintenance undertake. The range of skills required has increased and is predicted to further increase to adapt and respond to the constantly changing environment.

The key findings are:

Workload

- 87% of respondents anticipated their workload increasing in the next five years.
- Only 48% felt confident in their organisations ability to deliver future workload with staffing levels a common reason for respondents feeling less than confident.

Barriers to progression

- Salaries associated with arboricultural professions and limited career development options were the top barriers experienced by respondents.
- Other barriers experienced were lack of experience and a perception that job remits are wide, which could be related.

Training

- 74% of respondents had a budget for staff training and professional development.
- Specific comments around training called for more specific focus on urban forest management, and more London based training and professional development opportunities.

Recruitment

- 70% of respondents felt they had a current skills gap within their organisation.
- 45% have been unable to find people with the required knowledge and skills.
- 43% struggled to recruit people with the skills needed as a result of headcount and budget freezes.
- 58% had experienced a low volume of applicants, with 53% reporting applicants lacked sufficient knowledge, and 40% lacked practical skills.

Potential initiatives

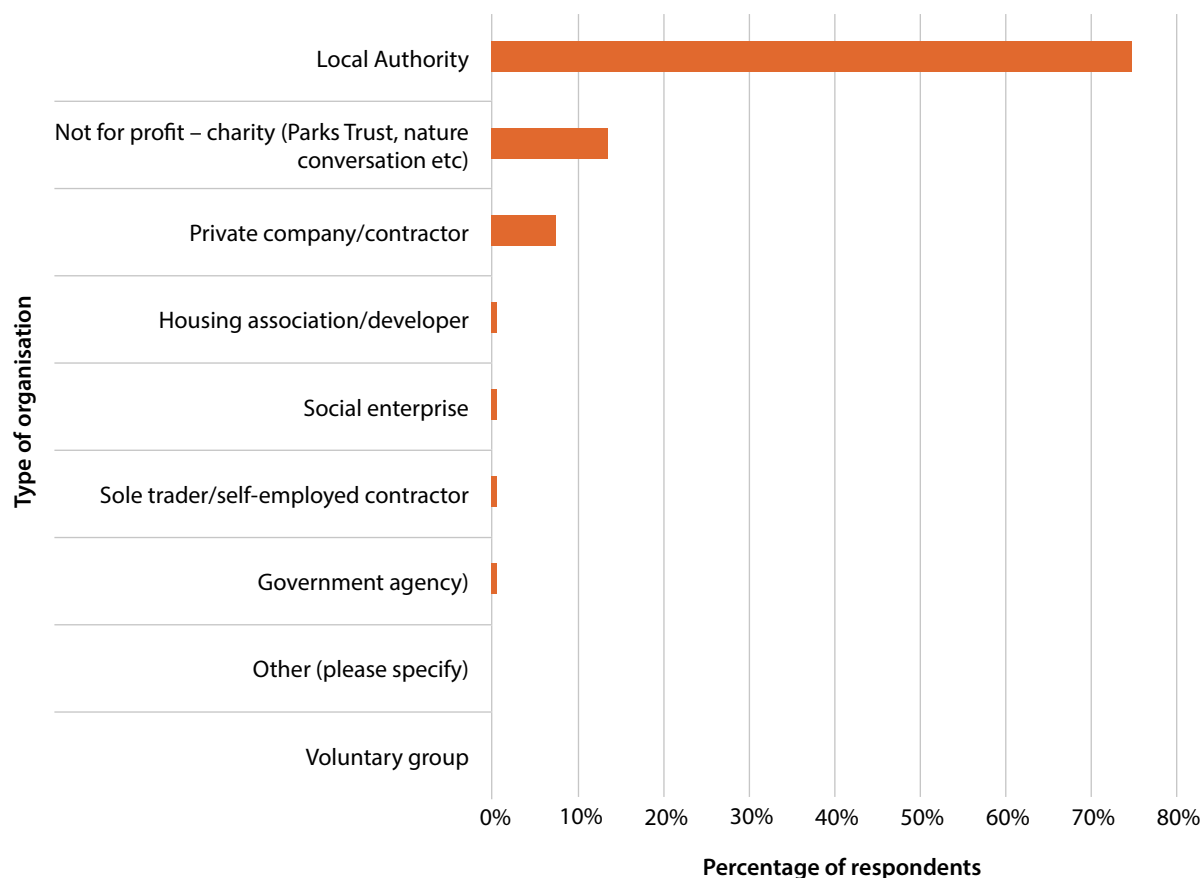
- Respondents overwhelmingly highlighted the importance of improving career progression and salaries.
- Other initiatives that were popular with over half the respondents were better promotion of the industry, increasing availability of training, and a call to sector bodies and training providers to better promote and develop apprenticeships, internships, and traineeships.

Skills and recruitment issues remain a key concern to London based organisations and individuals involved in tree and woodland management and maintenance. Both finding and attracting people with the required knowledge and skills and providing opportunities for upskilling existing staff seem to be key themes and something sector partners will need to explore and collaborate to address.

Survey Results



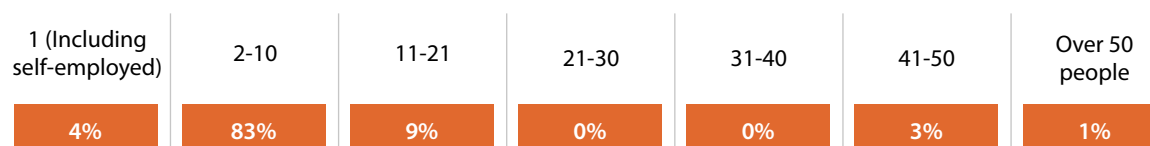
Question 1: What type of organisation do you work for?



74% of responses received were from those employed in arboriculture at local authorities in London. Those working in charities and private contractors were also represented in the survey as well as a smaller number of those engaged in housing, development, and for government agencies. Future work should be developed to engage those who traditionally do not engage with LTOA, Parks for London, and the London Urban Forest Partnership.



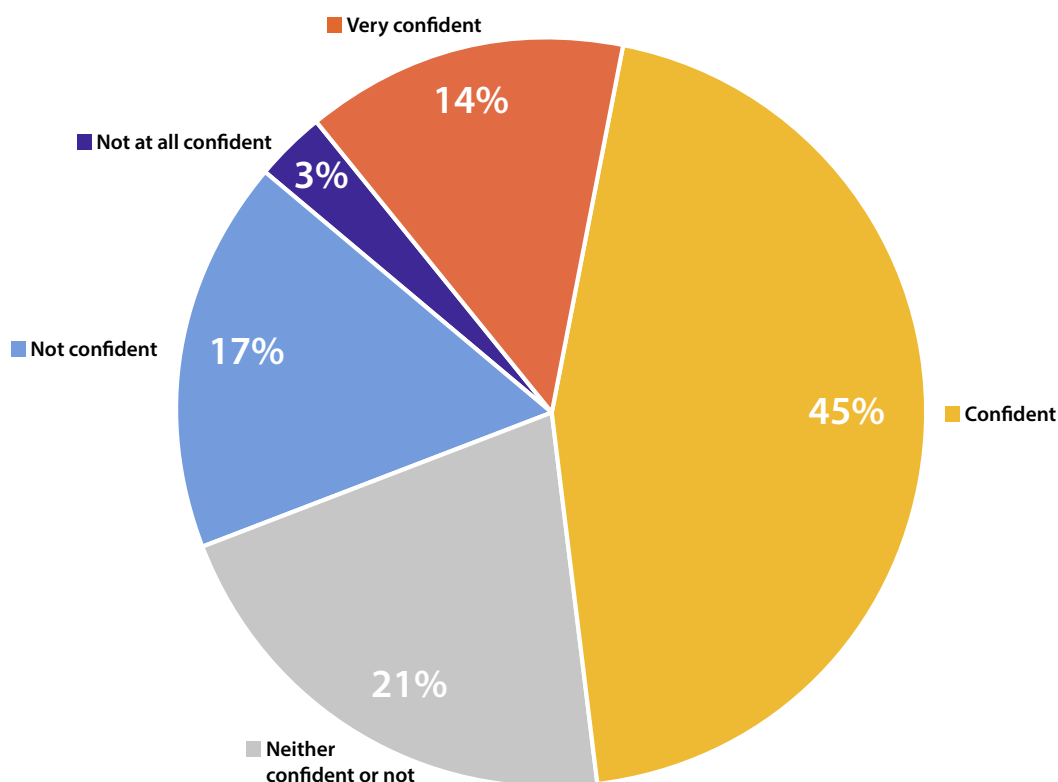
Question 2: How many people are involved in tree management and maintenance in your organisation (excluding subcontractors)?



The majority of respondents have between 2 and 10 people involved in tree management and maintenance in their organisation. Far fewer respondents have between 11 and 20 people, one person, or over 50 people involved. There were no respondents with between 21 and 40 people involved in tree management and maintenance in their organisation.



Question 3: How confident do you feel about your organisation/ teams' ability to deliver its existing contracts and workload?



59% of respondents felt confident or very confident in their organisations ability to deliver their existing contracts and workload with 20% not confident or not at all confident, and 21% neither confident or not.

