



association for public service excellence

Local Authority State of the Market 2025

Parks and Greenspaces



Briefing 25/04

March 2025

Table of Contents

Results at a glance	3
1 Purpose of the report	4
1.1 Methodology.....	4
2 Budgets.....	9
3 Additional funding	11
4 Income generation.....	13
5 Efficiencies.....	17
6 Workforce.....	18
7 Training and apprenticeships.....	20
8 Number of parks and visitors.....	21
9 Rangers.....	23
10 Service standards and quality.....	25
11 Biodiversity	28
12 Weed control.....	30
13 Community and volunteer involvement.....	32
14 Future growth	34
15 APSE Comment: Dual buy-in is crucial for “soft target” parks services	37
15.1 Three main takeaways	39
15.2 How can APSE help?	40
15.2.1 Training.....	40
15.2.2 Benchmarking.....	40

Local Authority State of the Market 2025

Parks and greenspaces

This analysis was conducted by Matt Ellis, APSE Principal Advisor for Parks

For any enquires in relation to the survey, Matt may be contacted on:

Tel: 0161 772 1810 Email: mellis@apse.org.uk

Results at a glance

(Change from 2024)

Budgets

Expect a decrease in revenue over the next year	58%	+ 8%
Expect a decrease in capital over the next year	58%	+12%
Expect the level of funding in the budget to decrease by >20% in the next five years	10%	+6%

Income generation

Obtain additional funding through S106	81%	+1%
Consider political resistance a barrier to generating income	69%	+4%

Workforce

Implemented a recruitment freeze in the last 12 months	45%	+7%
Have apprentices	37%	-7%
Will not be recruiting apprentices in 2025-26	73%	+20%

Future decreases for the service over the next 12 months

Maintenance of grounds	75%	-2%
Reduction in service or standards	64%	-10%

Future growth for the service over the next 12 months

Community involvement/engagement	57%	No change
Allotments/community gardens	26%	-4%

1 Purpose of the report

Each year APSE undertakes a survey on the state of the market in local authority parks, horticultural services and grounds maintenance. The survey is distributed to officers and elected members across the UK and includes a range of questions covering a diverse range of topics – from budgets and income generation to biodiversity targets and community groups.

Where possible, this report adopts a comparative analysis with previous APSE state of the market surveys. This allows for the identification of trends in the sector, as well as the challenges, opportunities, and issues that local authority parks and green space teams are facing. The results of the survey are shared with local authorities and other organisations to help them better understand the needs of the sector.

1.1 Methodology

APSE conducted an online survey of its member councils between January and February 2025. Respondents were relatively evenly spread across APSE's six areas of activity: APSE Scotland, APSE Wales, APSE Northern Ireland, APSE Northern, APSE Southern and APSE Central.

What do the survey results tell us?



"The squeeze on public sector resources are affecting parks and green spaces disproportionately to other service areas."

There has been a 14% increase in the number of respondents who either 'Agree' or 'Agree strongly' with the above statement – increasing from 66% in 2024 to 80% in 2025.

This trend likely reflects the fact that, with local government finances across the UK continuing under pressure, albeit with some improvements to the settlement in Autumn 2024, councils are continuing to prioritise statutory services such as children's and adult social care over discretionary services such as parks.

Notwithstanding the services local authorities are legally obliged to provide, parks also face fierce competition for resources from other council services. The latest [Survation public opinion poll](#), conducted on behalf of APSE, found that, when those polled were asked to allocate a notional budget of new spending across 12 services, the public allocated the least amount of new spending to parks and greenspaces – which suggests that whilst the public value their local parks they do not regard parks as being in need of further funding compared to other high profile areas of public attention such as pot hole repairs.

One respondent highlighted just one real-world outcome of diminishing parks budgets:

"The situation has gotten progressively worse over the last few years where we've stopped the play equipment replacement programme due to budget cuts."

84%

"Agree" or "Agree strongly"

"Reductions in funding has resulted in a withdrawal of maintenance from some land and an increase in unmaintained land."

When it comes to those who 'Agree' or 'Agree strongly' with the above statement, there has been a slight increase of 6% from last year's survey (78%). One respondent commented:

"All areas of maintenance seem to be being squeezed. Volunteers seem to be keen but can actually be less efficient as they take a lot of officer time to supervise and maintain the groups."

84% is still down on the 2022 high of 92%. This drop from 2022 may be explained with reference to the increasing number of councils who are embracing more relaxed green space maintenance regimes because of rewilding initiatives and hitting biodiversity targets, which may be incidental to the issues of funding reductions. One of the respondents did caveat this point however, by adding that:

"Notwithstanding the biodiversity gains that can be achieved by less intensive management, this approach takes a good deal of education which also impacts on resources."

92%

"Agree" or "Agree strongly"

"Lack of investment in parks and green spaces will have health and social impacts"

An overwhelming majority of those surveyed "Agree" or "Agree strongly" with the above statement and recent academic research adds weight to this claim. A February 2025 article in the Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health (JECH) found that in England, a 1% increase in grassland area was associated with a 37% reduction in annual preventable deaths among the most deprived urban areas.¹

¹ [Inequality in green space distribution and its association with preventable deaths across urban neighbourhoods in the UK, stratified by Index of Multiple Deprivation | Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health](#)

78%

"Agree" or "Agree strongly"

"The public should get free access to all parks"

A decrease from 2024 (91%), this drop may reflect the need amongst local parks services to find ways to plug the gaps in funding; namely through trading, charging and other income generating activities.

However, 78% still represents significant support across the sector for parks as a universal service – free at the point of access. One of those

surveyed noted:

"The public should have free access to all municipal parks, but private ventures and botanical gardens for example could augment their budget with small fees."

"What environmental issues are a priority for your parks and greenspace service?"

[Multiple choice]

84%

Biodiversity

65%

Litter control

51%

Dog fouling

Biodiversity continues to be identified as the main environmental priority for parks services at 84%. This is to be expected: Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) became mandatory on 12 February 2024 under Schedule 7A of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (as inserted/amended by Schedule 14 of the Environment Act 2021). More information about the biodiversity initiatives local council parks teams are engaged in can be found in [11 below](#)

Though the proportion of UK adults who own a dog has grown since the onset of the pandemic in 2020, dog fouling has dropped as a priority from 65% in 2023 to 51% in 2025. This may be a consequence of the increase in upper limits for on-the-spot fines introduced as part of the Anti-Social Behaviour Action Plan in April 2023. Or it may simply be other environmental issues – such as biodiversity and litter control – now take precedence. APSE conducted its own survey on dog enforcement in 2023², and prepared a briefing on the Anti-Social Behaviour Action Plan.³

² <https://apse.org.uk/index.cfm/apse/members-area/briefings/2023/23-41-dog-enforcement-survey/>

³ <https://apse.org.uk/index.cfm/apse/members-area/briefings/2023/23-19-anti-social-behaviour-action->

“What social issues are a priority for your parks and green space service?” [Multiple choice]



As in 2024, the most popular response for social priorities was ‘Supporting healthy living’. Research by Public Health England highlights that regular use of parks is linked to lower risks of obesity, heart disease, and depression.⁴ APSE’s own research in 2020 estimated that parks contribute £2.8bn per year to Scotland’s community health and well-being. Through their contribution to better health, parks save NHS Scotland some £9m per year in fewer GP visits alone.⁵

Regarding other social issues, there have been increases since 2024 in the number of respondents acknowledging ‘Reducing anti-social behaviour’ (+9%) and ‘Promoting community cohesion’ (+11%) as priorities. These increases, perhaps spurred by the public disorder experienced in the summer of 2024, reflect attempts by local councils to find ways to bring communities together through shared use of local assets. For example, several northern English cities are transforming once neglected passageways into community spaces filled with flowers, vegetables and urban art.⁶

[plan/](#)

⁴https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5f202e0de90e071a5a924316/Improving_access_to_greenspace_2020_review.pdf

⁵https://www.apse.org.uk/sites/apse/assets/File/Spending%20on%20parks%20in%20Scotland_compressed-2.pdf

⁶ https://www.ft.com/content/6a93f565-5264-496e-b8fb-df6c4f6f4a6f?utm_source=chatgpt.com



Out of the loop with your council peers? APSE can help...

All APSE members can sign up to APSE's Parks, Horticulture and Grounds Maintenance Network. This online network provides four meetings across the year, with expert speakers from across local government and the wider parks and greenspace sector. The network is your chance to talk about the latest legislation, technology and best practice with your peers in local government. Be sure to sign up for the network [using this link](#).

2 Budgets



The main takeaway from 2.1 is that concerns over budget cuts far outweigh expectations of growth. This should not be surprising when one considers the latest APSE and Suvration research:

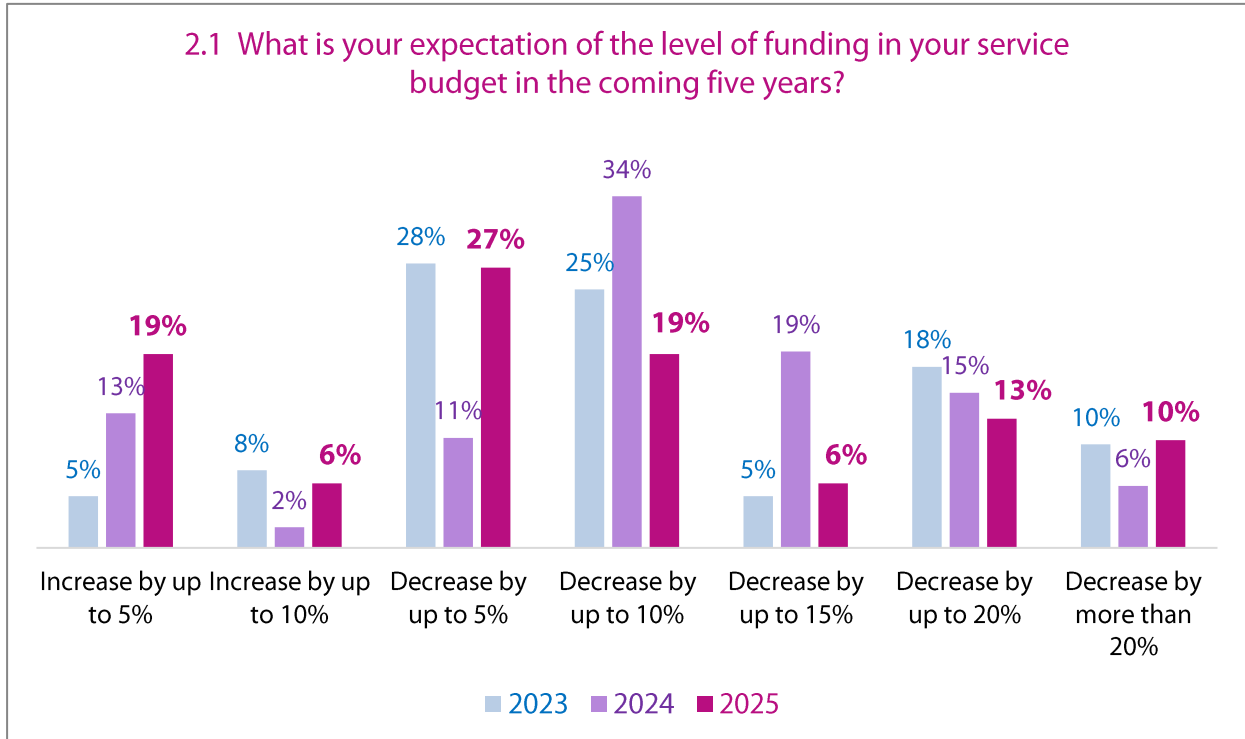
- One in three councillors think their local authority is at risk of bankruptcy within the next five years.
- One in three councillors think their local authority is at risk of bankruptcy within the next five years.
- 87% of councillors surveyed do not believe their authority will receive funding adequate to their needs from central government.⁷

2.1 reveals very few of those surveyed expect to receive an increase in revenue in their parks budgets this coming year (6%), with even fewer expecting an increase in capital (4%). Over half of those surveyed (58%) expect a decrease in revenue and capital, trending upwards from 2024. One comment noted their fear parks would be seen as a 'soft target' when it came to the senior decision-makers at their council identifying services for cuts:

"Our council is currently in a very precarious financial situation and it is likely that parks as the "soft target" will see a further reduction in its budget."

⁷ <https://www.apse.org.uk/index.cfm/apse/news/articles/2024/one-in-four-planning-committee-members-oppose-the-building-of-new-homes-in-their-local-area-new-suvration-poll-finds/>

2.1 What is your expectation of the level of funding in your service budget in the coming five years?



The graph above reveals just how uneven expectations are across UK local government with regards to the medium-term funding of local authority parks services.

It is revealed that a plurality of those surveyed expect their level of funding to decrease by up to 5%. Of note is the rise in those surveyed expecting an increase by up to 5%, with almost a fifth anticipating such an increase (19%).

