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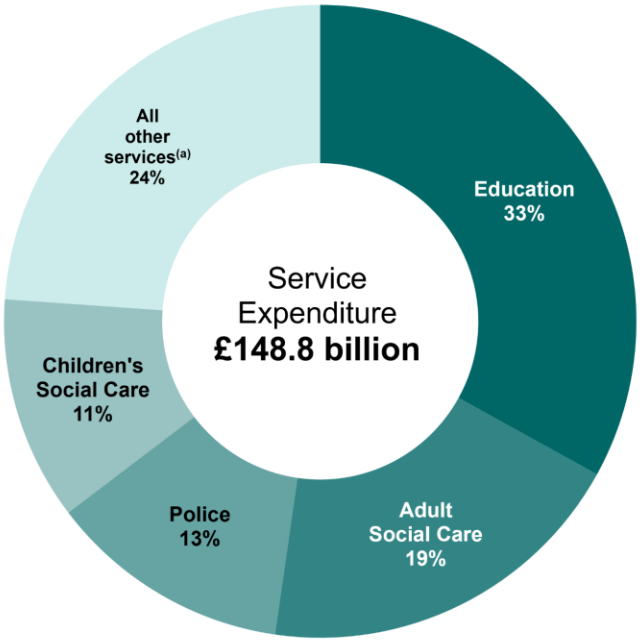
Protecting parks now and in the future

How can local authorities protect, enhance and future proof parks and open spaces amid increasing financial pressures and changing environmental challenges?

Speaker: Abi Ademiluyi, Principal Policy Lead

The Finances: Do they add up?



Although Education largest passported through to schools and academies

Adult care 19%

Children's Services 11%

'All Other Services' 24%

All other services ……..



Parks
Greenspace
Streetscene
Leisure
Libraries
Waste…..

Almost all services the public receive at a neighbourhood level!

The continuing squeeze

- Adult and Children's Services demand is increasing
- Housing and homelessness demand and cost increases
- Special Educational Needs and Disability demand and cost increases
- Leaving neighbourhood level services as the 'poor relation'

Share of Spend

- 16 local authorities now spend more than 80 pence in every £1 on social care.
- Net spending on social care reached a record £42.8 billion which is 71.9% of combined core spending in 2025–26.
- This is up from 62.4% in 2017–18.
- In some are spending is even higher e.g. Halton Council in the North West reached 92.9% of its core funding on social care.
- These leaves spending on parks even lower down the priorities.

Do parks matter?