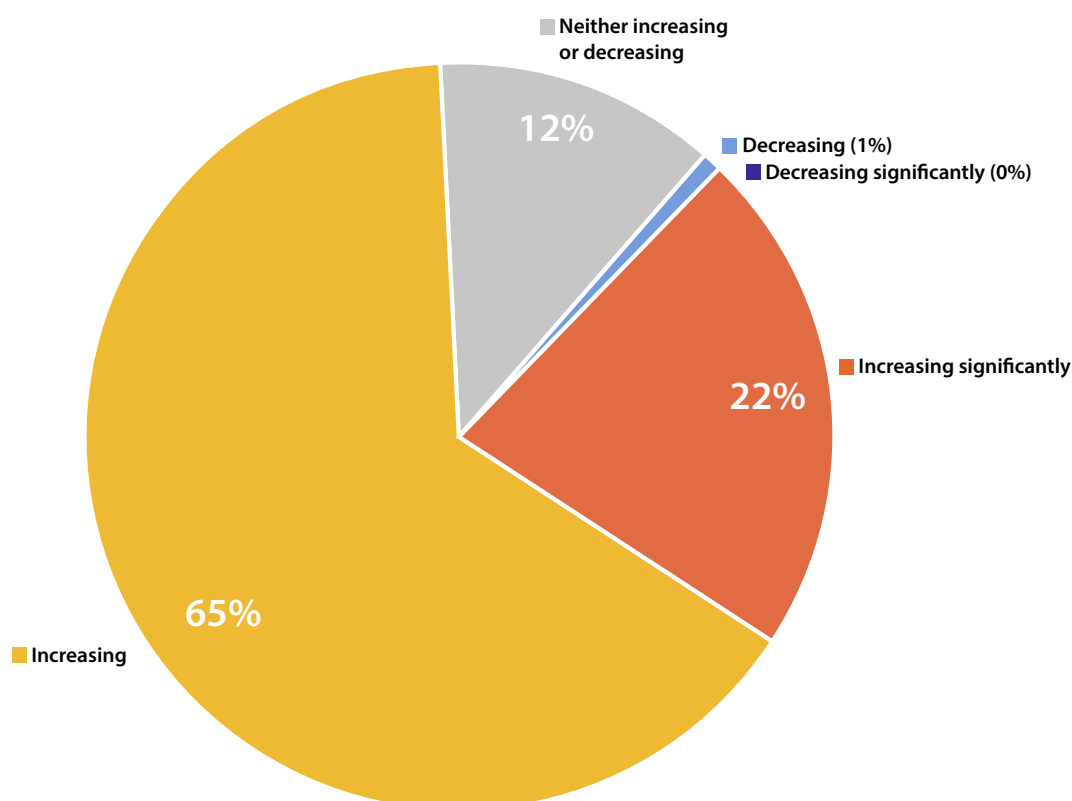
The 77 responses contained 58 individually referenced reasons, of which 24 expressed positive sentiments, 29 negative sentiments, and 5 neutral.

Half of the positive sentiments focused on the motivation, dedication, and experience of staff teams, with other responses citing having strong internal processes and systems to manage workload; and ensuring consistent delivery through working in partnerships with other organisations. Two respondents indicated that the reason they felt confident about delivering existing contracts is because they can restrict what they tender for in the case of private organisations, and do not exceed the internal resources available.

The overwhelming majority of negative sentiments cited recruitment challenges as the biggest challenge, with funding pressure second. The remainder of the negative sentiments cited political pressures on tree planting, low staff morale/leadership issues, and access to suitable training opportunities to upskill existing staff.



Question 4: How do you anticipate the demand for your organisation/teams' services changing over the next five years?

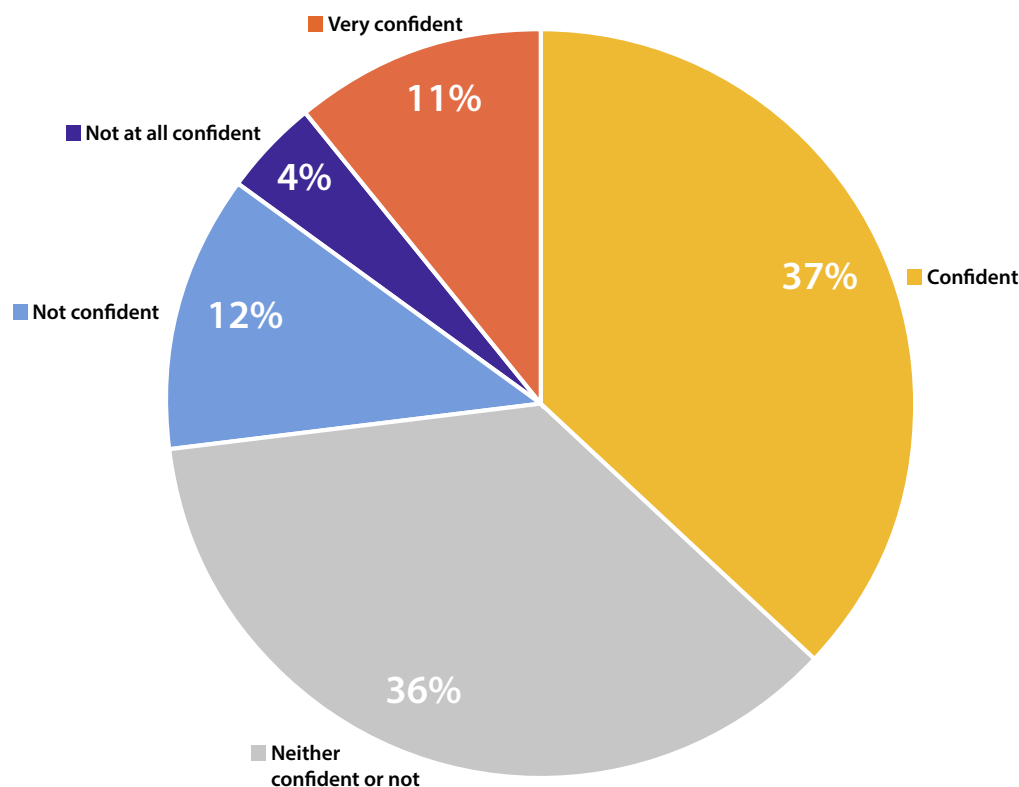


The majority of respondents believe the demand for services will increase. The most common reasons were the general pressure to plant more trees with higher planting targets, then that there was more interest from the public in trees because of increased awareness of the benefits and importance of trees. The demands of a changing climate and weather extremes means more demand for planting trees to mitigate this. Trees are higher on the political agenda along with greater awareness and focus on environment and nature conservation issues.

The respondents also mentioned that there are more tree pest and diseases to manage which takes up more time and better green infrastructure in urban areas is needed along with changes in staffing levels.



Question 5: How confident do you feel about your organisation/teams' ability to deliver its future contracts and workload?