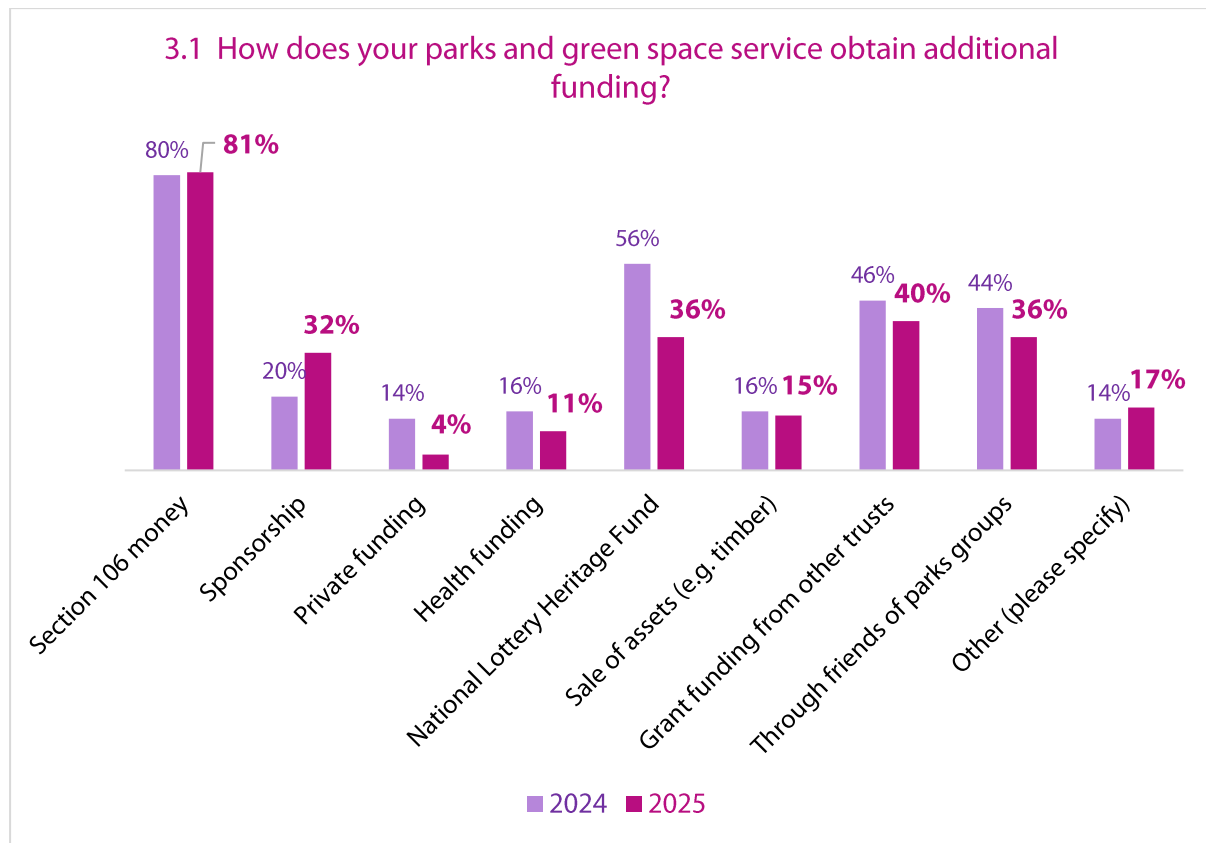
At the other end of the spectrum, those expecting their level of funding to decrease by more than 15% over the next five years has remained fairly steady since 2023, averaging at just under a quarter (24%).

One respondent reported no change but raised the complex and unpredictable issue of looming reorganisation:

“Expecting no change but with local government reorganisation now looming who knows what could happen.”

For more information about how APSE can support your service through reorganisation, visit our Local Government Reform Support Hub [here](#).

3 Additional funding



Section 106 money remains the most popular source of additional funding for local councils with a little over four-fifths of those surveyed obtaining funding from it. This represents a drop of 7% from 2023, and a drop of 12% from 2019. This drop may be explained by the shift to the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL). Unlike S.106, which is tied to specific developments and often includes obligations for green space, CIL funds are distributed more flexibly and may not prioritise parks. Also, with the Government making housing a priority by targeting 1.5 million new homes over the next five years, councils may now be prioritising affordable housing in S.106 agreements, sometimes at the expense of contributions for public open spaces or parks.

Compared to last year (56%), there has been a 20% decrease in the number of those surveyed accessing National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) money. There have also been reductions in those accessing 'Private Funding (-10%)', 'Health funding' (-5%), 'Grant funding from other trusts' (-6%), and 'Through friends of parks groups' (-8%). These drops may be explained by strained council resources, making it challenging to allocate funds or personnel to pursue external funding opportunities, including those from the NLHF.

Comments to 4.1 raised the income generating prospect of green finance models such as habitat banks – exemplified by Plymouth City Council and Ocean City Nature.⁸ The BNG Mitigation Hierarchy states that gains delivered onsite are the preferred option. However, where this cannot be achieved, there is the option to purchase biodiversity units offsite. Habitat banks are the land where these offsite units are purchased. The banks are usually parcels of degraded or low-quality land where a significant uplift in biodiversity can be achieved. APSE's 2024 briefing '*Habitat banks: An introduction for local authorities*' explores this phenomenon in more detail [here](#).⁹

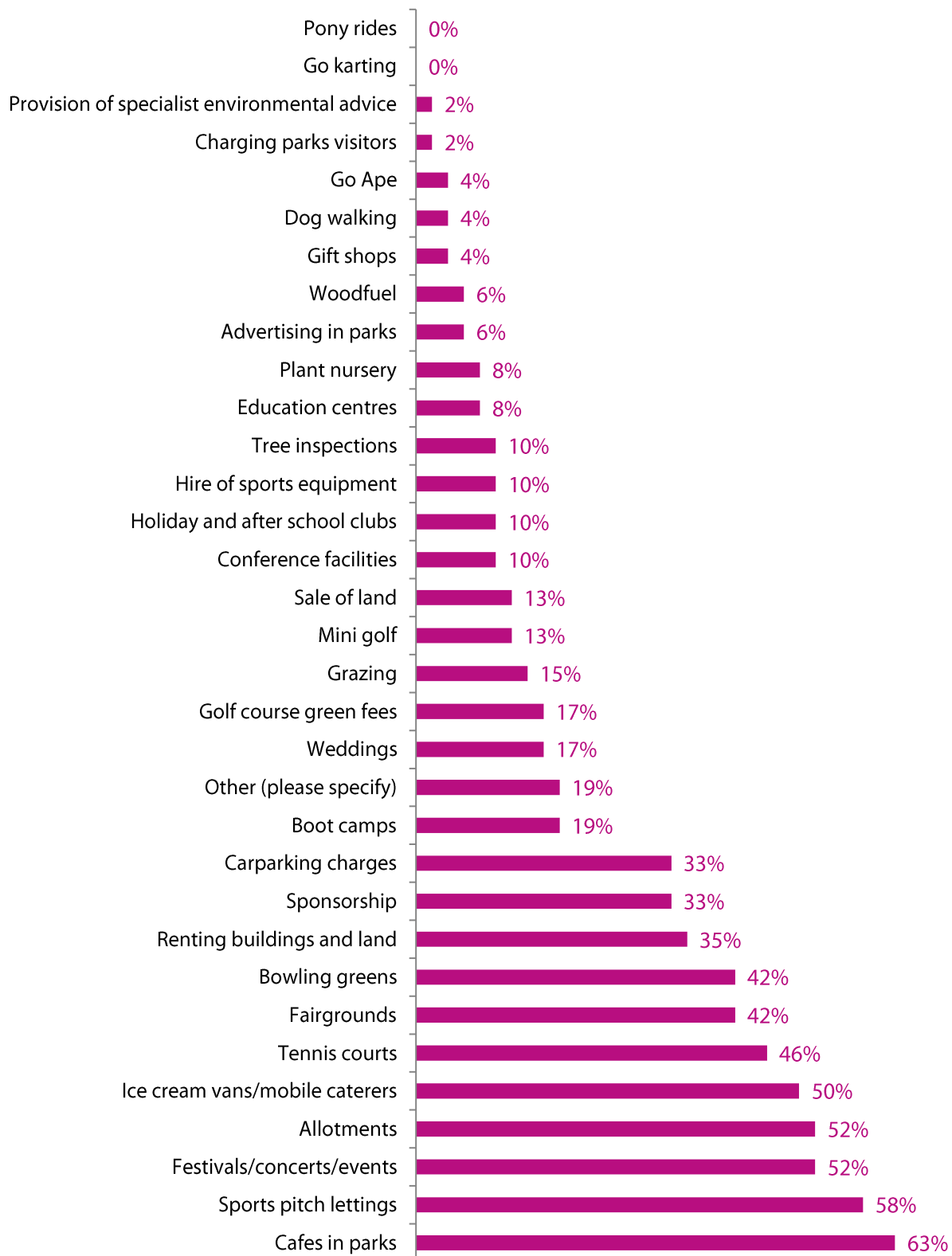
Amidst the local government funding crisis, 3.1 shows that local authority parks teams are continuing to successfully introduce new and innovative ways to sustainably manage parks. Whether this be through income generation, partnerships or alternative forms of funding. However, there is a limit to how many budget gaps these new innovations can plug.

⁸ <https://www.plymouth.gov.uk/news/innovative-new-finance-model-set-boost-biodiversity-plymouth>

⁹ <https://apse.org.uk/index.cfm/apse/members-area/briefings/2024/24-17-habitat-banks/>

4 Income generation

4.1 What areas do you currently generate income in through fees and charges (either provided in-house or through a franchise)?



APSE's State of UK Public Parks 2021 Report found that, between 2010 and 2016, parks lost an estimated £500 million in funding. An estimated £190 million was lost from local authority parks budgets between 2016-2021, meaning a total of £690 million was lost from parks budgets 2010-2021.¹⁰

The squeeze austerity placed on local council finances – and the finances of parks teams in particular – has meant parks professionals have had to come up with more creative ways to generate income to bridge the gap left by cuts in funding. These sources of income include commercial trading for profit, using assets to generate income and, in some cases, offsetting service costs by using fees and charges.

4.1 reveals the wide range of income generating activities parks and greenspaces teams are engaged in. These activities took a serious hit during the pandemic as cafes, sports pitch hire, and events were effectively stopped by public health restrictions. Though there has been some recovery, several income generating activities are still much slower than they were pre-COVID. For example:

Income generating activity	2019	2025	Variation (+/-)
Sports pitch lettings	83%	58%	- 25%
Fairgrounds	80%	42%	-38%
Festivals/concerts/events	77%	52%	-25%
Renting buildings and land	73%	35%	-38%

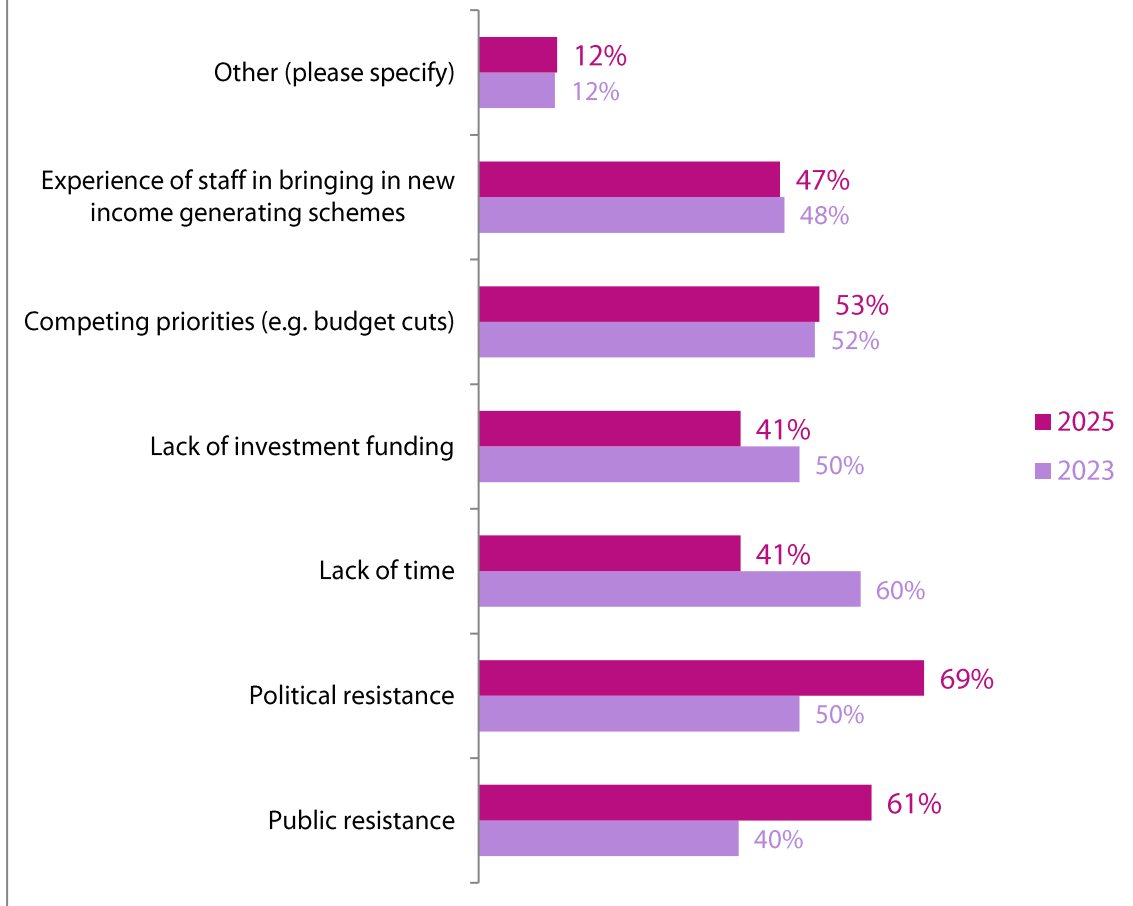


In need of some commercial savviness? APSE can help...

