



association for public service excellence

Local Authority State of the Market 25/26

Sports and Leisure Management



Briefing 25/43
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Table of Contents

Results at a glance	3
1 Introduction	4
1.1 Methodology.....	4
2 Strategic outlook	5
3 Financial outlook and funding pressures.....	7
4 Management and structure.....	11
5 Facilities and infrastructure	14
6 Staffing and workforce.....	18
7 Parking.....	21
8 Membership, pricing and public access	22
9 Sports pitches and outdoor provision.....	26
10 Integration with Health and Wellbeing.....	27
11 APSE Comment.....	28
11.1 Three main takeaways	29
How can APSE help?	30
11.2 Benchmarking for your sports and leisure service.....	30

Local Authority State of the Market 25/26: Sports and Leisure Management

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Results at a glance

(Change from 2024)

Strategic outlook

Agree/Agree strongly that "Leisure's future lies in integration with health"	97%	+4%
Agree/Agree strongly that "It is right to subsidise leisure"	90%	-6%
Agree/Agree strongly that "National funding for sport ignores local government"	68%	-8%

Financial Outlook

Expect demands on the service to increase in the coming year	83%	+8%
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Facilities and Infrastructure

Rate their facilities as 'Requiring refurbishment'	53%	<i>Data change</i>
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Management and Structure

Deliver leisure services through an in-house model	62%	<i>Data change</i>
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Membership and Pricing

Average cost of a single adult swim	£6.20	+£1.10
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Sports Pitches

Have not established any new pitches in the last 2 years	78%	+2%
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1 Introduction

Each year APSE undertakes a survey on the state of the market in local authority sports and leisure management services. 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 staffing to sports pitches and car parking.

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 sports and leisure 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 August and October 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.



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

All APSE members can sign up to APSE's Sports and Leisure Management Network. This online network provides at least four meetings across the year, with expert speakers from across local government and the wider sports and leisure 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 Strategic outlook

The strategic landscape for local authority sports and leisure services continues to evolve, shaped by financial pressures, changing public expectations and a growing emphasis on public health. The data reveals a sector in a state of strategic flux.

	Agree / Agree Strongly	Agree / Agree Strongly	Agree / Agree Strongly
	2023	2024	2025
Free swimming for over 60s is unsustainable	69%	90%	81%
National funding for sport ignores local government	69%	76%	68%
It is right to subsidise leisure	93%	96%	90%
The era of traditional swimming pools is coming to an end	17%	31%	32%
Leisure's future lies in its integration with health	98%	93%	97%
Council leisure provision must rival the private sector to survive	61%	72%	69%

An overwhelming and consistent majority (97% in 2025) believe that leisure's future is inextricably linked to health integration. This reflects a long-term strategic shift from viewing leisure centres purely as venues for recreation to seeing them as frontline assets for preventative health.

The [Local Government Outcomes Framework \(LGOF\)](#) further reinforces this strategic shift, providing a clear structure for measuring how local services contribute to population health, wellbeing and social outcomes. By framing leisure centres as frontline assets for preventative health, local authorities can directly link sport and leisure provision to measurable outcomes in the LGOF, strengthening the case for continued public investment. This alignment also supports cross-departmental coordination, ensuring that leisure services are integrated within broader health and social systems, as recommended in the 2021 report '*Securing the future of public sport and leisure services*',¹ produced on behalf of APSE, the LGA, and CLOA.

¹ <https://www.apse.org.uk/index.cfm/apse/members-area/apse-networks/sports-leisure-management/resource-hub-for-sports-and-leisure-services/securing-future-public-sport-leisure/>

The strong, though slightly decreased, support for subsidising leisure (90%) underscores a continued belief in its public good value, even amidst financial strain.

The slight dip in agreement that free swimming for over 60s is "unsustainable" (from 90% to 81%) may indicate that, while still a significant financial challenge, some authorities are finding ways to manage these schemes through targeted partnerships or integrated health budgets. The gradual year-on-year increase in those agreeing that "the era of traditional swimming pools is coming to an end" (now 32%) signals a growing acknowledgement that future facility portfolios will need to be more diverse, energy-efficient and multi-functional to remain viable.

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

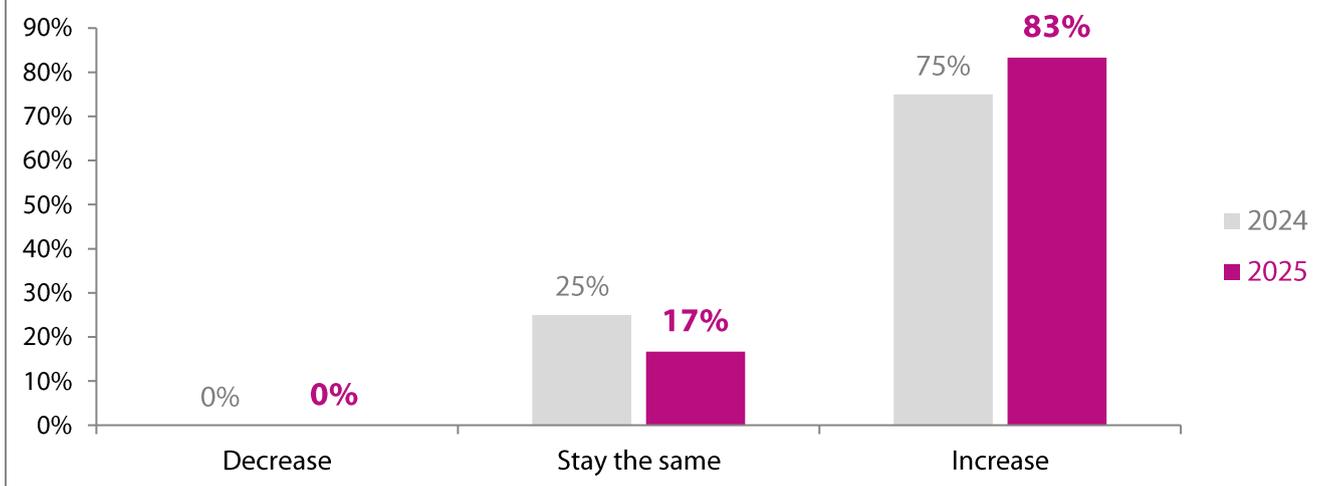
Most respondents do not anticipate a decrease in work within local council sports and leisure services. In fact, many report rising attendance levels, higher membership sales, and growth in children's swimming lessons, leading to increased workloads and a need for more staff. However, a few areas of potential decline were noted, including traditional indoor sports, where some centres have converted sports halls into larger gym spaces, and reception roles, as services move toward greater self-service systems. Some councils also referenced ongoing leisure service reviews, which may influence future staffing or service delivery, while one mentioned a focus shift toward supporting elite sports.

Where do you see growth for leisure services over the next 12 months?

Respondents consistently identified significant growth opportunities in health, fitness, and wellbeing services within local council sports and leisure provision. Many highlighted closer integration with the NHS and public health bodies, including exercise referral schemes, falls prevention, and relocation of community health services – such as physiotherapy and specialist nursing – into leisure centres. There is also strong emphasis on expanding fitness facilities, increasing gym capacity, and developing new membership models, particularly for young people and older adults. Councils are seeking to diversify income through creative, commercially minded initiatives and partnerships, while continuing to promote inclusive, entry-level activities to encourage wider community participation. Overall, the trend points toward health-focused, preventative, and partnership-driven growth across the sector.

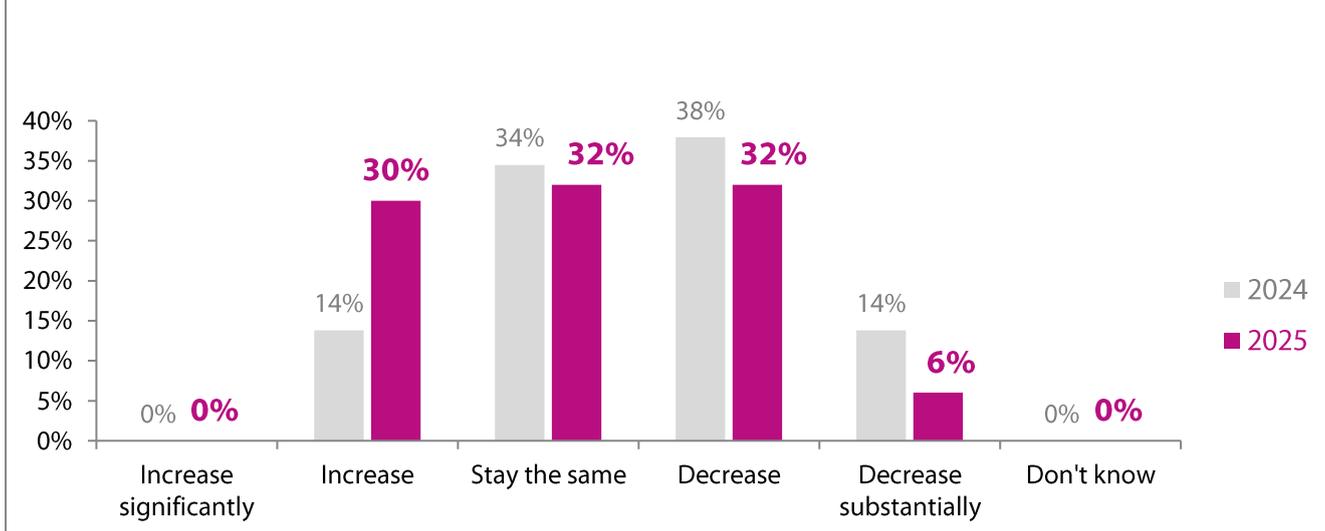
3 Financial outlook and funding pressures

