

Newcastle, UK

Participatory Budgeting for a Vibrant City

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Summary

Through an international learning exchange between eight European cities, Newcastle City Council became inspired to use participatory budgeting: getting local people to understand how public money is used and involving them in decision-making around it. This case study illustrates the value of sharing experiences of empowerment internationally and explains how participatory budgeting (PB), as developed originally in Brazil, has been adapted to support community empowerment in the northern UK city of Newcastle upon Tyne. Vince Howe is Social Policy Team Manager at Newcastle City Council.

Background

The budget for Newcastle City Council is based on a vision to create a vibrant, inclusive, safe, sustainable and modern European city. The main budget for Newcastle City Council is the General Revenue Account. The funding comes from the government, a share of national business rates and Council tax. For every £10 spent, £6.20 is from the government and a share of national business rates; and £3.80 is from Council Tax. In January of each year the Council's Resident's Panel – made up of 1,000 people across the city – agree to take part in surveys about the budget. In February, the Council's Executive looks at the results of the consultation and makes a final recommendation on the proposals. The Council's budget and the Council Tax for the year will then be set at the City Council meeting in March.



Young people gathering for a Udecide event to vote how to spend money on improving participation in sport.

What happened and why was it significant?

In 2005 Newcastle was invited to join *Partecipando*, a European Learning Network. This network linked Newcastle with eight other European cities to consider how to involve citizens in decisions made by public bodies. Listening to the experience of our Italian colleagues, we became interested in participatory budgeting and the possibility of getting local people to understand better how public money is spent; and of involving them in making decisions around this expenditure. We contacted the Participatory Budgeting Unit (PBU) in Manchester and discovered that, while participatory budgeting was well known in South America and Europe, little had been done in the UK. Feeling inspired by the experience of PB in other countries we decided to test the idea in Newcastle.

To do this we needed the support of senior politicians and senior officers. Fortunately they were open to new ideas and saw the potential of PB to improve relationships between the City Council, its partners and residents. Funding for two pilot studies was obtained from central government through the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit (NRU) and the Safer Stronger Communities project. The Liveability pilot covered three wards and focused on environmental improvements to create a cleaner, greener and safer community. The Children and Young Peoples (CYP) pilot was organised across the whole city and looked specifically at the needs of the younger generation.

The Liveability pilot began with a community lunch for residents from the three wards (13,000 households), Denton, Lemington and Woolsington, who were interested in finding out about PB. A working group of 30 residents and six council officers was formed to take the project forward. Since environmental issues had been identified as the top priority in a recent household survey by the City Council, the working group decided to focus on this issue in seeking ideas and setting criteria for allocating the money.

The Liveability pilot was branded as 'Udecide' and all residents were invited to submit ideas for 'a greener, cleaner and safer' neighbourhood. The working group evaluated them to check that they fell within the spending allowance,

could be achieved in a relatively short period of time and fitted the agreed criteria. This process led to 21 projects being short-listed.

The next step was an open day for residents to decide which projects should be funded. Over 100 people from Denton, Lemington and Woolsington attended – half of them seeking funding for their projects and the rest simply responding to publicity about the event. Over the course of four hours, 21 groups presented their ideas and the audience voted for the proposals they thought would be best for the area. In total 15 projects were approved for funding and unsuccessful projects were given advice about alternative sources of funding. Over £30,000 was allocated at the event.

One of the successful projects was a tea dance for older people organised by the young people themselves. This idea emerged after an elderly woman was attacked by a group of teenagers in the area and the young people felt the need to improve relationships between these age groups. The success of this project is demonstrated by several further collaborative events jointly organised by both young and elderly people.

The children and young people (CYP) pilot was organised by a group of partners working with young people across the city and neighbouring areas and representatives from Northumbria University. It involved an event, organised by The Wicked Planners, a group of 12 and 13-year-old girls from the West End of Newcastle who had previously received an award from the Office for the Deputy Prime Minister for their work.

Around 100 children, young people and their supporting workers attended the event. In small groups they were asked to build models to demonstrate their ideas of how they would like the funding to be spent. Participants then had a chance to look at all the projects before each group was given three minutes to explain their proposal. This was followed by voting and an announcement of the winning schemes.