APSE's rich database of consultants boasts a strong track record of delivering income generation for council grounds maintenance teams – and in the current budgetary climate this is more important than ever. Our team of experts combine a unique understanding of developing your team's commercial awareness with the ability to identify untapped sources of income. For more information about how APSE can help you unlock much-needed additional income, click [here](#).

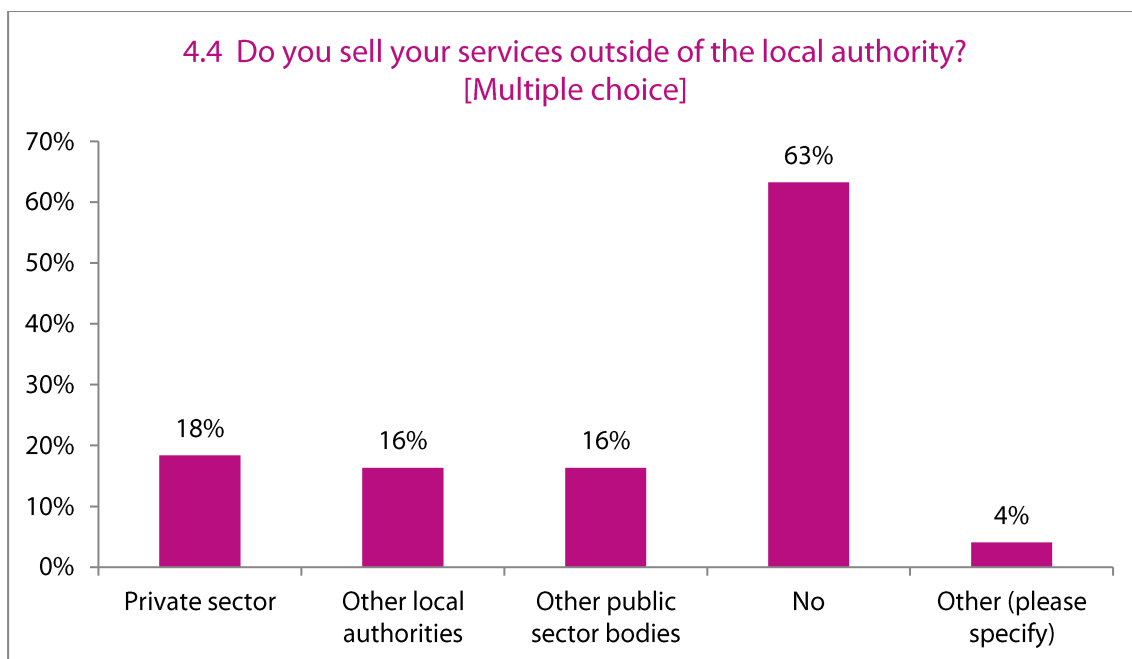
¹⁰ <https://www.apse.org.uk/apse/index.cfm/research/current-research-programme/state-of-uk-public-parks-2021/>

4.2 What are the barriers to generating income?



Regarding barriers to generating income, 4.2 shows 'Political resistance' and 'Public resistance' top the list. Public resistance (61%) is a 21% increase on the 2023 figure, whilst political resistance (69%) represents an increase of 25% from 2023. These increases may reflect the fact that, as the cost-of-living crisis has squeezed family budgets and weakened disposable income, charging and trading in parks services has become a more sensitive issue on the doorstep.

Dwindling budgets and resources also means parks teams are faced with a 'Lack of investment funding' (41%) and a 'Lack of time' (41%). So even for those teams that have political support, many lack the resources and capacity necessary to effectively implement income generating schemes.



The figures in 4.4 demonstrate just how few local authority parks teams sell services outside of the local authority. The fact that almost half (47%) of those surveyed in 4.3 do not have access to personnel with the necessary experience and knowledge of income generation makes it much harder to proceed with selling services outside of the local authority.

In APSE's *"Local authority income generation, trading and charging: State of the Market Survey Report 2015"*, APSE argued *"there is huge scope for developing business relationships with other public sector providers including the NHS, Police and Fire and Rescue Services."*¹¹ From 4.4, one can see that huge scope still remains as 'Other public sector bodies' remain a largely untapped customer base; just 16% of those surveyed sell their services to other public bodies.



In need of some commercial savviness? APSE can help...

APSE Training has designed a highly interactive course for parks professionals providing insight into the key issues and best practice techniques for creating a more sustainable basis for future funding. The course covers:

- Commercialisation - Business planning
- Risk management - Commercial environment
- Alternative funding sources
- Income generation - Traditional sources v Blue sky thinking

To book your place on 'Advanced Parks Management: Sustainable Finance (CPD)' click [here](#).

¹¹ <https://apse.org.uk/index.cfm/apse/members-area/briefings/2015/15-64-local-authority-income-generation-trading-and-charging-state-of-the-market-survey-report-2015/>

5 Efficiencies

Reductions in maintenance dominate the responses of those surveyed. As noted on page 4, 75% agree that *"Reductions in funding has resulted in a withdrawal of maintenance from some land and an increase in unmaintained land."* Comments also drew attention to staff redundancies, in addition to increasing volunteer involvement and income generating activities:

"Reduced maintenance frequencies with less staff. Reducing higher maintenance areas. All large cost items such as bedding have been removed."

"Cut of 50% to the number of Green Flag award sites. Drastic limitations to spending on any non-safety repairs"

"Greater focus on income generation. Greater consideration to how we work over numerous sites. Greater consideration of staff processes."

"Removal of annual bedding to plant more sustainable displays."

"Removing high cost services such as gate locking and additional weekend seasonal staff cover."

"We have reduced the area that is mown (leaving areas of long grass for wildlife). Reduced the number of mowing cuts, stopped formal bedding using wildflowers instead, removal of gym equipment that are at the end of life and not replaced it."

"Reducing the number of FT apprenticeship positions by half (from 4 to 2), reducing the hours / staff dedicated to parks, reducing the number of free public activities and events provided by parks, reducing the horticultural displays."

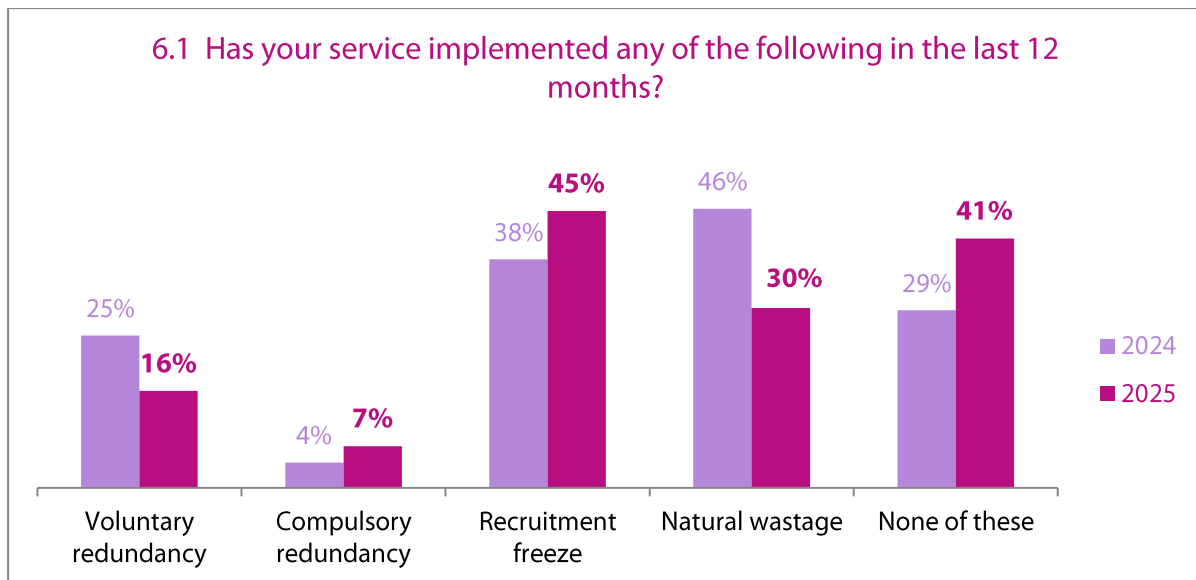
"More efficient tech, revenue generating activities, prioritising of major works."

"Reducing reliance on paper-based operations in administration and management."

"Don't mow. Optimising our operations. Reduction in cutting schedules."

"Reduced grass cutting and bin emptying."

6 Workforce



6.1 reveals there has been a 16% drop in the number of authorities reporting 'Natural wastage' amongst their workforces. This may be explained by the fact that, with the cost-of-living crisis and economic instability, employees may be more reluctant to leave their jobs. Furthermore, some workers who considered leaving their local authority pre-2020 may have postponed their departure due to disruptions caused by COVID-19, meaning 2023-24 saw higher-than-usual exits.

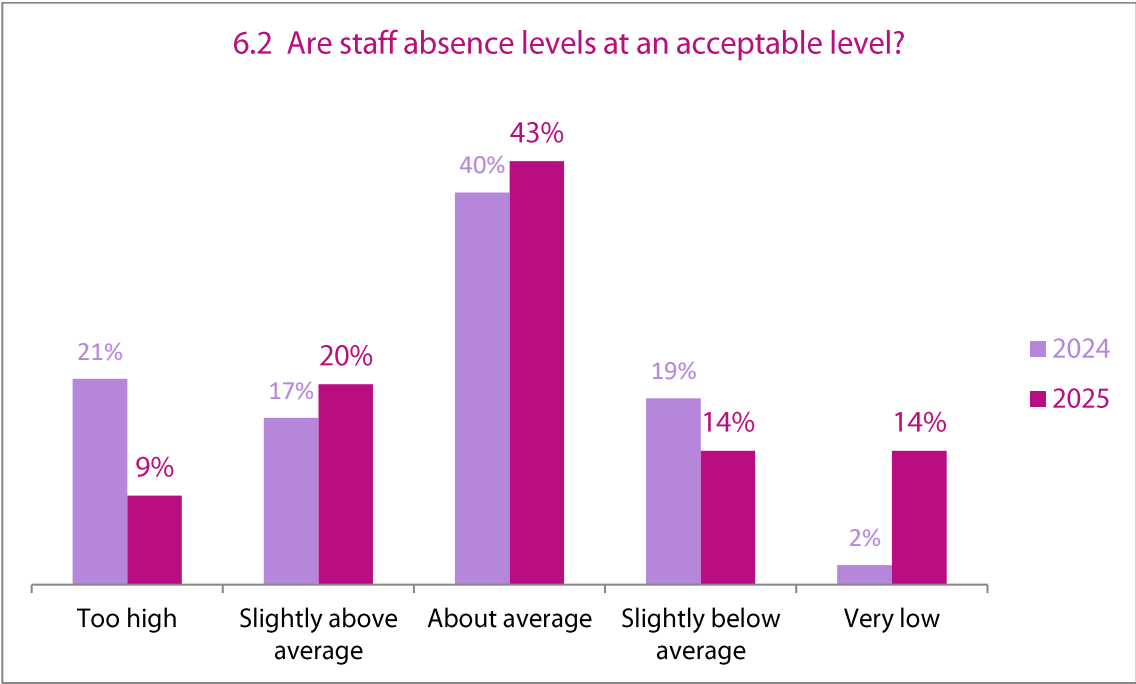
Almost half of those surveyed (45%) report implementing a recruitment freeze, which is the highest APSE has ever recorded in our series of state of the market surveys in parks. This unprecedented figure is likely to be a reflection of significant shortfalls in council budgets' However, with the impending devolution and local government reorganisation set out by the English Devolution White Paper published on 16 December 2024, it will be interesting to see if this situation has a further detrimental impact on staff recruitment, as councils consider their parks structures in advance of reorganisation.¹²



Facing reorganisation? APSE can help...

With councils merging services, there will be a need to review property and asset bases, look at depot rationalisation or repurposing sites, and ensure services are fit for purpose and are run with optimal efficiency. The APSE network can support your local authority grounds maintenance service through reorganisation – visit our [Local Government Reform Support Hub](#) for more information.

¹² <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/local-government-reorganisation-policy-and-programme-updates>



When it comes to staff absences, the most notable change from 2024 has been with regards to the numbers reporting 'Very low' and 'Too high' absence levels: a 12% increase in those reporting the former and a corresponding decrease in those reporting the latter. There may be several reasons for this improvement: better health and safety measures; changes in flexible working; post-pandemic stabilisation; or more efficient workforce management.

Sick of your team's absence levels? APSE can help...



APSE Performance Networks is the largest voluntary public sector benchmarking service across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. As standard for all our benchmarking services – including grounds maintenance – we provide data on staff absences and productivity. By comparing with other UK councils, APSE Performance Network provides intelligence which can be used for internal reporting, informing priorities and budgeting, as well as highlighting areas of improvement over time. For more information about how your parks team can benchmark against others – and secure big improvements in cost, quality and performance – [click here](#).

