SKILLS 2 GROW RESEARCH

# Oxfordshire Small Business Confidence Survey

Autumn 2026

**Survey of 102 Oxfordshire business owners, directors, self-employed professionals and senior managers**

Fieldwork: 25 August-5 September 2026 | Published by Skills 2 Grow

Independent local business research

## Executive summary

Oxfordshire business decision-makers remain broadly optimistic despite widespread cost pressure. Nearly three-quarters reported higher operating costs, yet the same proportion rated their confidence at four or five out of five. Revenue and growth expectations were positive for a majority, while recruitment intent was concentrated among larger respondents.

| 73.5% | 73.5% | 58.8% |
| --- | --- | --- |
| reported rising operating costs | rated confidence 4 or 5 | expect business growth |

The results point to resilience rather than ease. Businesses are absorbing pressure from transport and fuel, tax, advertising and premises while continuing to pursue growth. Competition, rising costs, lack of time and customer acquisition are the most frequently identified barriers.

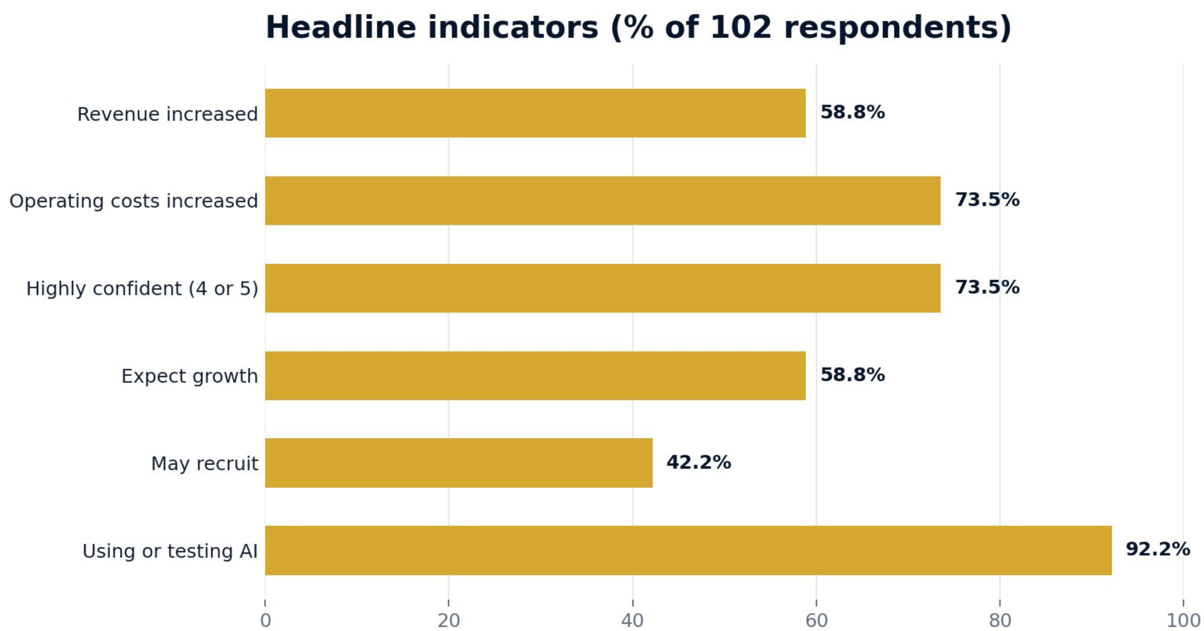


*Figure 1. Headline indicators. Percentages use all 102 eligible responses.*

## 1. Sample profile

The survey received 102 complete eligible responses. Every respondent confirmed that their business was based in, or actively served, Oxfordshire. The sample included 39 self-employed professionals, 26 business owners, 22 company directors and 15 senior managers.

- Geography: 25 respondents were in Witney/West Oxfordshire, 16 in Oxford, 14 in Abingdon/Vale of White Horse, 11 in Didcot/South Oxfordshire, 10 in Bicester, eight in Banbury/Cherwell, nine elsewhere in Oxfordshire and nine based outside the county while actively serving it.
- Business size: 36 worked alone, 28 employed two to ten people, 35 employed 11-49 people and three employed 50 or more.