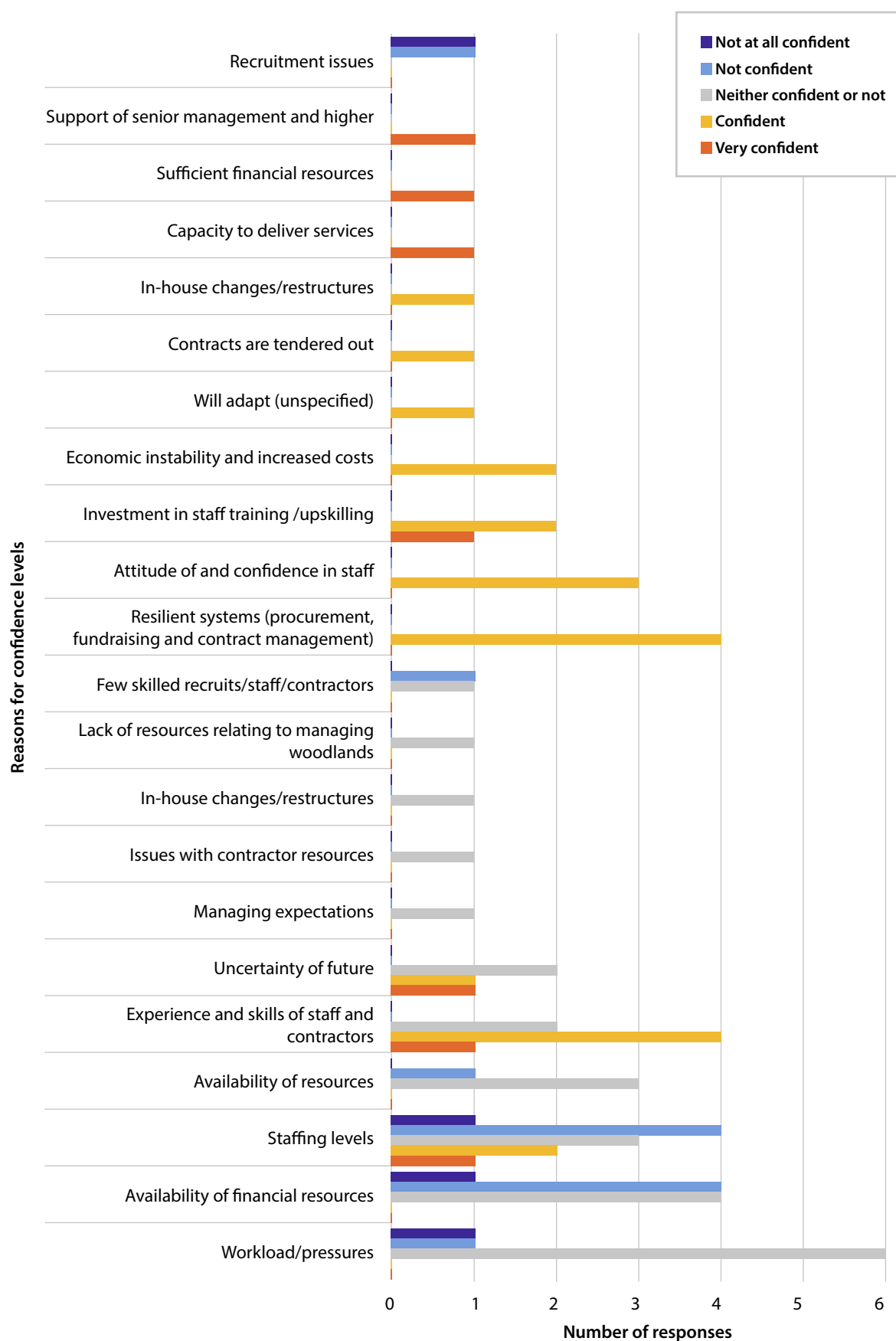


The majority of respondents, 73%, are split almost equally between feeling confident or neither confident or not in their organisations/teams' ability to deliver its future contracts and workload. 12% feel not confident and 11% feel very confident whilst a small minority, 4%, feel not at all confident.

“Without achievable targets and effective processes in a digital age the disconnect between those making contact and those delivering tree services increases.”



Please elaborate on the reasons for your confidence levels in answer to Question 5.



When asked to elaborate on the reasons behind their confidence levels, 70 respondents chose to give reasons. The most popular themes for multiple levels of confidence related to staffing levels and the availability of financial resources.

Respondents who felt 'very confident' listed several reasons predominately relating to numbers and skills of staff and their confidence in them. The resilience of systems such as procurement was a popular theme for respondents who felt 'confident' and, like those who felt 'very confident', also listed reasons relating to staff including their experience, skills, and attitudes.

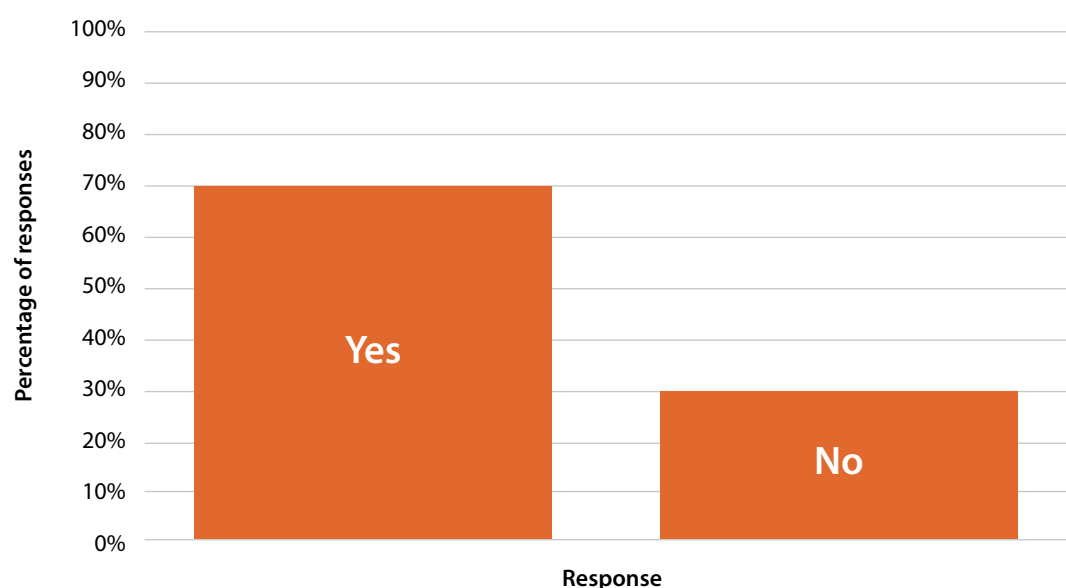
For those who felt 'neither confident or not', workload/pressures was the overarching reason followed by the availability of financial resources and staffing levels. The latter two themes were also the most popular reason for respondents who felt 'not confident'.

Those who felt 'not at all confident' were split between themes relating to workload/pressures, availability of financial resources, staffing levels and recruitment issues.

Staffing levels was a common theme for respondents feeling less than confident and the responses to Question 13 give some indication of the challenges respondents face when recruiting.



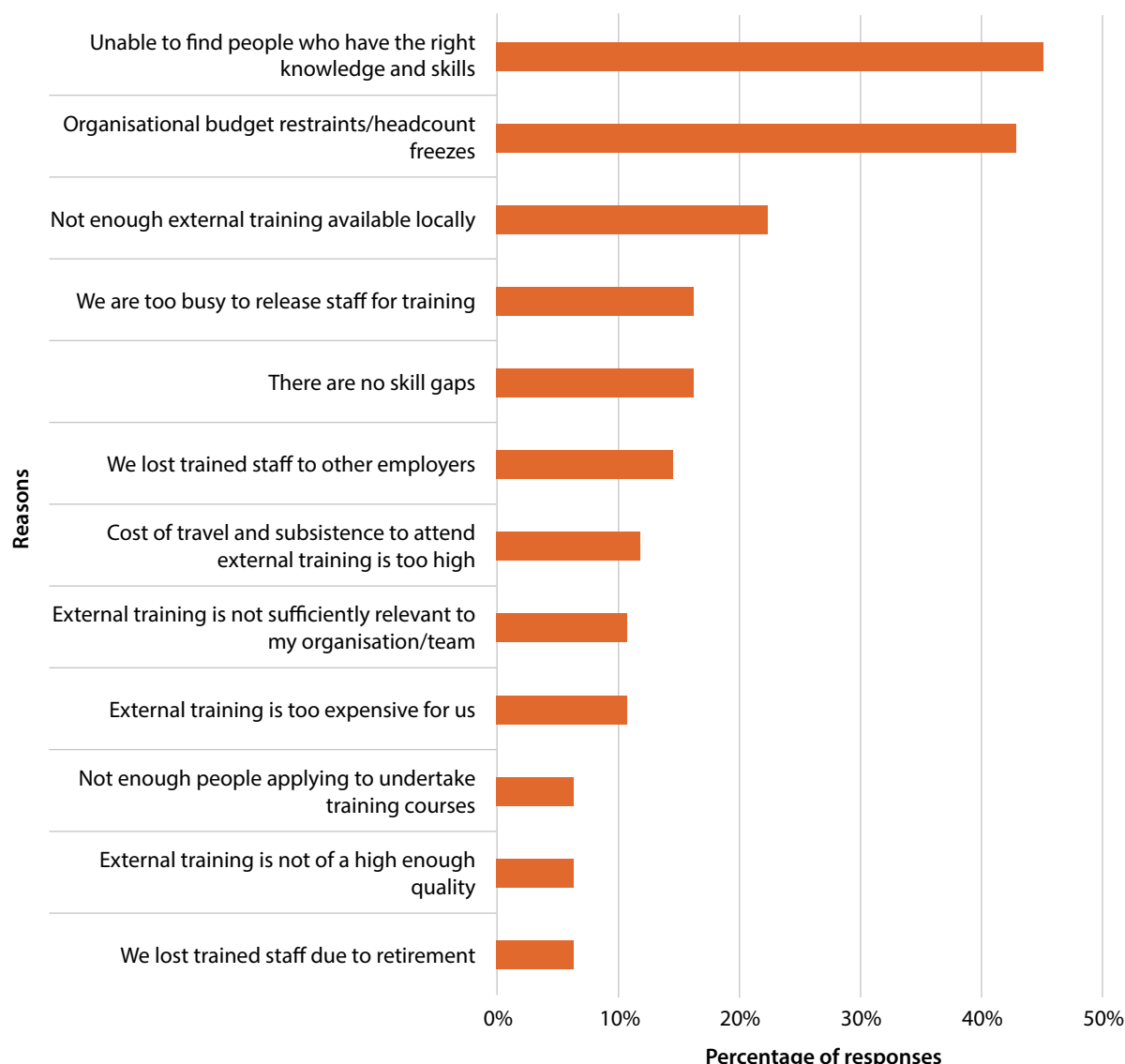
Question 6: Do you currently have any skill gaps within your organisation/workforce?



The majority of respondents felt that a skills gap existed in their workforce. Answers to question 7 and 13 suggest some reasons why these skills gaps exist, whilst also highlighting the barriers that exist currently - including lack of sufficient knowledge, suitable qualifications, and practical skills.



Question 7: What are the reasons for any skills gaps within your organisation/team? Please tick all that apply.