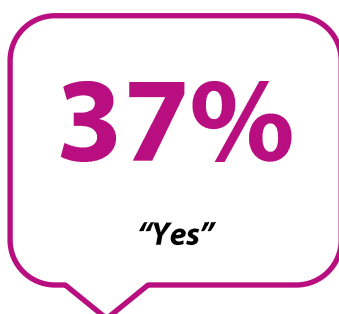
7 Training and apprenticeships



"Is the training budget over the next 12 months going to..."

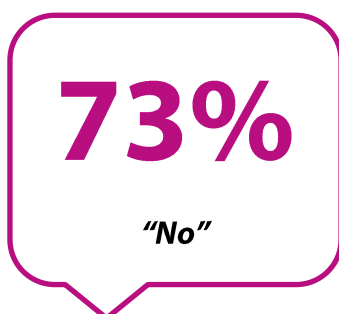
68% thought that the training budget will stay the same over the next 12 months, which is a slight decrease from last year (71%).

There has been a 2% drop in the number of councils expecting their training budgets to decrease and a 5% rise in the number expecting an increase (7%).



"Do you have apprentices?"

Only 37% of respondents stated that they currently have apprentices, which is a notable decrease from 2022 when 61% reported they had apprentices.



"Are you going to be recruiting apprentices in 2025-26?"

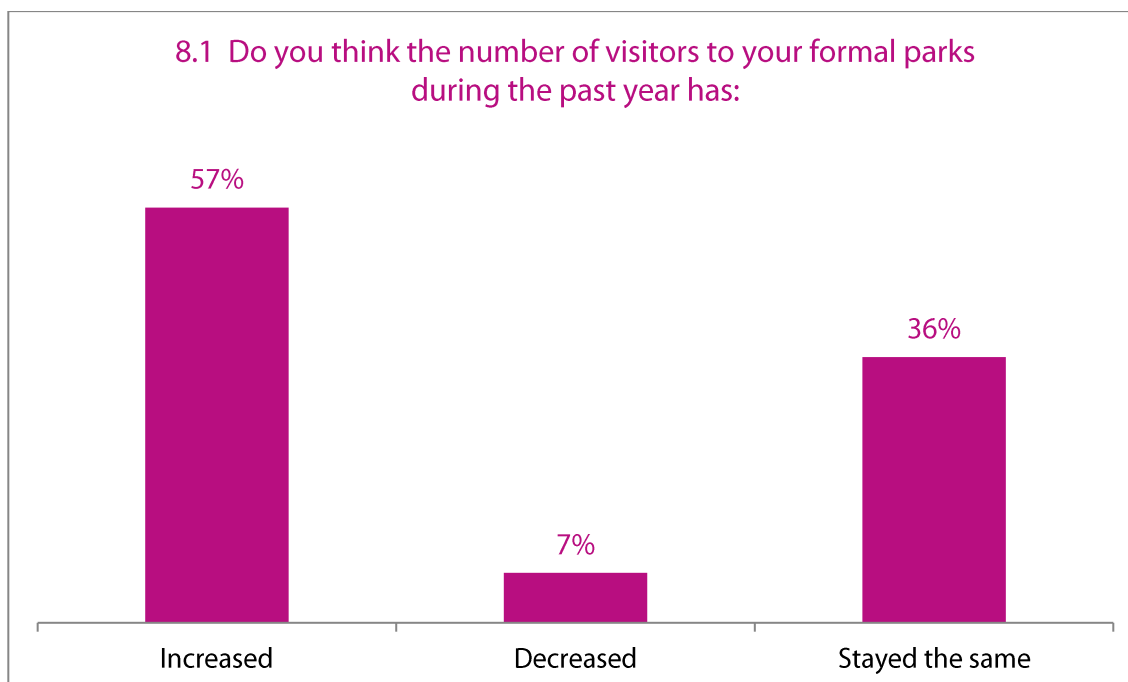
Almost three-quarters reported they will not be recruiting apprentices for 2025/26 – a 16% jump from last year and the highest figure APSE has ever recorded in our series of state of the market surveys in parks. As budgets feel the strain, and with fewer senior staff available, councils report lacking the capacity to properly train and support apprentices.

APSE has always advocated for the importance of apprenticeships, lifelong learning and career pathways in the local authority parks sector. APSE previously held the Chair's role of the Parks Action Group Knowledge and Skills workstream and published a report '*Nurturing skills for 21st century parks*', which we would encourage you all to download for free from the APSE website.¹³

Our conclusions from that report included the development of a model framework that is recognised by all stakeholders in the sector and which would guide organisations in developing the appropriate knowledge and skill.

¹³ <https://www.apse.org.uk/index.cfm/apse/members-area/special-interest-portals/parks-portal/research-papers/nurturing-skills-for-21st-century-parks/nurturing-skills-for-21st-century-parks/>

8 Number of parks and visitors



The graph above reveals that 57% of those surveyed report the number of visitors to their formal parks has increased during the past year. This suggests that the heightened interest in parks, which surged during the pandemic, has been sustained over time. We know that UK parks experienced a significant increase in visitors during the pandemic – as many as 94% reported increased visitor numbers in the 2021 APSE survey.¹⁴ A study published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* observed that urban park usage in Edinburgh nearly doubled during the pandemic, with notable increases in social, sports, fitness, and playground areas.¹⁵

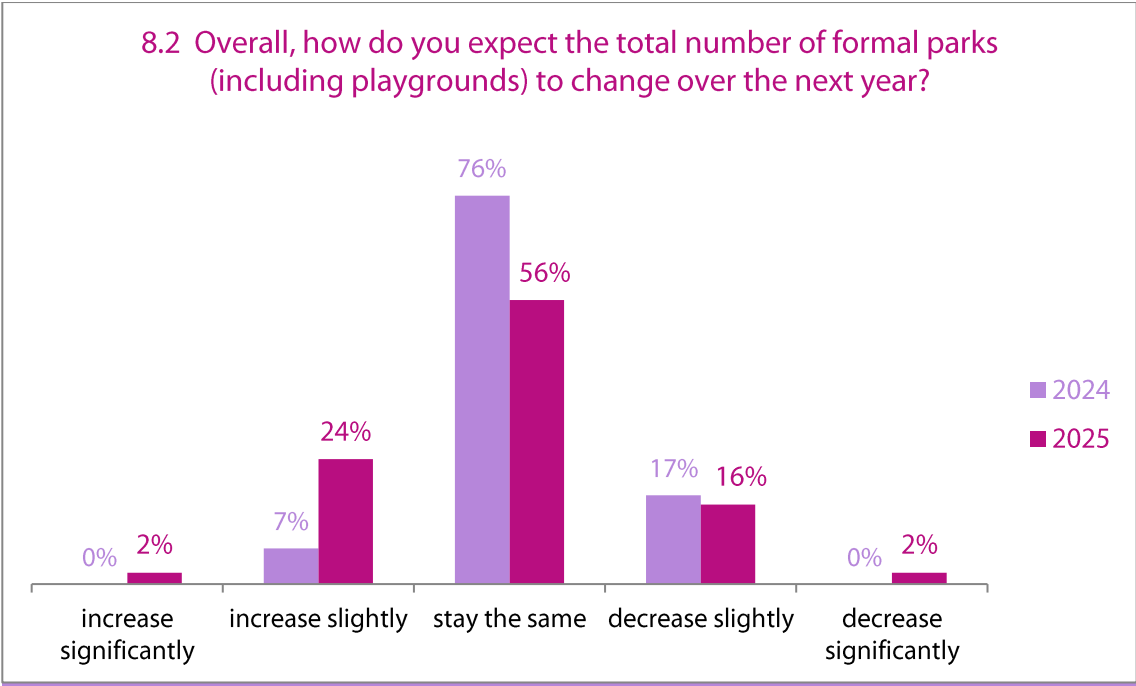
Figure 8.1 supports this trend, revealing that visitor numbers remain high, indicating that parks continue to play a vital role in community well-being and outdoor activity post-pandemic. This sustained engagement highlights the enduring value of greenspace in urban environments.

APSE's *Post Pandemic: Green Urban Spaces* guide explores ways in which local authorities can maximise the recognised benefits of urban green space to residents, communities, local businesses and the wider local environment¹⁶. You can read the report [here](#).

¹⁴ <https://apse.org.uk/index.cfm/apse/members-area/briefings/2021/21-20-results-of-the-apse-survey-parks-and-greenspaces-state-of-the-market-2021/>

¹⁵ https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10648880/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

¹⁶ <https://www.apse.org.uk/index.cfm/apse/research/current-research-programme/post-pandemic-green-urban-spaces/>



When it comes to the total number of formal parks (including playgrounds), 8.2 reveals a majority (56%) expect the number of parks to remain the same. However, there has been a notable rise (+16%) in those expecting the total number to 'Increase slightly' from last year. This slight increase may be a result of urban regeneration projects or new housing developments. One respondent commented:

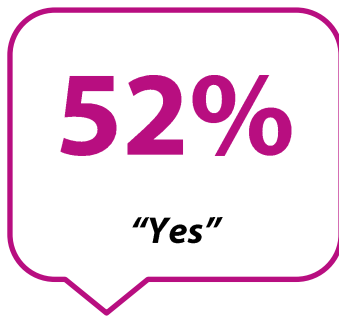
"We are always gaining greenspaces due to the amount of development going into our local area, we tend to inherit sites at least once a year."

On the other hand, 16% report they expect formal parks in their area will 'decrease slightly.' This is likely due to budget constraints, competing land-use priorities, or the redevelopment of existing green spaces for housing or infrastructure projects. As urban areas continue to expand and pressure on land increases, some local authorities may face difficult decisions about the allocation of space, potentially leading to a reduction in parkland.

One respondent highlighted the ongoing tension between development and the preservation of public parks in the UK:

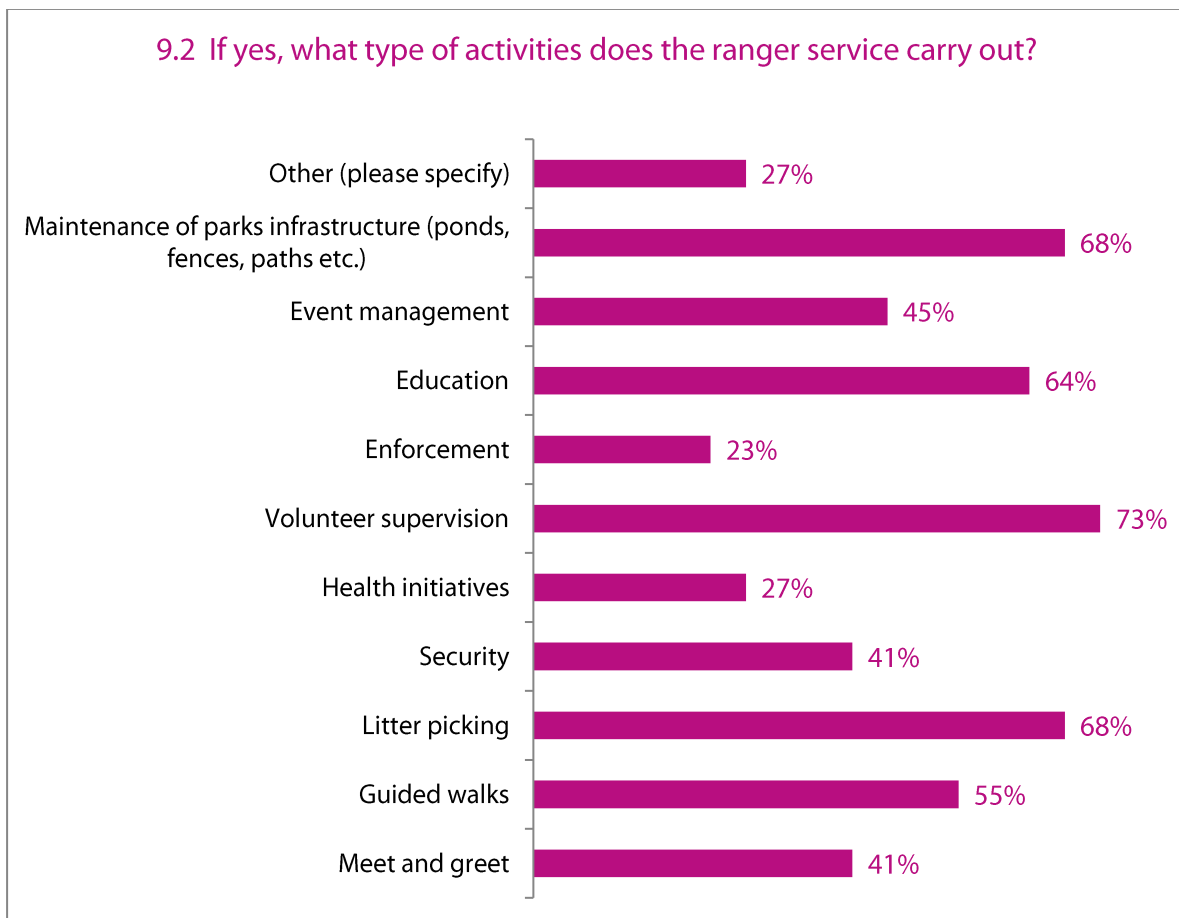
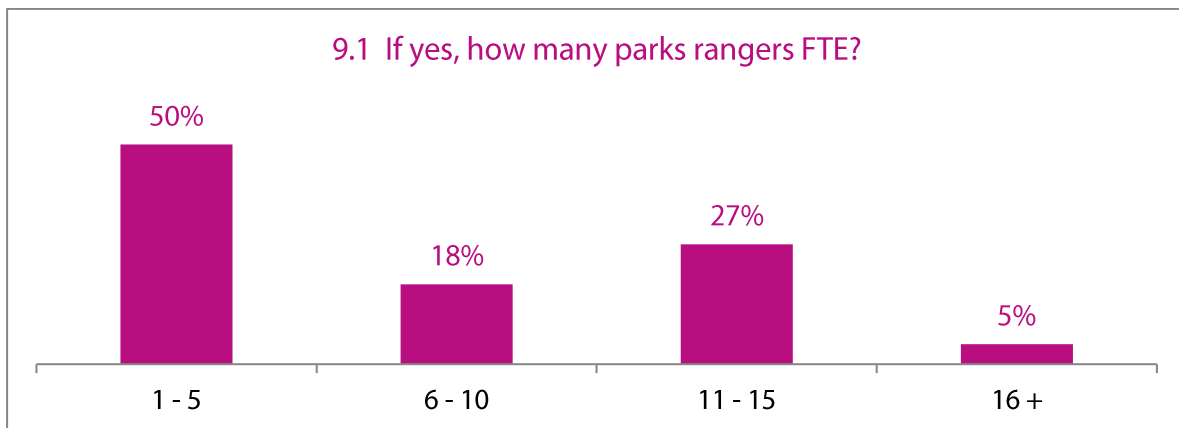
"With limited funding and growing demands on public spaces, it's becoming increasingly challenging to preserve all our green areas."