3.1 How will the demands on your leisure service change in the coming year?



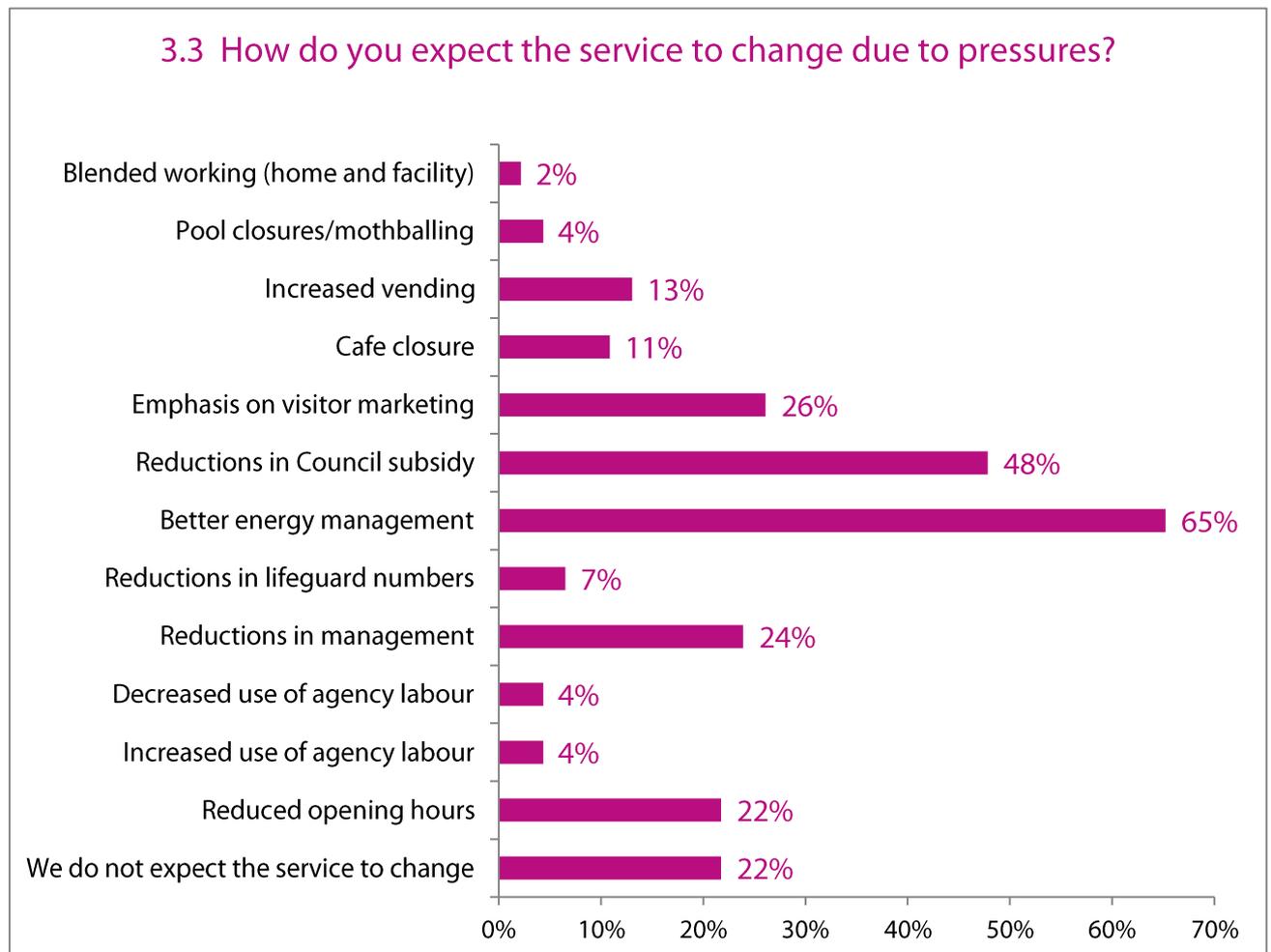
The financial context for leisure services remains very challenging. 3.1 reveals a significant 83% of respondents expect demands on the leisure service to increase in the coming year, an 8% rise from 2024. None of those surveyed expect the demands on their service to decrease in the coming year.

3.2 Overall, how do you expect the leisure budget to change in 2026/27?



3.2 shows that, when asked about expectations for the 2026/27 leisure budget, respondents expressed more optimism than in the previous year. There was a marked increase around (+16%) in those expecting their budgets to rise, paired with an 8% reduction in the proportion predicting substantial decreases. Although funding remains tight overall, this shift suggests that the sector perceives a degree of stabilisation after several years of volatility. Respondents may be looking to

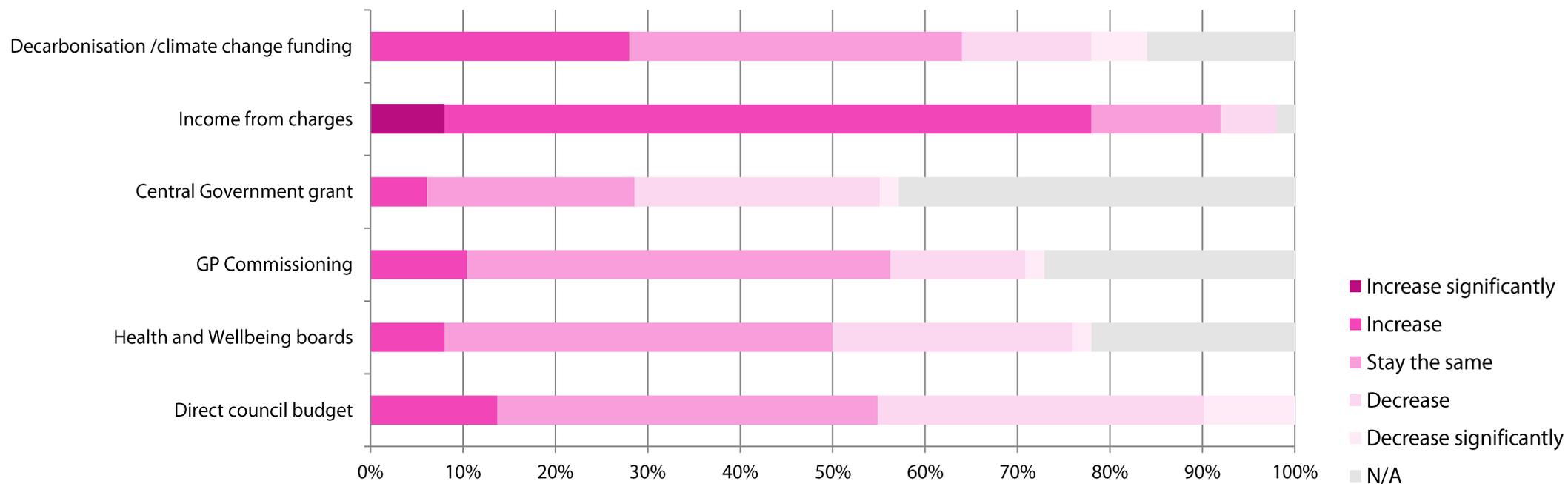
recovering income streams, improved efficiency in energy management, and emerging capital programmes to help ease financial pressures. While not signalling a full return to financial security, the results indicate a majority of those surveyed are experiencing a modest but meaningful improvement in confidence.



When asked how they expect leisure services to change under current pressures, 3.3 reveals a large majority (65%) expect improvements in energy management, reflecting both the high cost of utilities and the growing importance of sustainability within local government operations. Nearly half expect a reduction in council subsidy, which is consistent with the funding outlook and reinforces the trend toward a more self-financing model. Alongside this, providers are expecting to place greater emphasis on visitor marketing, with a quarter predicting a stronger focus on attracting and retaining customers to support income growth.

Anticipated changes also extend to service structures and delivery. Just under a quarter (24%) of respondents expect reductions in management, signalling continued organisational streamlining as services look to control workforce costs. Similar proportions foresee reduced opening hours (22%), indicating that operational adjustments may be necessary to maintain financial viability. At the same time, around one in five (22%) expect no changes at all, demonstrating that pressures are uneven across the sector and that some services feel able to maintain current provision without making substantial adjustments.

3.4 How do you expect funding for leisure services from the following sources to change over the next two years?



	Direct council budget	Health and Wellbeing boards	GP Commissioning	Central Government grant	Income from charges	Decarbonisation /climate change funding
■ Increase significantly	0%	0%	0%	0%	8%	0%
■ Increase	14%	8%	10%	6%	70%	28%
■ Stay the same	41%	42%	46%	22%	14%	36%
■ Decrease	35%	26%	15%	27%	6%	14%
■ Decrease significantly	10%	2%	2%	2%	0%	6%
■ N/A	0%	22%	27%	43%	2%	16%

The survey data in 3.4 highlights a picture of financial constraint, with limited optimism for significant increases from most traditional funding streams. Key patterns include:

Continued pressure on direct council budgets

- Only 14% expect an increase in direct council funding, while a combined 45% expect their budget to decrease (35.3% decrease, 9.8% decrease significantly).
- This reinforces ongoing strain on local authority budgets and suggests that many leisure services will continue operating under financial pressure for the foreseeable future.

Modest expectations for health-related funding

- Health and Wellbeing Boards and GP Commissioning show broadly neutral outlooks, with the majority expecting funding to stay the same (42% and 46% respectively).
- Very few respondents anticipate significant positive change, indicating that the hoped-for shift towards preventative health investment in leisure has not yet materialised.

Central government grant funding remains uncertain

- Only 6% expect increases, while 29% expect decreases (27% decrease, 2% decrease significantly).
- With 43% answering N/A, many providers appear to have little or no recent experience of central government support, underscoring the long-term withdrawal of ring-fenced national funding for leisure.

Income from charges seen as the most buoyant source

- A combined 78% expect income from charges to increase (8% significantly; 70% increase).
- A reliance on customer income can raise concerns about affordability, especially for low-income users.

