



What's the

council ever
done for me?



school meals

housing

social care

parks

healthy living

libraries

swimming

leisure centres

regeneration

street cleansing

street lighting

refuse collection

highways

**LOCAL SERVICES
LOCAL SOLUTIONS**

Local services: Local solutions

The rapidly changing environment local government operates in throws up challenges that are becoming ever more complex in nature. Local authorities continue to respond to the diverse needs of different communities, whilst managing competing demands and priorities placed on it by central government and local citizens who utilise services.

In today's modern economy, consumers expect not only greater personalisation of services but local councils to act as a catalyst to bring together a range of public bodies and to have the ability to intervene decisively through the services it provides, in order to build community capacity and cohesion.

Local government is by its very nature part of the local community and the people that the public value the most are those who make an impact on their lives through the services they consume daily.

More and more the services local authorities provide are becoming integral to everyday living within communities. Be it social care support for the elderly to live independently, healthy eating and physical activity initiatives for the young or general improvement of the local streets and environment to enhance everyone's safety and quality of life.

This interface is crucial to the perception that the public have of local government in its entirety and yet this very area has in the past been undervalued by central government and deprived of resources ring fenced to other areas.

The Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) has always believed that locally accountable, locally provided services offer the most innovative, sustainable solutions for delivering excellent front-line services.

This campaign comes at an opportune time with debate raging over the future of local government in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. It is fundamentally important that policy makers recognise that the key to a renaissance in the value public services are held in is by understanding that the highly visible services operating within local communities are the ones the public hold in the highest regard.

This pamphlet considers ten important issues impacting on local services today and shows through a series of case studies the effect local services have on peoples' lives. APSE looks at these issues from the angle of policy implementers, the very people who by definition have to put policy into practice.



I split up with my partner shortly after Joshua was born. It was a struggle for me because childcare is so expensive and I simply don't have the family near me locally to help out. I had no choice but to give up work to look after Josh. Having worked since leaving school I felt lonely and vulnerable as a 'stay at home single parent'.

I was hoping that things would change when Josh got to school age but most employers need you in work before 9 o'clock, so for the first year of his school life I still couldn't find work to fit in. That's why I was delighted when Glasgow council introduced their breakfast schemes in all primary schools. For the first time in 7 years I was able to say to employers that I could start work at a reasonable time and still know that my son would have a happy start to the day, with a good meal inside him and in a safe environment. Best of all the scheme was free so I didn't have to worry about expensive fees. It made sense financially for me to find work and I didn't have to find the fees for a child minder which I could ill afford. Josh is happy and I am happy and less isolated!

Thank you Glasgow!

Local efficiency: Local solutions

The debate taking place at present says efficiencies are no longer just about back office functions. Shared services can also be front of house services and can mean sharing between different public bodies. No one can argue against the efficient use of public money, especially when resources are limited, but there are conflicting ideas about how those efficiencies can be achieved.

APSE wants to see public-to-public partnership arrangements with collaboration between councils and other agencies, not just on delivering efficient use of public resources but also on policy and joint outcomes, such as healthy communities and clean and safer neighbourhoods.

And when it comes to seeking ways to achieve efficient use of resources, APSE says this should not be just about looking at accounts and balancing the books. APSE believes councils should be investigating how public money can be best used to deliver across a range of public services.

This includes the use of community benefit strategies in all areas of public investment, with capital investment delivering on training and skills and revenue purchases helping sustain small to medium enterprises. There should be the sharing of best practice and the expansion of services to the public by the better use of assets and 'productive' time.

In Essex fifteen councils have got together to jointly procure their energy needs and in doing so have saved £1.7m per annum. This is money that can be redeployed to where it really matters, frontline services to local communities.

APSE believes local government has already shown it supports the best use of public money and has proved this by delivering on efficiencies, exceeding efficiency gains as well as being ahead of target.

It now wants to see efficiencies driven by service improvement and not by savings. When savings have to be made, these can be achieved through partnerships with other public sector agencies, and when councils want to enter into partnerships with each other they should have flexible legal powers to allow them to collaborate without complex company arrangements.

And, although it believes the quality and availability of services should never depend on the size of someone's bank balance, APSE is not against increasing revenue by charging for services... but only in appropriate circumstances where the most vulnerable citizens are guaranteed protection.



