



association for public service excellence

# State of the Market 2026

## Local authority catering services



**Briefing 26/06**  
**February 2026**

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## **State of the Market 2026**

### **Local authority catering services**

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### **About APSE**

The Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) is a not-for-profit local government body working with over 300 councils throughout the UK.

Promoting excellence in public services, APSE is the foremost specialist in local authority frontline services and operates one of the UK's largest research programmes in local government policy and frontline service delivery matters.

# Results at a glance

Scope of the service	2026	2025
Provide school meals	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>
Catering sits within central FM service including Soft FM	<b>26.32%</b>	<b>39.39%</b>

## Workforce

Personal workload to increase	<b>77.18%</b>	<b>81.25%</b>
Catering service workload to increase	<b>68.42%</b>	<b>65.63%</b>

## School Meals

The average pupils pay for a primary school meal	<b>£2.71</b>	<b>£2.63</b>
The average pupils pay for a secondary school meal	<b>£2.89</b>	<b>£2.79</b>
Staffing costs have seen the greatest rise	<b>100%</b>	<b>90.63%</b>

## Future growth areas for the service over the next 12 months

Selling services to other councils / council areas	<b>41.18%</b>	<b>40.74%</b>
Catering for early years	<b>41.18%</b>	<b>33.33%</b>

## Future decrease areas for the service over the next 12 months

Contracts with schools	<b>50.00%</b>	<b>43.48%</b>
Contracts with academies	<b>64.29%</b>	<b>60.87%</b>

## **1 Local authority catering services - State of the Market 2026**

APSE conducted an online survey in December 2025 and January 2026, which was sent out to local authority catering contacts throughout the UK.

A series of questions were asked covering attitudes to the issues currently facing catering, including the operation of the catering organisation and challenges for the future. Most of the questions have been surveyed since 2008 and trends are now apparent.

The data collected through these surveys is intended to provide a snapshot of the perception of local authority caterers. For a detailed and verifiable comparison of both financial and performance data, authorities who are not already members, should consider joining APSE performance networks, the UK's largest, and longest established, voluntary data benchmarking service for local councils.

## **2 Results**

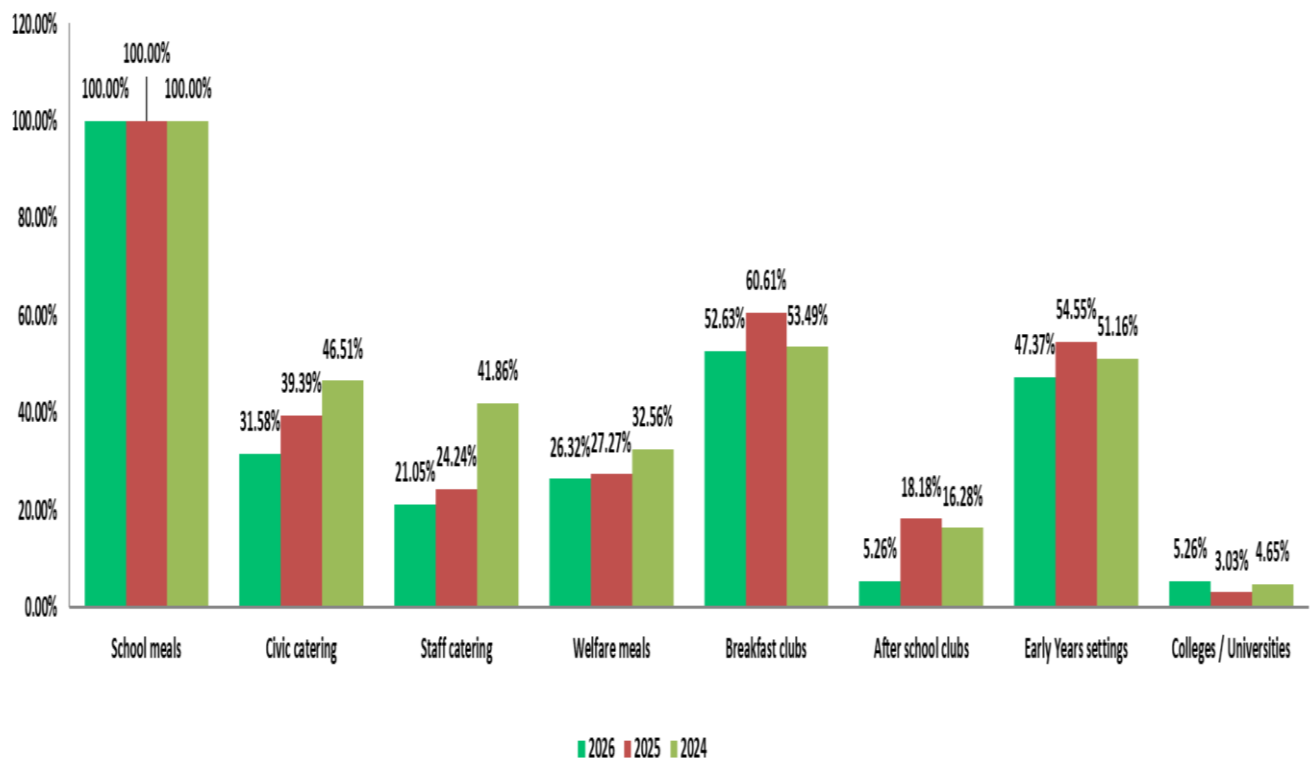
Respondents were UK wide with 64% of respondents from England, 24% from Scotland and 12% from Wales. The survey, therefore, reflects APSE's UK-wide membership and provides a broad reflection of opinion.

## **3 Scope of the catering service**

### **3.1 What catering services do you supply?**

The graph below outlines the services supplied by local authority caterers for 2026.

The responses to the 2026 survey show that the scope of the catering service remains consistent with the last two surveys and it is clear that school catering remains the dominant service with 100% of respondents advising that they provide this service.



The data shows that the number of respondents reporting that they provide civic catering has seen a further decrease from 46.51% in 2024 to 31.58% in 2026. This could be due to the costs associated with catering for civic events making the service not viable. Especially the additional costs associated with staffing such events.

The number of respondents reporting that they do staff catering is at the lowest in three years and has dropped to 21.05%. This again could be attributed to the costs of providing the service coupled with the changes in work patterns reducing demand for the service.

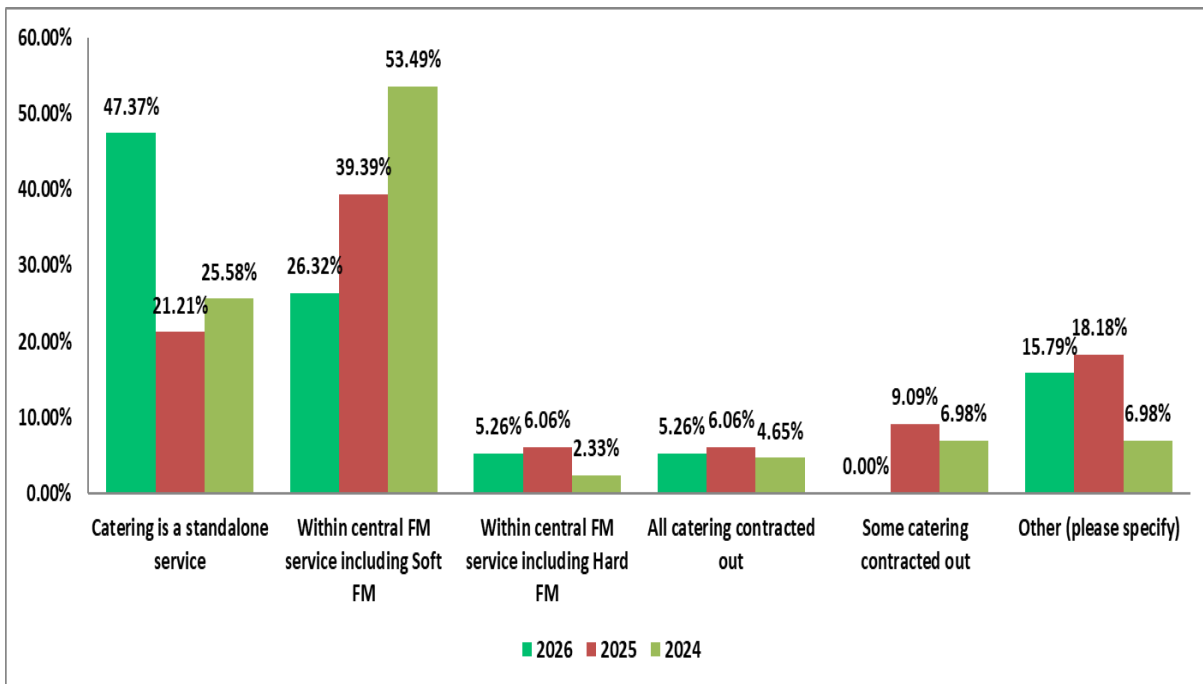
The number of respondents that report that they provide catering for after-school clubs has decreased to a three-year low with just 5.26% of respondents reporting this to be the case and just half of respondents are reporting that they provide catering to early years settings. This could be due to an increase in the number of hours that families are eligible for free childcare places.