- Business age: 53 had operated for four to ten years, 25 for one to three years, 16 for more than ten years and eight for less than one year.
- The largest represented sectors were health/care/wellbeing (19), beauty/personal services (14), hospitality/food/leisure (11) and professional services (10).

INTERPRETATION NOTE

**This is a diverse convenience sample of local business decision-makers, not a random sample of every Oxfordshire business. Results should be read as a snapshot of respondents rather than a county-wide population estimate.**

## 2. Revenue, costs and confidence

Sixty respondents (58.8%) said revenue had increased during the previous 12 months, including five who reported a significant increase. Thirty said revenue was approximately unchanged, eight reported a decrease and four preferred not to say.

Cost pressure was more widespread: 75 respondents (73.5%) reported increased operating costs. Six described the increase as significant. Despite this, 75 respondents (73.5%) rated their confidence at four or five out of five, with an average confidence score of 3.86.

KEY FINDING

**The central story is not declining confidence. It is continued confidence in the face of rising costs.**

## 3. Where cost pressure is strongest

Respondents could select up to three cost pressures. Transport and fuel was selected by 62 respondents (60.8%), followed by tax at 54 (52.9%) and advertising and marketing at 35 (34.3%).

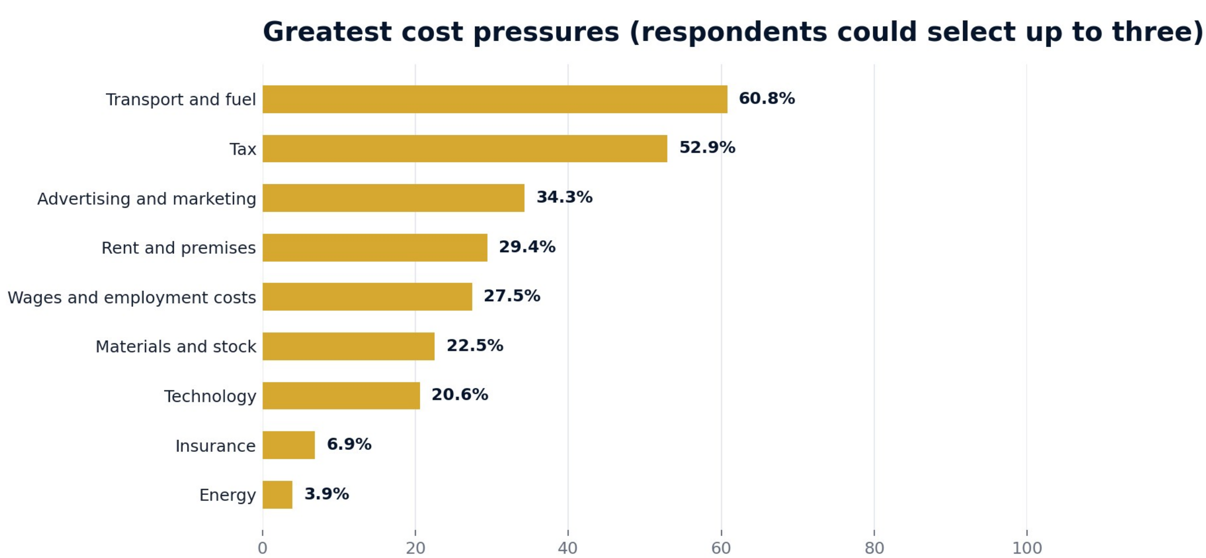


*Figure 2. Cost pressures. Multiple selections were permitted, so percentages do not total 100%.*

Rent and premises affected 29.4%, wages and employment costs 27.5%, materials and stock 22.5%, technology 20.6%, insurance 6.9% and energy 3.9%. The results show that pressure extends beyond one input: many businesses face a combination of mobility, tax and customer-acquisition costs.

## 4. Growth expectations and recruitment

Sixty respondents (58.8%) expect their business to grow over the next 12 months: 50 expect slight growth and ten expect significant growth. Forty-one expect stability and one is unsure. No respondent selected a decline option.

Recruitment expectations were more cautious. Forty-three (42.2%) may recruit employees or contractors, 33 do not expect to recruit, 23 said recruitment was not applicable and three expect to reduce staffing.

