

# A Small Price to Pay?

The pros and cons of  
charging charity beneficiaries

January 2021  
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# Introduction

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## **Can (and should) charities charge their beneficiaries to make up for falling fundraising income? And what happens when they do?**

The Covid pandemic has demonstrated how vulnerable many fundraising techniques are to the effects of lockdown. Events, street collections, shops, street fundraising, and door to door fundraising have all been devastated this year. So as fundraising income is depressed, in some cases possibly for years, how can charities make up for the loss in income? This paper looks at the legal, practical, mission and pricing challenges of charging beneficiaries, as an alternative source of revenue.

Charities offer a diverse range of services, from addiction recovery programmes and pet hospitals to community minibus services and art galleries. Deciding whether to charge beneficiaries for these services can elicit strong views, even outside of a pandemic. The significance of the decision, and the potential implications resulting from charging, varies enormously depending on several factors.

Legally, charities are entirely permitted to charge beneficiaries for services they provide, and financial data for the sector suggests that there are significant benefits of doing so. We then consider evidence from a wide range of research to help answer some key questions facing charities when considering their approach towards charging. This includes:

- Evaluations of the impact of pricing strategies for specific development and health interventions
- Research into pricing and the psychology of consumption

There is limited research directly comparing charities that charge and those that do not. Two recent research studies both found that there are no significant differences between organisations within the same sector that charge and those that do not. In 2018, Flóra Raffai compared charging and non-charging UK sight loss charities through an online survey and analysis of 94 charity accounts, around half of which were charging for services.<sup>1</sup>

This study considered the quality of charities, mission focus, staff morale, volunteer commitment, and their relationship with beneficiaries. In 2016, the Association of Independent Museums (AIM) commissioned a survey of over 300 museums, plus stakeholder consultations and 20 in-depth case studies, to investigate the impact of different pricing strategies on factors including: visitor numbers, diversity of visitors, income, visitor satisfaction/quality of visit, and reputation.<sup>2</sup> The narrow focus of existing research highlights a need for further research into the effects of charging, and considering more fully the views of staff, volunteers, and beneficiaries – particularly among organisations that change their pricing policies.

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<sup>1</sup> Raffai, Flora. 2018. *Fee or free: should charities charge beneficiaries fees for services?*. Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation.

<sup>2</sup> DC Research. 2016. *Taking Charge – Evaluating the Evidence: The Impact of Charging or Not for Admissions on Museums*.

# 1. What does the law say about charities charging for services?

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From a legal perspective, charities are entirely entitled to charge fees for their services. The Charity Commission recognises that, *'there is no objection in principle to the charging of fees for services provided by charities.'*<sup>3</sup> A number of charities routinely charge fees for their services, such as independent schools, private hospitals, and care homes.<sup>4</sup> In addition, *'charities can charge fees that more than cover the cost of providing services and facilities, as long as the charges are reasonable and required to carry out the charity's aims, for example in maintaining or developing the services it provides.'*<sup>5</sup>

To justify their charitable status, charities which charge fees need to ensure that people who cannot afford to pay the fees have an opportunity to benefit in a way that relates to the charity's aims. In every case, it will depend on the actual provision and the circumstances of the particular fee-charging charity whether the provision of benefits to the poor is more than minimal or tokenistic. For instance, charitable fee-charging schools usually need an income from fees to be viable, making it legitimate for their admissions to be weighted in favour of potential beneficiaries able to pay fees.<sup>6</sup> Charity Commission guidance lists illustrative examples of ways in which fee-charging charities 'might provide benefits for the poor,' such as offering bursaries, reduced membership, or reduced cost of tickets or treatment.<sup>7</sup> Since 2008, charities have also been legally required to report on public benefit within their Trustees' Annual Report. However, researchers have found that the requirements are often not met, including a lack of discussion about the implication of fees on accessibility.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Charity Commission. 2013. *Analysis of the law relating to public benefit.*

<sup>4</sup> It is estimated 27% of private hospitals are registered charities and recent research estimates that 2,000 care homes have charitable status. Collinge, Tom. 2020. *Charity care homes: Small but impactful.* NPC Blog.