Respondents also commented that they provided other types of catering services including: -

- Care homes
- Holiday provision
- Public and community cafes

### 3.2 How is the catering service organised in your council / catering organisation?

The survey sought to gain information regarding how the catering service was organised within the council. The graph below outlines the responses received and provides a comparison with the last two surveys conducted.



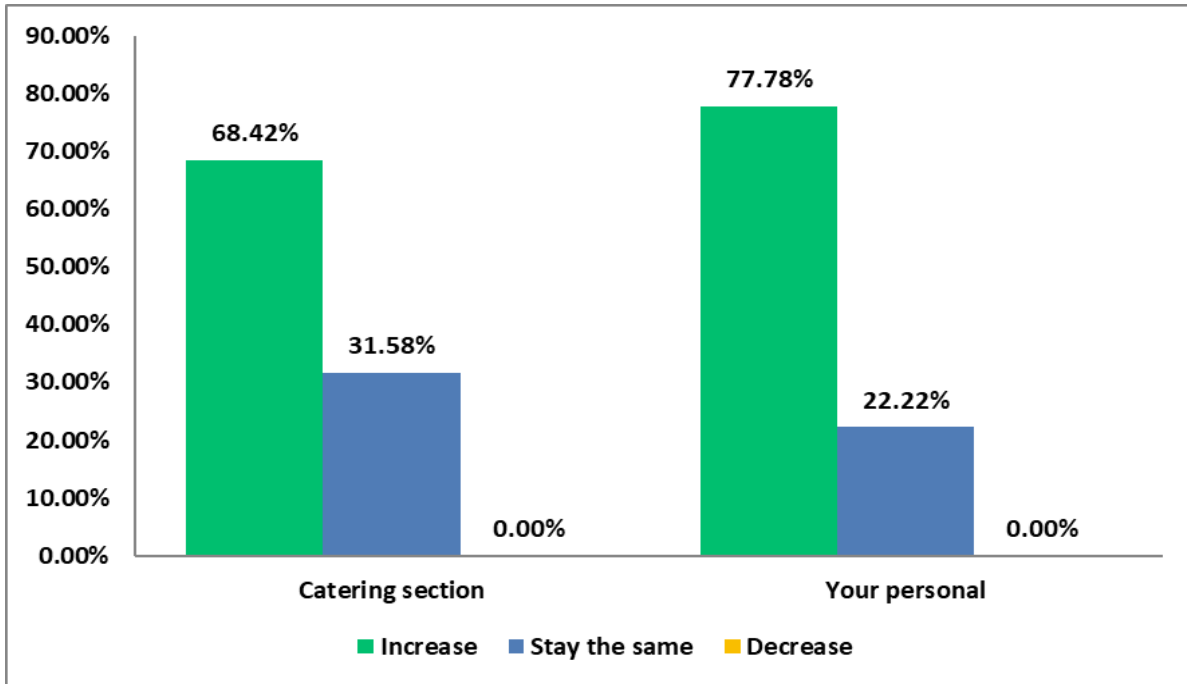
The responses to the survey show that there has been a large increase in those reporting that catering is a standalone service and there has been a 27.17% decrease from 2024 in the number of respondents reporting that the catering service sits with a central FM service

When reviewing the comments from the 15.79% that reported other respondents, advise that the catering services sits within another area of the council such as children’s services.

## 4 Workload

### 4.1 How do you expect workload to change over the next 12 months?

The survey asked how workload was expected to change over the next 12 months both personally and for the wider catering service. The graph below provides an overview of the responses received.



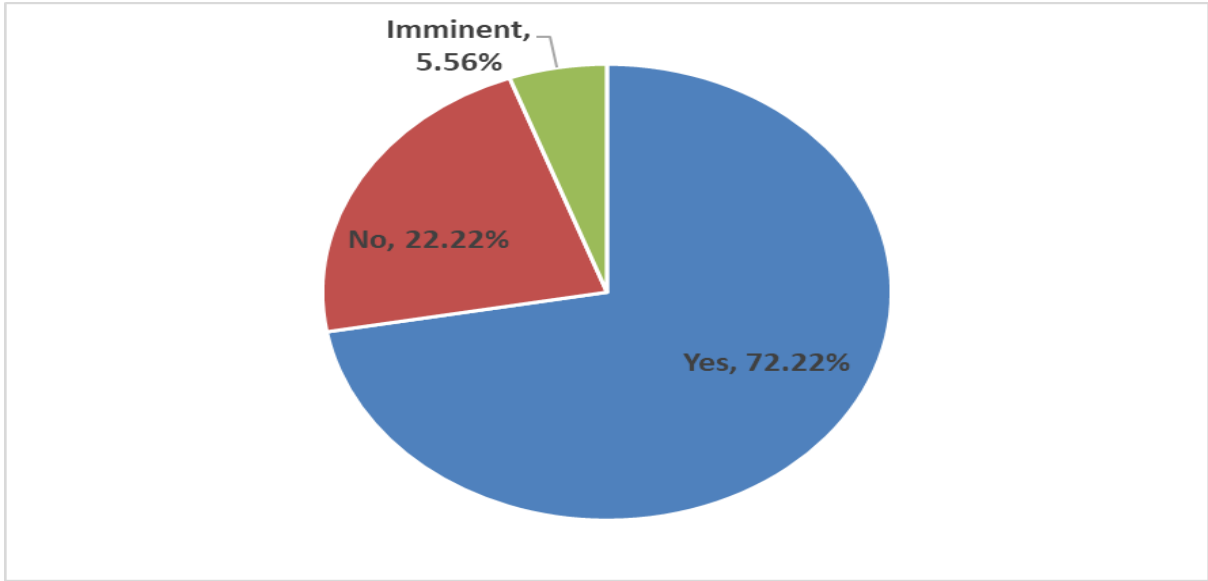
The majority of respondents (77.78%) expected that their personal workload would increase, 22.22% thought it would stay the same and none of the respondents believed their personal workload would decrease. When referring to the catering section, 68.42% of respondents expected that the workload would increase, 31.58% thought it would remain the same over the next year and none of the respondents believed it would decrease. The percentage of respondents that believed the workload of the catering section, and personally, would increase, remains high, with responses showing a further slight increase from 65.63% of respondents in 2025 to 68.42% of respondents in 2026 reporting that the workload in the catering section would increase.

These increases could be attributed to the range of services the service provides, the impact of retention and recruitment issues, reduced budgets and the recent changes in government policy.