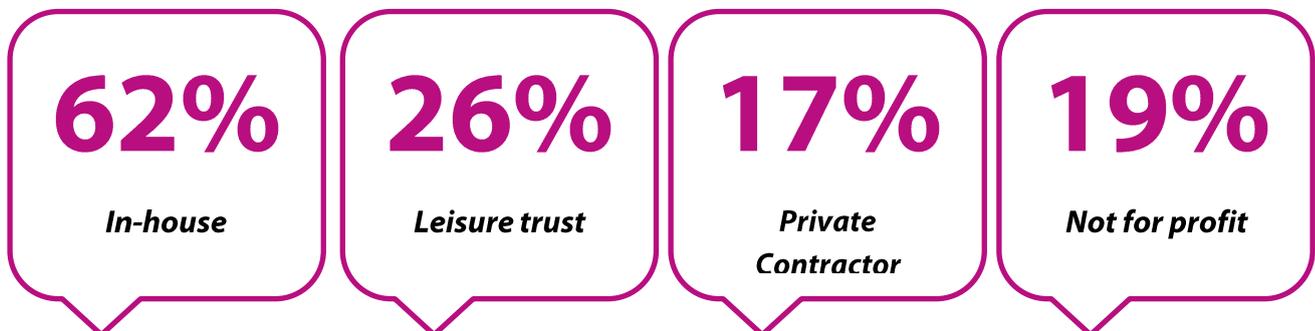
Decarbonisation funding shows growth potential

- With 28% expecting increases and 36% expecting funding to remain stable, there is cautious optimism around decarbonisation/climate-related funding.
- Although, as noted in APSE Energy Briefing 25/25 *“APSE Energy representations to the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero on behalf of APSE Energy Members”*², issues remain for the sector as the impact of the loss of the Public Sector Decarbonisation Fund is yet to be fully realised and alternative sources of funding developed.’

² <https://apse.org.uk/index.cfm/apse/local-authority-energy-collaboration/apse-energy-briefings/2025/>

4 Management and structure

Who currently manages leisure?



The management models for leisure services show a settled yet competitive landscape. A strong majority of services (62%) are now delivered in-house, a significant consolidation of this model. Leisure trusts manage 26% of services, with a further 12% operating under a mixed management model.

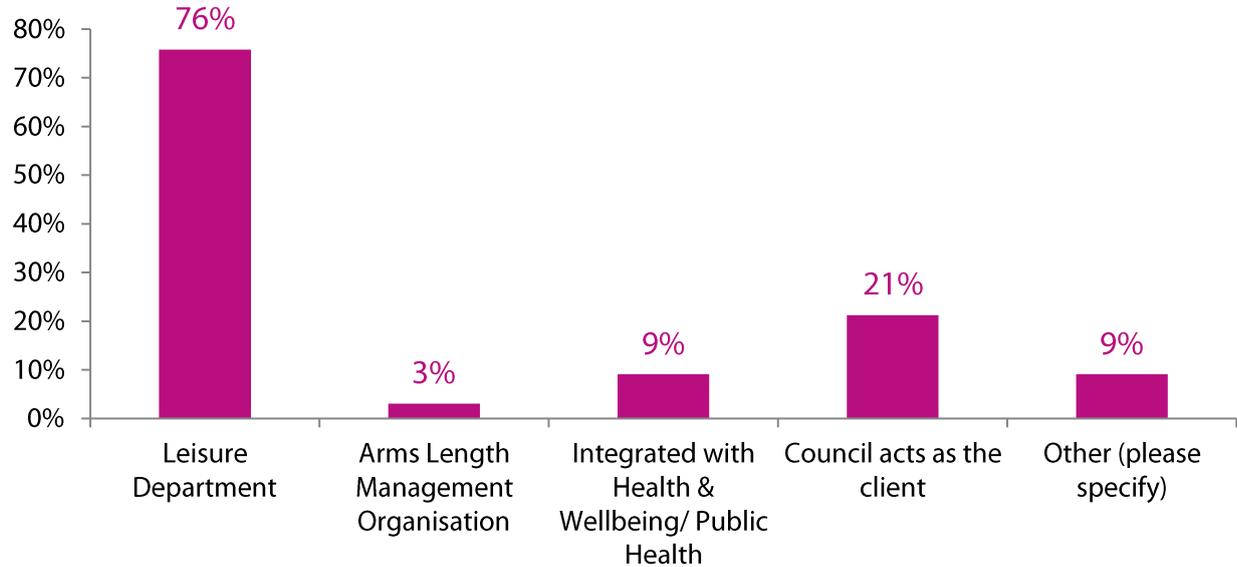
During the post pandemic period a number of local authority trusts were in-sourced either directly to the local authority or to a Teckal company, as a result of increased funding pressures and a need to ensure integration with health and wellbeing initiatives. This trend appears to be continuing and suggests that many councils have re-evaluated their options post-pandemic and are choosing to retain direct control over leisure services. This may be driven by a desire for greater strategic alignment with public health goals, more direct management of subsidies or a response to the mixed performance of trust models during a periods of serious financial pressure.



Spotlight on local excellence: Huntingdonshire District Council

Huntingdonshire District Council is transforming its One Leisure service to become more financially sustainable, customer-focused and aligned with local health priorities. Following an independent review, the service has modernised its operations, improved performance, and invested in facilities and digital upgrades. As a result, One Leisure is growing participation and income, moving from a cost to the council to a positive financial contributor. [You can read more about their transformation here.](#)

4.1 If in-house, which of the following apply?



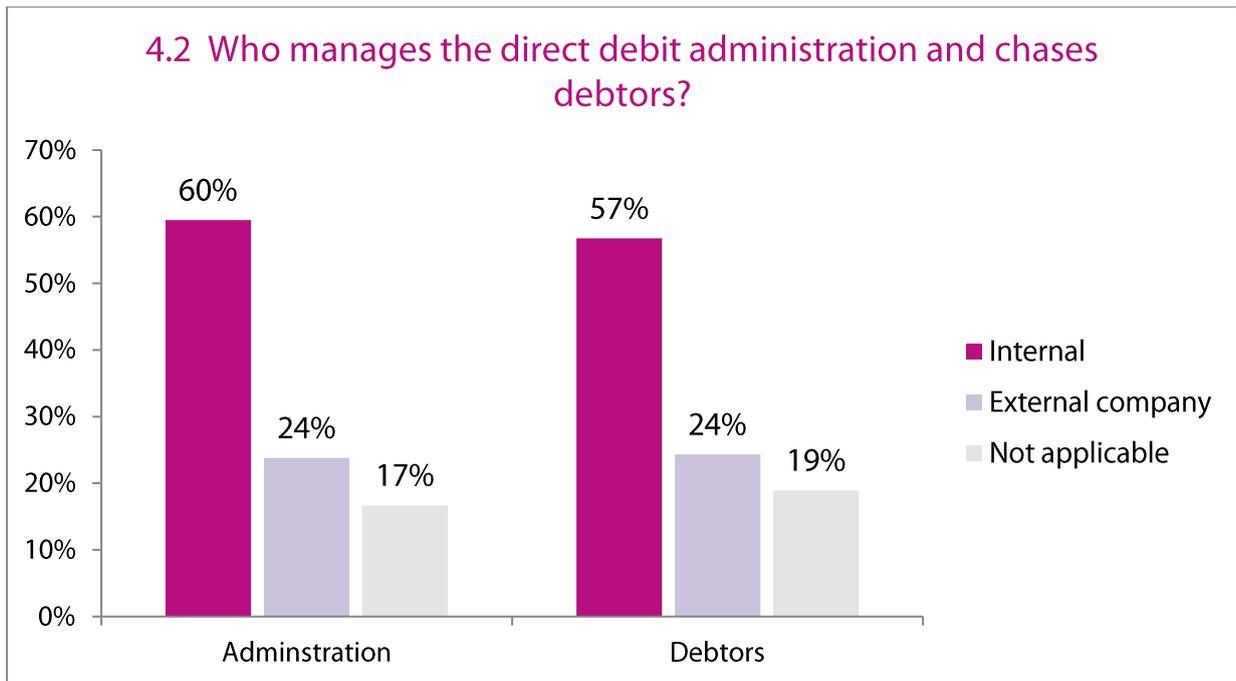
4.1 highlights a sector that remains predominantly traditional in its delivery structures. When asked about in-house service models, most respondents (76%) reported that their leisure service sits within the leisure department, while around one fifth (21%) operate with the council acting as the client. Only a small minority (9%) indicated integration with health and wellbeing or public health functions, suggesting that although partnership working is increasing in some areas, full structural integration with health systems is still limited.



Looking to insource your leisure service? APSE can help...