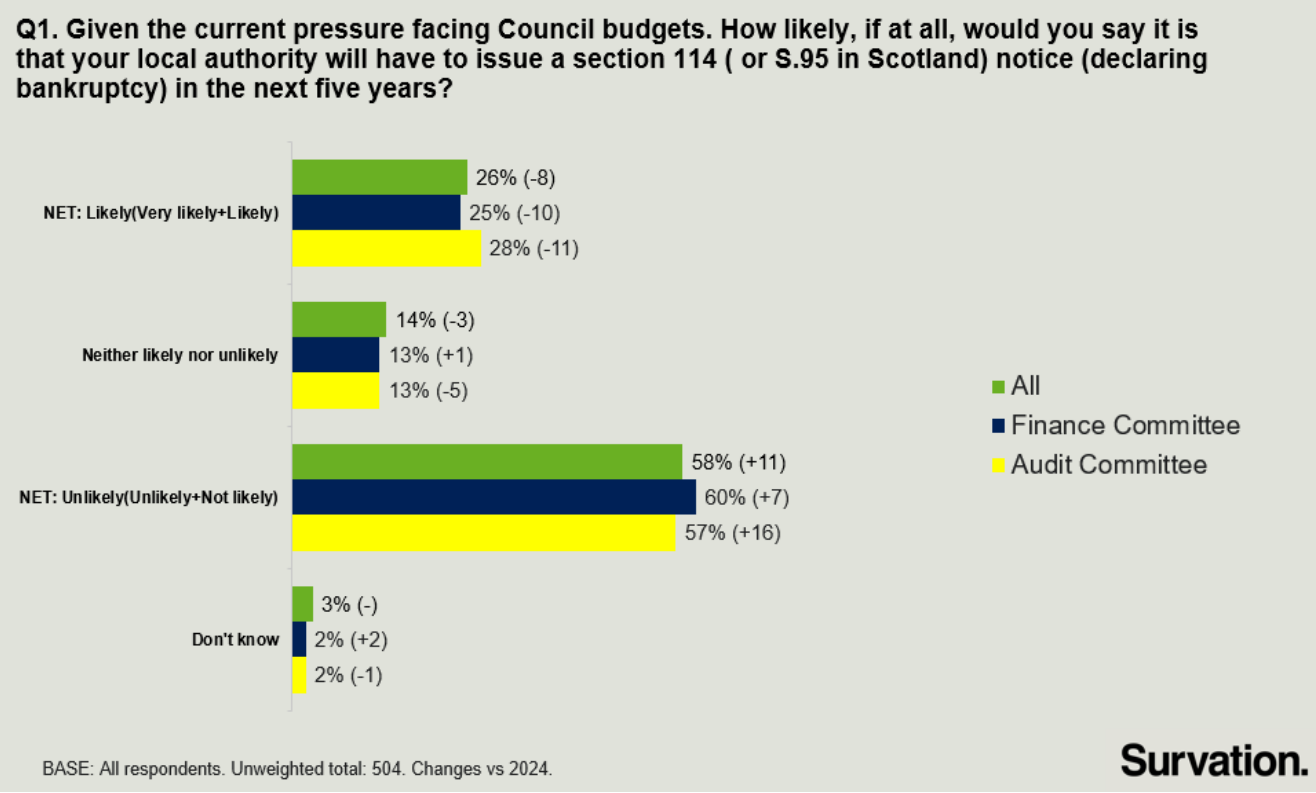
- Many government policies intersect with parks and greenspace
- Obesity and the NHS ten year plan
- Community cohesion as a priority for MHCLG
- Climate change (tree cover, ‘sponge parks’, heat absorption)
- Biodiversity (soil health, plant and animal species preservation and reintroduction)

But….. Value of parks is not reflected in funding

- Where new funding streams have come in rarely do they apply to parks
- Specific bid pots e.g. ‘pocket parks’ – are limited and do not address revenue funding – often one off capital schemes
- Where parks contribute to wider outcomes they do not benefit from any wider savings to the public purse.

Polling with Survation

Results suggest councillors also think council budgets overall will remain challenging and more S.114 notices are likely



How have parks services responded?

- In some councils a recognition that cuts have gone too far!
- Some budgets reset and additional resources (though budgets not reinstated to pre-2010)
- Services changed – such as wild-flower meadows with lower maintenance costs
- Cuts to cuts! Grass cutting frequencies

APSE State of the Market: Budgets

87%

"Agree" or "Agree strongly"

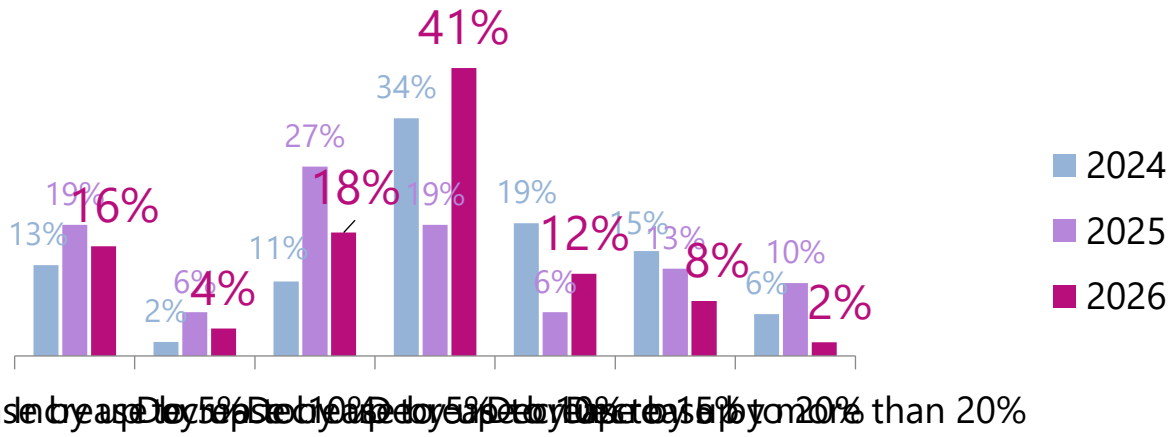
(+7%)