## 5 Staffing

### 5.1 Do you pay the higher Living Wage Foundation Living Wage?

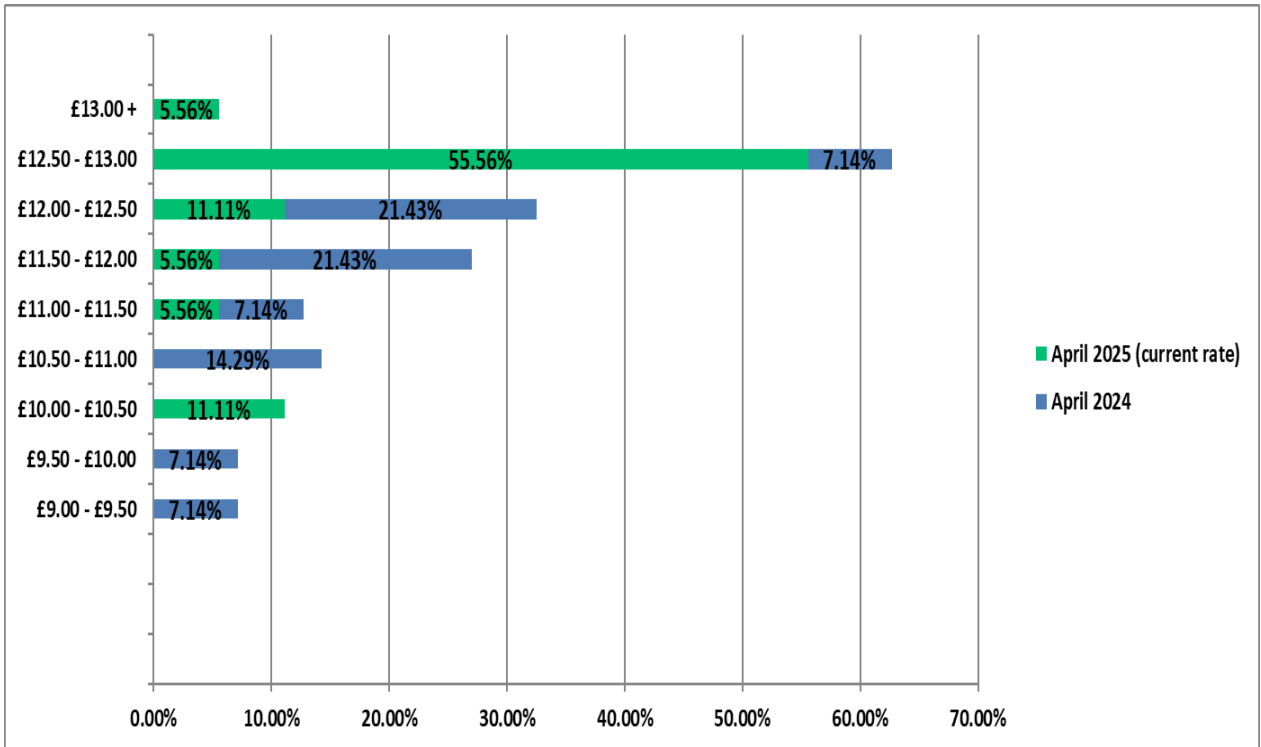
The chart below provides an overview of whether councils pay the higher living wage.



The vast majority of respondents, 72.22%, report that they pay the higher Living Wage with a further 5.56% implementing it imminently and only 22.22% reporting that the higher foundation living wage is not paid.

## 5.2 What is the basic current hourly rate for a catering assistant (before tax) in £

The graph below provides an overview of the hourly rates for a catering assistant:



The most common rate reported in 2025 was £12.50 to £13.00 per hour with 55.56% of respondents reporting this to be the case. Whereas for 2024 the most commonly hourly rates reported are £11.50-£12.50 and £12.50-£13.00.

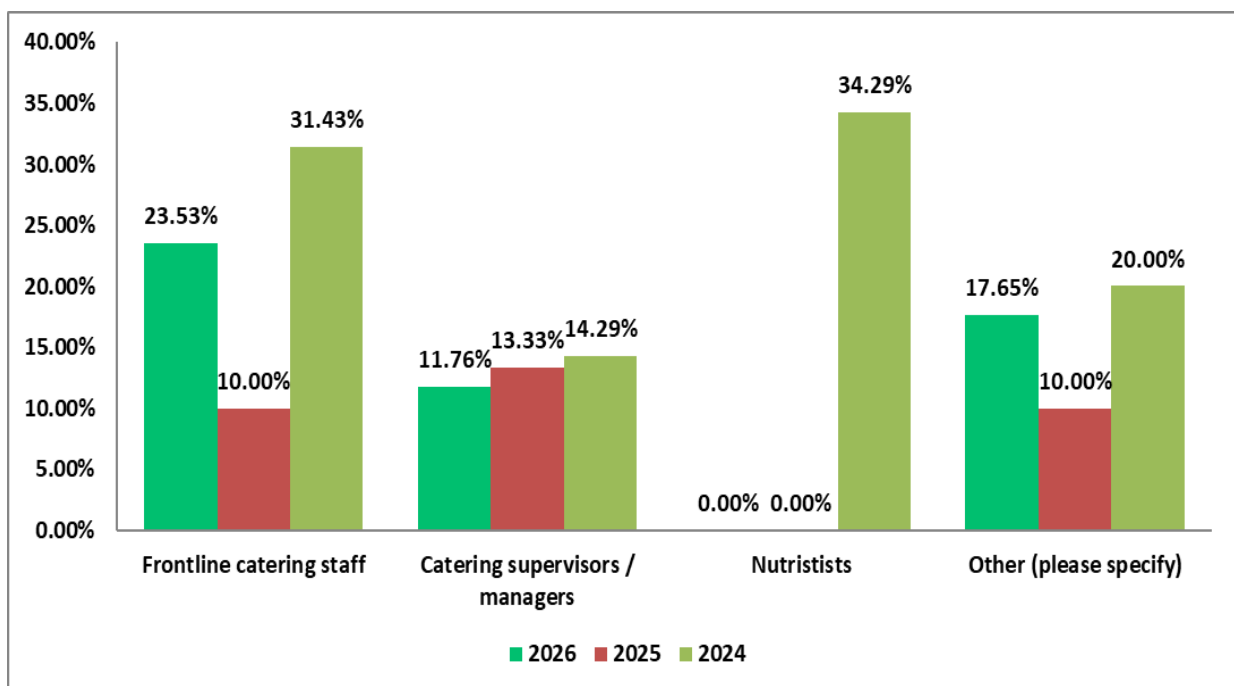
For the first time, respondents are advising that the rate of pay is over £13.00.

The graph clearly demonstrated the impact that the recent NJC pay agreement which specifically weighted pay towards lower graded posts agreed in November 2023 has had on the hourly rates of catering assistants. This continued in the 2024 settlement and whilst fair wages are to be applauded, in a service reliant upon essentially a trading arrangement with schools, the above graph is demonstrable of the upward trends in labour costs.

### 5.3 Does your service offer any of the following apprenticeships?

With the introduction of the Apprentice Levy and the important role that apprenticeships play in future proofing the workforce, from 2018, new questions focusing on apprenticeship programmes were added to the APSE State of the Market survey.

The graph below highlights the areas of the service where apprenticeships are in place from the responses in 2025, 2024 and 2023.