<sup>5</sup> Charity Commission. *MP Factsheet: Public benefit and charities.*

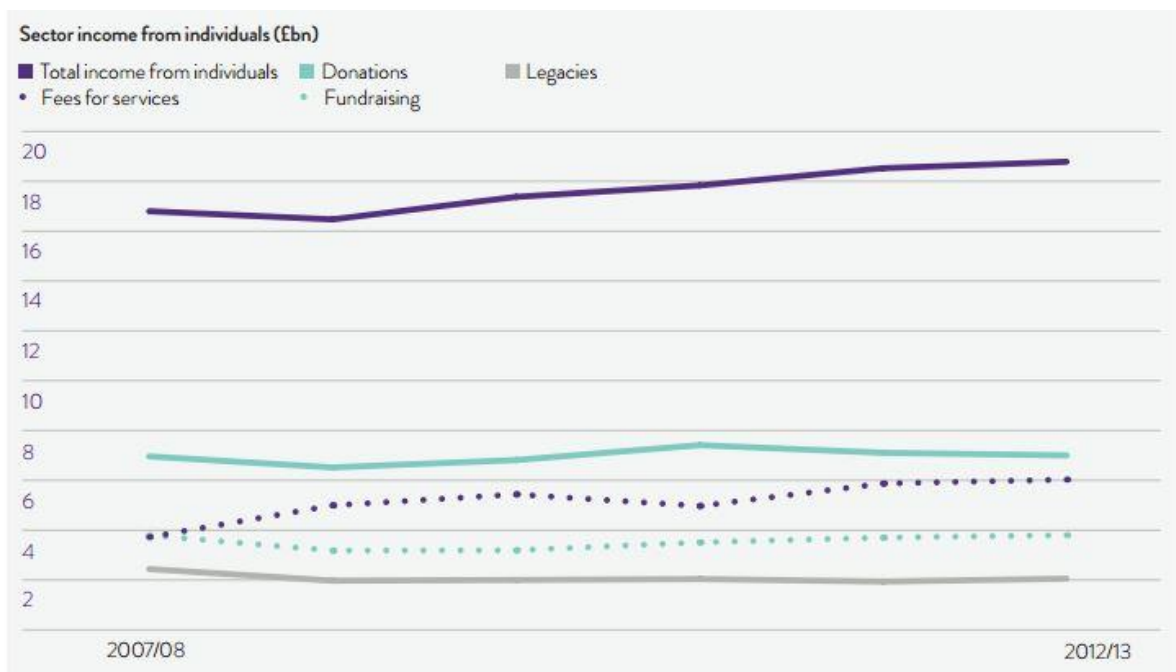
<sup>6</sup> Charity Commission. 2013. *Analysis of the law relating to public benefit.*

<sup>7</sup> Charity Commission. 2013. *Guidance: - Charging for services: illustrative examples of benefits for the poor.*

<sup>8</sup> Charity Commission. 2018. *Transparency Data: Public benefit reporting by charities;* Civil Society News. 2011. *Most fee-charging charities do not consider affordability in their annual reports.*

## 2. What impact is charging likely to have on revenue generation?

Following the financial crash of 2007/08, the charity sector experienced a significant fall in income. One of the few sources of income that bucked the trend was fees charged for services provided by charities. By 2015, NCVO reported that *'donations have recently recovered to pre-recession levels [and] the significant growth in income from individuals has been driven by fees charged by charities for services.'*<sup>9</sup>



The report continues to suggest *'relying on this as a major source of future income growth may be unsustainable or undermine organisations' charitable aims in some parts of the sector.'*<sup>10</sup> NCVO's lead in Sustainable Funding, Rosaline Jenkins, caveated this claim, particularly given how charging for services has been one of the few growth areas. She maintains that charging for services may be key for charities to establish sustainable funding by diversifying their income and moving away from a dependency on grants.<sup>11</sup>

Raffai's survey of sight loss charities concluded that *'charities who charge generally have more income, more numerous and diverse sources of income, larger staff numbers, and a larger community of beneficiaries.'*<sup>12</sup> Research into the impact of museums' pricing strategies found the vast majority of museums that charge for admission report on the positive impact this has on

<sup>9</sup> NCVO. 2015. *Financial Sustainability review of the Voluntary Sector*.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Jenkins, Rosaline. 2015. *Charging for services, trading and ethics (put a poka-yoke in your pipeline)*. NCVO blog.