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

APSE State of the Market: Future funding?

- *Most parks services expect further budget cuts*
- *Increases will be minimal*
- *"Unknown, but expect LGR to be disastrous for Parks services."*
- *"Unknown due to impact of LGR."*

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



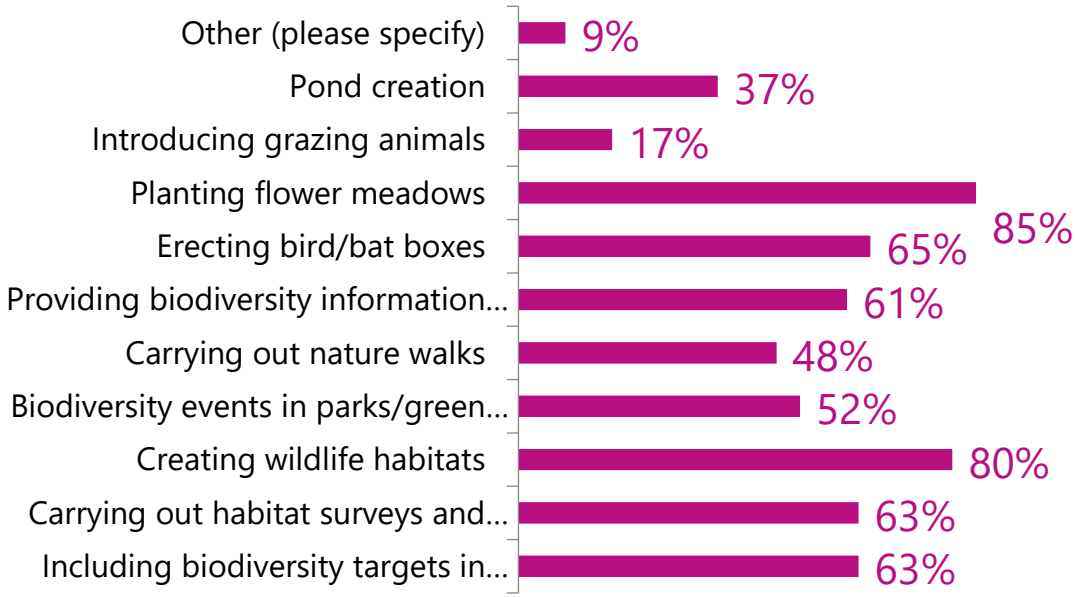
Biodiversity: Remains a priority

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

95%

Biodiversity

Which of the following biodiversity initiatives have you carried out:



Rewilding: Remains a priority

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

53%

Yes



The APSE report – *Rewilding for the future: Insight and best practice from local councils* – provides an overview of what schemes councils are engaged in and the progress they are making in contributions to rewilding.