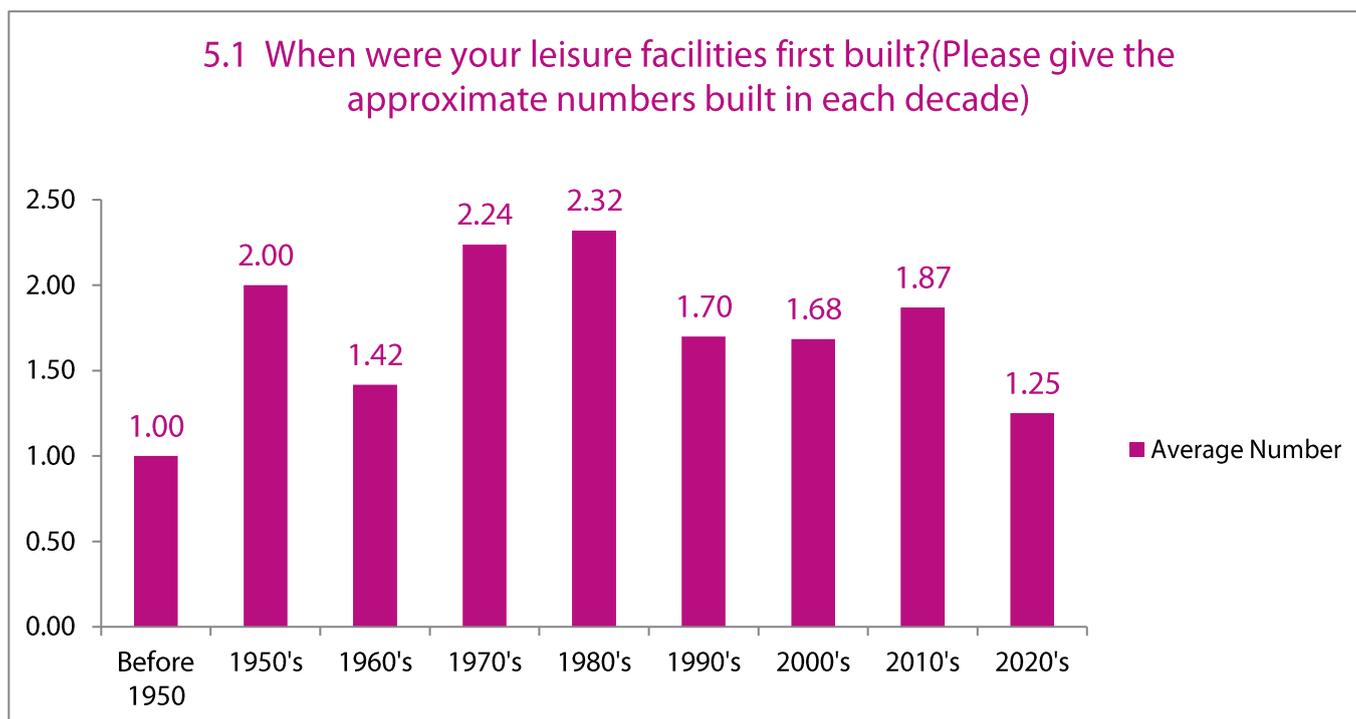
Through our ethical consultancy service – APSE Solutions – councils can access expert support with strategic reviews, operating models, business planning and transformation programmes to ensure an effective and sustainable in-house service. [For more information about how APSE Solutions can help, click here.](#)

APSE Training's *Insourcing Public Contracts: Rebuilding Capacity* course helps council leisure teams understand what's needed to successfully bring services back in house. It provides practical guidance on assessing viability, rebuilding internal capacity, planning the transition and designing a modern, sustainable in-house delivery model – giving teams the confidence and tools to manage leisure services effectively within the council. [You can book your place on the training course here.](#)



In terms of financial administration, 4.2 reveals the majority of authorities continue to manage direct debits internally, with 60% overseeing administration in-house and 57% also undertaking debtor chasing themselves. Around a quarter outsource these functions, reflecting a continued mix of internal capacity and reliance on external providers, often shaped by local resourcing or legacy arrangements.

5 Facilities and infrastructure



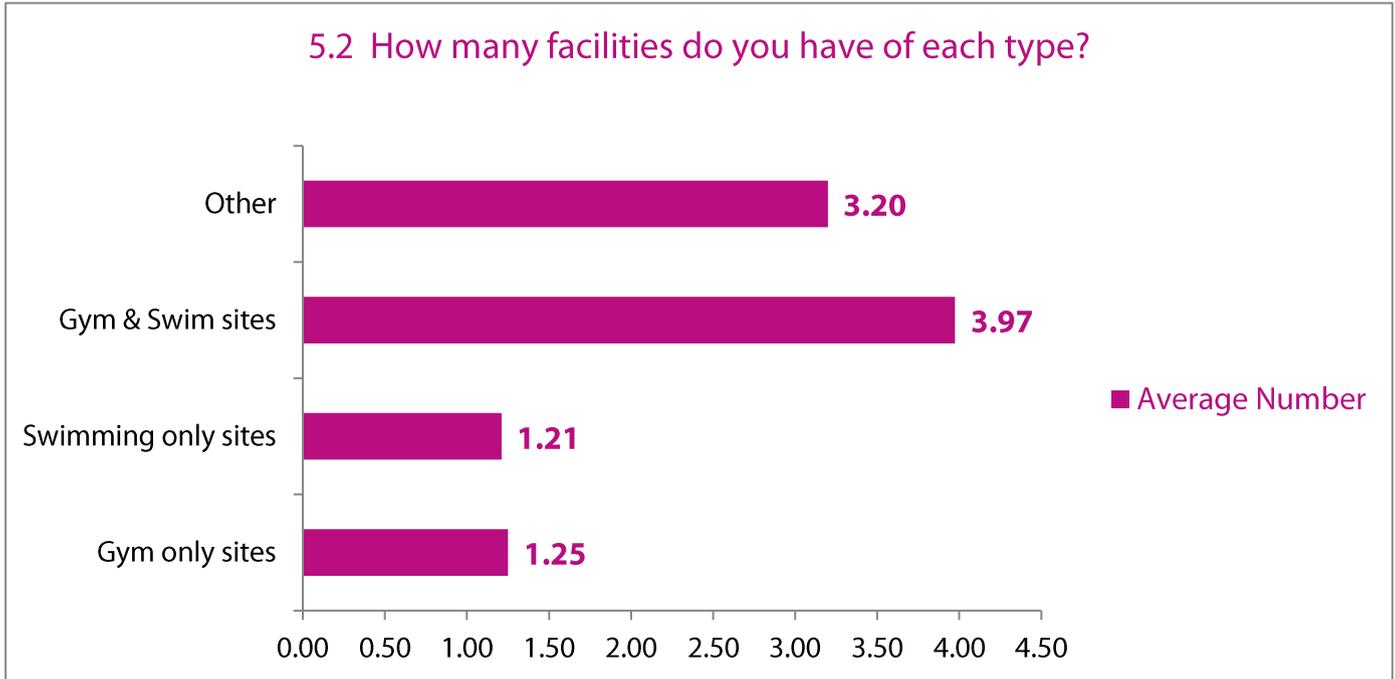
The profile of leisure facility development highlights the ageing nature of much of the estate. The highest levels of construction were reported in the 1970s and 1980s, with average numbers of 2.24 and 2.32 facilities built during those decades respectively. This aligns with historic waves of investment following the Local Government Act 1972. It is also notable that an average of 2.0 facilities were built in the 1950s, reinforcing the significant proportion of stock that is now several decades old and increasingly in need of reinvestment.

Overall, how would you rate your average facility?



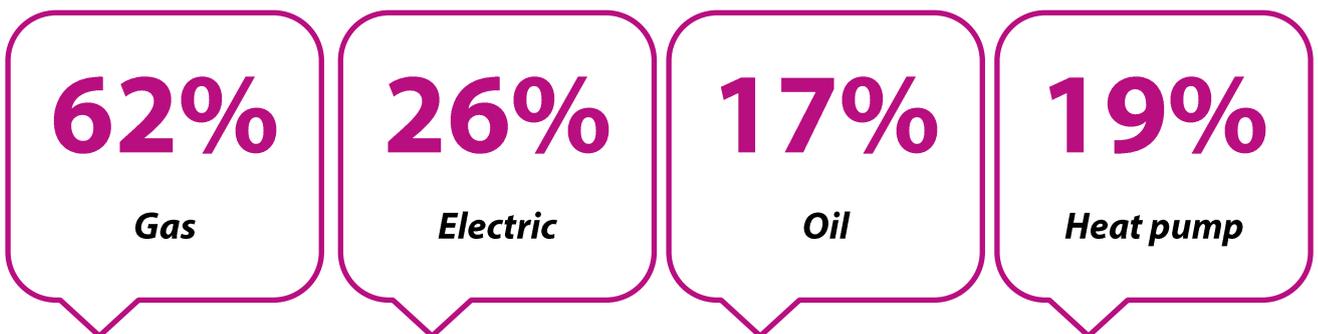
While almost half (45%) of respondents rate their average facility as in 'Good condition', a majority (53%) state their facilities are 'Requiring refurbishment'. A further 2% are considered 'Uneconomical to repair/beyond life', highlighting the critical need for capital investment.

5.2 How many facilities do you have of each type?



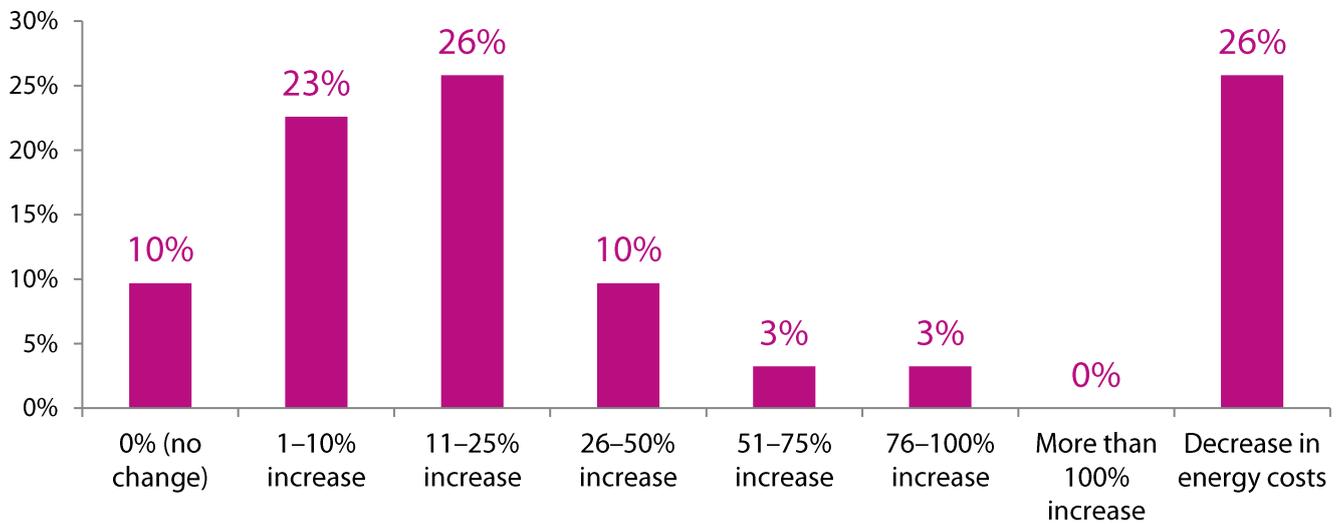
When asked about facility types, 5.2 shows combined gym and swim sites remain the dominant model, with an average of almost four per authority. Swimming-only and gym-only sites are much less common, averaging around 1.2 and 1.25 respectively. This pattern reflects a long-term shift towards multi-use centres designed to maximise footfall and accommodate a broader programme offer.