KEY FINDING

**Growth expectations are widespread, but recruitment intent is highly dependent on business size.**

## 5. A clear business-size divide

For analysis, respondents were divided into businesses with one to five people (n=50) and those with six or more people (n=52). Larger respondents were more likely to report high confidence, expect growth, contemplate recruitment and use AI regularly.

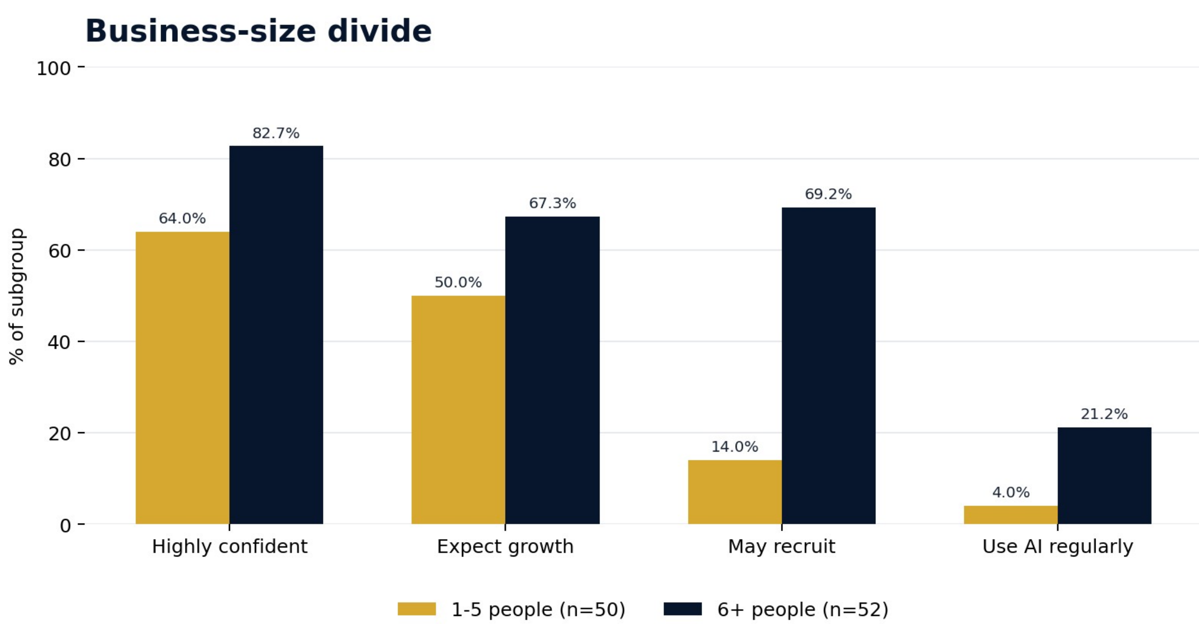


*Figure 3. Comparison by number of people working in the business.*

- 64.0% of one-to-five-person respondents were highly confident, compared with 82.7% of those with six or more people.

- 50.0% of smaller respondents expected growth, compared with 67.3% of larger respondents.
- 14.0% of smaller respondents may recruit, compared with 69.2% of larger respondents.
- 4.0% of smaller respondents used AI regularly, compared with 21.2% of larger respondents.

These comparisons are descriptive and should not be interpreted as proving that size causes confidence or recruitment intent.

## 6. Marketing and artificial intelligence

Google and search engines were the most frequently selected best-performing marketing channel (28 respondents), closely followed by paid advertising (27), email marketing (21) and networking (19). Only seven respondents selected Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram or recommendations/word of mouth combined.

AI engagement was very high within this sample. Ninety-four respondents (92.2%) were already using or testing AI: 49 used it occasionally, 32 were testing it and 13 used it regularly. Five planned to use it and three were not using it.

CAUTION

**High AI engagement may partly reflect how and where this voluntary online survey reached respondents. It should not be presented as a definitive Oxfordshire-wide adoption rate.**

## 7. Obstacles to growth

Competition was the most common single growth obstacle, selected by 25 respondents (24.5%). Rising costs followed at 22 (21.6%), lack of time at 18 (17.6%) and finding customers at 17 (16.7%).

