

Evaluation of the take-up and use of the Well-Being Power

Research Summary



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Research Summary and Key Findings

The Well-Being Power (The Power) was introduced in 2000 to increase local authorities' capability to act on behalf of their areas. Between 2003 and 2007, INLOGOV, the University of Birmingham and the Cities Research Centre, the University of the West of England undertook a formative evaluation to examine local authorities' take-up and use of the Power and the factors which had affected it.

This evaluation was commissioned in response to concerns that the Well-Being Power had not made sufficient impact on local government. However, based on the research findings, it could be argued that the cultural and contextual changes necessary to stimulate widespread usage of the Well-Being Power were not sufficient following the 2000 Act. This is supported by evidence from other countries that have made these major changes in the role and remit of local government eg Scandinavia¹. It may be that changes in local government since 1997 combined with the evolving policy context provide a more sympathetic environment for the take-up and use of the Well-Being Power.

This report presents the overall findings of this study. The research team has produced other materials including a practice guide for using the Well-Being Power² and a report on the links between the Well-Being Power and Sustainable Development³.

The Key Findings show that:

- Awareness and understanding of the Well-Being Power was highest amongst local authority corporate officers and executive members and lowest amongst partners, community and voluntary sector representatives.
- Use of the Well-Being Power remained limited over the life of the evaluation as local authorities had a tendency to use more specific powers to achieve their goals. Early uses of the Power tended to emphasise economic and environmental goals. Social uses emerged later. There was no evidence of local authorities balancing the economic, social and environmental impacts and outcomes of a decision to use of the Well-Being Power in line with sustainable development principles.

1 The Free Communes Experiments: lessons for policy in England, Communities and Local Government, June 2006 <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/freecommunes>

2 Kitchin, H et al (2008) *The Well-Being Power. Practical experience and perspectives*, Birmingham, INLOGOV, www.inlogov.ac.uk/publications.asp

3 Braybrook, L (2008) *The Well-Being Power and sustainable development*, Bristol, UWE, www.built-environment.uwe.ac.uk/research/cities/publications.asp

- Lawyers played a critical role in encouraging or discouraging use of the Well-Being Power. Chief officers and senior elected members could also make a difference to how the Well-Being Power was used, particularly if they deployed it in support of their community leadership and place-shaping roles.
- The Power had less impact on promoting community leadership than other levers, specifically Community Strategies and Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs). In practice use of the Well-Being Power reflected pre-existing community leadership capacity within local government.
- Efforts to promote awareness of the Power were hampered by the complexity of the legal power (combining considerable discretion with a list of exceptions), confusion amongst users between the Well-Being Power and the broader concept of 'well-being', and the difficulties of effectively communicating information in constantly changing organisations. This suggests that Communities and Local Government, national local government organisations such as Improvement and Development Agency for local government (IDeA), Local Government Association (LGA), Local Government Information Unit (LGIU) and local authorities need to be specific in their use of terms, be proactive in their identification of opportunities for using the Power and tailor advice and information to different stakeholder groups.
- Awareness and understanding of the Well-Being Power translates into use in many ways and is affected by a range of factors including: the capacity and capability of the local authority, the strength of local partnership relationships and the nature of interactions between the centre and the locality. Providing more information and advice about uses of the Power will only have limited impact if these wider factors are not also addressed.
- Recent policy changes, particularly the opportunities available to local authorities in their 'place-shaping' role and the flexibility offered by the new performance framework, provide new impetus for local authorities to innovate to improve outcomes including making use of the Power.

The remainder of this document presents more detail on the **research background**, and **findings** and **key recommendations** of this study.

Research Background

The Well-Being Power enables local authorities to undertake any action to promote or improve the social, economic and environmental well-being of their area. Intended to be understood as a ‘power of first resort’, the Power addresses concerns about local authorities overstepping the limits of more specific powers; thus allowing local authorities to develop new ways of undertaking existing activities, and gives local authorities the flexibility to innovate⁴.

However, early signs were indicated that the Well-Being Power had not made a significant impact on local authorities following its introduction in 2000. Possible reasons for this included a limited understanding about the potential of the Power, perceived legal barriers, the negative effect of early reports of ‘failed attempts’ to use the Power, and a perceived lack of local capacity to realise the Power’s potential.

In response to these concerns central government commissioned a formative evaluation to assess whether localities were aware of the Power and how this awareness translated into use, and to identify ways in which awareness and usage of the Power could be increased.

Research Findings

Awareness, understanding and perceptions of the Well-Being Power

In local authorities corporate officers and executive members were most likely to have a sound grasp of the potential and limits of the Well-Being Power. Awareness of the Well-Being Power amongst other local authority staff and councillors was limited though this improved over the life of the evaluation. In Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs), and among communities and the voluntary sector, awareness of the Power was low at the start of the evaluation and remained so.

The Power was understood in two distinct ways in localities: as an instrument for achieving locally agreed goals in the absence of other specific powers, and/or as a lever of cultural change in local government supporting its evolving role as community leader or place-shaper. This latter understanding was closely linked to the concept of well-being that had become increasingly popular amongst policy makers. The presence and dominance of these understandings was influenced by local contextual factors.