The number of respondents reporting that they offered apprenticeships to frontline catering staff has increased by 13.53%, although the number of respondents for 2026 reporting that they offer catering managers and supervisors' apprenticeships, this has been fairly consistent over the last three years. For the second year running there are no councils offering

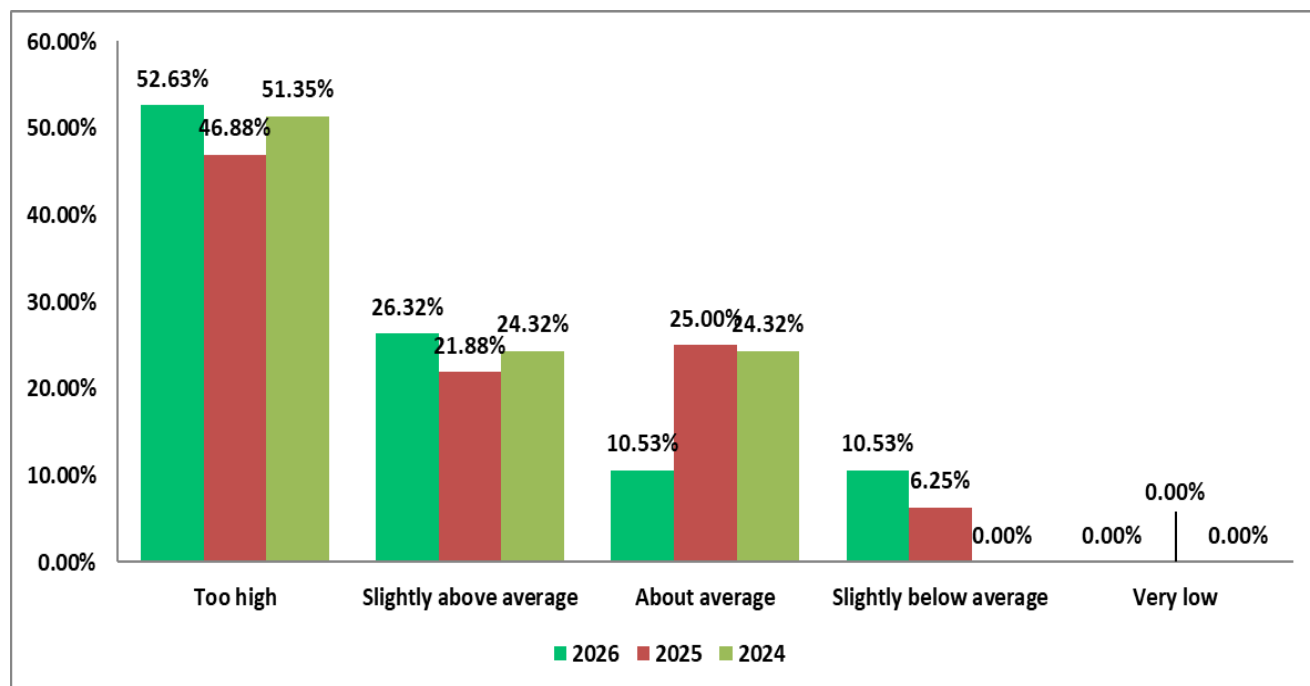
nutritionist apprenticeships.

For those councils advising 'other' as their answer, they either report that they do not provide apprenticeships due to staff only being on 30 weeks per year contracts and the part-time nature of the work. The ones that commented that they did provide apprenticeships advised that these were in business support functions.

#### 5.4 Are staff absence levels at an acceptable level?

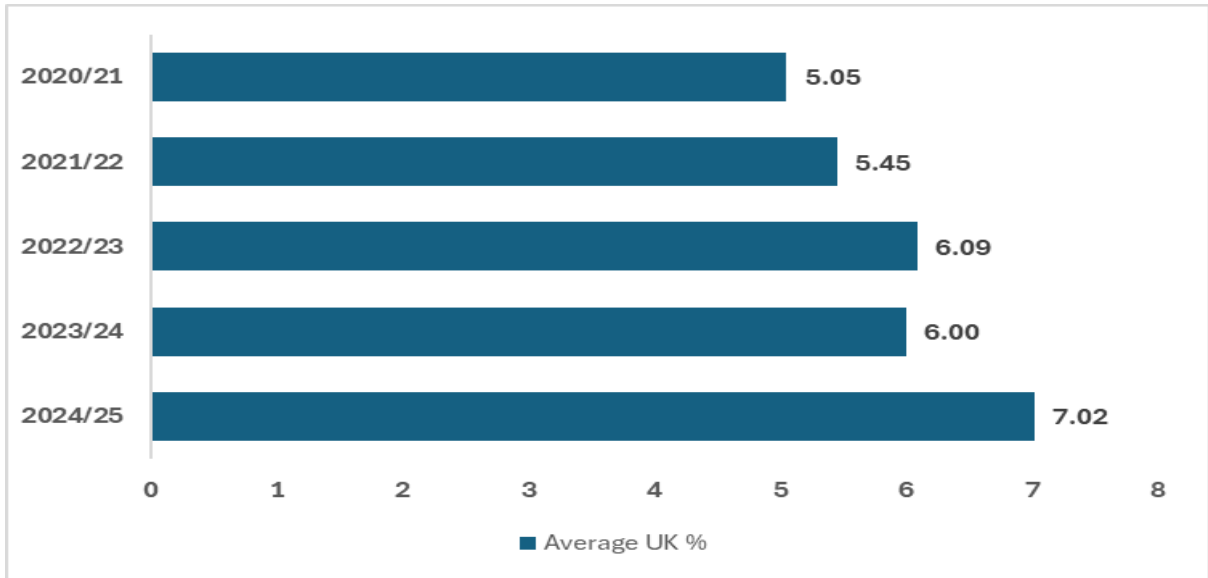
The State of the Market survey sought to establish what the perception of the respondents was in relation to the level of staff absence and how this perception compared with previous years.

The graph below outlines the views of the respondents for 2026, 2025 and 2024:



The vast majority of respondents in 2026, (78.92%) perceived that staff absence was slightly above average or too high, which has increased since 2025 where 68.76% of respondents report this to be the case. No respondents stated that they thought the absence was very low or slightly below average.

The State of the Market survey asks for perceptions, however the APSE Performance Networks data reports on the UK average for frontline staff absence. The table below provides an overview of data.



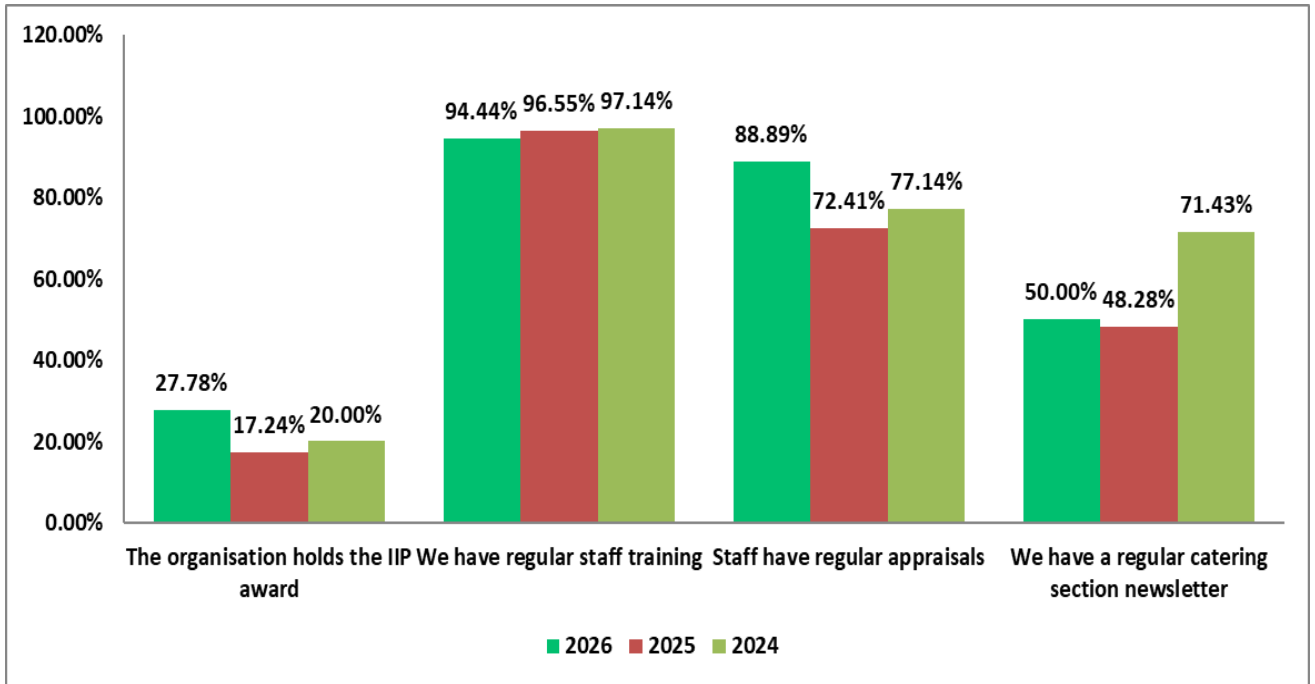
When comparing the perception, against the data it is clear to see that frontline staff absence as risen steadily over the last five years, and with the majority of respondents to the survey state that staff absence is too high indicates that there are other factors that are in play influencing the perception such as the issues with recruitment and retention.