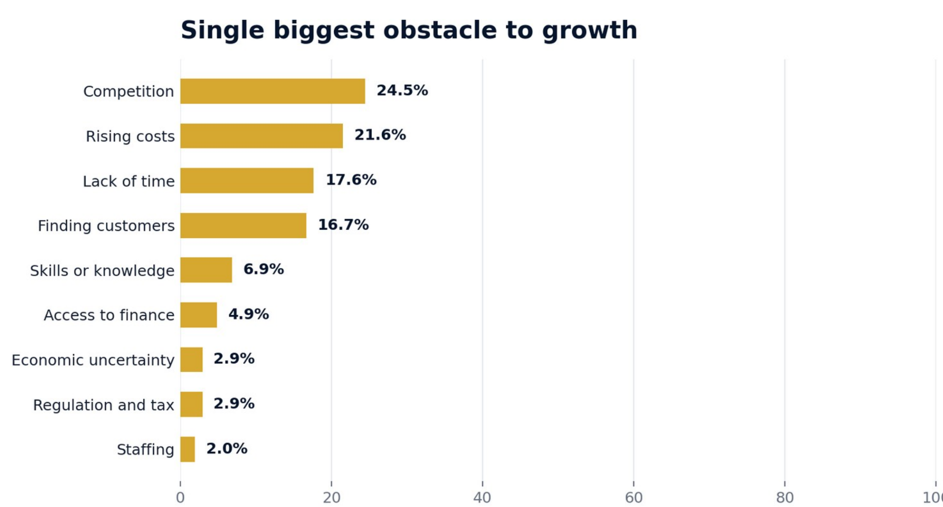


*Figure 4. Respondents selected one principal obstacle.*

Skills or knowledge was selected by seven respondents, access to finance by five, economic uncertainty and regulation/tax by three each, and staffing by two. The distribution suggests that growth support needs to address both market-facing challenges and internal capacity.

## 8. Voices from the survey

Eight respondents supplied comments and gave permission for anonymous quotation. Selected comments are reproduced without identifying information and with only light typographical correction.

> *“Prices are going up for everything. Rent, electricity and fuel - I cannot keep up.”*
> **- Anonymous Oxfordshire business respondent**

> *“A huge decrease in foot traffic.”*
> **- Anonymous Oxfordshire business respondent**

> *“It is hard to find staff who are highly qualified for this job.”*
> **- Anonymous Oxfordshire business respondent**

> *“Too many businesses offer the same service.”*
> **- Anonymous Oxfordshire business respondent**

> *“The cost of living has increased significantly.”*
> **- Anonymous Oxfordshire business respondent**

## 9. Implications

- Cost control and pricing support remain important even when topline confidence is positive.
- Microbusinesses may need different support from larger firms, particularly around capacity, recruitment readiness and systematic AI adoption.
- Customer acquisition remains central: competition, finding customers and advertising costs collectively shape the growth challenge.
- Local business support should balance optimism with practical help on margins, time, marketing effectiveness and operational systems.

## Methodology and publication notes

Skills 2 Grow conducted the anonymous online Oxfordshire Small Business Confidence Survey from 25 August to 5 September 2026. The analysis includes all 102 submitted responses. Required questions were complete, all respondents confirmed eligibility, timestamps were unique, and no exact or core-answer duplicates were identified.

Because the survey was voluntary and distributed online, it is a non-probability convenience sample. It cannot establish the views of every Oxfordshire business or support formal margins of error. Subgroup results are descriptive, and small location or sector groups should not be ranked as statistically representative.

Six respondents gave permission to quote but did not enter a comment; only the eight submitted comments accompanied by permission were considered for publication. The source workbook is retained by Skills 2 Grow.

Suggested citation: Julian Frincu, Skills 2 Grow (2026), Oxfordshire Small Business Confidence Survey - Autumn 2026.

## About Skills 2 Grow

Skills 2 Grow provides practical consultancy, mentoring, training and business support for start-ups, entrepreneurs and established businesses. The research was developed to give Oxfordshire decision-makers, business organisations and local media a clearer view of current trading confidence and growth pressures.

Website: https://skills2grow.co.uk/