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News release

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Councils should be able to explain charging variations to the public

A report from the Accounts Commission says that charges for council services should be consistent, clear and easily explained to the public. It also says that councils should compare their charges with others and be able to explain any significant differences.

Councils are able to set charges for many of their services. This can help to keep services running or help the council to meet particular policy priorities. The report says councils should ensure that their charging policy is consistent with policy priorities. For example high sports and leisure charges might work against the aim to promote a healthy lifestyle.

Charging for services like adult social care, sports and leisure, planning and building consents and car parking raises more than £1.3 billion a year, equivalent to over 50 per cent of the amount raised through council tax in 2012/13.

The report says councils have to understand the needs of service users and make better use of cost information to make informed decisions on the level at which to set charges. Without this there is a risk of the public paying too little or too much.

Charging for services: are you getting it right? highlights the different approaches to charging across local authorities and sets out good practice. It found that there are significant variations in charges in different councils. For example home care ranges from £8.56 to £23.70 per hour and pest control from free to £102.

The public may view these variations as unfair or confusing so the report says it is important that councils benchmark their charges and can explain why their approach is not the same. It may be due to differences in charging policy, the level of service provided, or local circumstances.

Chair of the Accounts Commission, John Baillie, said: "These are financially tough times for councils and the public alike. It is important that councils have the ability to set appropriate charges for the services they provide but people also want to know exactly what they are paying for and that the charge is fair.

Many councils have the elements of good charging policies in place and we hope councillors and officers will be able to use this report to improve the way they deal with charging even further."

The report is the latest in the *How councils work* series which aims to stimulate change and help local authorities continue to improve their performance.

It features case studies from councils which highlight areas of good practice like setting out a corporate policy and carrying out rolling reviews. It also contains a checklist for councillors and officers to use when considering charges.

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Notes to editors

1. This is the sixth report in the *How councils work* series. Previous topics were the roles, responsibilities and working relationships of councillors and council officers; councils' use of arms-length organisations (ALEOs); the management of costs; performance management and improvement and capital project management.

2. Audit Scotland has prepared this report for the Accounts Commission for Scotland. All Audit Scotland reports published since 2000 are available at www.audit-scotland.gov.uk

- The Accounts Commission is the public spending watchdog for local government. It holds councils and various joint boards and committees in Scotland to account and help them improve. It operates impartially and independently of councils and of the Scottish Government, and meets and reports in public
- Audit Scotland is a statutory body set up in April 2000, under the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act, 2000. It provides services to the Auditor General for Scotland and the Accounts Commission for Scotland.