9 Rangers



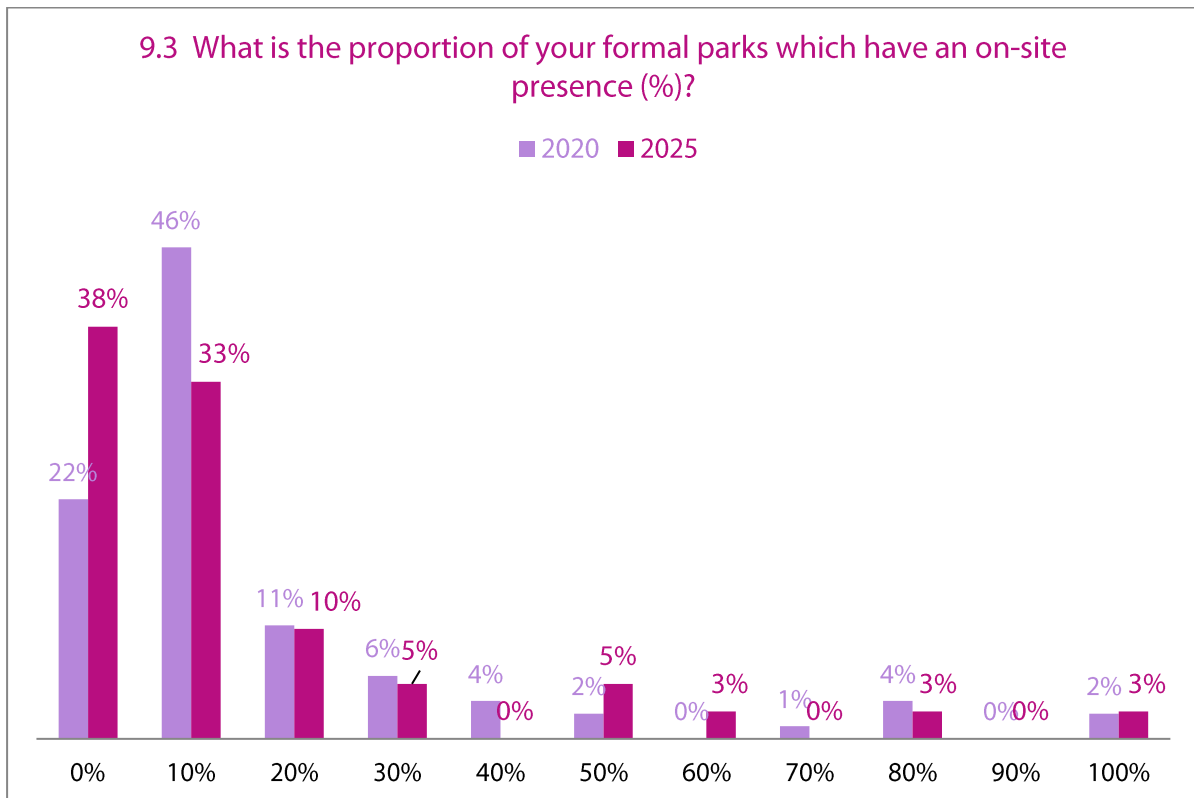
Do you have parks rangers?

52% reported having parks rangers, which is a 7% decrease from 2024 but a 3% increase on 2023.



With regards to the type of activities the ranger service carries out, 9.2 reveals the diversity of roles and responsibilities. There is very little variation from 2024 – ‘Maintenance of parks in infrastructure’ remains the most commonly identified activity with ‘Volunteer supervision’ and ‘Litter picking’ following closely behind.

When asked about the proportion of formal parks which have an on-site presence, 9.3 shows a breakdown of the responses received.



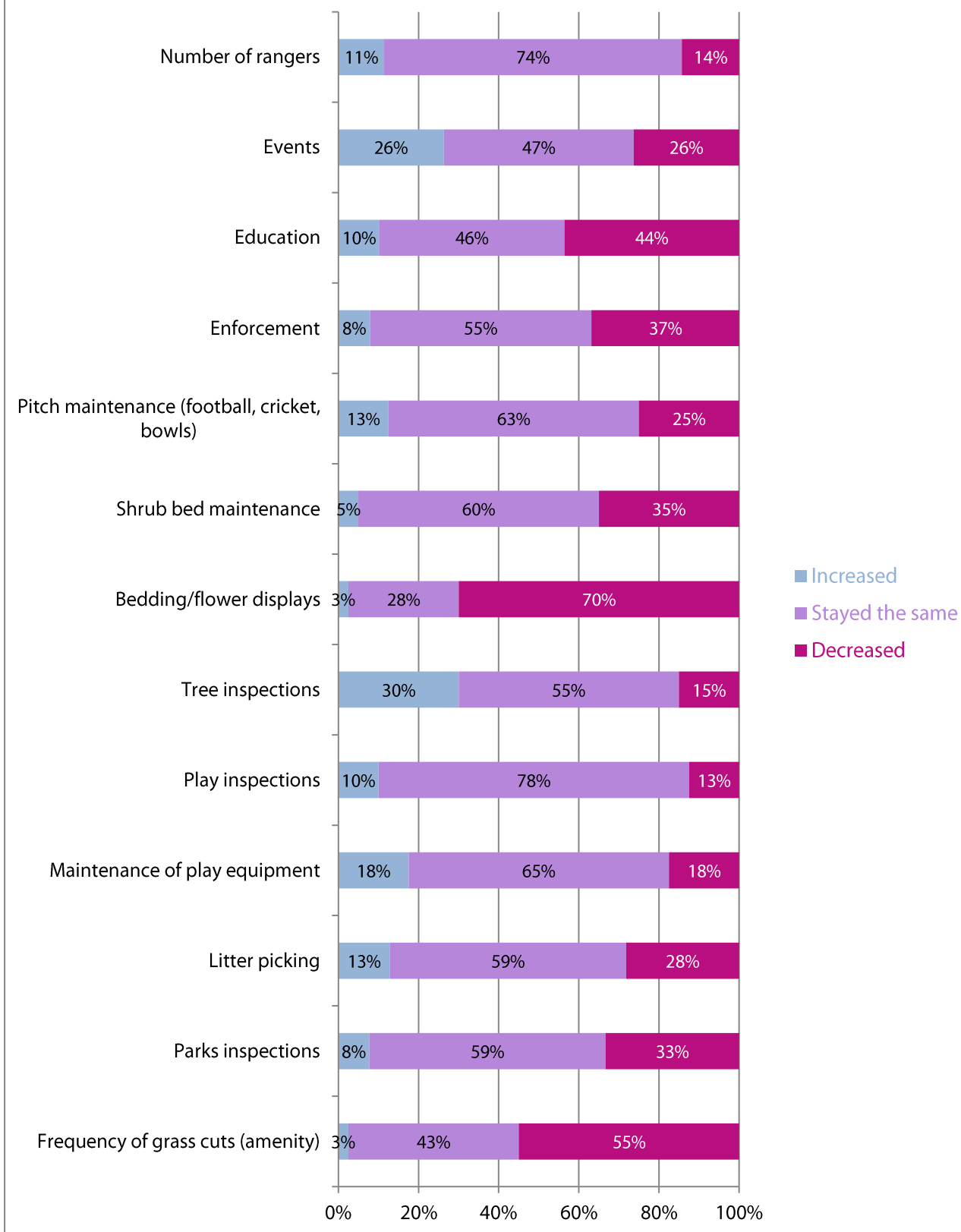
The decline in permanent on-site presence, or "parkies," in parks and greenspaces is a concerning trend, particularly given the growing emphasis on public safety, especially for women and girls. The survey finding that 38% of respondents reported having no on-site presence in their parks—a significant 16% increase since 2020—highlights a shift away from traditional models of park management and supervision.

This reduction in physical oversight raises important questions about safety, accessibility, and the overall quality of public spaces. Without adequate supervision, parks risk becoming underutilised or perceived as no-go areas, undermining their role as vital community assets that promote mental and physical well-being, social cohesion, and environmental stewardship. In 2023, West Yorkshire Combined Authority produced guidance on the design and management of parks. *'Safer Parks: Improving Access for Women and Girls'* includes suggestions for placement of facilities, paths and features that are easy to navigate and maximise visibility, ideas for bringing more women to the park, and recommendations for ways to a sense of belonging and familiarity.¹⁷

¹⁷ <https://apse.org.uk/index.cfm/apse/news/articles/2024/safer-parks/>

10 Service standards and quality

10.1 Over the past year, have the following increased, decreased or stayed the same?



Continuing the trend from 2023 and 2024, the number of those surveyed reporting decreases in maintaining flower displays has increased (70%). There have also been noticeable decreases for frequency of grass cuts (amenity) at 55% and in shrub bed maintenance at 35%. Just 3% reported increasing the frequency of grass cuts.

The survey revealed the average number of grass cuts per annum is 12. This is the same as last year and a drop from 2023 where the average came to 13.5.

With a growing emphasis on biodiversity and rewilding in public green spaces, councils across the UK are shifting their focus toward more sustainable and low-maintenance landscaping, such as wildflower meadows, which require less upkeep than traditional flower displays and shrub beds.



Making a hash of your grass? APSE can help...

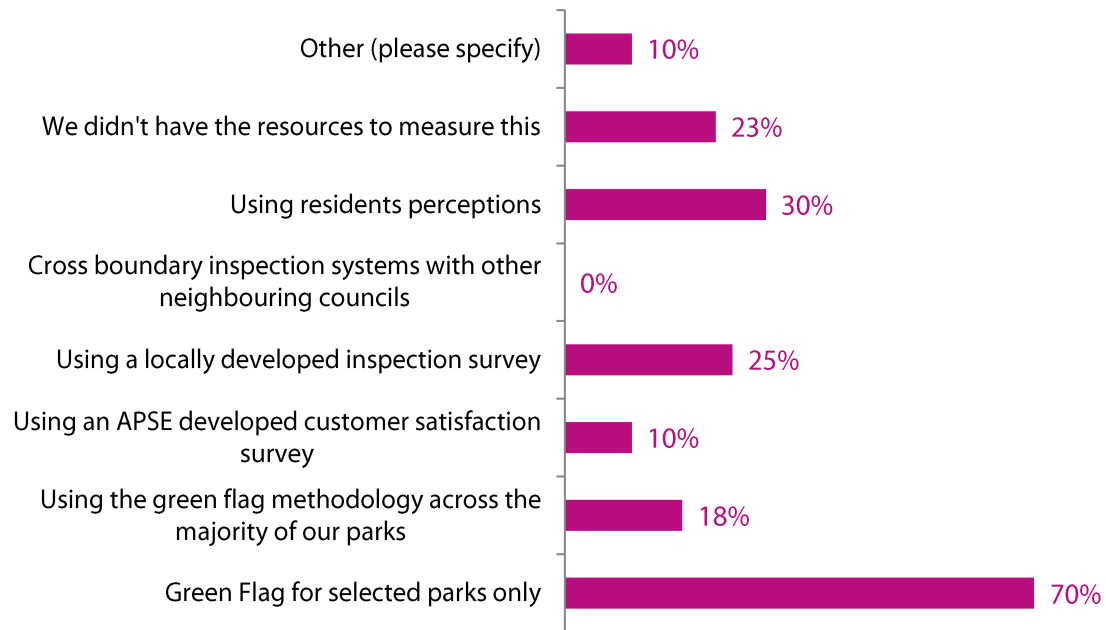
APSE held online events in [late 2024](#) and [early 2025](#) showcasing best practice local case studies in grassland management. We also designed a '*Grassland Management Guide*' to help local authorities approach this issue pragmatically and with sensitivity to the views of residents and communities. You can download the guide [here](#).