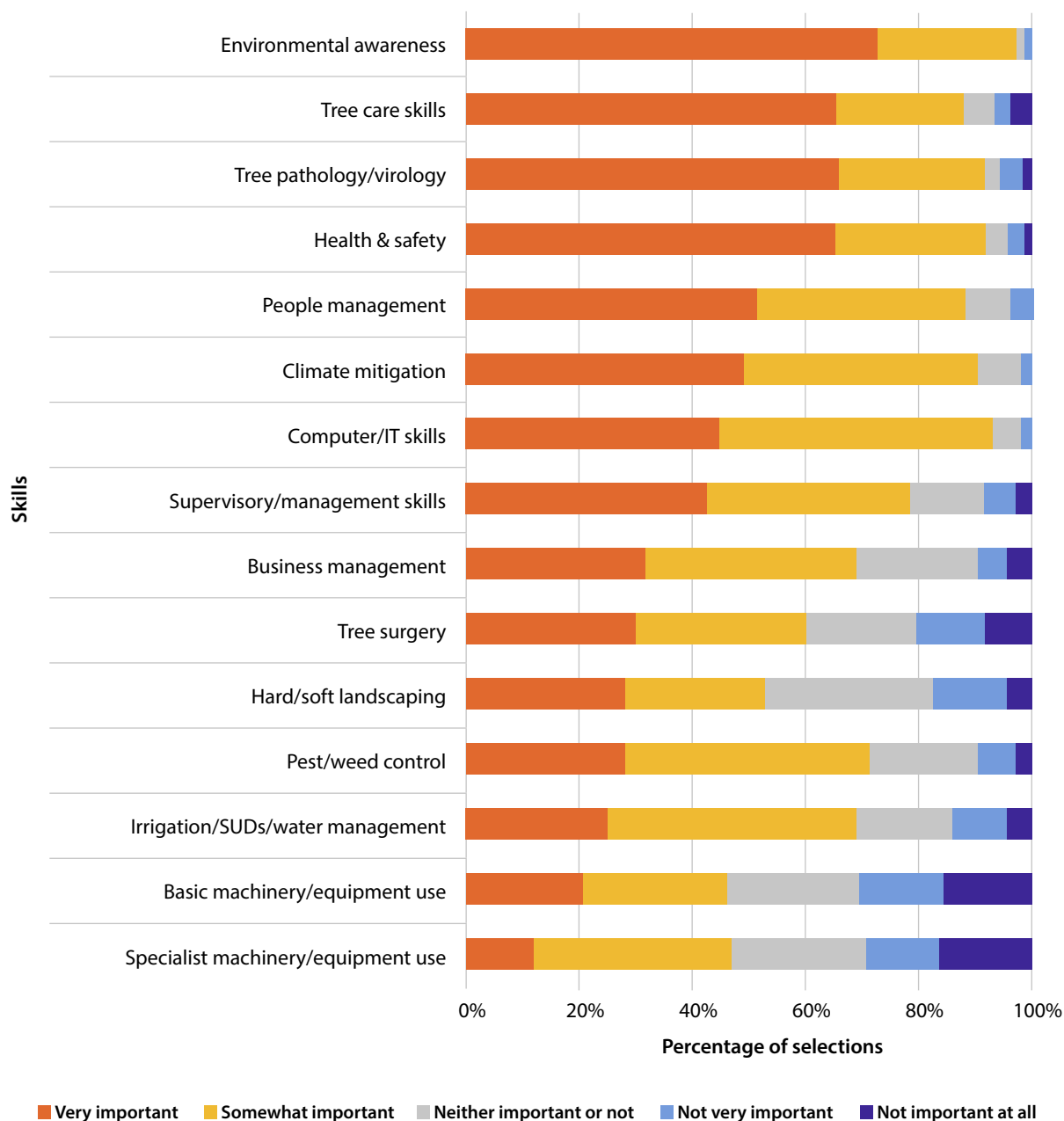
The majority of respondents who answered this question listed multiple reasons. 45% of the respondents have been unable to find people with the required knowledge and skills, and 43% struggled to recruit people with the skills needed as a result of headcount and budget freezes.

Lack of external training locally was cited by 22% of respondents, with 16% feeling they were too busy to release staff for training, despite acknowledging the skills gap that creates.

Of the respondents, only 16% felt they had no skills gaps currently.



Question 8: Within your role, how important are the following skills currently?



The majority of respondents selected environmental awareness, tree pathology/virology, tree care skills, health & safety, and people management as 'very important' skills in their roles currently.

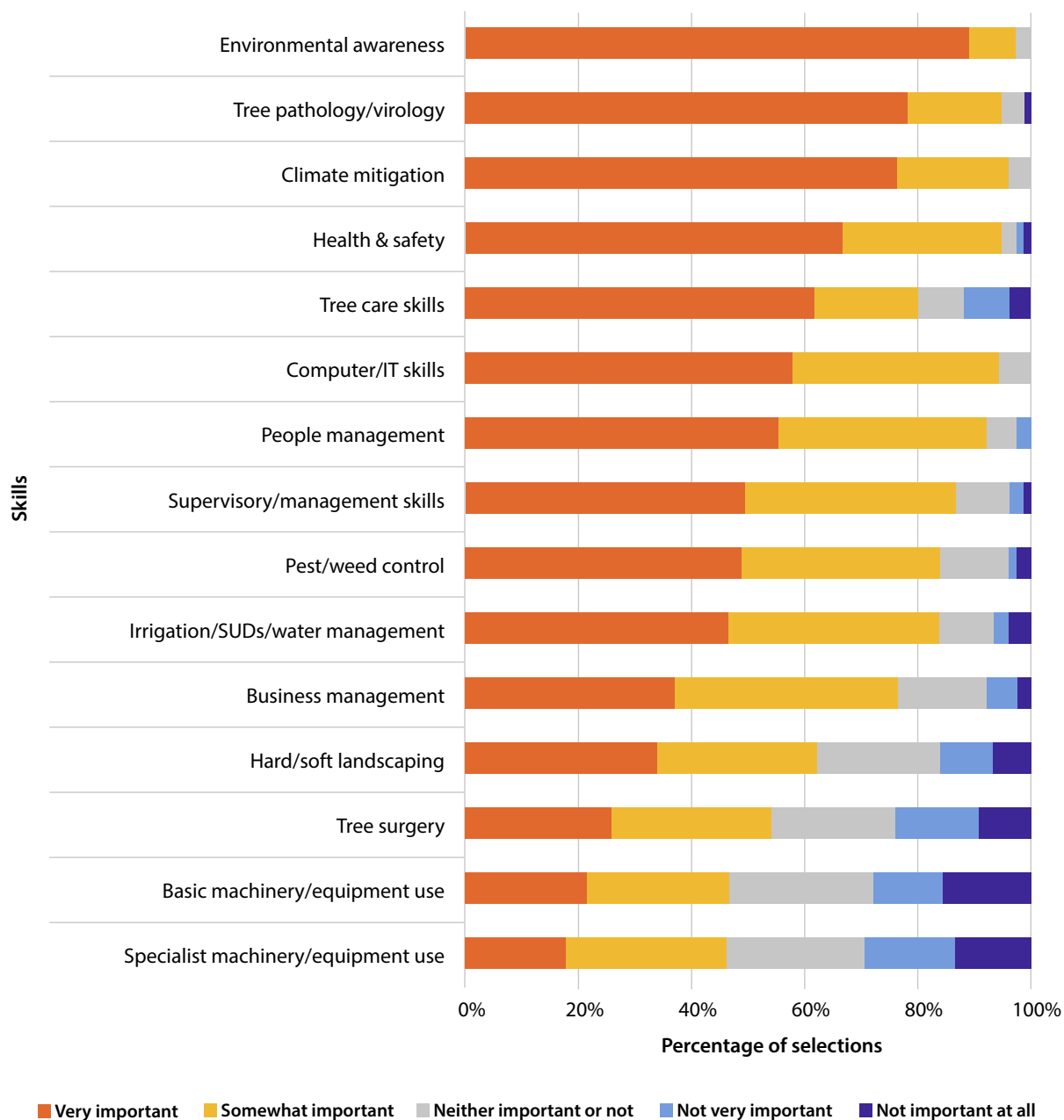
Computer/IT skills had a similar number of selections for being 'very important' or 'somewhat important' and was the highest scoring skill for 'somewhat important'. This was followed by skills in pests/weed control, irrigation/SUDs/water management, and climate mitigation.

Basic and specialist machinery/equipment use were both selected as the most popular choice for being a skill that is not important at all, followed by tree surgery, hard/soft landscaping, and business management which were also skills most selected for being neither important or not.

All skills attracted selections for all levels of importance, apart from environmental awareness, people management, climate mitigation, and computer/IT skills which were never selected as being not at all important.