<sup>12</sup> Raffai, Flora. 2018. *Fee or free: should charities charge beneficiaries fees for services?* Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation.

income. However, charging is not the biggest influencing factor on income from other sources, such as on-site secondary spend and spontaneous donations.<sup>13</sup>

Within some sectors, it may be questioned whether charging would really help enable sustainability. For instance, services focused on the most vulnerable and needy may struggle to find beneficiaries who are able to afford to pay for them, especially at a price to generate sufficient profit for re-investment in free services. Fee charging services may also have new costs associated with them, such as establishing a trading arm and putting resources into marketing, means assessment, and fee collection.<sup>14</sup> Some are concerned that if charities start charging fees, existing public funders may see it as an opportunity to reduce funding.<sup>15</sup> Raffai downplays such concerns in their research, acknowledging that the charging sight loss charities they surveyed have more diverse sources of income, and suggesting this may be because they appear *'to conform to the government ideal of social enterprises, which would increase their legitimacy in the eyes of funders.'*<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> DC Research. 2016. *Taking Charge – Evaluating the Evidence: The Impact of Charging or Not for Admissions on Museums*.

<sup>14</sup> Jew, Phil. 2011. *Charging at the point of delivery*. NCVO guest blog post.

<sup>15</sup> Jones, Jonathan (2015) 'The most unsayable truth: museums are not the NHS – they should charge us' The Guardian. 23.7.2015.

<sup>16</sup> Raffai, Flora. 2018. *Fee or free: should charities charge beneficiaries fees for services?* Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation.

### 3. Can charging undermine a charity's mission or legitimacy?

Whilst charging fees seems integral to the nature of a private school or private hospital, some dispute whether these institutions even ought to have charitable status. The question of whether some charities ought to charge fees elicits fiercely held opinions. Roberta Smith argues that a museum's decision whether or not to charge for admission 'encodes the institution's core values — its sense of itself, its mission and its public — and broadcasts them to that public. It's like a thumbprint, a tiny yet accurate key to a whole identity.'<sup>17</sup> Noting that people are happy to pay to attend rock concerts and sports events, museum director Philippe de Montebello asked, '*what is it about art that it shouldn't be paid for?*'<sup>18</sup> Others argue, like public libraries, museums should be equally available to all, for the good of the individual and society as a whole. In this vein, museum director Glenn Lowry maintains that '*it's almost a moral duty that museums should be free.*'<sup>19</sup>

In some sectors, the idea of charging for services provokes fears that charging could destroy relationships with staff, volunteers, and beneficiaries. For instance, within the advice and advocacy sector, Phil Jew recognises that whilst some see charging as an opportunity to make services sustainable, there are also '*those who would quit today if their organisation levied a charge.*'<sup>20</sup> Their concern is that charging a fee for welfare or rights advice, or health and social care advocacy, would fundamentally change the nature of the service and the relationship between advocate or adviser and the client – potentially leading to a breakdown in trust. In contrast, some have noted that in the area of disability, the notion of 'service users' or 'beneficiaries' becoming 'customers' may be seen as an empowering change.<sup>21</sup> Raffai found that the fears of many non-charging charity practitioners, (that charging for services would weaken their legitimacy as charities or compromise their ability to achieve their social mission), were seemingly unfounded, since charities that did charge experienced neither higher levels of mission drift, nor the erosion of their intrinsic quality.<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, charities must consider how charging for a service may affect their particular mission and values. They should also be aware that charging could change their organisational culture. As NCVO advice notes, '*If you've been used to delivering subsidised services with a grant, it can be a bit of a culture shock to have to start talking about sales forecasts.*'<sup>23</sup> Charities need to consider how this may affect both working culture and their brand. Selling goods and services may require staff to employ different skills, (for instance in marketing and financial planning), and potentially even require new job roles.

<sup>17</sup> Smith, Roberta. 2006. *Should Art Museums Always Be Free? There's Room for Debate*. New York Times.

<sup>18</sup> Observer. 2018. *With Admission Fees, the Question Is: What Should a Museum Be?* Accessed 27/01/2021

<sup>19</sup> Smith, Roberta. 2006. *Should Art Museums Always Be Free? There's Room for Debate*. New York Times.