The decrease in 'Education' and 'Events' activity at a faster rate compared to 2024 highlights a significant shift in priorities for parks teams, likely driven by resource constraints and the pressing need to address more immediate operational challenges. As resources become increasingly stretched, parks teams are being forced to make difficult decisions about where to allocate their limited time, funding, and personnel. This often means that long-term initiatives, such as educational programs and event management, which can require specialist planning, coordination, and investment, are deprioritised in favour of addressing more urgent issues like maintenance, safety, and environmental concerns.

Regarding tree inspections, the safety of trees has now become a pressing concern for parks teams across the UK. Ash dieback has wrought destruction across the country and is expected to kill a significant portion of the UK's ash trees - up to 80% according to the Woodland Trust¹⁸. With some high-profile fatalities caused by falling trees, tree inspections have grown in frequency for 30% of local authority parks professionals this past year and decreased for only 15% of respondents.

¹⁸ <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/trees-woods-and-wildlife/tree-pests-and-diseases/key-tree-pests-and-diseases/ash-dieback/#:~:text=Ash%20dieback%20will%20kill%20up,ash%20trees%20across%20the%20UK>.

10.2 How did you measure the quality of parks during 2024-25?



The effects of the continuing budget reductions with increasing demand for services present an increasing challenge for local authorities to be able to continue to provide a high level of service delivery. To get from start to finish and deliver services effectively, councils need to know where they are, where they are going and how to get there – they need evidence and decisions need to be grounded in good data not opinions. Data is crucial in our ever-changing world for first class information on how to deliver first class public services. So, it is concerning to observe in 10.2, that 23% do not 'have the resources to measure' the quality of parks.

Struggling to find a quality inspection system? APSE can help...



APSE's Land Audit Management System (LAMS) is a quality inspection system to monitor grounds maintenance and/or street cleansing. If you are a member of APSE's Performance Networks you will be able to use LAMS to measure the quality of your own localities, and at the same time benchmark these against other local authorities. You can choose between using the system to monitor grounds maintenance, street cleansing and/or cemeteries/crematorium land maintenance.

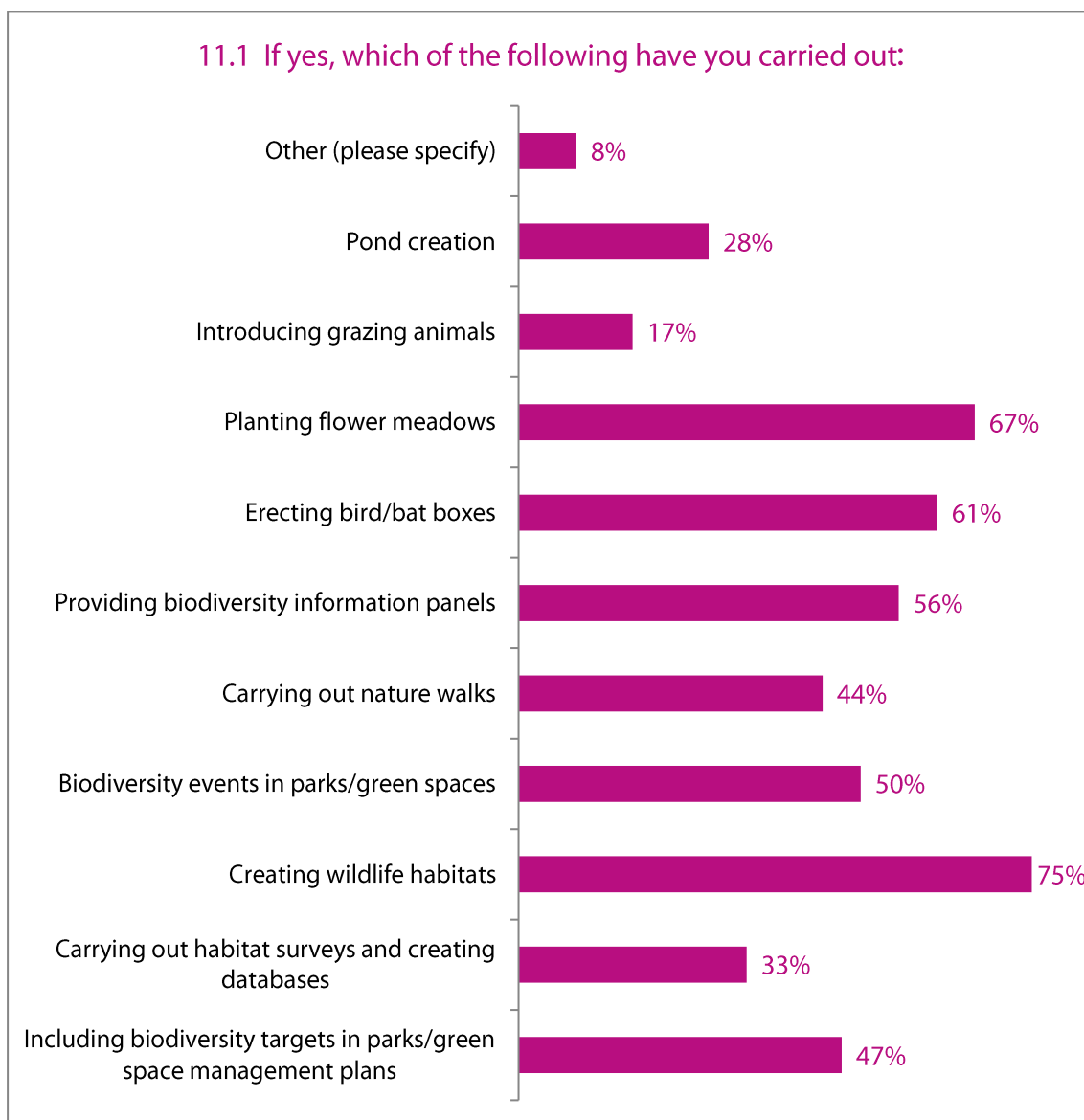
For more information about how LAMS can help support your grounds maintenance team on its quality improvement journey, [click here](#).

11 Biodiversity

Do you make specific provision for promoting biodiversity in parks and green spaces?

85%
Responded "Yes"

The figure of 85% should come as no surprise when one considers the introduction of Mandatory Biodiversity Net Gain in February 2024. This requirement has spurred local councils to prioritise biodiversity initiatives in parks and green spaces, aligning with broader environmental goals and public demand for greener urban areas. Some of these biodiversity initiatives are listed below in 11.1.



The most popular initiatives, as highlighted, include:

1. Creating Wildlife Habitats (75%)

This is the most widely adopted initiative, reflecting a focus on restoring and enhancing natural ecosystems within urban areas. Wildlife habitats can range from rewilding sections of parks to creating ponds, wetlands, or woodlands. These habitats support a variety of species, from insects to mammals, and contribute to the overall health of local ecosystems. By creating interconnected habitats, councils are addressing habitat fragmentation, which is a major threat to biodiversity.

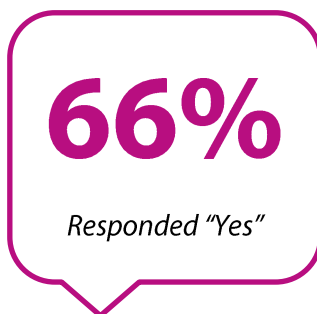
2. Planting Flower Meadows (67%)

Flower meadows are a visually appealing and ecologically beneficial way to enhance biodiversity. They provide food and shelter for pollinators such as bees, butterflies, and other insects, which are crucial for maintaining healthy ecosystems. Flower meadows also require less maintenance than traditional grass lawns, making them a cost-effective and sustainable option for councils. Furthermore, they contribute to carbon sequestration and improve soil health.

3. Erecting Bird/Bat Boxes (61%)

Installing bird and bat boxes is a practical and targeted approach to supporting specific species. Bird boxes provide nesting sites for species that may struggle to find suitable habitats in urban areas, while bat boxes offer roosting spaces for these nocturnal pollinators and pest controllers. Both initiatives help to boost local populations of these species.

Are you considering 'Rewilding' any of your parks or greenspaces?



66% of those surveyed are considering 'Rewilding' their greenspaces. APSE's 'Protecting local greenspace' report finds examples of golf courses and quarries turned into valuable biodiversity areas now teeming with wildlife. This includes an abandoned golf course turned into a wildlife haven in Cheshire and a disused quarry transformed by natural regeneration in West Cumbria.¹⁹



Biodiversity Net Gain? APSE can help...

APSE Training has designed a highly interactive course for parks professionals who are keen to further their understanding of this crucial topic and how they can link BNG to corporate and service objectives. You can learn more about the course – *Biodiversity Net Gain: Preparing Parks Professionals* – [here](#).

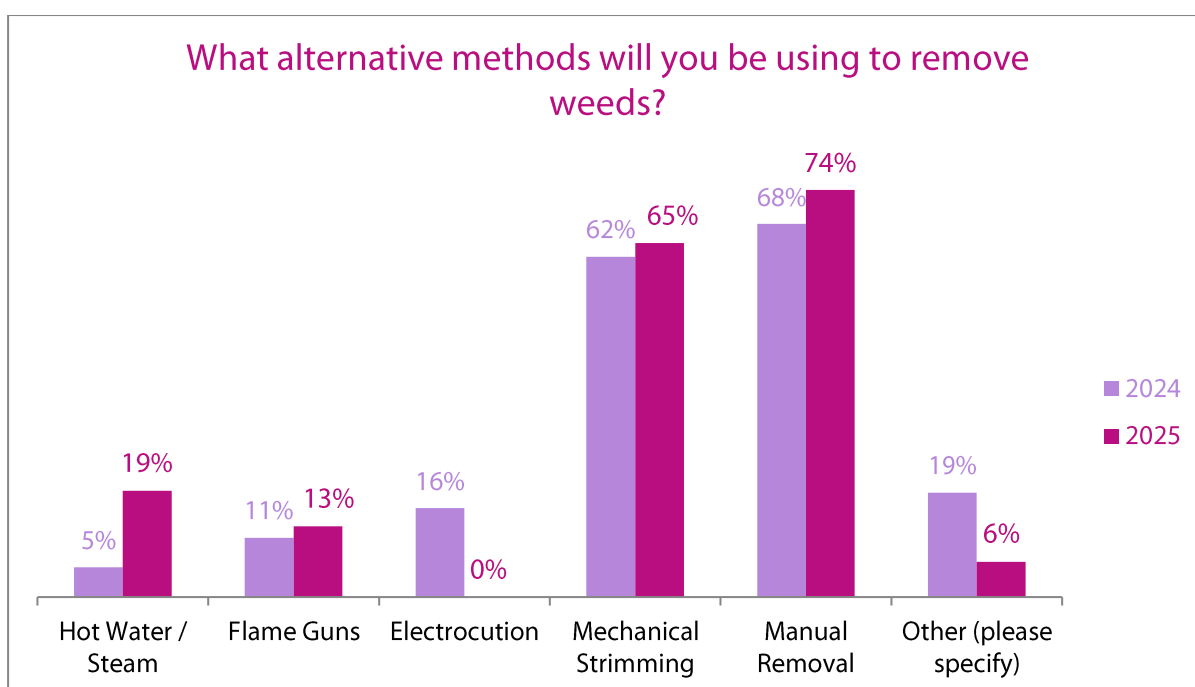
¹⁹ <https://apse.org.uk/index.cfm/apse/members-area/briefings/2025/25-03-protecting-local-greenspace/>

12 Weed control

Are you considering reducing the amount of chemical treatment you use to eradicate weeds?

63%
Responded "Yes"

63% of respondents are actively or considering ways to reduce the amount of chemicals they use to manage their parks and greenspaces. This is a decrease of 19% from last year, but this drop can be explained by the fact many councils have already reduced chemical treatment to the minimum.



Manual removal remains the most popular method for tackling weeds, with 74% of respondents opting for this approach. Unlike chemical herbicides, manual removal eliminates the risk of soil or water contamination, making it a preferred choice for those seeking sustainable solutions. The slight increase from last year suggests that more people are willing to invest time and effort into this labour-intensive but effective method.

Mechanical strimming follows closely behind, with 65% of respondents using this technique. While strimming does not remove weeds at the root, its ability to maintain tidy landscapes with minimal effort makes it a practical solution,

Interestingly, alternative methods such as flame guns and hot water steam have seen noticeable increases in adoption. Flame guns, which use intense heat to destroy weeds, have grown by 2% from the previous year. While the increase is modest, it suggests a steady interest in non-chemical approaches that offer rapid results. Meanwhile, the use of hot water steam has risen significantly

by 14%, indicating a shift toward methods that leverage natural elements without harming the environment. The growing awareness of eco-friendly solutions may be driving this trend, as more individuals and organisations seek safer alternatives to herbicides.

Conversely, the use of electrocution for weed removal has declined sharply by 16%. This suggests that users may have encountered limitations or inefficiencies with this method, possibly due to cost and practicality,

Overall, the data highlights a continued move toward sustainable and non-chemical weed management methods. We know there is disagreement amongst the scientific community about the safe use of glyphosate; the European Union extended glyphosate's authorisation for a further 10 years. APSE also understands, from various meetings and consultations with our members, that alternative methods are not the most cost-effective – nor always the most popular on the doorstep. However, APSE believes the prudent approach for local councils is to restrict its use – and the survey results show that is happening across hundreds of councils across the UK.