The complexity of the legal power – the combination of considerable discretion with a list of exceptions caused considerable confusion amongst officers and elected members – and the difficulties of communicating information effectively in organisations constantly coping with change meant that efforts to promote awareness of the Power were limited in their

⁴ Kitchin, H. *Promoting Well-Being: Making Use of Councils’ New Freedom*, (2003) INLOGOV, University of Birmingham

coverage and their impact. This suggests that future attempts to improve awareness and understanding should be tailored to meet specific needs. Chief executives, chief officers, and senior corporate strategy officers ought to know most about the potential and limits of the Power in practice. All elected members should be aware of the essential features of the Power, particularly in relation to partnership working where it creates significant opportunities. Likewise local stakeholders and partners to the LSP would benefit from an understanding of the essentials of the Power.

Take-up and use of the Well-Being Power

Use of the Well-Being Power remained limited over the life of the evaluation although it was applied across a wider range of policy areas. Potential use of the Power was considered more readily in local authority decision making although its actual use depended on the availability of more specific powers and the authority's preference to rely on these.

Lawyers played a critical role in encouraging or discouraging use of the Well-Being Power. Informed and experienced lawyers may be positive about use of the Power, but the majority of lawyers were cautious about its use. Chief officers and senior elected members could make a difference to how the Well-Being Power was used, particularly if they deployed it in support of their community leadership and place-shaping roles.

Social, economic and environmental uses of the Well-Being Power

The Well-Being Power was used in pursuit of social, economic and environmental goals, although initial use emphasised only economic and environmental goals. Social uses emerged later.

The requirement for local authorities to contribute to sustainable development through Sustainable Community Strategies (SCS) emphasises the importance of balancing the economic, social and environmental impacts and outcomes of a decision to make use of the Well-Being Power. The evaluation did not reveal any evidence of a balancing exercise having been undertaken as part of the decision-making process, although an awareness of sustainability has stimulated interest in local authorities.

Impact of the Well-Being Power on community leadership by local authorities

Overall the Power had less impact on promoting community leadership than other levers, specifically Community strategies and LSPs. In practice, the use of the Well-Being Power tended to reflect pre-existing community leadership capacity within local government rather than act as a catalyst for it.

Linkages with the wider policy programme for local government

The Well-Being Power is not readily identified as a key element in the local governance framework, other than in connection with the SCS. The original Government guidance on SCS contained a single paragraph on the Power. This proved insufficient to enable elected members and officers to understand the potential of the Well-Being Power in the context of the SCS.

Recent policy changes, particularly the opportunities available to local authorities in their 'place-shaping' role and the flexibility offered by the new performance framework, provide new impetus for local authorities to innovate to improve outcomes including making use of the Power.

Key Recommendations

Local authorities should adopt measures that promote an understanding of the concept of well-being and an awareness of the authority's capacity to contribute to this through its community leadership/place-shaping role. This may provide reassurance about use of the Well-Being Power and a sustainable knowledge base. Specifically local authorities should consider:

- providing targeted briefings for senior officers with policy and service responsibilities
- maintaining electronic information systems that give access to relevant advisory materials
- offering easy access to advice at the early planning stages of innovative projects
- giving periodic updates on the essentials of the Well-Being Power to elected members to promote awareness and confidence
- running an email advice service for elected members, through member services, allowing requests to be referred on for legal advice
- providing training and advisory support for lawyers, to promote confidence in their use of the Power
- establishing the range of powers available to LSP and LAA partners, so that all are fully aware of the legal as well as policy tools available to achieve joint objectives.

Central government has a key role to play in promoting awareness and understanding of the potential of the Well-Being Power. Specific activities it should consider include:

- referring to the relevance and potential of the Power in policy documents and procedures
- encouraging and responding effectively to section 5 applications requesting the removal of restrictions and limitations in other legislation that constrain use of the Power
- providing advice, guidance, identification of opportunities, and additional capacity within the National Association of Local Councils to enable parish councils to take advantage of the Power.

Conclusions

The Well-Being Power was named in order to encourage local authorities to think in broad terms about their goals. Since the 2000 Act the term 'well-being' has been used extensively with no regard to the Power. In this context realising the potential of the Power means that policy makers need to be more explicit in their usage and in identifying opportunities for the use of the Power in their policy proposals. Communities and Local Government, national local government organisations such as IDeA, LGA, LGIU and local authorities need to tailor advice and information, based on an assessment of how different stakeholder groups could benefit from different levels of understanding of the Power.

However, the evaluation also revealed the many and varied ways in which awareness and understanding of the Well-Being Power translate into use and are affected by a range of factors including:

- the capacity and capability of the local authority
- the strength of local partnership relationships and
- the nature of interactions between the centre and the locality

Providing more information and advice about uses of the Power will only have limited impact if these wider factors are not addressed.

The experiences of central and local government in relation to the Well-Being Power are a good illustration of how policy implementation can confound expectation. They demonstrate the need for policy makers to attend to implementation at the 'top' as well as 'bottom', and reinforce the importance of communication, clarity and consistency in dealings between the centre and localities throughout the implementation process.

Research Method

The evaluation framework that underpinned this evaluation is based upon the principles of theory driven evaluation, combining 'Theories of Change' as developed by the Aspen Institute (1995)⁷ and 'realistic evaluation' as developed by Pawson and Tilley (1997)⁸. A suite of methods were used in support of this evaluation framework including literature review, stakeholder workshops (38 participants), interviews with policy leads in central government (36) and representatives of professional networks (23), sample survey of lawyers (48), seven demonstration projects, and five longitudinal case studies.

⁷ Connell, J.P, Kubisch, A.C., Schorr, L.B., & Weiss, C.H. (Eds) (1995) *New approaches to evaluating community initiatives: volume 1 – concepts, methods and contexts* Aspen Institute, Washington DC

⁸ Pawson, R. and Tilley, N. (1997) *Realistic Evaluation*, London, Sage

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