<sup>20</sup> Jew, Phil. 2011. *Charging at the point of delivery*. NCVO guest blog post.

<sup>21</sup> Jenkins, Rosaline. 2015. *Charging for services, trading and ethics (put a poka-yoke in your pipeline)*. NCVO blog.

<sup>22</sup> Raffai, Flora. 2018. *Fee or free: should charities charge beneficiaries fees for services?* Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation.

<sup>23</sup> NCVO. *Charging for services: Advice for charities on charging for services*. NCVO Knowhow webpage. Accessed 16.11.20.

To make an informed decision on whether to start charging for a previously free service, NCVO recommends undertaking an options analysis.<sup>24</sup> Charities need to seek to understand the pros and cons of cutting services, reducing the quality or extent of services, or charging for them in some way, from both their beneficiaries perspective as well as their own (for instance, how would subsidising services affect their other activities?) . Engaging with existing and potential service users can help charities understand what they value about the service, and how best to differentiate their service from alternatives.

When making any changes to pricing it is especially important to: recognise the role of people's perceptions, communicate clearly with stakeholders and the local community about the reasons for the changes, and ensure that staff and volunteers 'buy into' the approach (providing training where needed) and are confident in communicating it. Market testing may be a useful part of the process – getting feedback about how people feel about the pricing system and payment process, as well as how they value the service and its perceived worth to them.

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<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*

## 4. Is free necessarily better?

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Despite strongly held opinions (by some) that certain services should always be free, evidence does not show that providing services for free necessarily leads to improved outcomes. One study researching benefits to a service being free looked at variation in access to free health care occurring under apartheid in South Africa, and found children given access to free health care saw substantial improvements in weight-for-age z-scores.<sup>25</sup> However, research considering the impact of removing user fees for healthcare in rural Ghana found free care improved the health of anaemic children, but had no health effect on the study population as a whole, or on the incidence of self-reported illness.<sup>26</sup> There is also evidence showing outcomes may sometimes be improved if beneficiaries have to pay a charge rather than receive a service for free. For instance, one study found malaria bed nets that were paid for were more likely to be used correctly than those obtained for free. To raise levels of use, the study recommends tailored intervention strategies informed by data on specific non-use patterns that depend on the cultural beliefs or factors that drive the behavioural decisions of the target population.<sup>27</sup>

There is anecdotal evidence that people may attach more value to services if they have to pay for them and are more likely to use them as intended. Jenkins describes how NCVO offered training for free and found that people would fail to turn up or attend, be disengaged, and leave early. When the same training was later offered at a price, delegates were enthusiastic and later reported using what they learnt (and the trainers were happier too).<sup>28</sup> In the debate about museums charging entrance fees, it is sometimes argued that visitors may value museums more if they pay for entry. Perhaps unsurprisingly, analysis of visitor data suggests that 'dwell' times are typically longer for museums that charge for admissions, whilst free entry museums have higher rates of repeat visits. However, for overall enjoyment of visits, there was very little difference.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Tanaka, Shinsuke. 2014. *Does Abolishing User Fees Lead to Improved Health Status? Evidence from Post-apartheid South Africa*. American Economic Journal: Economic Policy, 6 (3): 282-312.

<sup>26</sup> This study used data from a randomized experiment, which randomly assigned households to free healthcare or a control group of user fees. Powell-Jackson et al. 2014. *Who benefits from free healthcare? Evidence from a randomized experiment in Ghana*. Journal of Development Economics. 107: 305-319.

<sup>27</sup> Moscibrodzki, Patricia et al. 2018. *Free versus purchased mosquito net ownership and use in Budondo sub-county, Uganda*. Malaria Journal 17: 363.

<sup>28</sup> Jenkins, Rosaline. 2015. *Charging for services, trading and ethics (put a poka-yoke in your pipeline)*. NCVO blog.

<sup>29</sup> DC Research. 2016. *Taking Charge – Evaluating the Evidence: The Impact of Charging or Not for Admissions on Museums*.