Weeding out poor practice? APSE can help...

APSE regularly receives queries on weed control methods from our member councils. We source responses to these queries by circulating them to our extensive UK-wide network of parks professionals. Queries relating to glyphosate usage have even been collated into a report [here](#) (which APSE member councils can access by contacting enquiries@apse.org.uk).

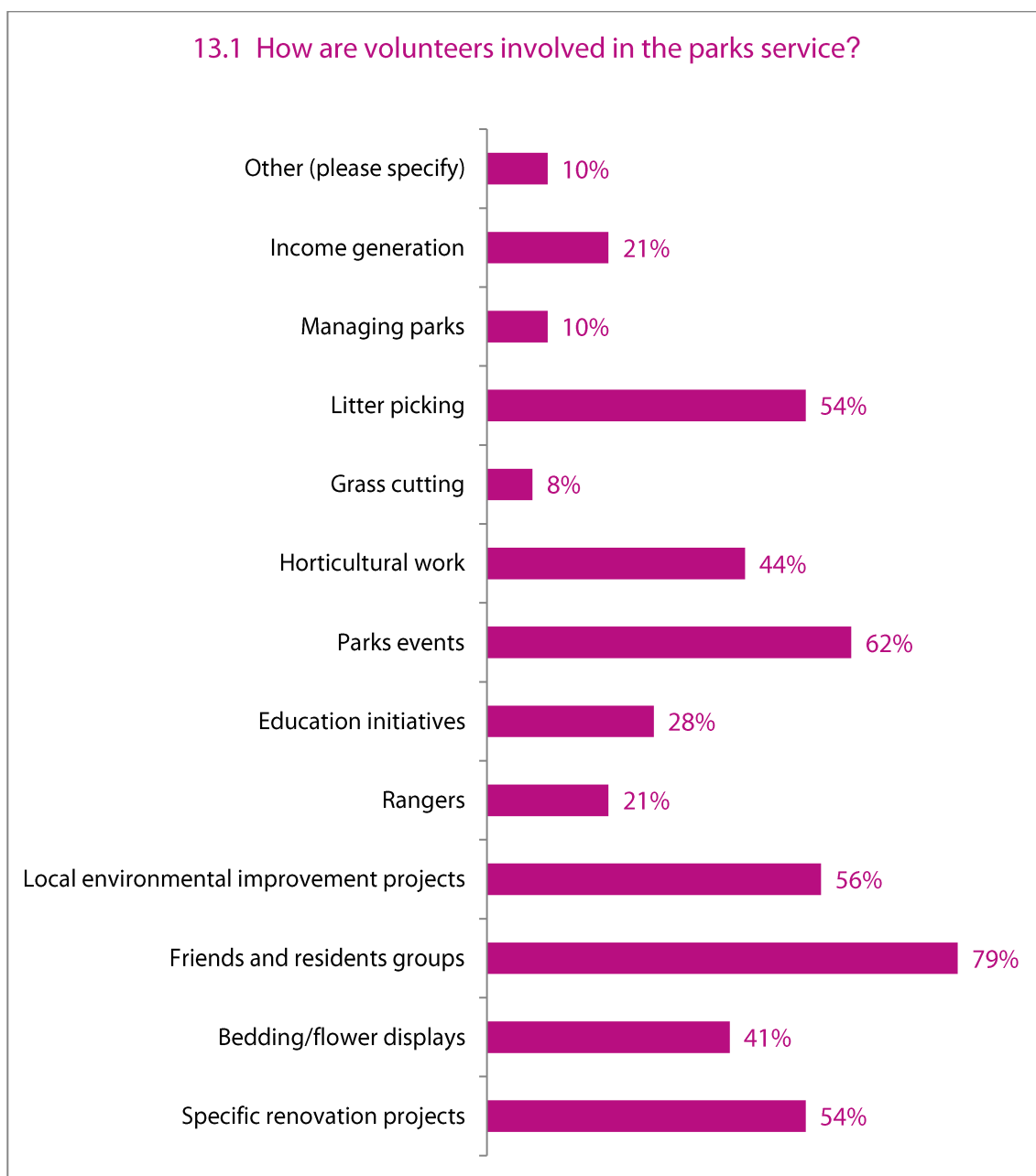
If you belong to an APSE member council and have weed control queries – or any queries relating to grounds maintenance – the APSE network may have the answers. Connect with the APSE network and get involved with our Network Queries service [here](#).

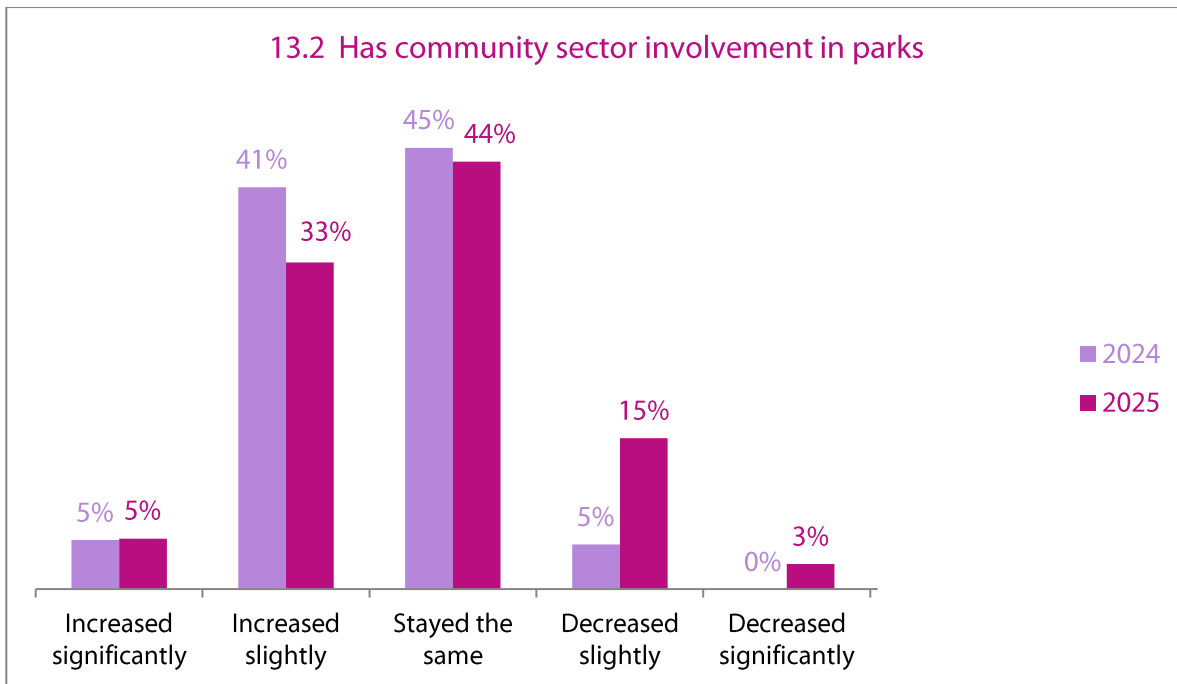
13 Community and volunteer involvement

Do you have friends of parks groups?

88%
Responded "Yes"

Friends of Parks groups can play a key role in preserving parks, organising events, and advocating for improvements; leading to better-maintained and more accessible outdoor spaces for residents. The steady increase in their presence from last year (+2%) indicates a growing awareness of the importance of community involvement in environmental stewardship and public space management.





13.2 shows the rate of respondents reporting significant or slight increases in community sector involvement in parks has slowed – standing at 38% compared to 46% in 2024. Economic slowdowns or budget constraints can reduce the resources available for community engagement programs, making it harder to sustain or grow involvement. Furthermore, communities may be facing other pressing issues that divert attention and resources away from parks and recreational activities. For instance, rising living costs or other social challenges – ageing population – might lead to decreased volunteerism or participation in community projects.

However, looking ahead, those surveyed expect community sector involvement in parks to increase over the next 12 months. As reported in [14](#), 57% of respondents expect to see community involvement in parks grow in 2024/25.

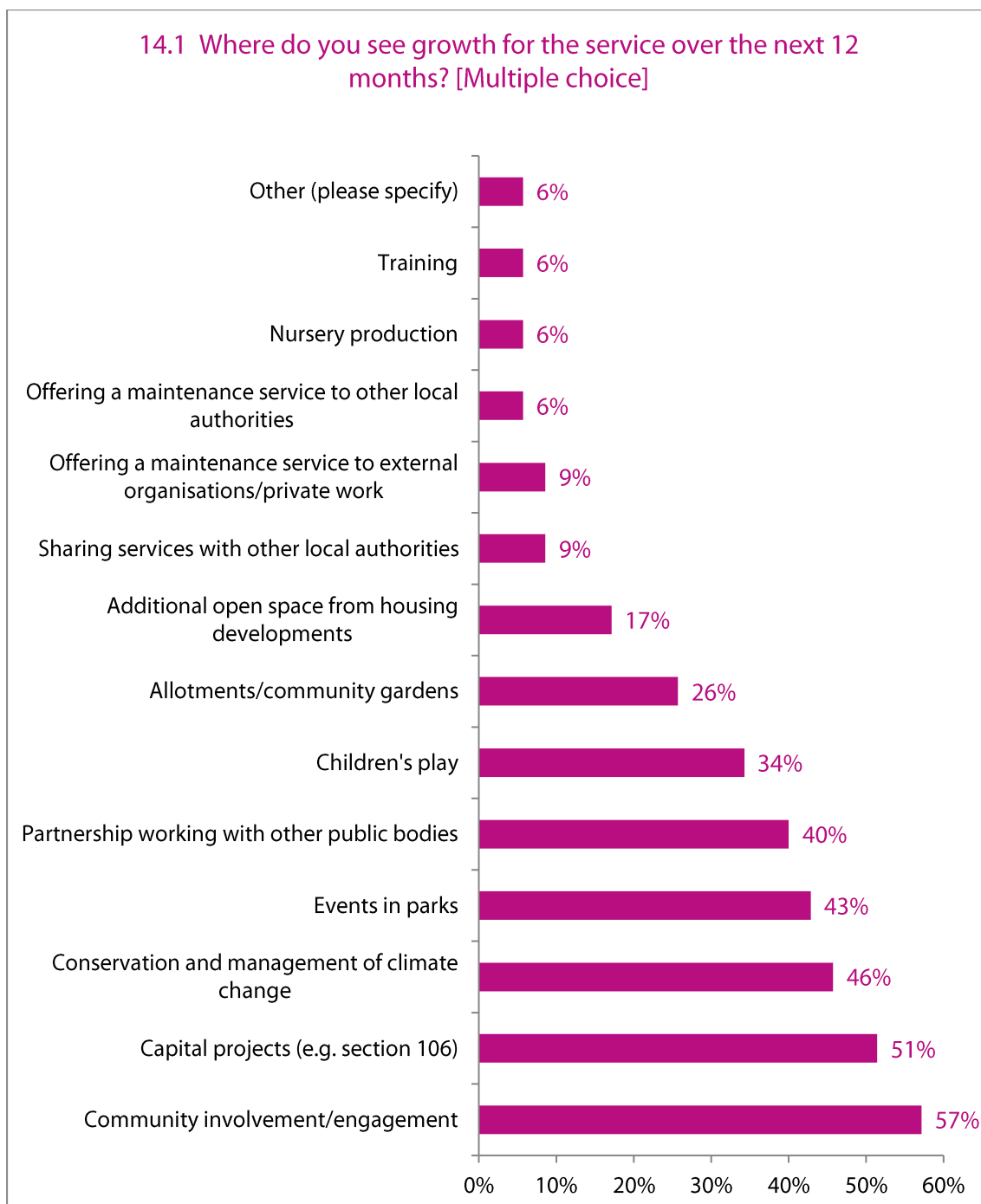
Volunteers can make a huge difference to the quality of life of local communities, contributing to the delivery of local authority outcomes. Managing the quality of local provision is vital. It is incumbent on local authorities to ensure the quality of volunteer management and support reflects the value of such an important frontline resource.

Struggling to engage volunteers? APSE can help...



APSE Training has designed a highly interactive course to help local authorities understand their obligations and responsibilities in managing volunteers effectively and supporting voluntary and community organisations. For more information about *Working with Volunteers and the Voluntary Sector*, and how you can book your place, [click here](#).

14 Future growth



The projected growth in community involvement and engagement within UK local parks over the next 12 months is a positive indication of a shift towards more participatory green spaces. With 57% of respondents highlighting this area as the most likely to experience growth, it suggests that local authorities and park management teams recognise the importance of fostering stronger connections between the public and these outdoor spaces. Increased community involvement can lead to more volunteer programs, local initiatives, and educational activities, helping to create a sense of ownership among residents and ensuring that parks remain well-maintained and valued by the community.

Capital projects, identified by 51% of respondents as a growing focus, point to significant investment in infrastructure and facilities within parks. This could include new pathways, play areas, seating, and improvements to accessibility.

The emphasis on conservation and climate change management (46%) highlights the ongoing awareness of environmental challenges and the role that greenspace can play in mitigating climate impacts. As evidenced in the programme of speakers and topics for [APSE's Parks Seminar 2025](#), our greenspace is increasingly seen as vital space for biodiversity, carbon capture, and natural flood management.