Although not asked in the survey but reported by councils at the [APSE Catering Network](#) there has been an increase in the number of staff being off work for stress, mental well-being-related conditions and individuals unable to work due to being on waiting lists for NHS treatment.

**5.5 Which of the following staff training applies to your authority/organisation?**

Evidence shows that a well-trained workforce not only is a positive representative of the service but providing training is an investment in the future and quality of provision.

The graph below highlights the staff training that applies to respondents:



The responses for the last three years are relatively consistent and demonstrate that local authorities invest in their staff through the training that they provide.

Regular staff training has remained above 95% for the last three years, and over 70% of respondents have reported that they hold regular staff appraisals.

Investment in the workforce in the form of training not only ensures that staff are kept up to date with the latest food-related legislation such as allergen awareness, but it also assists with the motivation of the workforce. APSE Training has developed a course specifically for local authority caterers regarding managing catering costs and offers various other courses to support in the development of the local authority workforce. Please [click here](#) for further information or contact Helen Reed on [hreed@apse.org.uk](mailto:hreed@apse.org.uk)

## 6 School Meals

### 6.1 What do pupils pay for a school meal?

The survey asked respondents to provide details of the price pupils pay for a school meal in primary and secondary schools. The table below provides an overview of the highest, lowest and average price paid by pupils for a school meal.

Year	Primary			Secondary		
	Lowest	Highest	Average	Lowest	Highest	Average
2024	£1.90	£3.10	£2.46	£1.80	£3.15	£2.44
2025	£1.90	£3.20	£2.63	£2.10	£3.50	£2.79
2026	£2.10	£3.30	£2.71	£2.20	£3.85	£2.89

The average price paid for a primary school meal has seen an increase from £2.46 in 2024 to £2.71 in 2026. The average price paid for a secondary school meal has also seen an increase from £2.44 in 2024 to £2.89 in 2026.

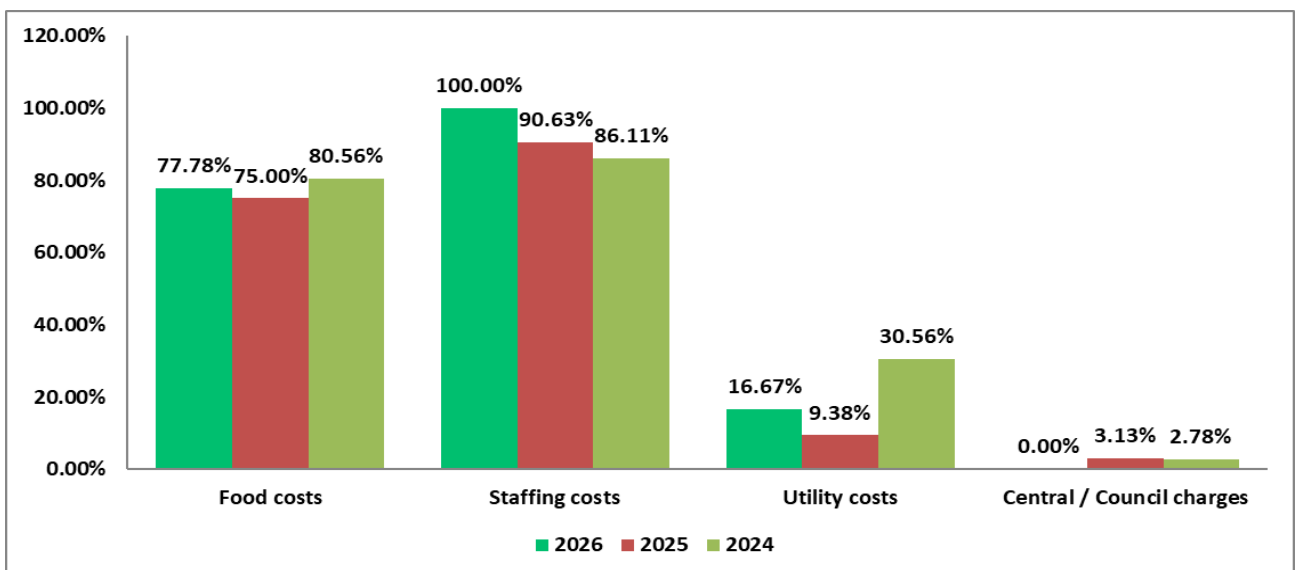
Catering managers report at the APSE Catering Network, that they are reluctant to increase the price the pupil pays for a school meal due to the impact on the family's budget. However, it is clear from the responses to the survey that due to the rising costs of providing the provision and with councils unable or unwilling to subsidise the service due to budget pressures, there has had to be an increase in prices to ensure viability.

It should also be noted that many children do not pay for their meals, due to the respective government policies and the Mayor of London's initiative.

## 6.2 What aspect of the catering service has seen the greatest price rises?

This question was first asked during the cost-of-living crisis and going forward it will allow price increases to be tracked. Therefore, the survey sought to ascertain where the greatest price rises were in the service.

The graph below provides an overview of the responses received:



It is evident from the responses that the two aspects of the service that have seen the greatest impact from the price rises are food and staff cost. The percentage of respondents reporting food costs has stayed over 75% for the last three years. On the other hand, there has been a further increase in the respondents reporting that staff costs had seen the greatest increase, with 100% advising this to be the case.

### **6.3 What measures has the service taken to mitigate the impact of rising food costs?**

To gain an understanding of what measures councils are undertaking to mitigate the impact of price rises the survey asked respondents to indicate what they are doing to mitigate the rises.

The table below provides a comparison of the measures that respondents have reportedly taken in 2026, 2025 and 2024 surveys.

	<b>2026</b>	<b>2025</b>	<b>2024</b>
Worked with suppliers	94.44%	83.87%	82.86%
Increased the use of seasonal produce	55.56%	54.84%	57.14%
Introduced meat free days	38.89%	64.52%	42.86%
Reduced the options available	22.22%	38.71%	22.86%
Decreased portion sizes	16.67%	19.35%	8.56%
Other (please specify)	11.11%	0.00%	20.00%

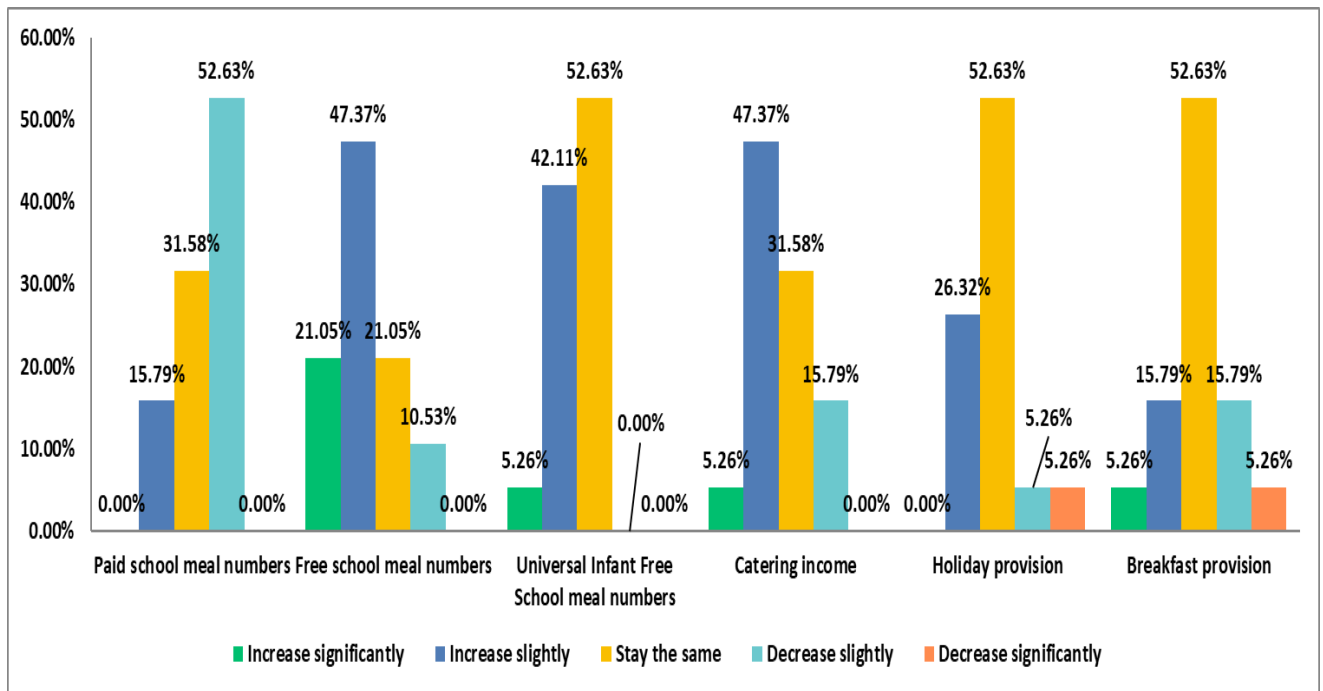
When comparing the responses over the last three years it is clear that catering managers and suppliers are working together with 94.44% reporting this to be the case for 2026 and increase of over 10.00%. It is pleasing to see that although local authority catering services are under severe financial pressure relatively few respondents have resorted to decreasing portion sizes or reducing the number of options available.