## 5. How should charities price their services?

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Where a service has previously been free, some may fear that it will no longer be used if it is then charged for (particularly if alternatives remain free of charge), and so they may be tempted to charge low prices. However, as Clark argues, 'under-pricing can be just as perilous ... Price is often a proxy for quality, and when you [price the service] at the low end, it signals that you're unsure of [its] value — or the value just isn't there. Either can be alarming for prospective clients.'<sup>30</sup> AIM's research found museums that introduced an admission charge noted that the barrier and challenge around this occurs irrespective of the price charged. So, changing from free to a low price does not reduce this challenge, and can cause issues around perceptions of low price equating low quality, as well as concerns that income from admissions charging may not be sufficient to cover the operational cost and/or provide a sufficient return.<sup>31</sup>

Whilst charging may promote an appreciation of quality for services that are in demand, not all services offered by charities are in demand. Some charities are trying to reach groups who do not want their help and are not interested in what they have to offer. The most vulnerable, most disengaged, and most at risk should not miss out because access to services are limited to only those who are prepared to pay something towards them. Having the financial ability to pay also does not necessarily imply capability to decide to pay.<sup>32</sup> Charities need to consider what happens if a beneficiary stops paying for a service for any reason. Would they turn them away or have built in provision for this possibility? There may be some services that charities will never charge for as a point of principle, for instance a charity may not charge to help people in crisis but may charge the same beneficiaries for other services once they are more stable.

Research demonstrates pricing policies do not just influence demand for a product or service, but also consumption – the extent to which customers use products or services they have paid for.<sup>33</sup> Research has repeatedly shown the extent to which customers use services they have paid for determines whether they will continue to use the service and recommend it to others. Higher consumption means higher sales and customer retention. Whilst profit is not the end goal for charities, it is important to charities that any services they provide are actually used, whether paid for or not.

Just as evidence shows people may attach more value to, and therefore be more likely to use, services or products that they have paid for compared to obtained for free, there is also evidence that people are more likely to use services when they are aware of its cost and feel 'out of pocket'.

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<sup>30</sup> Clark, Dorie. 2017. *Why you should charge clients more than you think you're worth*. Harvard Business Review.

<sup>31</sup> DC Research. 2016. *Taking Charge – Evaluating the Evidence: The Impact of Charging or Not for Admissions on Museums*.

<sup>32</sup> Jew, Phil. 2011. Charging at the point of delivery. NCVO guest blog post.

<sup>33</sup> Gourville, John and Soman, Dilip. 2002. *Pricing and the Psychology of Consumption*. Harvard Business Review.

This is due to what is known as the 'sunk-cost effect': people feel compelled to use products they have paid for in order to get their money's worth. Behavioural economist Richard Thaler gives the example of a man paying a \$300 annual membership fee for a tennis club. After just a fortnight, he develops an acute case of tennis elbow but continues to play despite the pain, saying: "*I don't want to waste the \$300.*"<sup>34</sup>

It is common for organisations to increase sales by masking the costs of their services, for instance through advance sales, season tickets, and bundling small costs into a single fee. However, such pricing practices risk prioritising a short-term increase in sales over long-term customer retention, since masking how much a customer has spent on a service may decrease the likelihood that they will use the service, let alone pay for it again in the future. By bringing attention to the cost, payments that occur at or near the time of consumption (unlike season tickets for instance) boost the likelihood of its consumption. Analysis of a gym's records showed that whether members made annual, semi-annual, or quarterly payments, use was the highest in the months immediately following payment and declined steadily until the next payment. Members who paid each month (and so were regularly reminded of its cost) used the gym most consistently and were most likely to renew their membership.

Whilst price bundling may be deemed a necessary tool to promote initial sales, organisations may still be able to psychologically link payments to benefits by highlighting the prices of individual items after the payment has been made. For instance, Gourville and Soman suggest health maintenance organisations in the US could promote preventive care by itemizing the cost of individual services within bundled fees, to encourage customers to get check-ups, immunizations, (and so on), that they have already paid for. It may be beneficial for charities to be transparent about the cost, price, and value of components of the services they offer, in order to help service users realise the sunk cost – even if the actual cost to them is less or non-existent.

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<sup>34</sup> Gourville, John and Soman, Dilip. 2002. *Pricing and the Psychology of Consumption*. Harvard Business Review.