Mark was a shy 11 year-old and lacked self-confidence. He was overweight and was reluctant to get involved in activities with friends. Northampton Council set up a scheme called Body4Life. Mark was referred by his School Health Advisor to get involved in this 12-week programme to reduce weight, eat healthy and get fit. As his mum and dad were also invited to get involved, Mark didn't feel alone and decided to give it a go.

In the physical activity sessions, Mark could get involved in a range of activities, although he did prefer basketball and martial arts. He also started understanding more about what he was eating. Mark is now more confident, outgoing, has more energy and now wants to continue with physical activity with his new found friends.

Local integration: Local solutions

First impressions count and the old adage is now being used to argue that holistic services make a vital contribution to wider policies of local and national importance.

Those first impressions are heavily linked to the 'liveability' agenda, which focuses on what the public experience when they walk out of their front door. That initial snapshot can influence how a member of the community believes local public services are being delivered.

This highlights the importance of visible front line services, such as street cleansing, maintaining good quality parks, refuse collection, street lighting and maintaining roads and pavements.

And local government services again play a vitally important role in encouraging communities to adopt healthier lifestyles. Sports and leisure and catering can jointly promote the benefits of exercise and good diet and there is evidence that a holistic approach to services plays an important contributory role in addressing existing problems.

It makes sense that the public is more likely to attend leisure centres if there are good transport links, good street lighting in that area and decent cycle and footpaths. It's a joint approach.

Community safety is another agenda which has a contribution from a number of single services, such as CCTV and the role of

environmental design in 'designing out' crime. APSE argues the value of in-house services as a collective force for the delivery of these wider agendas.

These overlaps apply not only across single services within local authorities but across the public sector itself: the healthy living agenda cuts across the health service and community safety interfaces with the police.

APSE believes there must be links to the disciplines that apply across the whole of the public sector. We want to see local authorities lead health prevention rather than wait for the treatment of ill health. We want to see the experts in local authorities using their skills in environmental design to 'design out' crime. Try asking what parts of the wider policy objectives do they meet? And how can we involve in-house providers in regeneration schemes.

Remember the importance of those first impressions. Develop 'street scene' services to bring in cutting grass verges with cleaning the street, focusing on outputs as opposed to individual tasks. Once you do, you stop hearing: 'I clean the street' and 'I cut the grass'. Suddenly it's: 'Is the street clean?'

Sue from the council visits the homes of elderly clients for a couple of hours each week and to them she is worth more than her weight in gold and her visits mean much more than just clean sheets and a sparkling kitchen floor.

George, of Telford, looks after his bed-bound wife Ida, and, until he had two heart attacks himself in January did all the cleaning, cooking and shopping himself. Sue's help cleaning and making beds means George and Ida are able to stay at home together. And that means a lot to him. "All our friends are in the area and we have good neighbours which count for a lot these days," said George.



Local choice: Local solutions

We are continually being told we are not doing enough to give people more choice in public services, even though there have never been as many options on offer as there are today.

And we know; because we're in the front line, giving the public choice is not a universal option. It is difficult to offer in services that are, by necessity, rationed, and it has to be restricted in areas such as planning and trading standards.

However, we can point to major success stories where the public sector has developed choice, such as choice-based lettings for tenants of social housing, which has helped put pride back into the public housing sector. Other good examples exist including school meals, leisure activities, recycling and parks.

New technology has been harnessed to provide more options on services, while at the same time making them more efficient. Many councils have, for example, developed choice through

using new technology in appointment booking systems, another major step forward in giving the public wider choice about when and how they receive council services and at the same time creating more efficient services through minimising missed appointments.

We know there is more to do in this area. We know smarter solutions are needed to help raise the level of service offered to the public, and we're getting there.

What must be questioned is that choice in itself is an answer. It isn't. The public want greater personalisation of service, in packages that are co-ordinated and coherent, not fragmented and remote.



The Ogumbu family has lived in a council house in Brentford but the property has had little in terms of investment over the past 20 years. It is managed by Hounslow Homes who have been responsible for implementing the Government's Decent Homes Standard to refurbish council housing to an appropriate standard for the 21st century. The council's skilled workforce have installed a new kitchen and bathroom and made other improvements to the home – and the benefits are having an impact on the family and on their neighbours.

Mr. Ogumbu said: 'My home now looks like a top hotel!'