## **7 The catering service**

### **7.1 Overall, how do you expect the following to change over the next year?**

The survey sought to gain an understanding of the expectations for catering service over the next 12 months.

The graph below highlights the responses received:



The survey highlighted that just over 50% of respondents predicted that Universal Infant Free School Meal numbers, holiday provision and breakfast provision will remain the same in the next year.

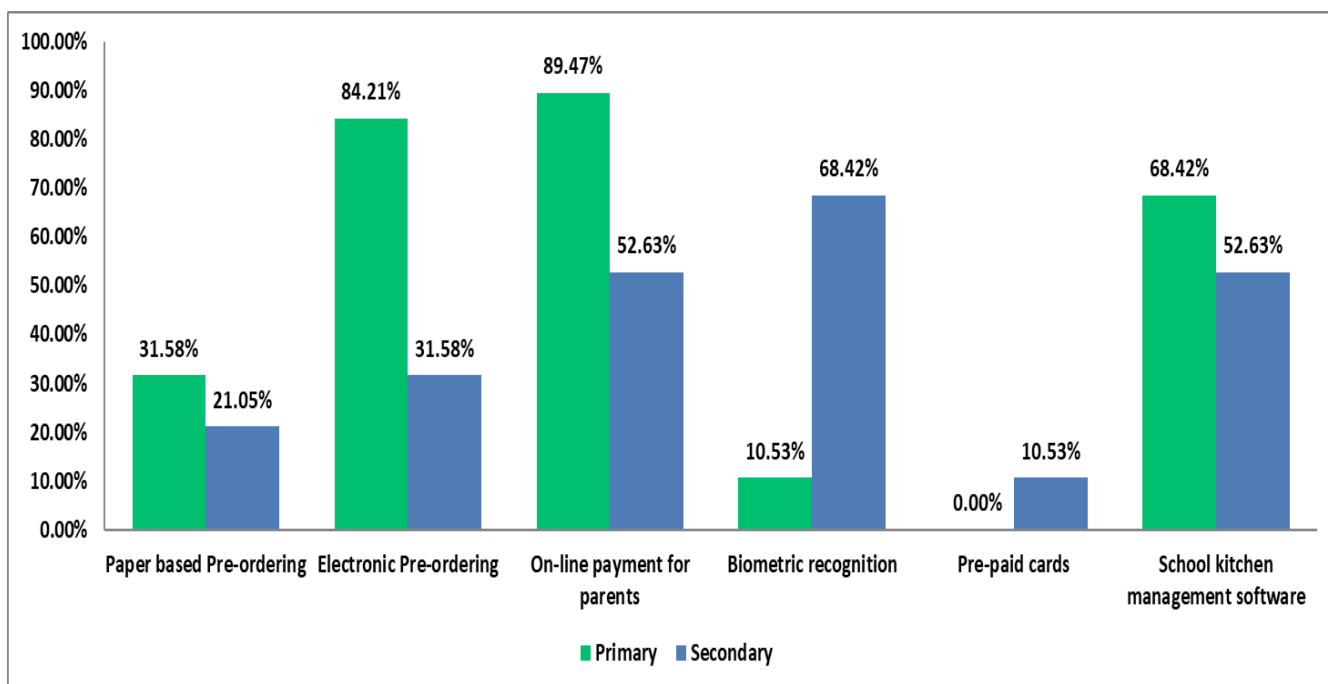
47.37% of respondents believed that there would be a slight increase in Free School Meal numbers and catering income.

If these expectations come to bear, then there will be a further pressure placed on the catering service, as the gap between the funding for free school meals and the cost of delivering the meal has increased, coupled with a slight decrease in the paid school meal numbers which will place a further viability burden on the service.

## 7.2 Which of the following do you use?

Many councils use a catering software package to comply with nutritional requirements and to meet the requirements of Natasha's Law. Several systems exist to assist with productivity, reducing queuing, waste management, and the requirement to handle cash.

The graph below outlines the percentage of respondents that report the systems that are utilised in at least one school for both primary and secondary schools.



For primary schools, 84.21% of councils report that they are now using electronic pre-ordering, 89.47% report that they are utilising on-line payments systems for parents and 68.42% are using school kitchen management software.

In secondary schools, 68.42% of respondents report that they are using biometric recognition, 10.53% have pre-paid cards in place and 52.63% have on-line payments for parents.

The data shows that there has been an increase in the number of councils moving away from paper-based pre-ordering systems in both primary and secondary schools.

Due to the financial pressures, use of digital tools will assist the viability of the service, by providing real time data to manage the service and free staff up to perform other tasks. However, investment in such technologies needs to be balanced against the benefits, suitability and practicality,