## 6. How can charities improve accessibility to services?

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All charities providing services should monitor the demographics of those accessing their services, particularly before and after any changes are made to pricing strategies. After Labour reintroduced free admission to national museums in 2001, admissions rose significantly (on average 70% in the first year of free admission), however it does not seem to have significantly increased the diversity of visitors as intended.<sup>35</sup> Some have argued that national museums should reintroduce charges (whilst retaining free entry to certain groups), in part to help widen access by allocating some of the extra income gained to inclusion and outreach programmes.<sup>36</sup>

AIM's research on independent museums across the UK concludes that charging does not affect the social mix of visitors to museums; visitors to all museums (free or not) tend to underrepresent lower social grades and over-represent higher social grades than in wider society.<sup>37</sup> This may indicate a charge is not the deterrent stopping more diverse audiences visiting, and/or those museums that do charge have not significantly increased diversity through inclusion programmes.

To make a service accessible to those on lower incomes, charities may offer discounts for a service, or a free or lower-rate membership subsidised by higher-rate payers. If some service users are being charged more to subsidise the cost of the same service for others, care needs to be taken that a two-tier service does not arise and consequently perpetuate inequalities.<sup>38</sup> Paying for a service may not only lead service users to value it more but may also lead them to having different expectations of the service (for example around availability and results).

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<sup>35</sup> Centre for Public Impact. 2016. *Case Study: Universal free admission to the UK's national museums*.

<sup>36</sup> Hunt, Tristram. 2011. *We need to start charging for museums and galleries again*. The Guardian. Accessed 6.3.2011.

<sup>37</sup> DC Research. 2016. *Taking Charge – Evaluating the Evidence: The Impact of Charging or Not for Admissions on Museums*.

<sup>38</sup> Jew, Phil. 2011. *Charging at the point of delivery*. NCVO guest blog post.

## Conclusion

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With or without the pressure that a pandemic has put on charities, there is no *'one size fits all'* when it comes to considerations around charities charging beneficiaries for services, and the events of 2020 have only made these decisions harder. Charging offers charities a legal and potentially viable method for income generation in response to falling revenue from other sources such as fundraising, although the implications of charging vary depending on a range of factors. Charities must consider how charging for a service may affect their organisation's mission, values, transparency, accountability, equality and diversity, and how best to guard against these principles being compromised.<sup>39</sup> The research into museum charging highlights how the same charging and pricing strategies had varying types and levels of impact, depending on the museum's context and characteristics, its collection and customers, and its organisational culture and communication.<sup>40</sup>

Decisions around pricing strategies should be based on service user data and research, as well as an understanding of the charity's offer and audience. Given the variation between sectors, more research is needed to take into account these differences. Longitudinal studies would be particularly valuable to consider the implications for charities before, during, and after changing their charging policies.

Perhaps the most important conclusion is that charging beneficiaries is something that every charity whose income has fallen this year should be looking at more closely. It can be an effective way to boost income and, in some cases, increase take up, revenue, and the perceived value of the service. It is a false dichotomy to assume that doing good has to be paid for by somebody other than the recipient of that good. There is no doubt that this is an issue that charities should be looking at with great thought and care. Ultimately, if the benefits of a service can continue when otherwise they would not, that in itself can only be good.

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<sup>39</sup> Jenkins, Rosaline. 2015. *Charging for services, trading and ethics (put a poka-yoke in your pipeline)*. NCVO blog.

<sup>40</sup> DC Research. 2016. *Taking Charge – Evaluating the Evidence: The Impact of Charging or Not for Admissions on Museums*.

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## About nfpSynergy

**nfpSynergy is a research consultancy that aims to provide the ideas, the insights and the information to help non-profits thrive.**

We have over fifteen years of experience working exclusively with charities, helping them develop evidence-based strategies and get the best for their beneficiaries. The organisations we work with represent all sizes and areas of the sector and we have worked with four in five of the top 50 fundraising charities in the UK.

We run cost effective, syndicated tracking surveys of stakeholder attitudes towards charities and non-profit organisations. The audiences we reach include the general public, young people, journalists, politicians and health professionals. We also work with charities on bespoke projects, providing quantitative, qualitative and desk research services.

In addition, we work to benefit the wider sector by creating and distributing regular free reports, presentations, and research on the issues that charities face.

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