Local capacity: Local solutions

Councils have never solely been the provider of local public services, always having had a broader, social remit to be at the heart of the community, supporting and developing the groups and individuals within it.

One of the main benefits to the community has always been the local authority's ability to draw on direct resources, which in turn has enabled it to improve on the services it provides and have the capacity to influence other providers within local economies. Modern life often demands responses to emergency situations be these floods or terrorism. Being able to allocate direct resources in an integrated fashion is essential.

This allows for a much more integrated approach to developing 'joined up' services to meet the demands of communities and neighbourhoods, and through this the local authority can promote fair employment practices and act as a community leader.

When it simply acts as an enabler, much of that energy and impetus that helped put it at the heart of the community is taken away.

What concerns councils is that with a purely enabling role there could be a lack of democratic accountability. Elected members, voted in to represent the community, increasingly find themselves unable to respond to the concerns of the community by changing service provision if those services themselves are locked into a contractual structure.

A strong core of directly provided services allows authorities to respond to changes in priorities, both within neighbourhoods, and at a regional level. Councils can skill the workforce to deliver lasting changes, whilst retaining and maintaining knowledge within the authority, and re-draw in-house budgets faster than complex external contracts when re-prioritisation becomes necessary.

By maintaining capacity, local authorities can help ensure they have a strategic and operational role to play, but they would argue anyway that their experience and expertise must put them centre stage when it comes to delivering quality public services... and democratic accountability.



Margaret Fortheringham is a very happy tenant of South Lanarkshire Council. She lives in the Spittal area of Rutherglen in a home that was previously in need of improvement. As a result of the HomeHappening improvement programme she has had a new kitchen and bathroom fitted and now feels her home is at an appropriate standard for the 21st century.

'The council workforce has done a great job – my house now feels like a really modern family home and all of my neighbours feel the same about their homes.

I feel like the council respects me and cares about my welfare'.

Local quality: Local solutions

APSE accepts local government can learn from both the private and voluntary sectors - and vice versa - but believes you don't ignore the positive impact of service inspection and the development of a Best Value culture across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland

This shows that local authorities are bringing about significant improvements in local government services by sharing of best practice, appropriate performance management, democratic accountability, less central control and a culture of innovation.

Look at recent examples and you see services once outsourced being brought back in-house. This shows that outsourcing services is not a panacea for better provision and that local government itself can provide top quality services.

In some instances, services are no longer being provided locally, and in others local authorities have had to shoulder the

burden of increased costs with no knowledge transfer to the council from the private sector. APSE believes that where the private sector is used it is essential that key knowledge must be retained by the local authority.

The proof is in the pudding and impressive CPA results, the achievements with regard to efficiency targets, along with data collected by APSE, show local government services provided directly have made dramatic improvements.

Modern local government is about maximising the benefits for local communities by engaging with all agencies be they wider public sector, voluntary or private sector. Those who pursued a dated ideological agenda around outsourcing services on a narrow cost basis are increasingly rueing the inflexibility, static performance levels and loss of control this often brings.

Marilyn and Jane have been together for 10 years and live in Rhyl. They have a limited support network, both being disowned by their families at an early age for being gay. Over the years they have had verbal abuse and hate graffiti, causing them to move house frequently.

In 2002, their Council and the local Police introduced wardens to clean up the streets. Marilyn and Jane felt that they could talk more openly to their local warden, Louise, than going into the police station to make a formal report. They explained to Louise that they didn't feel safe – they didn't even use the local shops as they felt too intimidated by the gang of youngsters who hung around at the end of the street.

According to Marilyn and Jane, just by being there the wardens have made their streets friendlier – they can even report when their street light stops working and the Council come out and fix it. The gangs of youngsters no longer hang around causing a nuisance. They can live in their area with pride.



Local democracy: Local solutions

The issue of elected mayors is one the Government seems determined to keep on the agenda along with city regions.

There have undoubtedly been some successes among the small number of local authorities that are now headed by a directly elected mayor. However APSE believes that the issue is not one of structure but one of leadership. Numerous examples exist of large cities regenerating themselves with high profile leaders being pivotal to these achievements.

We also need to ensure that there is a valued role for existing ward councillors and that the voice of their constituents is not lost under any alternative systems. Local democracy is about delivering for local people, representing them and being not only their area champion, but also a place shaper.