How are your facilities heated? (Tick all that apply)



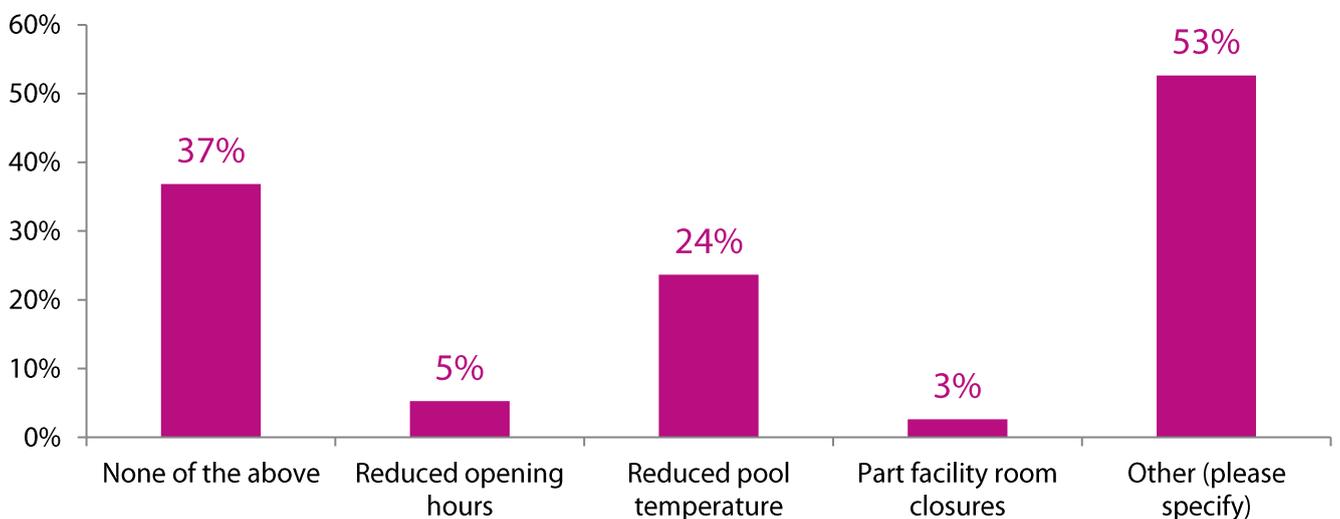
The methods of heating facilities reveal both the challenge and the opportunity for the sector. While 62% still rely on gas, a significant 26% now use electricity, and 19% have incorporated heat pumps. This transition towards more sustainable and potentially cost-effective heating sources is crucial, not only for reducing carbon footprints but also for mitigating exposure to volatile fossil fuel prices. However, the high upfront cost of retrofitting ageing pools and sports halls with new heating systems remains a big barrier.

5.3 What has been the % change in energy cost over the last 12 months? (Estimated % increase)



5.3 reveals energy costs remain a key area of concern, although the survey shows a more mixed picture than in previous years. Just over a quarter of respondents expect increases of between 11% and 25% over the next 12 months, while almost as many expect smaller rises of 1% to 10%. A further 16% anticipate more substantial increases of 25% or more. Notably, 26% expect their energy costs to fall, which may be linked to the increased roll-out of efficiency measures such as reduced opening hours, lower pool temperatures, installation of pool covers, LED lighting, solar PV, and heat pumps.

5.4 What energy saving measures have you implemented? (Please tick all that apply)



In 5.4, respondents reported implementing a broad range of energy-saving interventions. While around a quarter (24%) have reduced pool temperatures, many others have pursued a mix of operational adjustments and capital investment. Examples include pool cover installations, LED lighting upgrades, air source heat pumps, solar PV arrays, triple glazing, destratification fans, and, in some cases, wider decarbonisation programmes supported by grant funding. Together, these measures suggest a sector responding proactively to both financial pressures and carbon reduction targets.

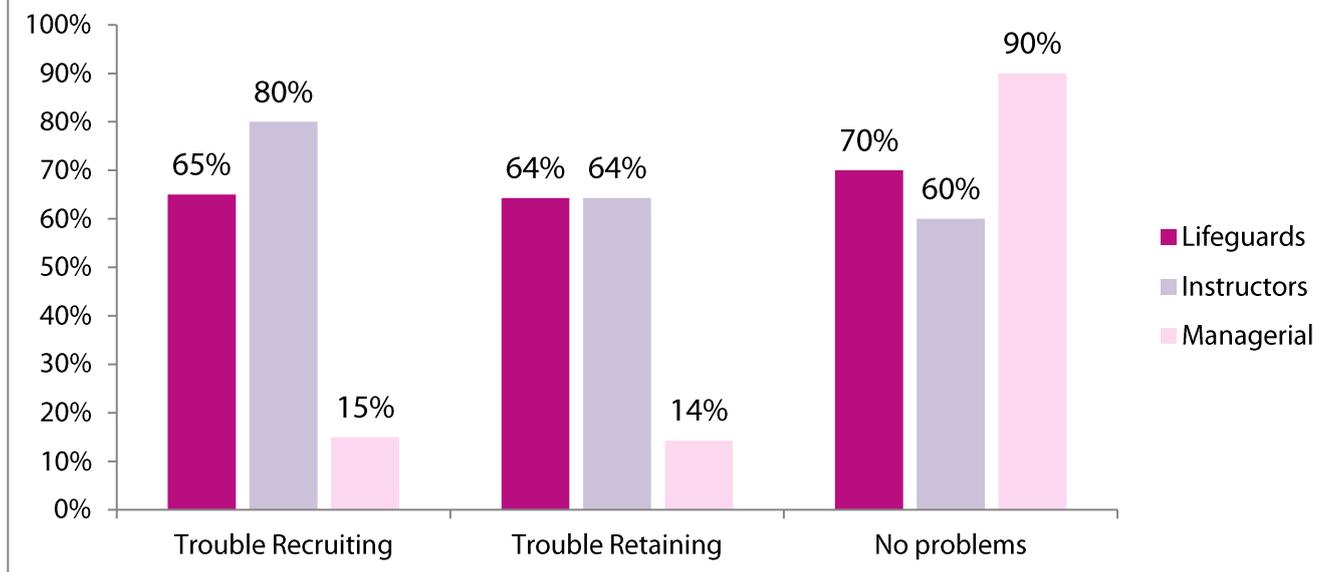


Struggling with rising energy costs in public leisure facilities? APSE can help...

APSE Energy Associates can support your council in cutting energy use and carbon emissions from leisure facilities by providing specialist consultancy on energy-efficiency and sustainability. Their team can carry out energy audits and feasibility studies of buildings, recommend and model decarbonisation plans (such as heat-decoupling, solar PV, lighting, insulation and efficient heating/cooling systems), and help you build robust business cases for investment, often identifying substantial cost savings and emissions reductions over time. [For more information click here.](#)

6 Staffing and workforce

6.1 Where have you had difficulty recruiting or retaining staff (over the last 12 months)



The survey shows workforce pressures remain one of the sector's most persistent operational problems. Respondents report higher usage levels and greater programme delivery (exercise referral, group classes, swimming lessons), which has translated into increased demand for front-line staff, particularly leisure attendants, swimming instructors and fitness coaches. Recruitment difficulties are reported as acute in certain roles – most commonly qualified swim teachers.



Spotlight on local excellence: Wirral Council

Wirral Council's Active Wirral Leisure service has partnered with the Institute of Swimming to launch a specialist training academy, offering local people the chance to qualify as a swimming teacher for just an £85 administration fee - a fraction of the usual £1,000 cost. By removing financial and qualification barriers, it's helping tackle the national instructor shortage, increase lesson capacity and ensure more children gain vital swimming skills.

[You can read more about the scheme here.](#)

What is the basic current hourly rate for leisure staff (before tax) in £?