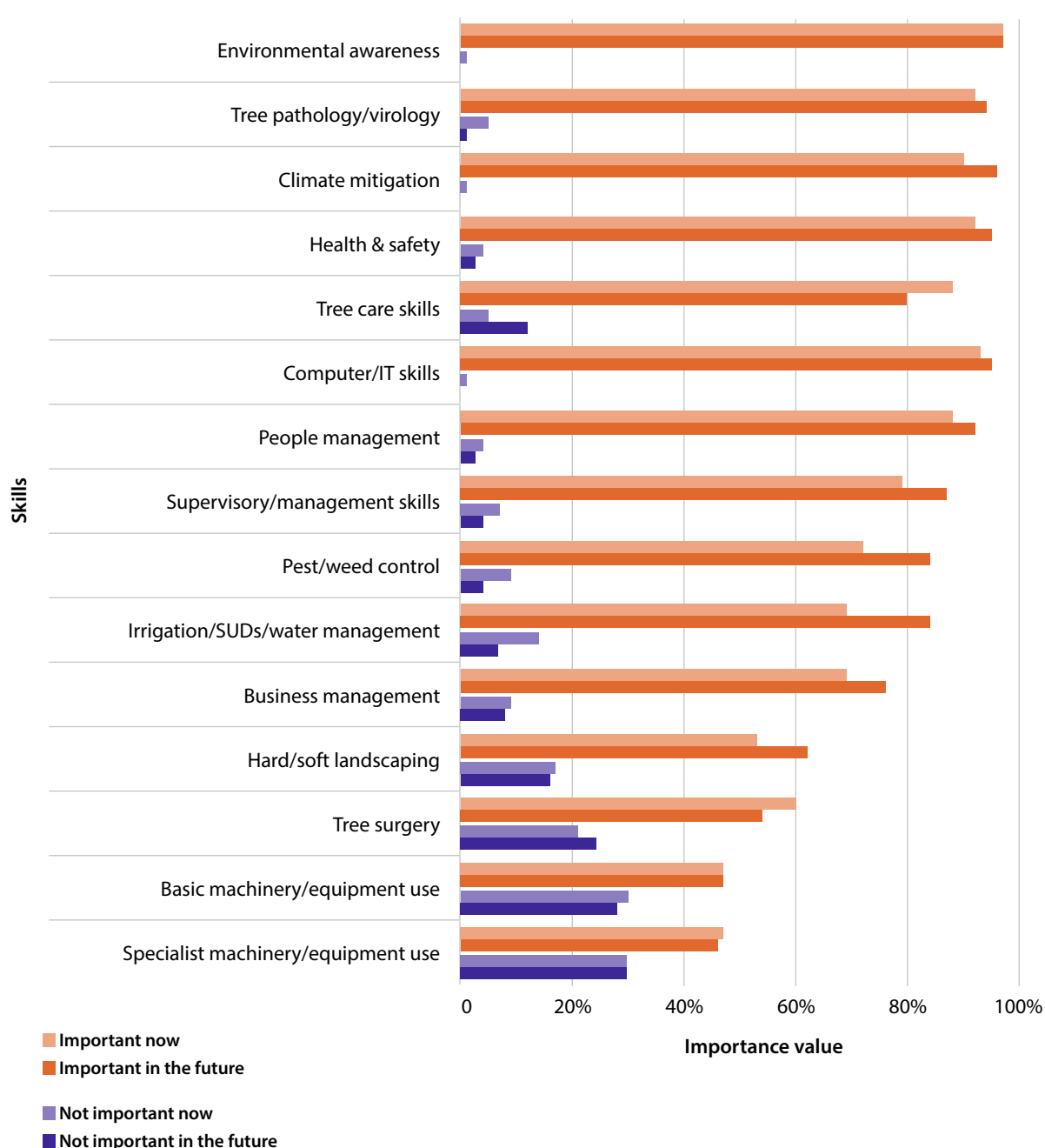
Question 9: How important do you feel the following skills will be for your role in the future?



It is clear from the heavy weight of responses across the board how multifaceted and diverse the range of skills required from those in tree management and maintenance is predicted to be in the future.



Skill demands now and in the future



Environmental awareness and climate mitigation were two overarching themes that scored highly, indicative of the widely acknowledged and increasing role that trees (and the need to manage and maintain them correctly) have to combat the climate emergency and provide nature-based solutions.

Tree pathology/virology was consistently ranked as important between both past, and future skills questions at 88% and 95%.

Environmental awareness scored highest on Question 8 (current skills) and Question 9 future skills, whilst Irrigation/SUDs/water management saw the largest increase, rising from 69% who felt it was important or very important currently to 84% who felt it would be in the future.

Also reflected in the responses was an increasing focus on management, supervisory, and people management skills.



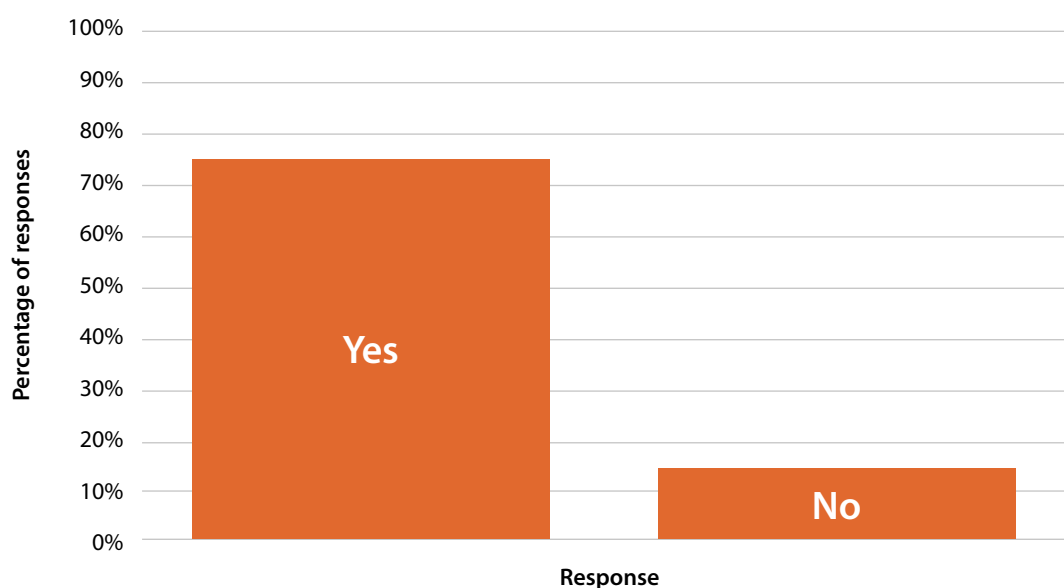
Question 10: Are there any other skills not listed above that you feel will be important in the future? Please specify.

Some of the respondents suggested other skills which may be of importance in the future outside of those already listed in the survey. One of the suggestions not directly related to arboriculture was around communications skills (e.g., writing grant applications, speaking to political leaders and community engagement). Another suggestion was having a broader set of skills around ecology, biodiversity and how trees fit within a wider land management plan.

Specific to arboriculture, there were several suggestions related to increasing knowledge of tree species for planting with climate change in mind and improved tree establishment.



Question 11: Do you have a budget for staff training and/or professional development?

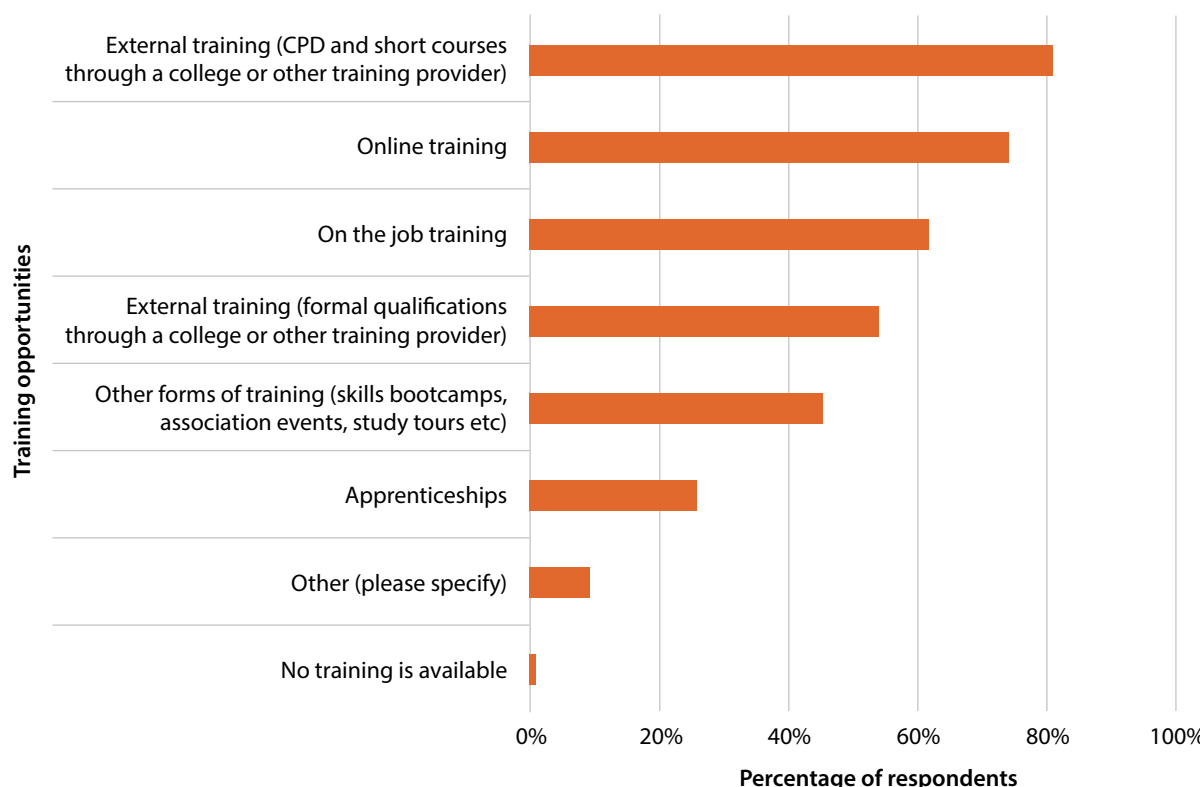


Question 11 asked about funding for training and nearly three quarters of respondents have training budgets available. It would infer there are opportunities for arboricultural skills to be improved in the current economic climate.