More than once, councils have been told by central government that one of the keys to providing quality public services

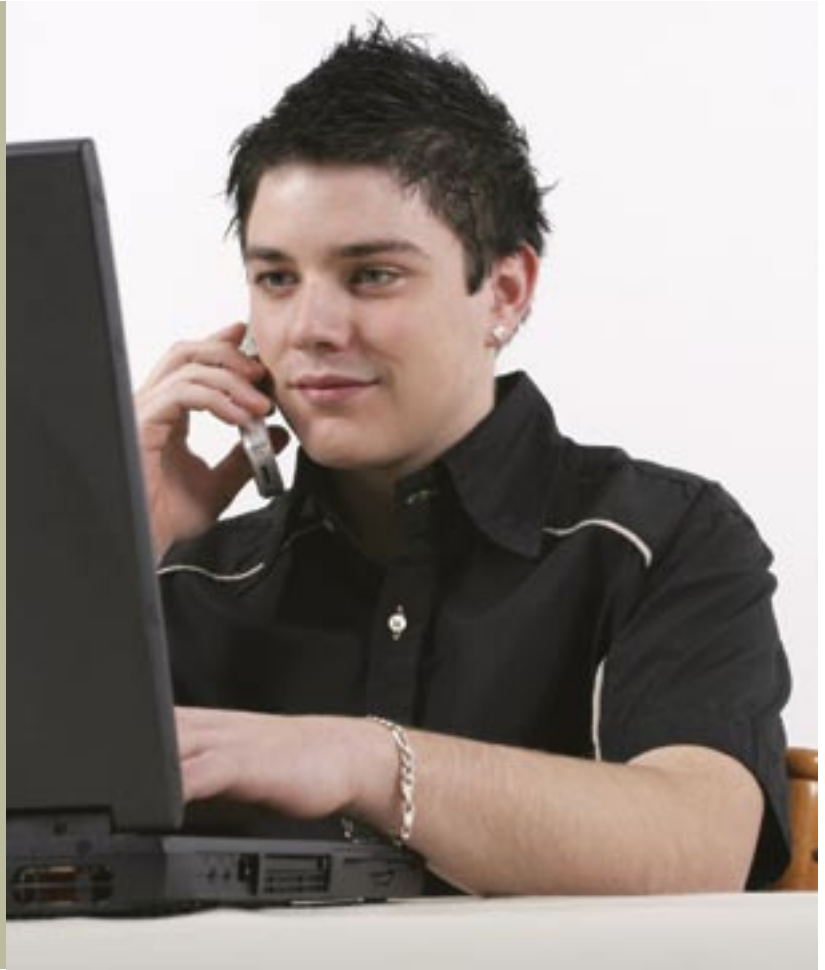
is for local authorities to listen to the grassroots, through such initiatives as neighbourhood forums, aimed at re-engaging the community. Where new political models exclude local communities there is a danger of the process overriding their needs and voices.

Good leadership is the key to effective representation, not the specific form it takes. Somewhere there will be room for elected mayors, but they will only ever be one of the solutions.

If communities want an elected mayor, then the machinery is there for them to make that decision. There should be no undue influence on our towns and cities to forsake tried and trusted political systems already in place and delivering for local people.

Ben lives in a deprived area of Preston and was working hard on shift in a low paid job. He had left school with few qualifications and had had little contact with information technology since leaving Ribbleson High School. He did not have the resources to buy a PC or get access to the internet nor did he know how to use it. Walking through the main bus station in Preston on the way to work early one morning he noticed an internet kiosk supplied by the council and a poster explaining where free training sessions were being held. After attending a one of the sessions at a local community centre he started using one of the kiosks and ended up learning about and applying for a job over the net.

He was successful in his application and now has a better job, earning more money, working better hours and with access to training that he could never have received in his previous job. He continues to use the free internet and video e-mail facilities in the 14 internet kiosks dotted around the city.



Local issues: Local solutions

Councils are entitled to ask how they are to balance new localism with the debate on service standards across the board and one of their first questions deserves to be 'what will be there to underpin and protect the standards for all citizens'?

The concept of devolved powers should not be about service delivery but about how neighbourhoods and communities can influence services and shape future improvements.

But before any responsibility can be passed down by councils, a good business case must be developed and there has to be in place a flexible framework based on democracy and the principals of due governance from those elected by the community to serve as councillors.