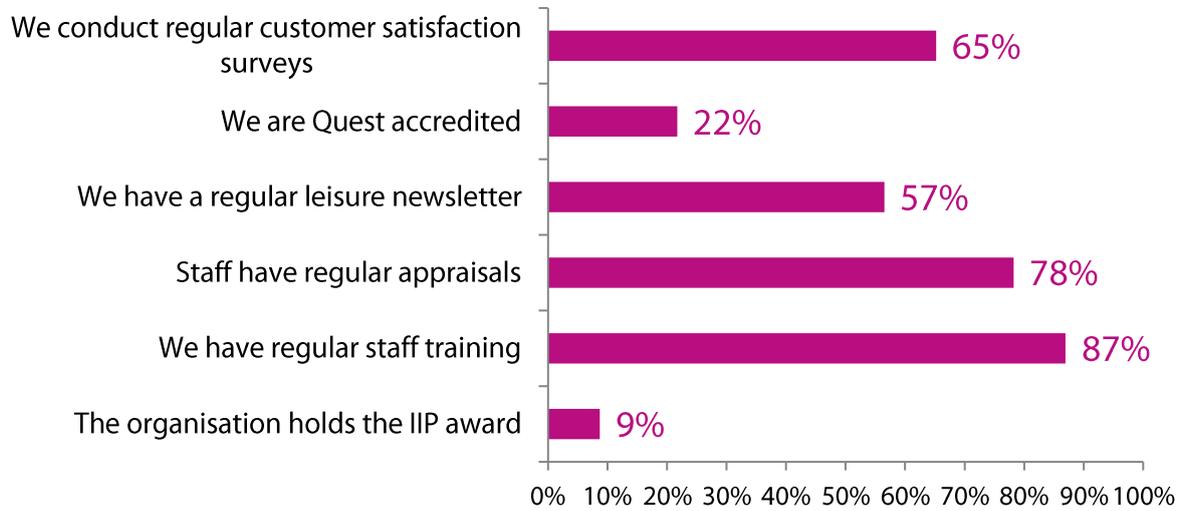
	2023	2024	2025
Basic current hourly rate	£11.53	£12.48	£12.57

Pay trends are creeping upwards, but not uniformly: basic hourly rates have risen modestly in 2024–25, yet many authorities report that market pay pressures and the cost-of-living crisis have pushed staff to alternative employment (retail, hospitality, private gyms) offering more flexible hours or slightly higher pay.



Staffing indicators show some improvement compared with 2024. Nearly half of respondents (48%) consider absence levels to be acceptable – an increase of seven percentage points – while 9% now report very low absence, up from zero last year. The proportion reporting slightly above average absence has fallen, while those stating absence is “too high” remain broadly unchanged at 13%. Overall, this suggests modest progress in stabilising workforce capacity.

6.3 Please select all options that apply to your approach to staff training and quality:



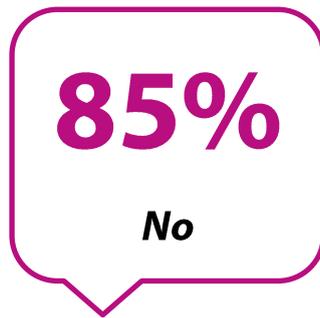
Approaches to staff training and quality assurance are well embedded across the sector. The vast majority (87%) provide regular staff training and appraisals, and many also use customer satisfaction surveys (65%) and newsletters (57%) to support service improvement and staff communication. External accreditations such as Quest and Investors in People are less widespread, reflecting broader resource pressures that may limit engagement with formal quality frameworks.



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 sports and leisure management – 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 leisure team can benchmark against others – and secure big improvements in cost, quality and performance – [click here](#).

7 Parking



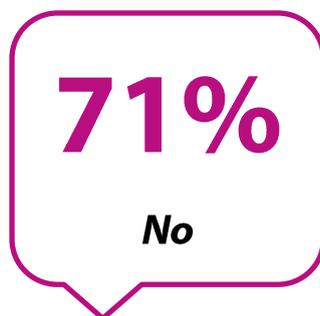
Do you charge for parking at any of your leisure centres?

Parking charges remain rare, with 85% of authorities not charging at their leisure centres. This indicates a continued focus on maintaining low barriers to participation, particularly in areas where public transport options may be limited.

If you charge for parking, what does it cost?

Summary of averages:

- Up to 1 hour → £2.13
- 1-2 hours → £2.78
- 2-3 hours → £3.60
- Over 3 hours / Day rate → £11.30

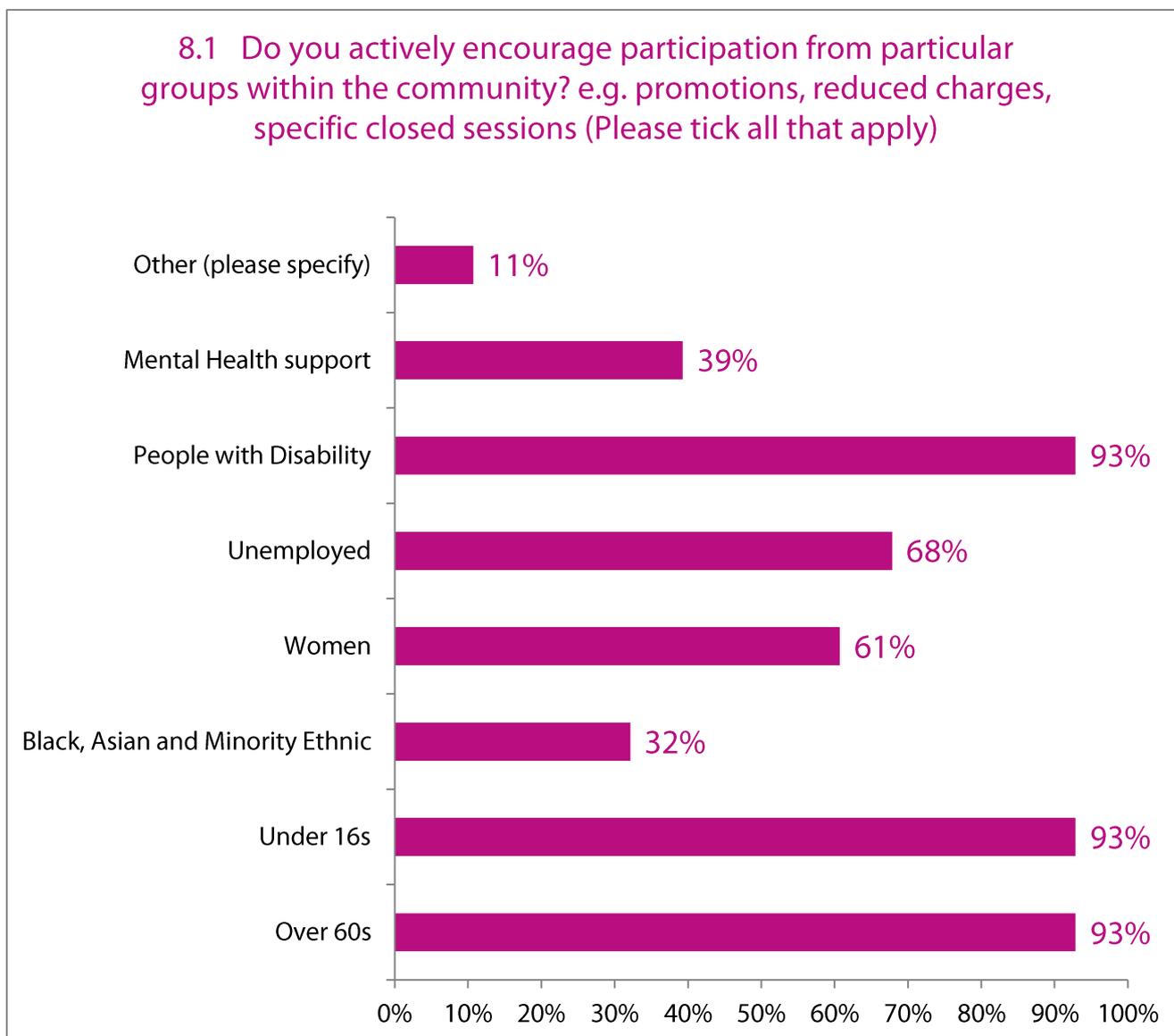


Do you refund a proportion of parking charges to centre users?

Practice varies: some authorities operate a full or partial refund of parking charges for paying customers (for example refunding parking on presentation of a membership card or booking confirmation), while the majority (71%) do not.

8 Membership, pricing and public access

Local authorities are walking a tightrope between financial sustainability and public accessibility.



Efforts to encourage participation among target groups are strong, especially for under-16s, over-60s and people with disabilities, with all three categories receiving active support from 93% of respondents. Engagement with unemployed residents, women, minority ethnic communities and people needing mental health support is also evident, though to a lesser extent, reflecting differing local priorities and resource allocations.

£6.20

**Single adult
swim**

What is the charge (if applicable) for a single adult swim?

operating subsidy per visit.

This metric highlights one of the clearest user-facing signs of financial pressure. The average single adult swim price has risen to £6.20 in 2025, up from £5.10 in 2024 and £4.90 in 2023. This step-change in prices appears to reflect a combination of direct cost pressures (energy, maintenance and staffing) and an effort to reduce the

£15

Average

Do you have a joining fee?

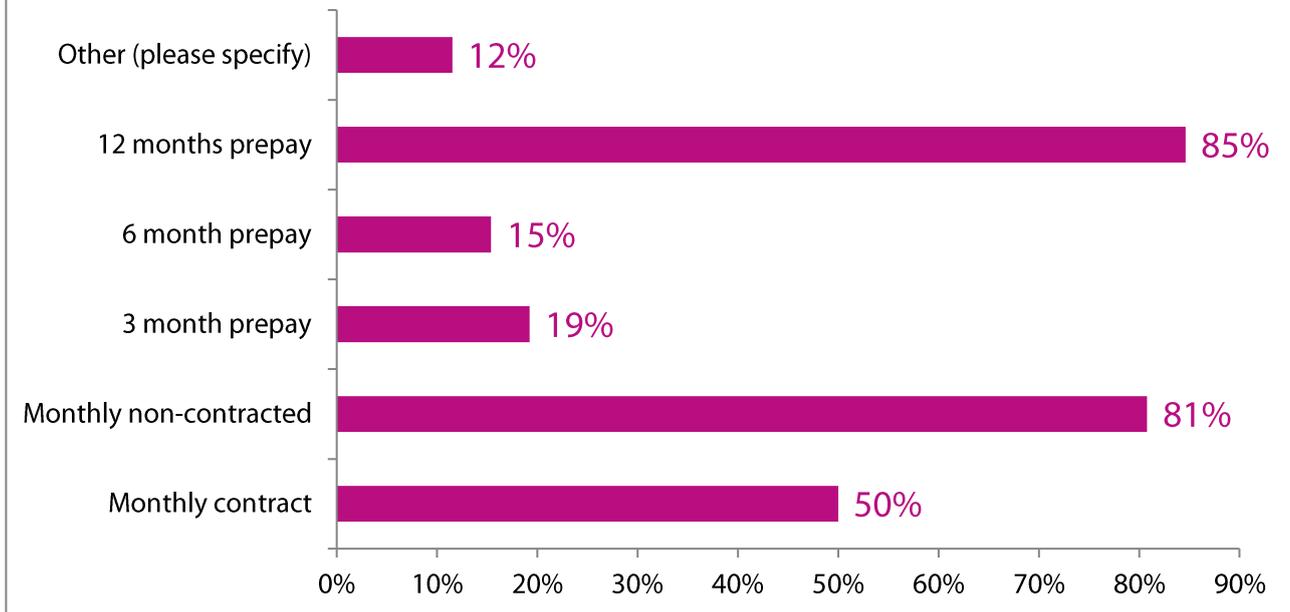
Joining fees remain in use across many authorities, though there is variation in approach – some councils have removed joining fees to reduce barriers to participation, while others retain a modest joining charge to cover administrative costs.