Of the respondents, 12% felt this question was not applicable. Represented in this 12% were a mix of organisations including a not for profit, a housing association, a surveyor contracting for a Local Authority and Local Authorities providing a varied mix of respondent type.



Question 12: What training opportunities are available for you and/or your staff?

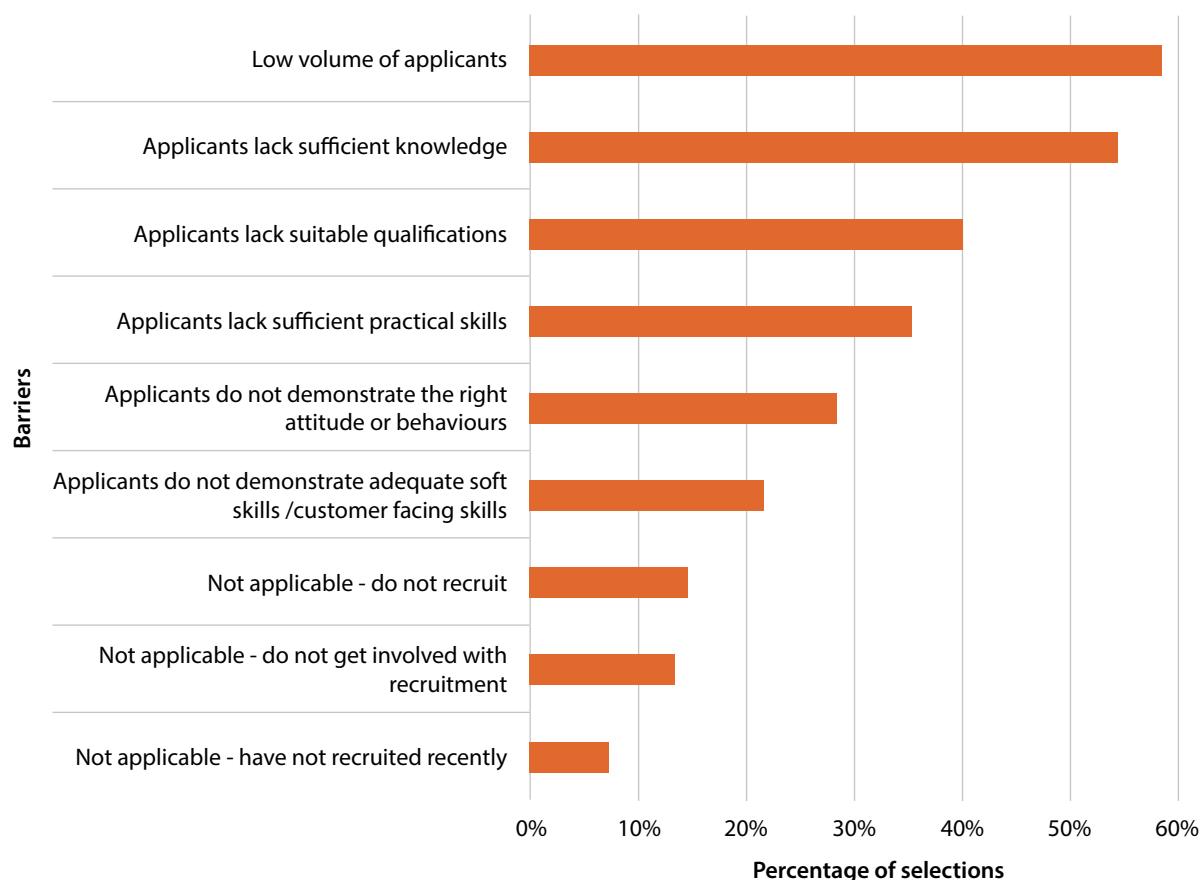


The majority of respondents were aware of a range of training opportunities available to them in a variety of formats and locations. Further investigation into the specific barriers in accessing training opportunities should be a priority for the sector. The least available opportunities were apprenticeships, potentially reflecting the complexities around accessing programmes, although this has the potential to rise as different levels of arboriculture apprenticeships are planned to be introduced over the coming years.

“There is significant potential in urban diverse communities to tap into environmental/tree/green professions if they were marketed and promoted to these groups early on & if the professions looked more like the communities they serve.”



Question 13: If you hire staff, what barriers do you currently experience when recruiting?



Respondents were able to select multiple barriers in response to this question. The barrier most frequently selected was low volume of applicants, followed by applicants lacking sufficient knowledge, and applicants lacking suitable qualifications and practical skills.

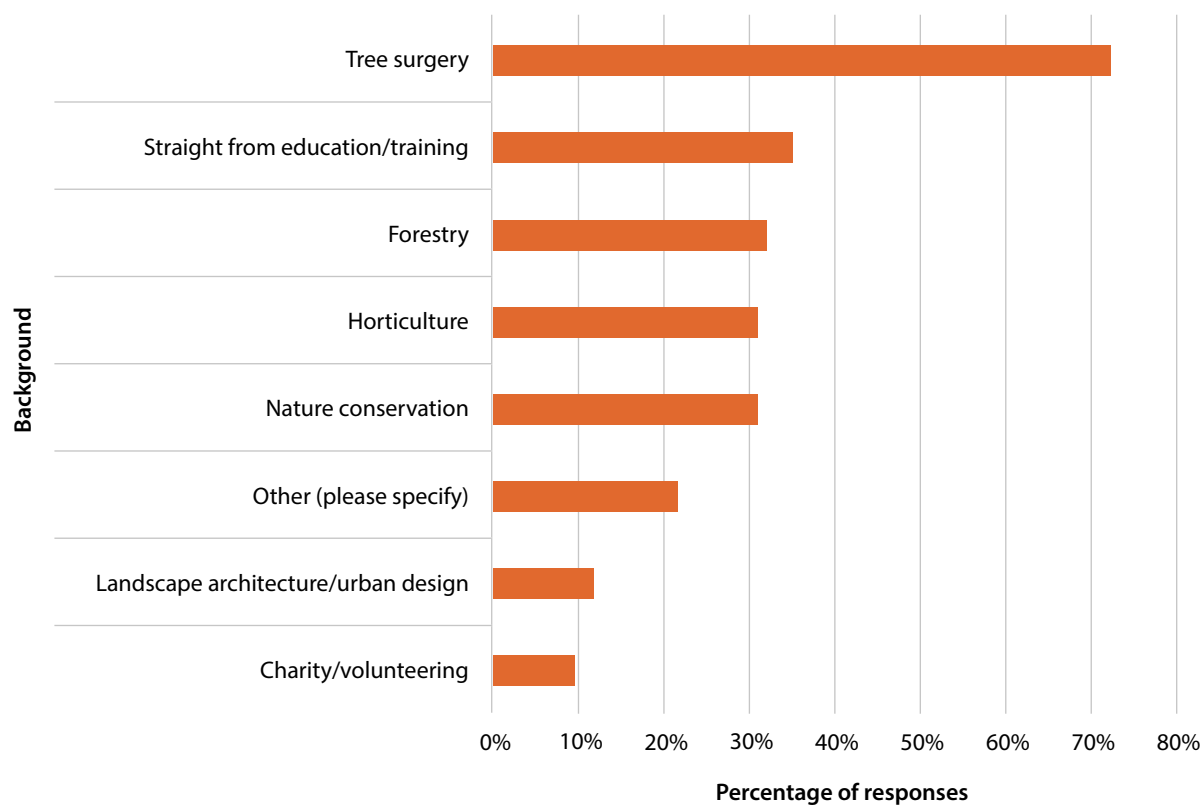
Respondents were able to suggest ways to improve recruitment in response to Question 17.

The designers of this survey have noted that 'applicants lack sufficient experience' and 'no barriers experienced' should have been included in the optional responses.

“We can get officer/coordinator level people but increasing difficult to find senior staff with right balance of practical and managerial skills to suit our specific organisation's needs.”



Question 14: If you do hire, what backgrounds have you recruited staff from in the past?



The majority of respondents indicated that they hire people from tree surgery backgrounds followed by applicants straight from education/training, forestry, horticulture, and nature conservation.

Only 34% of respondents had recruited people directly from education and training. This warrants further exploration to identify if this is because of low numbers of people finishing education and training courses, that those finishing courses do not have the right skills and experience, or for other reasons.