Efficiencies

84%

"Agree" or "Agree strongly"

2025 (+2%)

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

Reduced maintenance

67%

2025 (-3%)

Bedding/flower displays

40%

2025 (-15%)

Frequency of grass cuts (amenity)

39%

2025 (+4%)

Shrub bed maintenance

Income generation

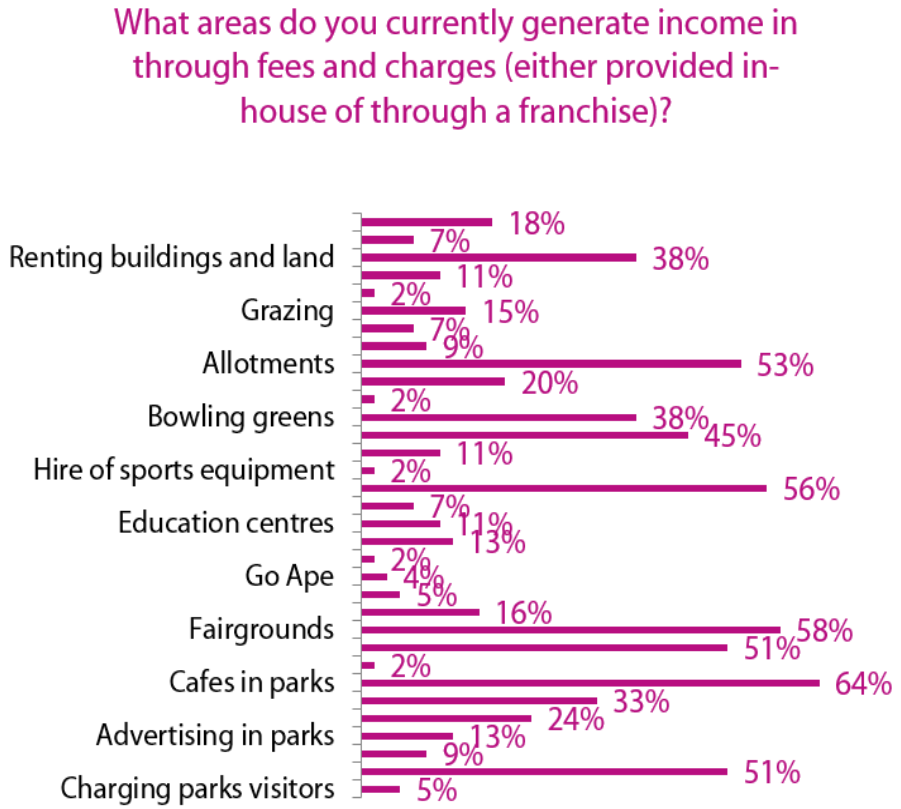
The £690m lost from parks budgets has meant parks professionals have had to come up with more creative ways to generate income to bridge the gap left by cuts in funding.

Income generating activity	2019	2026	Variation (+/-)
Sports pitch lettings	83%	56%	-27%
Fairgrounds	80%	58%	-22%
Festivals/concerts/events	77%	51%	-26%
Renting buildings and land	73%	38%	-35%

Income generation by type

Cafes, fairgrounds and sports hires are all popular

However, councils seek to balance access for all e.g. ***No desire to price families out of parks activities***



Income generation - *Barriers*

65%

2023 (+25%)

Public resistance

75%

2023 (+25%)

Political resistance

39%

2023 (-2%)

Lack of time

58%

2023 (+8%)

Lack of investment funding

The ongoing funding issues

- Balance of social care spend compared to ‘all other services’
- Other pressures on SEND, homelessness provision and housing need
- Level of indebtedness on local councils £120 Billion – up 7% in 2025
- LGR may produce legacy debt transfers
- Parks can ill afford more constraints on funding

Protecting frontline parks service spend?

- Know your data; what is the current cumulative spend?
- What service levels are in place?
- What do different residents expect?
- How many parks users are in your communities?

Communities can be a voice against further cuts to parks

Ensure you have a parks champion amongst your elected councillors !

- A real role for councillors to ensure that there are upfront commitments on parks services
- Don’t allow neighbourhood level services to be at the ‘back of the queue’ on service development, AI and digital transformation!
- Stability will matter to residents.
- Parks and the quality of local public realm contributes to businesses and local economic growth!

However….. Parks funding must be retained!



Questions..

Over to YOU!

Contact details

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