The typical monthly membership fee in £ (where applicable)

Membership Type	Average (£)
Full Membership	40.47
Off-Peak	28.66
Swim Only	27.44
Gym Only	29.82
Fitness Classes	20.31

Monthly membership fees vary by geography, centre type and included benefits (pool access, classes, gym use). The data shows a widening spread of membership price points as councils adopt tiered packages (off-peak, full access, student/senior rates), which helps target services to different market segments and supports cross-subsidisation of concessionary access.

8.2 What membership payment types do you offer? (Please tick all that apply)

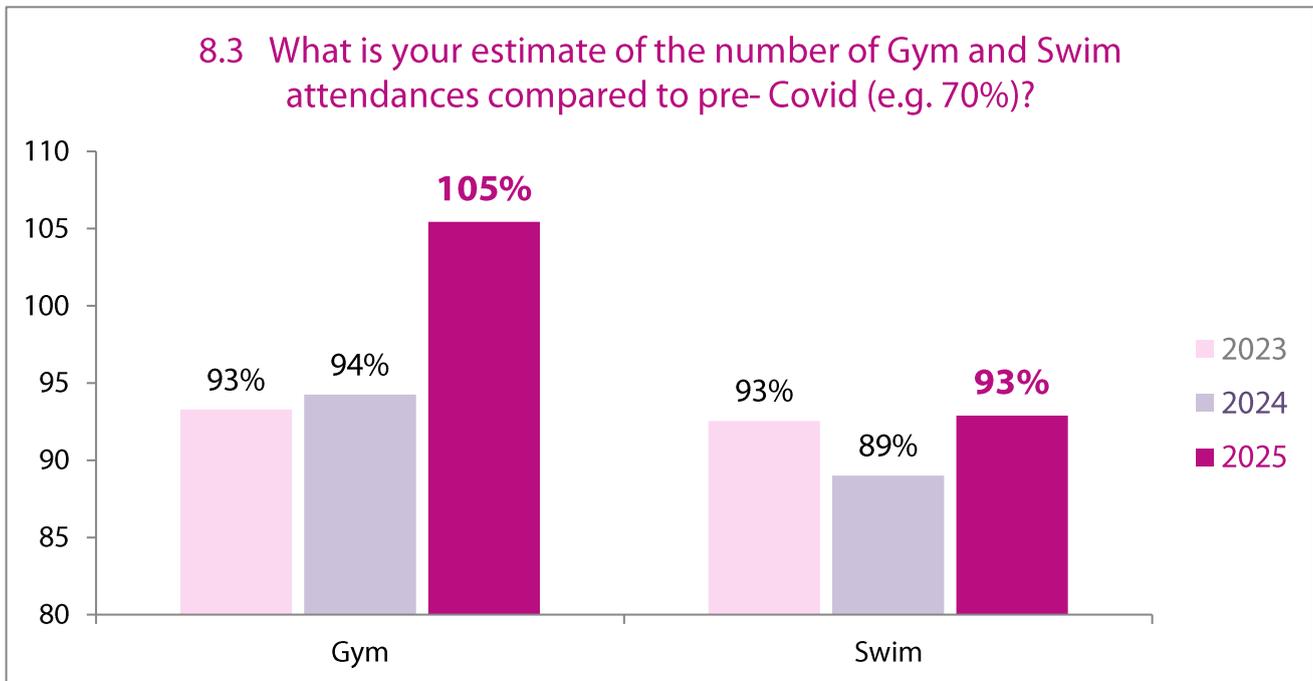


Membership package discounts offered:

	None	<10%	10-20%	20-30%	30-40%	40-50%	>50%
Low-income	18%	18%	24%	41%	6%	0%	0%
Over 65	21%	21%	37%	21%	16%	0%	0%
Disability	5%	5%	25%	35%	0%	10%	5%
Family / Household	56%	56%	0%	31%	0%	0%	0%
Corporate / Employer	5%	5%	55%	35%	10%	5%	5%
Junior / Youth	5%	5%	19%	24%	19%	14%	10%
NHS / Emergency Services	20%	20%	40%	20%	5%	0%	0%
Armed forces and Veterans	5%	5%	55%	15%	0%	0%	0%

The discount data reveals a complex picture of social equity efforts. Low-income residents most commonly receive 20-30% discounts (41% of authorities), which represents meaningful support when baseline prices are already stretching household budgets. More generous discounts appear for disability (some over 40%) and junior/youth categories, reflecting both moral priority and strategic investment in future participation.

The discounts for over-65s (mostly 10-20%) are, given the critical importance of activity for healthy aging, consistent with the health integration agenda. The high corporate/employer discount provision (55% offering 10-20%) suggests partnerships remain an important revenue and participation strategy.



Participation levels continue to recover after the pandemic. Gym attendances now exceed pre-Covid levels at 105%, a marked rise from 94% last year. Swimming continues to trail behind pre-pandemic baselines but remains on an upward trajectory at 93%, up from 89% in 2024.



Facing a hurdle in service delivery? APSE can help...

APSE regularly receives queries on sports and leisure management from our member councils. We source responses to these queries by circulating them to our extensive UK-wide network of sports and leisure professionals.

If you belong to an APSE member council and have any queries relating to your service – from payroll processes to pool safety inspections – the APSE network may have the answers. Connect with the APSE network and get involved with our Network Queries service [here](#).

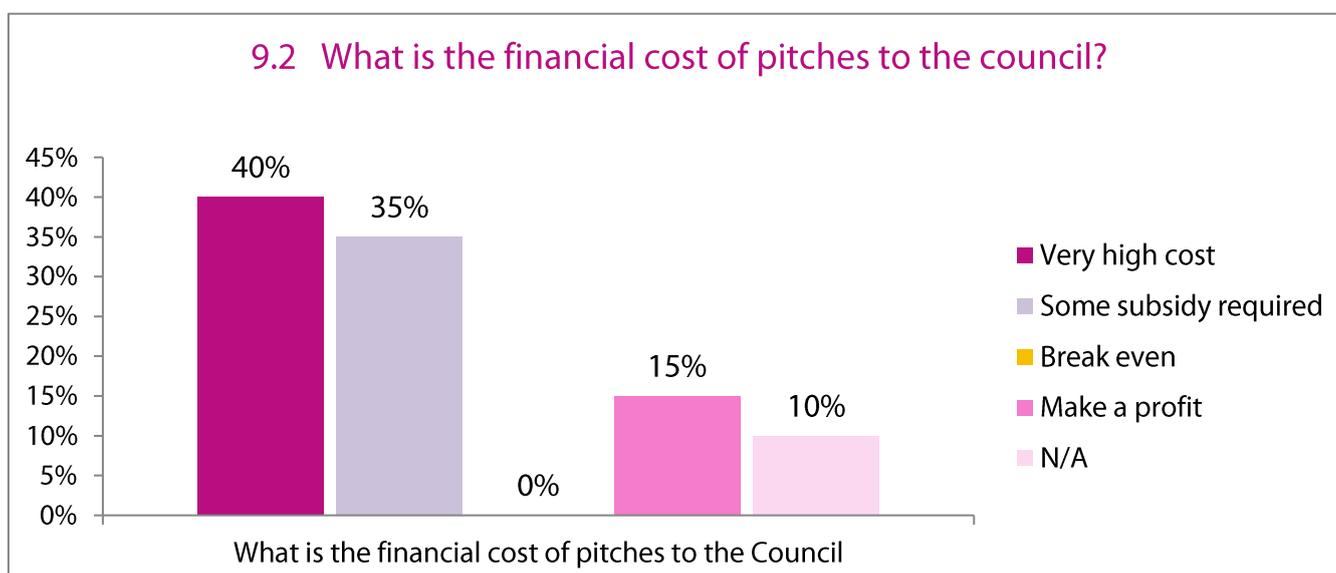
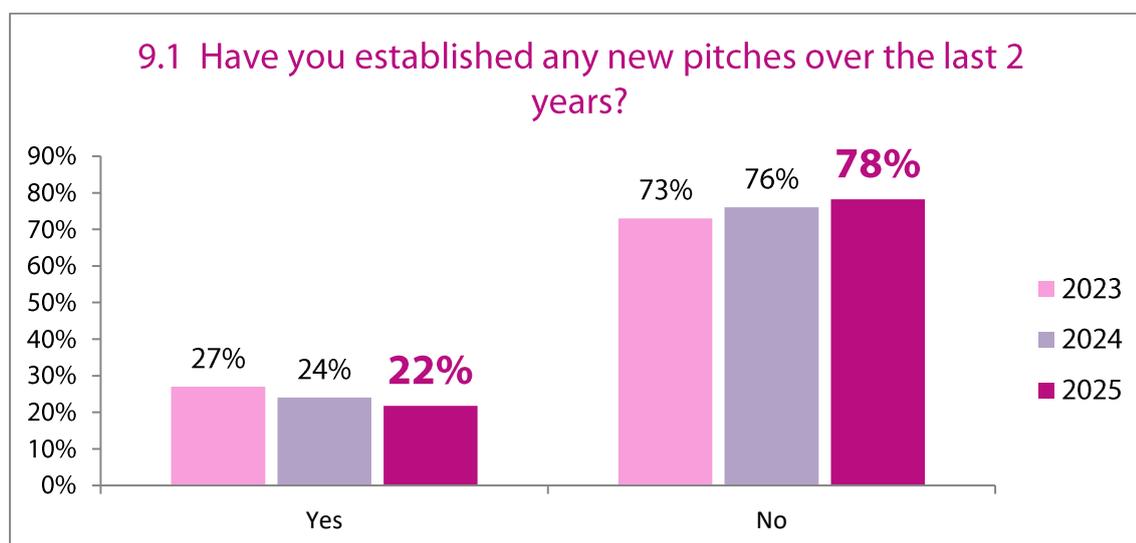
9 Sports pitches and outdoor provision