There is then the question of skills. No matter how committed and sincere communities are, it is unlikely there are, initially, the skills within them to manage complex contracts and potential

damage to economies of scale will also be a problem. Scarce resources need to be allocated in a fair and democratic fashion.

And what of local democracy? If the more vociferous communities demand changes of providers then those of a milder nature could end up with the worst services. This is where extremist groups could thrive, they could have a vehicle to deliver at grassroots level and flourish in one community while another community suffers social exclusion.

In all this, local councillors see a reduction in their influence on both the council and their neighbourhoods. If responsibility, and power, is being devolved then this should mean an enhanced and influential role for locally elected members. There can be no devolution without democracy. We need to enhance the role of ward councillors, not diminish it.

Local investment: Local solutions

When the Audit Commission reports that local government services have improved over recent years, it shows there should be confidence in local government's ability to get it right.

To follow that with confirmation that the efficiency targets called for by the Gershon Report are well on the way to being met, and there seems to be substantial evidence that local authorities are investing public funds effectively. In Wales and Scotland progress on the improvement programmes have been evidenced through the Welsh Assembly and Scottish Parliament.

But still there are calls for private money to be utilised to meet funding gaps, with any investment in the public sector matched by sweeping reforms, which must leave members and officers somewhat bemused. We know that the long term revenue implications on council tax of PFI being used to build capital infrastructure, such as waste disposal plants, make it unaffordable.

Prudential borrowing has been introduced and there is a responsibility on local authorities to use this as creatively as possible, such as Glasgow refurbishing its primary schools by this approach. Prudential borrowing provides a cheaper alternative to more expensive private finance options, which many local authorities will welcome, but then there is ring fencing of resources by central government, leading to restraint on investment.

There must be a level playing field on public finance, APSE believes, and local authorities, within the limits of their resources, should be free to decide their own priorities and invest as they see fit.

In terms of capital investment for each pound the public sector spends, how many jobs are created locally? How much support for training and skills is this going to lever in? What do communities want to achieve from new investment?

There is a domino effect on investment in the community, the benefits of which are not fully recognised. There has to be a broader calculation of the impact of investment on, say, parks and open spaces. Invest in a park and immediately there is the potential for the standard of health and the quality of life to go up.

Investment in school meals can lead to educating the wider community on healthy eating, and a decrease in spending to treat ill health and investment in waste disposal plants can be coupled with education on recycling and minimising waste.

There is a range of investments that can produce the domino effect and APSE believes it is vital for local authorities to be aware of just how far reaching their investments can be.



The Unionist and Nationalist communities in Northern Ireland have in some cases because of the infrastructure become polarised. The environmental enhancement programme in Dungannon and South Tyrone has been a unique but effective way of bringing the two communities together, transcending any political or religious barrier in the region. Communities have been galvanised to work together and provided with a sense of ownership and civic pride.

Mrs G Kirkwood of Belfast 15 felt moved to write to the Belfast Telegraph following a visit to the area. She explained “what a delight it was with no graffiti or litter – not even a single cigarette stub”. She also commented on the places where July 12 bunting was flying there were also Gaelic flags and stated “What about that for tolerance towards each other”. She finished by “offering congratulations to the people of the area and to the council”.

The result is that Dungannon is now a desirable place in which to work, live and socialise. Environmental improvements have been a simple but effective means of raising the standards within the community.

Local sustainability: Local solutions

Everyone looks for a bargain, but not every bargain carries a cut-price ticket.

Local government has learned quick fire solutions can have longer term implications. What may produce quick wins on savings can do long term damage. Cheapest is not always best.

APSE supports the need for sustainability to be a cornerstone of procurement decisions and believes it must be incorporated within all local procurement strategies.

It must be realised that short-term solutions to provide immediate funding can have long-term impacts with local authorities tied into lengthy contracts with a limited amount of flexibility, which is ultimately detrimental to the public.

We are all familiar with the example in Northern Ireland of the school built under a 25 year PFI deal that closed after 3 years and the long- term school meal contracts that had to be renegotiated with the private sector when Jamie Oliver came along.

There is a need for any large schemes to be piloted and only considered once there has been rigorous appraisal as well as rigorous scrutiny of the options available.

APSE believes there are good quality, sustainable solutions available and cost should only be one contributing factor to procurement decisions. It supports continuous improvement and building capacity to deliver services, while maintaining a degree of flexibility to change and adapt to the environment.

