

Leisure and Council trading

One of the areas to look for economies lies in Council trading activities. Some Councils spend large sums on setting up business activities in competition with the private sector. Particular favourites are to provide a wide range of leisure services. Where these become loss making, and subsidised, they can impede provision by the private sector whilst also lumbering taxpayers with liabilities. Councils claiming to be short of money should sell off businesses that the private sector can run better, transferring the risk of losses away from taxpayers.

There is a case for joint use facilities shared between secondary schools and the wider community. Swimming pools, gyms, courts, pitches and the rest can be reserved for school use during weekdays in term time, but made available to others in the evenings, at week-ends and during the school holidays. Good schemes can bring more capital to improve school facilities, with returns from charging the wider community. Councils can of course buy season tickets for free access for groups of people they wish to help.

Some Councils have large asset holdings offsetting large debts. Given the high level of total public sector debt there is a case for reviewing these holdings and drawing up a disposal programme to bring debts down where a Council claims it does not have enough money.

Council provision of car parking and waste services cause frictions with taxpayers. Waste disposal for households is meant to be a free service, covered out of general taxation and the Council Tax. Many Councils now have decided that garden waste, larger items and other specially designated waste should be paid for by the householder. Car parks long owned and paid for by taxpayers are used as ways of getting a substantial income out of part of the community. This can become a flare point with voters, and can put people off going into town centres where the parking is expensive and the enforcement often energetic and hostile. In both these areas there is a conflict between the concept of community service and the use of public assets with a wish by Councils to generate income to spend on other things.