

*Local Government Service  
Diversity: Practice, Expectations  
and Public Attitudes*

---

Summary Report



Local Government Service Diversity:  
Practice, Expectations and  
Public Attitudes  
Summary Report

York Consulting

July 2006

Department for Communities and Local Government: London

On 5th May 2006 the responsibilities of The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) passed to the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG)

Department for Communities and Local Government  
Eland House  
Bressenden Place  
London  
SW1E 5DU  
Telephone: 020 7944 4400  
Website: [www.communities.gov.uk](http://www.communities.gov.uk)

© *Queen's Printer & Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 2006*

*Copyright in the typographical arrangement rests with the Crown.*

*This publication, excluding logos, may be reproduced free of charge in any format or medium for research, private study or for internal circulation within an organisation. This is subject to it being reproduced accurately and not used in a misleading context. The material must be acknowledged as Crown copyright and the title of the publication specified.*

*Any other use of the contents of this publication would require a copyright licence.*

*Please apply for a Click-Use Licence for core material at [www.opsi.gov.uk/click-use/system/online/pLogin.asp](http://www.opsi.gov.uk/click-use/system/online/pLogin.asp), or by writing to the Office of Public Sector Information, Information Policy Team, St Clements House, 2-16 Colegate, Norwich, NR3 1BQ. Fax: 01603 723000 or email: [HMSOLicensing@cabinet-office.x.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:HMSOLicensing@cabinet-office.x.gsi.gov.uk)*

Further copies of this publication and alternative formats are available from:

DCLG Publications  
PO Box 236  
Wetherby  
West Yorkshire  
LS23 7NB  
Tel: 08701 226 236  
Fax: 08701 226 237  
Textphone: 08701 207 405  
Email: [communities@twoten.com](mailto:communities@twoten.com)

or online via the DCLG website: [www.communities.gov.uk](http://www.communities.gov.uk)

Printed in the UK on material containing no less than 75% post-consumer waste.

July 2006

Product Code: 06LGFG03986/a

## **INTRODUCTION**

1. The introduction of the power to promote or improve the economic, social or environmental well being of their areas and the general freedom to charge for discretionary services, have provided local authorities with the freedom to expand the range and nature of services they offer.
2. The study sought to:
  - Establish the current nature and extent of discretionary service provision by local authorities in England and Wales;
  - Analyse the relationship between the provision of discretionary services and the context within which local authorities operate;
  - Explore the processes that local authorities employ and may use in future to decide on charging policies for discretionary services;
  - Canvass the views of local authorities and to anticipate their reactions to the freedom to charge for discretionary services;
  - Establish the level of public awareness of, and attitudes towards, the provision of discretionary services.
3. The findings of the research are based on case studies with six authorities in England and Wales (carried out in two phases), surveys of all local authorities in England and Wales and a survey of 1,100 members of the public.

## **RANGE OF DISCRETIONARY ACTIVITIES**

4. Discretionary services are delivered by a significant proportion of local authority departments. They include some services that are common across most local authorities and others that are delivered to address specific local needs and priorities.
5. There is little evidence that local authorities are giving corporate consideration to the discretionary services they deliver. They are often seen as simply part of the range of activities that local authorities are engaged in, with little consideration given to whether or not there is a statutory duty.
6. It is important to recognise that discretionary services are not small in scale. Some, such as leisure services, are generally available and in some areas are used by a significant proportion of the local population. The scale of these services means that they require considerable staff and financial resources. An authority's history of providing some discretionary services often means that there is an expectation from residents that they

will continue to be available and therefore that it would be politically unacceptable for them to be withdrawn.