Local performance: Local solutions

It is perhaps now time for the debate to shift gear in accepting that as with other areas of the public sector staff are key assets to service improvements, that's what they've been trained for, that's where investment in skills and training has gone. So too we need to recognise that in-house employees are to an extent a controlled asset, a resource that can be redirected to meet new local needs and demands and respond to local and national service priorities; this is perhaps best illustrated in the area of school meals, with the response to the Jamie Oliver campaign.

Local government has empowered employees, given them responsibility to be the public face of a council and staff have risen to the challenge, at times quite magnificently, an example is where we have witnessed outstanding transformation in street scene services, making local environments cleaner, safer and greener.

These multi-skilled staff members are an essential tool in service delivery and APSE believes their rightful place is within the local authority. A council loses skills through transfer, often along with its ability to achieve savings.

Before any decisions are made on staff transfers, the influence on the remainder of council services and the impact on responsive and flexible service delivery has to be taken on board.

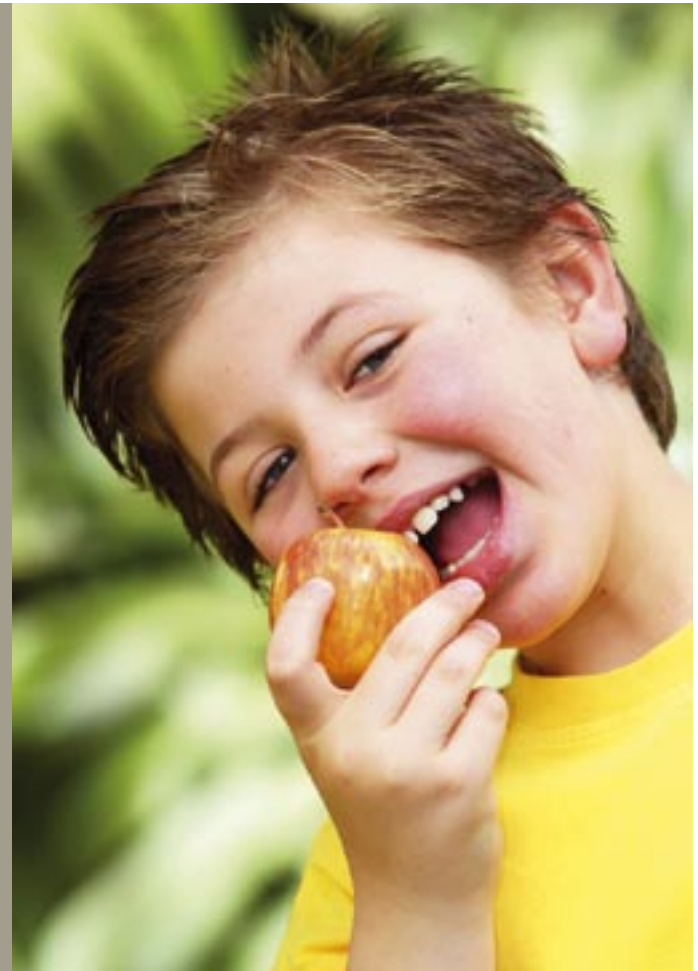
But it is not only the local economy that is affected by transfers, there is also an effect on the knowledge that an authority can draw on locally. Transferring jobs out of the locality through outsourcing services should be seen as a double blow to the people living in an area. Does it really add value to a local economy to transfer high value jobs and local supply chains hundreds of miles away?

“My older brother Sam was bullied at school. Mum says it’s because he’s fat. Mum says ‘we have fat genes’. I didn’t know what she meant. At school we’ve learnt all about healthy eating. Milk gives me strong teeth and bones. Fruit and vegetables help me grow. I’m not fat like our Sam. Mum learnt how to cook because a lady from Tower Hamlets council came to our school so Mum could learn to cook like the dinner ladies. We stayed behind after school and tasted everything. When Mum had finished the cooking we ate it for tea. It was delicious!”

*Tower Hamlets: Cookery Skills for Parents:
Delivery on Healthy Communities*

Fact: Councils are essential to improving the health, well being and life expectancy of UK citizens.

Fact: Obesity reduces life expectancy. A man in Kensington and Chelsea will live to an average age of 79.8 years. A man in Glasgow will live to an average of just 69.1 years.





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