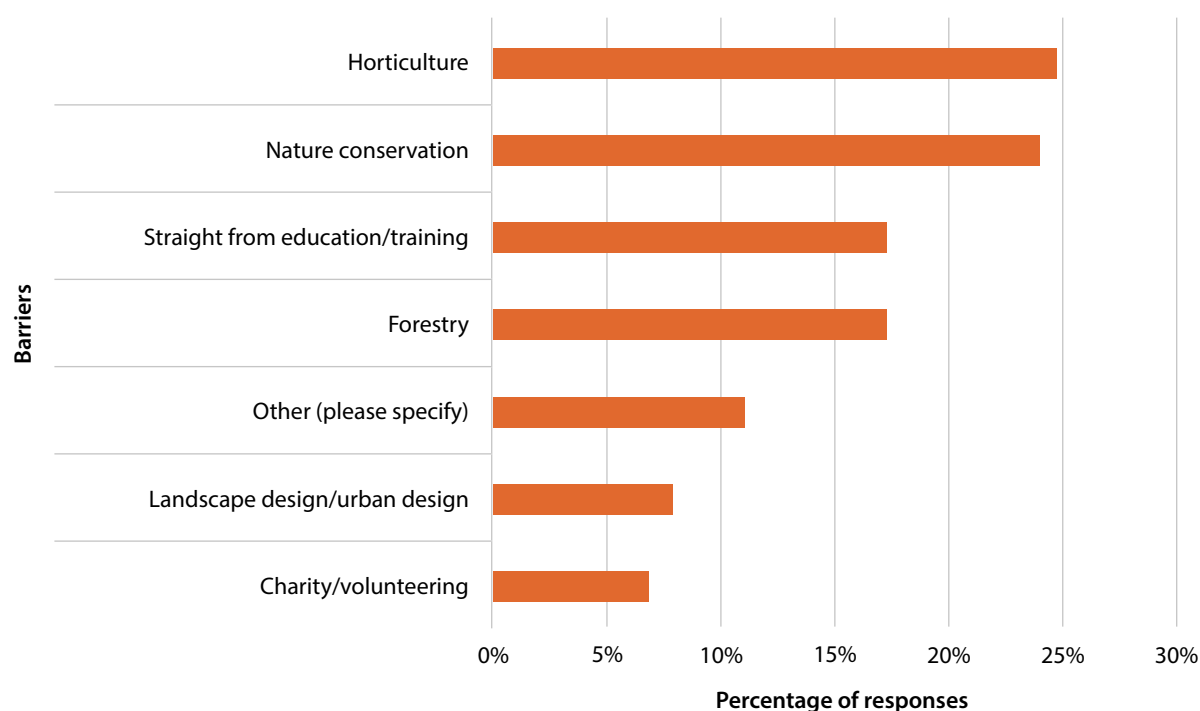
Backgrounds given as 'others' can be grouped as arboricultural consultancy, other local authority background e.g., parks/planning, and from a volunteer pool.

13 respondents chose not to answer.

“We don’t have a skill gap, but we do have a gap in the workforce size making it difficult to meet workload demands.”



Question 15: What background did you enter the arboriculture industry from?

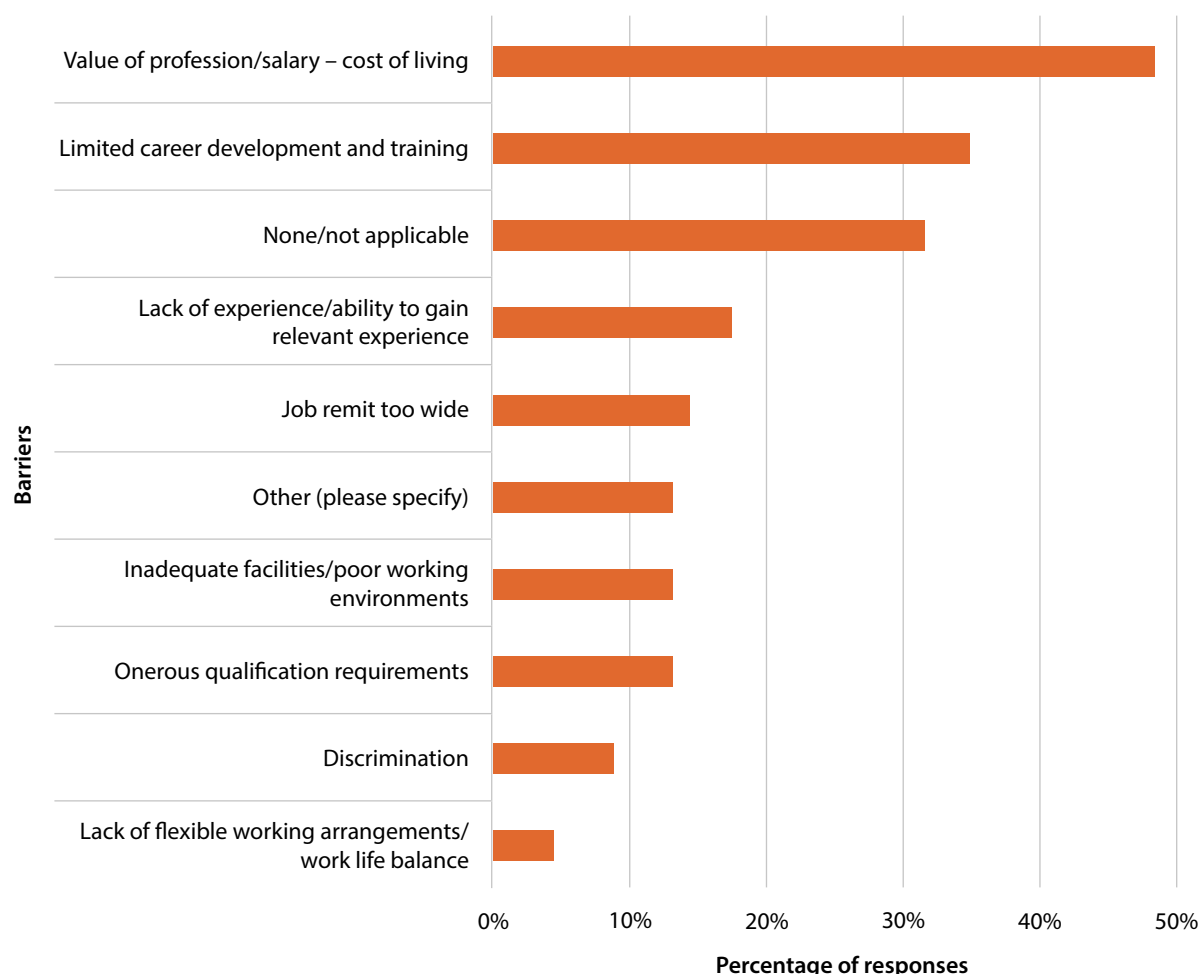


Of those not already involved in arboriculture before their current role, most entrants into the sector came from horticulture, nature conservation, straight from education/training, or forestry. The other backgrounds mentioned included parks management, a career change from humanities, from an education provider, and via agency work.

“Tree and woodland management and managers need to be part of an integrated approach to habitat management if they are to help combat global warming and loss of biodiversity both of which are currently critical issues.”



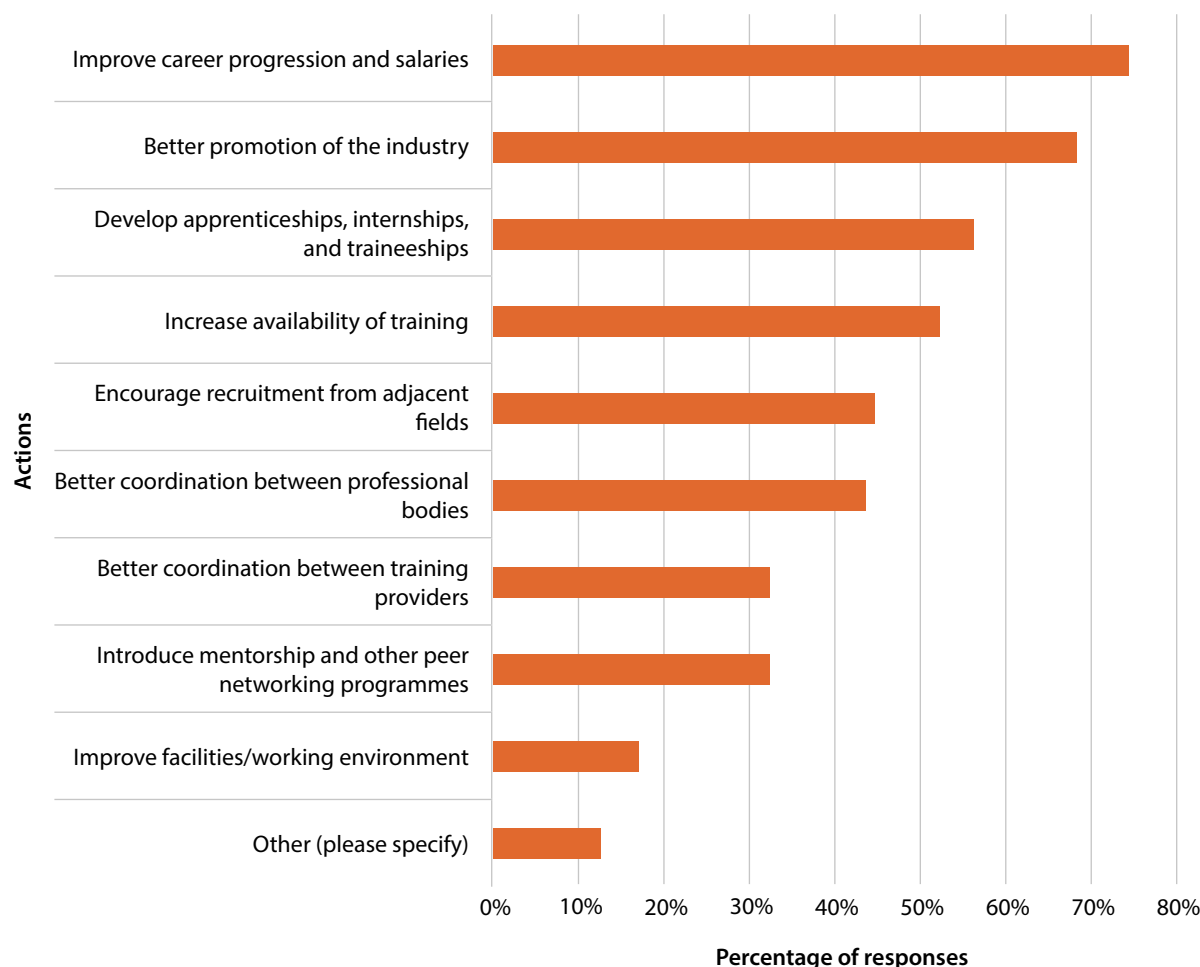
Question 16: What barriers to entering and progressing in the profession have you encountered or experienced?