7. Some discretionary services offered by local authorities specifically target disadvantaged groups. Such services can carry political weight that is disproportionate to the level of use and can add significantly to statutory service provision.
8. The diverse nature of discretionary activities means that it is not possible to identify distinct trends in the range and nature of provision. Much relates to factors that influence individual services.
9. The availability of financial and human resources are critical factors influencing the provision of discretionary services. The approaches to service planning and development across authorities are significant influences on how discretionary activities develop, but there is little evidence of planning approaches specifically in relation to discretionary activity. Work with external partners is becoming increasingly important in shaping discretionary activities.
10. There is very little evidence from the case studies that local authorities are making explicit use of the Well Being Power. As powers had not been regarded as a significant limitation on activities in the past, the introduction of the Well Being Power has provided little stimulus to action.

## **CHARGING FOR DISCRETIONARY SERVICES**

11. Prior to the Local Government Act 2003, local authorities were able to charge for some, but not all, discretionary services. This created the potential for significant uncertainties regarding where charges could and could not be applied. The introduction of the new freedom to charge was intended to remove uncertainties regarding the potential to charge for services, which were seen as a potential barrier to the development of discretionary activities. Therefore, the new freedom was seen as providing a mechanism to facilitate the development of new discretionary activities.
12. Charging for discretionary services was commonplace prior to the granting of the new freedom. This was generating significant revenues. For example one district council was generating gross annual revenues of £5 million from the operation of its leisure centre, whilst lettings of community centres and other facilities generated upwards of £1.3 million per annum. One of the unitary case studies was generating annual revenues of around £18 million from its leisure services provision.
13. There was little evidence of specific policies regarding charges for discretionary provision, although more general charging policies incorporated discretionary services. Conventions have evolved around authorities' approaches to charging.

14. In general, the case study authorities were not experiencing practical constraints on charging for discretionary activities prior to the introduction of the freedom to charge. However, the cultures of individual authorities and specific service departments were creating barriers in some cases.
15. The general perspective from the case study authorities was that the freedom to charge would have little impact on the range and nature of services provided. This reflected the extensive use of charging prior to the introduction of the freedom.
16. Responses from members of the public indicate that they do not expect to pay charges for the services they receive from their local authority. However, they are, to some extent, willing to pay to make use of local authority services.

## CONCLUSIONS

17. Local authorities are not treating discretionary activities as distinct from the services they have a statutory duty to provide. They appear to be considered either as individual activities, or simply as part of the overall activities of the authority as a whole. Therefore, there is little evidence of specific corporate approaches to the development and delivery of discretionary activities.
18. The expectations of local residents place some constraints on the real flexibilities that local authorities have to withdraw from providing some services, even where technically they are free to do so. This can also limit the extent to which authorities are able to consider moving into new services.
19. It was impossible to collate a comprehensive base of data on the discretionary activities of local authorities and hence to provide a full overview of the range of factors that are influencing provision.
20. Whilst discretionary activities are seen as making an important contribution to the achievement of strategic objectives, it is not clear that there is always an explicit link between the factors driving corporate strategies and the discretionary services offered.
21. It is significant to note that we found little evidence that the Well Being Power is influencing approaches to developing discretionary activities. This is partly a reflection that they were not being constrained by a lack of available powers.
22. Local authorities are not considering discretionary activities as a specific element of their functions and this carries through to approaches to the implementation of charges.

23. We found little evidence that the freedom to charge for discretionary services is being seen as creating opportunities to develop new areas of activity or implement charges for existing free services.
24. The introduction of the freedom to charge has provided a useful clarification of the position in relation to the powers to charge for discretionary services where this was previously unclear. This has helped to give confidence that charges can remain and has avoided potential uncertainties when considering new service developments.
25. The development of new services is being heavily constrained by resource issues within authorities. The freedom to charge is not necessarily providing a sufficient incentive for local authorities to embark on new areas of activity.
26. The fact that charging by local authorities for discretionary services is already well-established means that residents are already accustomed to paying charges for at least some of the services they receive. However, whilst they are willing to pay for services, there is not an expectation that they will be required to pay. These views can create significant barriers to the introduction of charges and means that authorities must be clear and open about the rationale for charging.