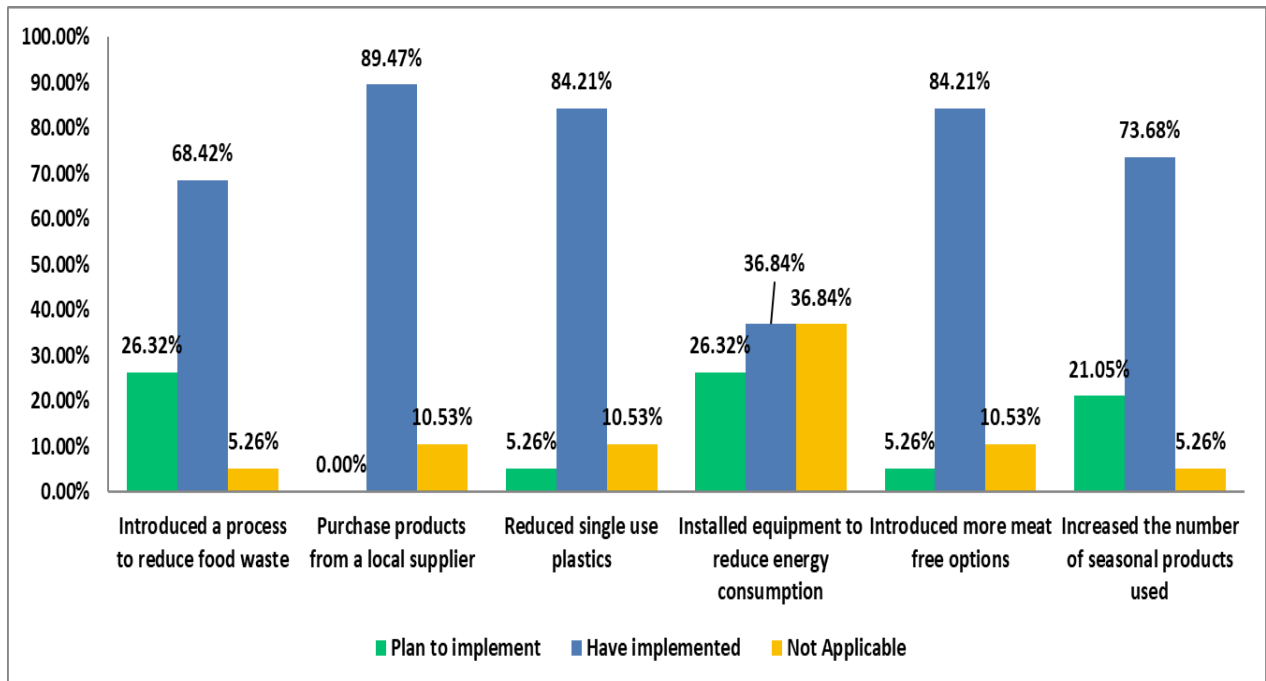
## 8 Sustainability

### 8.1 What measures have you implemented to make the service more sustainable?

Many local authorities have declared a climate emergency, and frontline services are required to implement measures to allow the council to achieve net zero targets. Therefore, last year an additional question was added to the State of the Market survey to gain a snapshot of

what measures the catering service has implemented or is planning to implement to make the service sustainable. This question was repeated in 2026.

The graph below outlines the measures that respondents have reported that they plan to implement or have implemented:



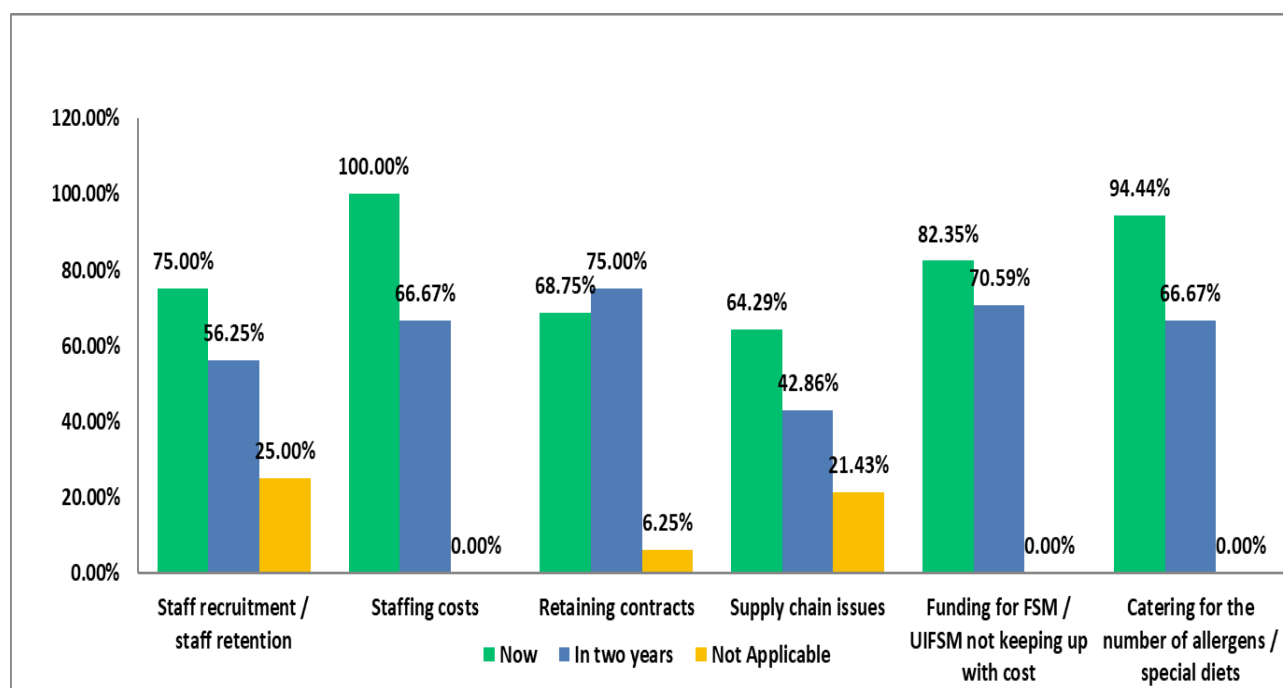
The greatest number of respondents, 84.21%, report that they have introduced more meat free days which compares with 93.55% who reported this to be the case in 2025. 89.47% purchase products from local suppliers, which represents an increase of 8.82% in the number of respondents reporting this in 2025.

The introduction of measures to make the service more sustainable, such as more plant-based foods, are not only good measures to implement, to assist in achieving net zero targets, but can also support the financial sustainability of the catering service. Therefore, when reviewing working practices and implementing new measures, a clear strategy can ensure that any opportunities to improve the future 'green' and financial sustainability of the service are adopted.

## 9 Comments on the future

### 9.1 What do you think are the greatest challenges facing the sector?

The graph below highlights what respondents believe to be the greatest challenges currently facing the sector and what the challenges will be in two years' time.



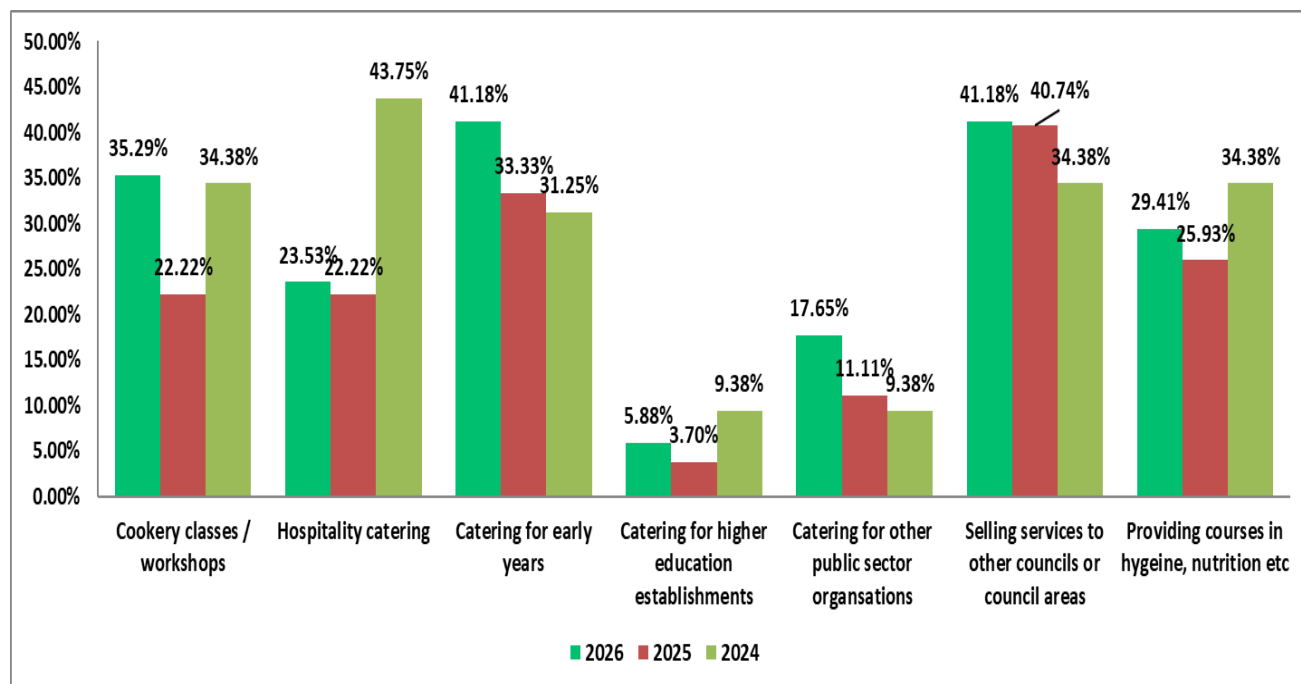
All respondents report that staff costs are the greatest challenge which compares with 100% in 2025, closely followed by catering for the number of allergens and special diets with 94.44% of respondents report this, which is a slight decrease from the 96.43% advising this to be the case last year. Funding not keeping pace with cost has reduced slightly from 96.55% of respondents citing this as a challenge in 2025 to 82.35% this year. The findings from the survey are consistent with the discussions that have taken place on the APSE Catering Network over the past few months.