78%
No

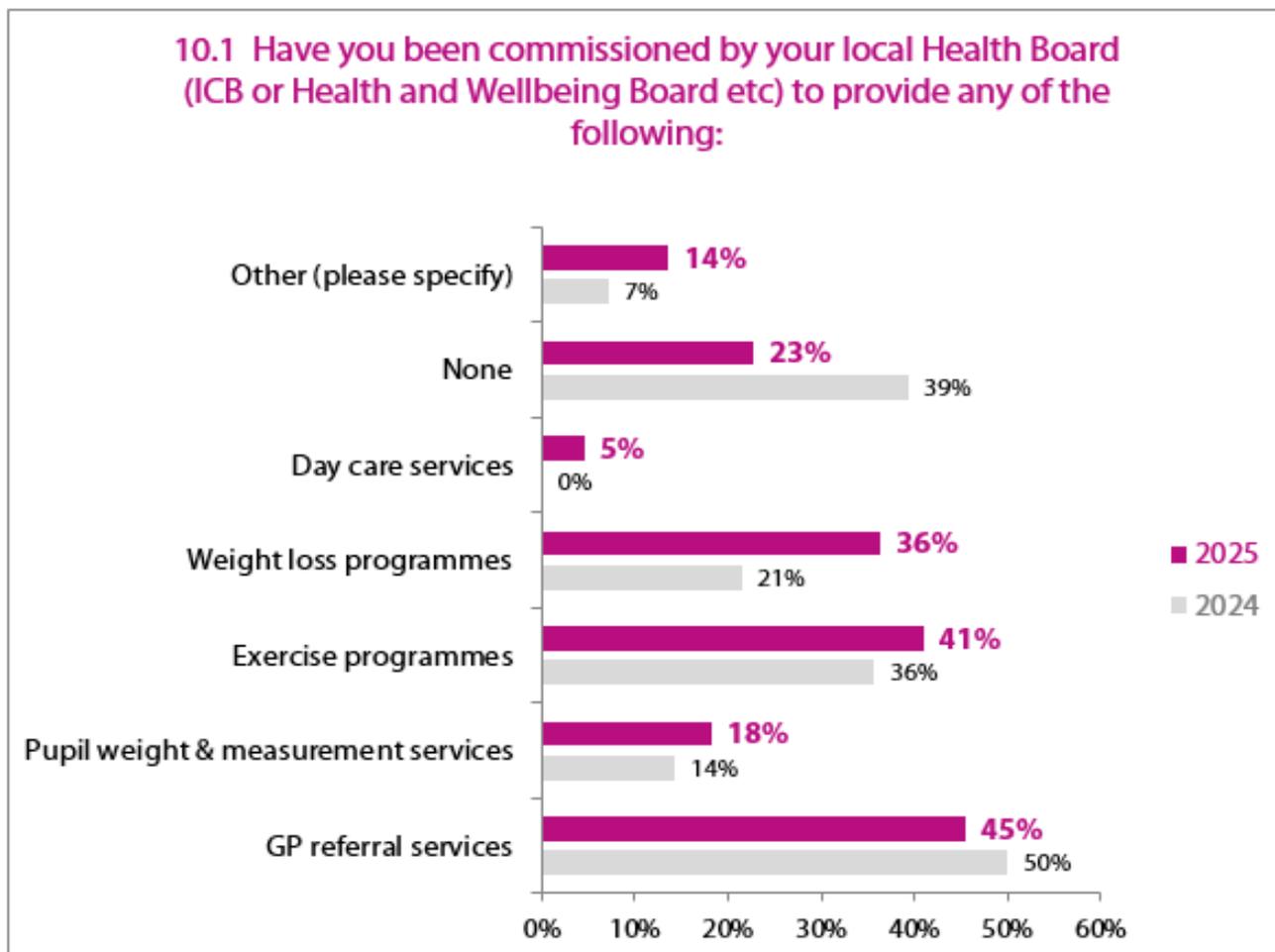
Have you established any new pitches over the last 2 years?

Investment in outdoor sports infrastructure appears to be lagging. A large majority of authorities (78%) report that they have not established any new pitches over the last two years. This likely reflects both a lack of capital funding and competing pressures for land use.

It is also likely driven by the financial cost of pitches to the council (shown in 9.2), with 40% of those surveyed reporting the cost is very high and 35% saying there is some subsidy required. 15% do report their pitches make a profit. This stagnation in the outdoor estate risks undermining broader goals around physical activity, community sport and public health.



10 Integration with Health and Wellbeing



In 10.1, it is revealed that commissioning relationships with Health Boards and Integrated Care Boards show signs of growth in several areas. Weight loss programmes, in particular, have seen a significant increase, rising to 36% of respondents – up 15 percentage points from last year. Exercise programmes, pupil measurement services and day care services have also increased modestly. However, GP referral services have fallen slightly from 50% to 45%, possibly reflecting changes in local commissioning priorities or referral pathways.

The trend shown in 10.1 indicates that, although the increases are modest, council leisure services are becoming increasingly integrated into the wider community health infrastructure. This shift reflects a growing role for leisure in supporting preventative health and managing demand on clinical services.

11 APSE Comment: Navigating the triple squeeze of rising demand, ageing assets and the health imperative

Local authority sports and leisure services are at a pivotal moment. They are simultaneously experiencing a surge in public demand, grappling with the decay of critical infrastructure and being championed as a solution to the NHS's preventative health crisis. Navigating this "triple squeeze" is the defining challenge for the sector.

The data reveals a service deeply confident in its social value – with near-unanimous agreement on its health role and the need for subsidy – but increasingly anxious about its operational and financial models. The rise of in-house management suggests councils want direct levers to control this strategically vital service. Yet the fact that over half of all facilities require refurbishment points to a dangerous investment gap.

At the recent [APSE Sports and Leisure Seminar](#) in Loughborough, many English councils reported that reorganisation – whether driven by financial pressures, structural change, or shifting political priorities – has become a major concern. This uncertainty is affecting long-term planning and adding further strain to already stretched leisure services.

The path forward requires a dual strategy. First, securing new investment is key. This means making a more compelling, evidence-based case to health partners for long-term, integrated funding that treats leisure as a health asset, not a discretionary luxury. It also means pursuing capital grants for energy-efficient retrofits which can reduce long-term operating costs and future-proof the estate.

Second, services must continue their strategic pivot towards health and wellbeing. The most successful services will be those that are fully embedded in local health economies, with data-driven outcomes that prove their value in reducing pressure on GPs and hospitals. This is not just about exercise referral; it is about hosting clinics and becoming community wellbeing hubs.

The slight decline in the belief that leisure must "rival the private sector to survive" is telling. The future of public leisure is not in competing with low-cost gyms on price, but in emphasising its unique value proposition: its inclusivity, its community focus and its key role in public health.

11.1 Three main takeaways

1. Health integration is key for the future

Leisure is no longer a "nice-to-have" service but a core component of local public health infrastructure. With 97% of professionals agreeing its future lies in integration with health, the focus must be on embedding services within NHS and social care pathways and proving their value through robust outcomes data.

2. Infrastructure investment gap

A majority (53%) of facilities require refurbishment. This poses a big risk to service delivery and financial sustainability. Addressing this through innovative funding and energy-efficient retrofits is a top priority to avert a widespread facility crisis.

3. Affordability tightrope

Services are increasing prices (e.g., a 27% rise in swim costs since 2023) to cover rising costs, while simultaneously offering complex concession schemes to protect access for vulnerable groups. Balancing commercial pressure with social value is the central operational challenge for leisure management.

How can APSE help?

All APSE members can sign up to APSE's Sports and Leisure Management Network, which is an online network providing four learning events across the year, with expert speakers from across local government and the wider sports and leisure sector. You can sign up to the network using [this link](#).

11.2 Benchmarking for your sports and leisure service

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 leisure 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 advisory groups, 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 advisory groups are an excellent forum for sharing ideas and discussing topical service issues with colleagues from other councils throughout the UK.

Advisory groups 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 advisory group meetings and would like to be added to our list of contacts for your service area please email enquiries@apse.org.uk.

Our national advisory groups include:-

- FM and Building Cleaning
- Catering (School Meals)
- Cemeteries and Crematoria
- Highways and Street Lighting
- Housing, Construction and Building Maintenance
- Social Value, Procurement and Commercialisation Network
- Parks, Horticulture and Grounds Maintenance
- Renewables and Climate Change
- Roads, Highways and Street Lighting
- Sports and Leisure Management
- Vehicle Maintenance and Transport
- Veterans and Military Champions Network
- Local Government Reorganisation Network
- Waste Management, Refuse Collection and Street Cleansing

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



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