The anticipated growth in park-based events (43%) suggests a move towards making parks more dynamic, multi-use spaces. This year represents a big increase from 2023 – 19% to 43% – and reflects a need for parks services to generate income to offset gaps in their budgets. Hosting events such as festivals, concerts, markets, fitness classes, and community gatherings provides an opportunity to bring in additional income through permits, sponsorships and ticket sales.

Just over a quarter of respondents (26%) anticipate future growth in allotments/community gardens. APSE runs a separate annual state of the market survey on allotments, the latest of which can be accessed [here](#).²⁰

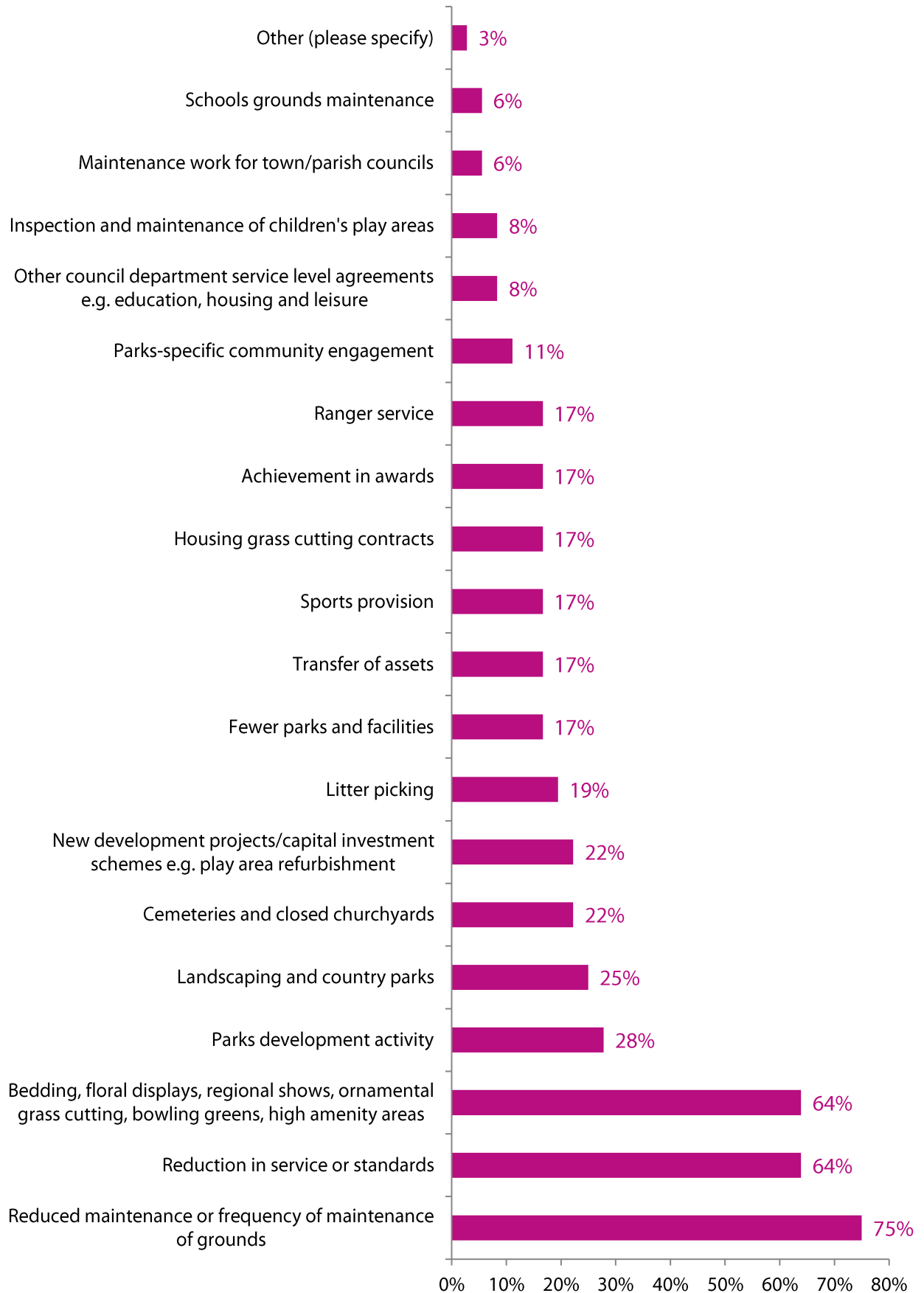
Future decreases in work are listed in 14.2. A substantial 75% of respondents indicated that maintenance reductions would be a key area of change, reflecting a broader trend of resource constraints. Within this category, specific services such as bedding, floral displays, regional shows, ornamental grass cutting, bowling greens, and high amenity areas are expected to see a 64% reduction in maintenance efforts.

More concerning is the expectation of a decline in service quality and standards, as reported by 64% of respondents. The increasing number of people foreseeing fewer parks and facilities further compounds these concerns, with figures rising from 9% in 2023 to 17% in 2025. This growth in pessimism suggests that not only will maintenance suffer, but there is also an increasing likelihood of the outright loss of public spaces.

Taken together, these findings signal a shift that could have lasting consequences for communities that rely on well-maintained green spaces for recreation and well-being. The trend toward decreasing maintenance and potential reductions in the number of parks underscores the need for strategic planning and innovative thinking on funding to ensure that these vital community assets remain accessible and properly maintained.

²⁰ <https://apse.org.uk/index.cfm/apse/members-area/briefings/2024/24-31-state-of-the-market-on-allotments-2024/>

14.2 Where do you see future decreases in work for the service?



15 APSE Comment: Dual buy-in is crucial for “soft target” parks services

Securing buy-in at both council leadership and resident level is critical to ensuring the continued delivery of quality greenspace services. Council leadership support is essential for securing funding, policy backing, and strategic prioritisation, while resident engagement fosters community buy-in, advocacy, and volunteerism.

However, with the ongoing pressures on local government finance, securing this dual buy-in for parks is not easy. Indeed, as one survey respondent put it in earlier in this report’s Budget’ section (2), parks are too readily viewed as a “soft target” for cuts.

APSE’s State of UK Public Parks 2021 report found that a total of £690 million was lost from parks budgets between 2010 and 2021.²¹ Even before the current funding crisis became acute in 2023, local authority parks teams had been left hollowed out by over a decade of austerity, with councils increasingly having to prioritise statutory services such as children’s and adult social care over discretionary services such as parks. This year’s survey finds this trend continuing with a majority of local parks professionals expecting decreases in both revenue and capital funding. The ongoing financial strain is adding to workforce reductions, declines in maintenance standards, and limitations on service expansion. With much depleted personnel, and competing against statutory services, securing buy-in from council leadership remains a big challenge.

The same is true when it comes to securing buy-in from residents, APSE’s latest public opinion poll with Survation – *Tracking Public Attitudes to Council Service Provision* – found that when asked to allocate a notional budget of new spending across 12 services, the public allocated the least amount of new spending to parks.²²

Amidst these big pressures, how can local parks professionals secure dual buy-in from those who decided local government budgets as well as residents?

One answer lies in strategically aligning greenspace initiatives with council priorities, particularly climate change and health and wellbeing strategies. By positioning parks as a solution to these challenges, grounds maintenance services can demonstrate the value of greenspace to senior decision-makers and residents alike. How we get this positioning right was very much the focus of speakers at the [APSE’s Parks Seminar 2025](#). Use the [link](#) to download presentations from the event.

For council leadership, this means highlighting how greenspace contributes to carbon sequestration, flood mitigation, and urban cooling, directly supporting climate action goals. Encouragingly, this survey has found councils continue to prioritise biodiversity initiatives, such as habitat creation and rewilding, which align with national environmental policies.

²¹ <https://www.apse.org.uk/apse/index.cfm/research/current-research-programme/state-of-uk-public-parks-2021/>

²² <https://apse.org.uk/sites/apse/assets/File/Summary%20of%20APSE%20Survation%20poll.pdf>

Parks should also be framed as cost-effective tools for improving public health by promoting physical activity, reducing stress, and fostering social cohesion, which aligns with health and wellbeing strategies. Again, the findings of this survey shows parks professionals fully understand just how important greenspace is to supporting health living.

For residents, effective communication is key—showcasing how parks enhance their quality of life, provide free access to nature, and offer spaces for community connection. Engaging residents through consultations, friends groups, events and volunteer opportunities can build a sense of ownership and advocacy, ensuring they become vocal supporters of park initiatives.

Parks and greenspace remain essential to public health, biodiversity, and community cohesion. The strong public support for free access to parks underscores their value as vital community assets. However, declining resources threaten the ability of local authorities to maintain service quality and meet growing visitor demands.

It is therefore vital that the local greenspace sector works together to develop as compelling a case as possible for continued investment in parks, both for residents and council leaders alike. This dual buy-in will help create a sustainable foundation for maintaining and enhancing parks, ensuring they remain valued public assets that meet the needs of both current and future generations.

15.1 Three main takeaways

1. Parks as vital community assets

Parks and greenspaces play a critical role in public health, biodiversity, and community cohesion. Despite strong public support for free access to parks, declining resources threaten the ability of local authorities to maintain service quality and meet growing visitor demands. It is imperative to develop a compelling case for continued investment in parks to ensure they remain valued public assets for current and future generations.

2. Dual buy-in is crucial for parks and greenspace

Securing support from both council leadership and residents is essential for the sustainability of parks and greenspaces. Council leadership support is necessary for funding and policy backing, while resident engagement fosters community buy-in and advocacy. Parks professionals must strategically align greenspace initiatives with council priorities, such as climate change and health strategies, to demonstrate their value and secure continued investment.

3. APSE's role in supporting parks professionals

APSE offers a range of resources, including training, benchmarking, and networks, to help parks professionals navigate the challenges of funding cuts, workforce reductions, reorganisation and service quality maintenance. By leveraging APSE's expertise and networks, local authorities can improve their parks and greenspace services, ensuring they continue to meet community needs and contribute to broader environmental and health goals.

APSE is also a member of the new MHCLG Parks Working Group, and will continue to advocate for the sector in ongoing discussions.

15.2 How can APSE help?

All APSE members can sign up to APSE's Parks, Horticulture and Grounds Maintenance Network, which is an online network providing four learning events across the year, with expert speakers from across local government and the wider parks and greenspace sector. You can sign up to the network using [this link](#).

15.2.1 Training

APSE Training has also designed several special interactive online course for parks professionals:

1. **Introduction to Parks Management (CPD)**. This preliminary course provides an introduction to the key issues and principles of parks management. If you are looking to move towards a more senior position, or you want to grow the skills to understand, develop, and cope with the demands faced by managers, this course will provide a robust overview. You can book your place on the course [here](#).
2. **Advanced Parks Management: Sustainable Finance (CPD)**. This particular course is the first in what is expected to become a suite of advanced modules for senior parks professionals. Focussing on sustainable funding, it provides an insight into the key issues and best practice techniques for creating a more sustainable basis for future funding. You can book your place on the course [here](#).
3. **Biodiversity Net Gain: Preparing Parks Professionals**. This training has been specifically designed to familiarise parks and greenspaces colleagues with this legislation. Through a variety of interactive activities, learners will have the opportunity to gather information and discuss strategies for practical application. You can book your place [here](#).

15.2.2 Benchmarking

APSE Performance Networks is the largest voluntary public sector benchmarking organisation in the UK. With over 200 authorities in membership, Performance Networks assists local councils by:

- Demonstrating progression on carbon reduction/ecological actions
- Helping to set a clear baseline on which competitiveness, efficiency and value for money can be measured in a systematic manner.
- Identifying the impact of service changes and interventions for your own local authorities and for others.
- Assessing the quality, cost and competitiveness of the services that councils provide on a regular basis.
- Helping to report data in meaningful ways to both elected members and the public.
- Identifying direction of travel and pace of change with regard to service delivery.
- Identifying inefficiencies such as poor productivity and high cost.
- Supporting service improvement through process benchmarking and sharing best practice examples.

For more information about how your parks service can benefit from Performance Networks membership, click [here](#).

Sign up for APSE membership to enjoy a whole range of benefits

APSE member authorities have access to a range of membership resources to assist in delivering council services. This includes our regular network meetings, specifically designed to bring together elected members, directors, managers and heads of service, together with trade union representatives to discuss service specific issues, innovation and new ways of delivering continuous improvement. The networks are an excellent forum for sharing ideas and discussing topical service issues with colleagues from other councils throughout the UK.

Networks are a free service included as part of your authority's membership of APSE and all end with an informal lunch to facilitate networking with peers in other councils. If you do not currently receive details about APSE Network meetings and would like to be added to our list of contacts for your service area please email enquiries@apse.org.uk.

Our national networks include:-

- FM and Building cleaning
- Catering (School Meals)
- Cemeteries and Crematoria
- Highways and Street Lighting
- Housing, Construction and Building Maintenance
- Local Authority Commercialisation, Income and Trading Network
- Local Government Reorganisation Network
- Parks, Horticulture and Grounds Maintenance
- Renewables and Climate Change
- Roads, highways and street lighting
- Sports and Leisure Management
- Vehicle Maintenance and Transport
- Waste Management, Refuse Collection and Street Cleansing

Visit www.apse.org.uk for more details.



Association for Public Service Excellence
3rd floor,
Trafford House,
Chester Road, Manchester M32 0RS.
telephone: 0161 772 1810
fax: 0161 772 1811
web: www.apse.org.uk