These concerns are understandable as these are sitting outside of the control of services managers and as such make it difficult for service managers to mitigate the risk and are resulting in the council reviewing their service and, in some cases, leading to the decision to be made to cease providing the service altogether. The APSE catering network has also supported its member councils with the growth in demand for allergen safe menus and special diets.

## 10 Growth areas

Clearly, there will be some variation in answers between the authorities responding to this question.

The graph below highlights the areas where respondents anticipated growth in 2026, 2025 and 2024:



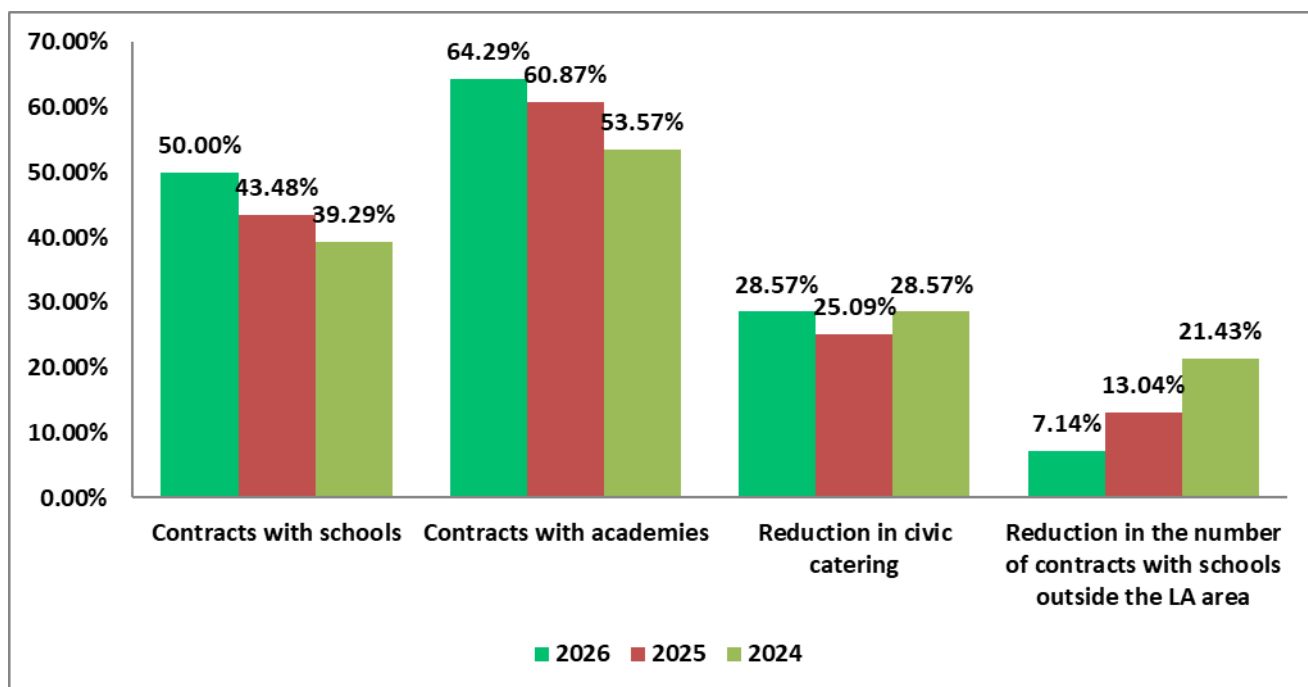
Selling services to other councils or in other council areas has seen an increase to 41.18% when compared with last year, this could be a reflection that the councils who are still providing the service are looking to fill the gap when other authorities decide to cease the service.

Catering for early years is seen as an area of growth with 41.18% reporting this to be the case, a 7.85% increase from 2025. In addition, there is a greater number of respondents than last year reporting the increase in cookery classes than last with an increase from the three-year low of 22.22% in 2025 to 35.29% in 2026.

It should be noted that in the comments on this question, respondents advised that due to the lack of money to invest in the service due to the financial pressures, it was not possible to grow the service.

## 11 Areas of future decrease

The graph below provides an overview of where respondents anticipate that there will be a decrease in work for the service. This is summarised in the graph below:



It is clear from the responses received that there was an expectation that the catering service will see a decrease in 2026 with half expecting a reduction in contracts with schools, and 64.29% anticipating that there would be a reduction in contracts with academies. This is not a surprise as these are common themes throughout the survey.

There has been a decline in the number of respondents believing that there would be a reduction in the number of contracts with schools outside the LA area from 21.43% in 2023 to 7.14% in 2025. This could be in part due to councils gaining contracts in areas where other authorities have ceased to provide a school meal service.

## 12 APSE comment

The value of school meals is clearly being recognised as a means by which to support children and families as the respective governments have made commitments to extend the eligibility of free school meals to more children and introduce breakfast clubs.

However, the service, in terms of its education catering side, still operates in the vast majority of cases within a market-model and fragmentation as a result of academies, and price-based competition for the service which tends to undermine the health and wellbeing aspects of catering, as a valued part of the armoury of joined-up local public services. Whilst there are some potential opportunities, the service remains restricted by the current model of education provision within England.

It is notable that the considerable divergence in policy within Scotland and Wales reflects greater synergy between the schools' meals service, health and wellbeing outcomes for children and young people, and the role that the school meal can play in the cost-of-living crisis and sustainability objectives.

Currently, there is a perfect storm impacting local authority catering service, due to the gap between government funding for free school meals and the cost of providing the school meal increasing, councils across the UK are reporting that it is very challenging to deliver the service and remain viable. This is resulting in several authorities in England reviewing the service and in a greater number of cases, opting to cease providing the service, and this contagion has now spread to some innovative models initially set up to tackle the financial challenges.

In some areas this is leaving the delivery of a school meals service to private sector caterers, which has several impacts including on the less profitable schools not having the option of provision, for example small schools. In addition, local authorities can use school meals to be part of the solution to issues should as the cost of living, obesity and providing the predominantly female part time workforce with good pay and conditions. With local authority providers exiting the market, these benefits cannot be realised.

Research conducted by APSE, ['Local authority education service: More than just a service'](#) explores the challenges of delivering the service, outlines the benefits of councils providing school meals and also sets out five recommendations for national governments regarding fixing school meal provision.

APSE remains very concerned that many councils view subsidy as something to be avoided or reduced but in reality, forcing the school meals service to operate in market conditions, where costs cannot ultimately be passed on to families or schools undermines the very

future of a decent local school meals service, with all of the ethical and social value advantages that this brings to local areas. As authorities in England face reorganisation, with many County Council services being disaggregated, options for the future viability of school meals provision should be considered across all political parties and indeed be worthy of a local council champion to secure future funding and services.

On a final point, APSE has consistently advanced the case for a return to greater local authority involvement in education provision and an end to the marketisation of education catering, reflecting the need for all local authority services to support children and young people providing holistic support within local communities. APSE will continue to press for public policy changes in this regard and to support the All-Party Parliamentary Group on School Food to campaign for greater awareness and recognition of the value of school food to children and young people.

**Vickie Hacking, APSE Principal Advisor**

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## 13 How can APSE help?

All APSE members can sign up to APSE's Catering 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](#).

### 13.1 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, 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.

APSE 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](mailto:enquiries@apse.org.uk).

Our national networks groups include: -

- Building cleaning and FM
- Catering
- Cemeteries and crematoria
- Local Government Reorganisation
- Veterans and Military Champions Network
- Social Value, Procurement and Commercialisation
- Housing, construction and building maintenance.
- Parks, horticultural and ground 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 <https://apse.org.uk> for more details.

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