Salaries associated with arboricultural professions and limited career development options were the top barriers experienced by respondents. Other barriers experienced were lack of experience and job remits being too wide, which could be related. This relates back to questions 8 and 9 which shows the breadth of skills necessary to work in the arboricultural industry. One-third of respondents said they had not experienced any barriers.



Question 17: What could be done to aid recruitment and retention?



Respondents overwhelmingly highlighted the importance of improving career progression and salaries to aid recruitment and retention in the sector. Other initiatives that were popular with over half the respondents were better promotion of the industry, increasing availability of training, and a call to sector bodies and training providers to better promote and develop apprenticeships, internships, and traineeships.

Specific comments around training called for more specific focus on urban forest management, and more London based training and professional development opportunities.

Also reflected in the responses was a need to encourage recruitment from adjacent fields, improve coordination between sector bodies, introduce mentorship and peer learning programmes, and better coordination between training providers.

All but improving facilities and working environment were seen as valuable by over a third of respondents, further reinforcing the need for coordinated and sustained initiatives focusing on recruitment and retention across the sectors.



Question 18: If you have any other thoughts or comments not captured in any of the questions above, please share them with us here.

One respondent mentioned the lack of experience of applicants which was not given as an explicit option in Question 13. Another respondent highlighted the lack of training available for forestry timber production.

A couple of comments were about greater diversity:

“Women are often discriminated against within the industry and there is opportunity to cast the net wider here. Greater understanding of arboriculture is needed within tree surgery fields.”

“There are other initiatives dealing with diversity in the environmental professions - but it is important for this to be covered as there is significant potential in urban diverse communities to tap into environmental/tree/green professions if they were marketed and promoted to these groups early on & if the professions looked more like the communities they serve. We need to work harder at this.”

The last comment below implies a wider range of training is therefore essential for tree managers. (This is illustrated in Question 9 where environmental awareness and climate mitigation come out on top as skills for the future).

“Tree and woodland management and managers need to be part of an integrated approach to habitat management if they are to help combat global warming and loss of biodiversity both of which are currently critical issues. Focus entirely on trees and tree management leads to a very simplistic approach to environmental protection which in turn often leads to inappropriate tree planting schemes, poor habitat management, and loss of biodiversity.”

Conclusions

Skills and recruitment issues remain a key concern to London based organisations and individuals involved in tree and woodland management and maintenance. Both finding and attracting people with the required knowledge and skills and providing opportunities for upskilling existing staff seem to be key themes and something sector partners will need to explore and collaborate to address.

Increasing workload is predicted across the sector, whilst the responsibilities and remits of those surveyed is widening and diversifying. This, coupled with employers being unable to find and/or attract candidates with the required knowledge and skills is creating an increasingly wider gap in expertise and knock on to practical delivery.

Responses reflected the multifaceted and wide range of skills, backgrounds, and experience required from those in tree management and maintenance. As there is ever widening acknowledgement of and interest in the role that trees (and the need to manage and maintain them correctly) have to combat the climate emergency and provide nature-based solutions the roles and responsibilities of those involved in the sector are also increasing.

Environmental awareness and climate mitigation were two overarching themes that scored highly, indicative of the widely acknowledged and increasing role that trees (and the need to manage and maintain them correctly) have to combat the climate emergency and provide nature-based solutions.

Despite the increasing role, importance, and narrative surrounding urban tree and woodland management (and resulting increase in workload and remits), salaries and career progression opportunities have not risen accordingly. Coupled with the increasing cost of living and inflation this creates significant barriers to those currently working in, or looking to move into working in London.

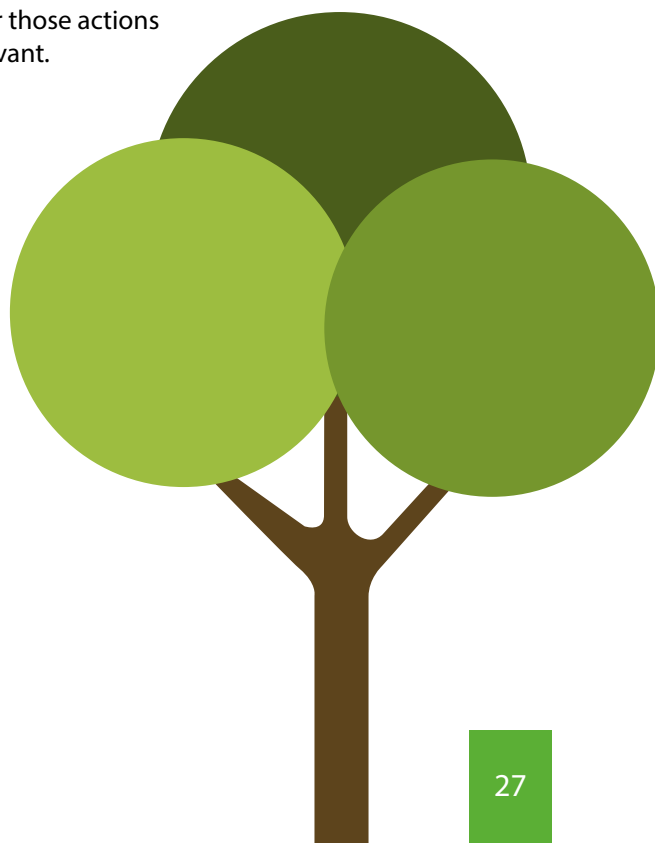
Low volume of applicants to open roles remains an ongoing issue, but more research is required to explore if this is an issue because people are reluctant to move roles, lack of clearly defined career pathways, inability to incentivise individuals moving across from complementary professions, or an overall lack of people in the industry.

Despite employers having budgets for training and professional development activities, the reported lack of suitable qualifications within the sector is still high which appears to be due to a lack of suitable training providers and locations and time pressures on delivering contracts making managers reluctant to release staff for training. Respondents generally felt that training is relevant, affordable, and that staff are willing to undertake training, but with only one specialist college based within the M25 it appears the issue isn't what is being offered but how much is being offered, where it is located, and how they are being promoted.

Suggested Actions

To address the range and complexity of challenges surrounding skills, recruitment, and retention in the London tree and woodland workforce multi-agency partnership and collaboration will be required. Although by no means a definitive list, we encourage sector organisations to consider the following next actions:

- Identify and engage partners with the skills, capacity, and experience to drive forward these actions, and pursue appropriate funding for delivery.
- Encourage arboricultural organisations, professional bodies, and colleges to create more training and professional development opportunities within London – addressing the skill areas identified in the survey (including those around environmental awareness and climate mitigation) and continuing to horizon scan to ensure future needs and requirements continue to be addressed.
- Provide more consistent promotion of existing and future training opportunities, including apprenticeships. Work with employers to identify new opportunities, initiatives, and incentives to attract potential employees from a diverse range of backgrounds and knowledge bases.
- Better definition and articulation of career pathways and progression within the industry from sector partners and employers. Explore the impact that the introduction of the term/concept ‘urban forester’ may have on the attractiveness and promotion of roles in the sector.
- Identify and engage a wider range of partners with relevant specialisms who would be able to adapt and provide training needed to upskill the existing workforce e.g., SUDs, subsidence, woodland management, biodiversity.
- Fund and deliver sub-sector specific surveys to further explore the skills landscape within those organisations e.g., private contractors, charities, consultants and specific role and salary benchmarking.
- Deliver a follow up survey in five years to determine whether those actions identified in the survey have been completed or are still relevant.



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