As with the Liveability event, the projects that did not obtain funding were given advice about alternative funding options. Eighteen projects, from a total of 23, were successful. They included a steel band made up of children with learning disabilities, a first aid course for young people, new

equipment for a local football academy, and the production of a book about what it's like to be a young Muslim in Newcastle. Just over £30,000 was allocated to these projects at the event.

DVDs of both events were produced and have been used locally and nationally to demonstrate how participatory budgeting was developed in Newcastle.

What were the challenges?

1. Working with a complex organisational structure.

Each pilot had a working group to ensure the project's aims and objectives were addressed and an overarching project board of local people and council officers to monitor the project and make decisions about its direction. Whilst this structure facilitated learning and reflection, and improved the end product, it did require good communication and coordination of ideas and people throughout the process.

2. Getting local officers' and councillors' commitment at the early stages.

Initial attempts to ensure commitment to the process by local Councillors from the three wards were not that successful. More work should have been done at the outset to ensure that local Councillors were 'on board'. Once the projects were well established Councillors became more interested, but it was hard to establish a clear role for them (especially as the projects were carried out quickly) as the elected civic leaders. In a similar way, it took a long time for some officers to trust the process and look beyond the problems that might have arisen.

3. Ensuring community volunteers had the skills needed to deliver the project.

To ensure that the PB process was community led it was essential that community volunteers had the skills needed to deliver the project. Training was provided by the PB Unit and the Council, covering a range of issues including budgets and electronic voting. Although this required a big investment of time, it was crucial to ensure that there was genuine ownership of the projects and that volunteers felt comfortable with the process and capable of carrying it out.

4. Overcoming cynicism and building trust amongst citizens.

Some community members were cynical about the process of asking people for their priorities. The Council had done this before and had not reported back to residents. For this reason we needed to ensure that residents could see the information they provided was valuable and would form the basis of decisions made through the PB process.

5. Enabling wider community participation.

Volunteers from the working group and staff gave up many hours of their time to ensure that their communities were able to access the process. Yet despite this, some sections of community did not engage. Had there been more staff resources, a greater proportion of the community would have received support to engage in the PB process.

What were the lessons?

1. Flexible funding is an advantage.

In Newcastle we were fortunate to receive funding from NRU and be allowed to use it to support PB projects across the city, not just in the most deprived areas. This willingness to work flexibly indicates enthusiasm for the project. However a different funder might have been nervous about the newness of this method and way of spending public money.

2. There is no one model of PB; it can be adapted to fit different situations.

The funding and much of the support for Newcastle's PB approach derives from current government enthusiasm for 'community kitties'. In Newcastle

this model has been further developed by the needs and wants of the people involved. After the first CYP pilot, young people said they wanted to decide their priorities for spending and have a direct say in service provision - for example, to choose which organisation offered the best services for tackling issues around alcohol misuse. They wanted to let different service providers make bids for contracts and they would then vote for which one they preferred.

3. Brokering new ideas through networks of people can galvanise action.

Momentum around implementing PB involved getting local people, agencies, politicians and council officers on board from an early stage. All these people needed to be talked through the process from the ideas to the events so that it was well supported and any problems arising did not put the whole process in jeopardy.

4. Identify clear roles and responsibilities for all.

In both the pilots it was important that participants were clear about the amount of work they were undertaking. This ensured that people stayed committed to the process and did not feel they were taking on too much or setting their expectations too high. There was a recognition that local councillors needed to play a more visible and significant role and they were invited to join the working group.

5. Ensure 'checks and balances' to make sure the process is fair and transparent.

We needed clear criteria for evaluating and selecting proposals to ensure ideas voted on during the day were all good

quality proposals. It was also important to have local people with clear ideas about their goals, a well structured day and clear rules on how to vote. All these measures safeguard the quality of the project.

6. Having raised expectations, maintain the level of engagement.

In Newcastle there are now plans to spread PB over five wards using ward budgets (city council money) and to embed the process within the Council. It is important to plan projects around existing structures within organisations so that it becomes embedded in the way funding is allocated. Signs that there is a commitment to PB are that judges of the National Regeneration and Renewal awards recognised Newcastle's PB programme as being truly 'community led' and Newcastle is also hosting a national conference on PB in 2008.

7. Communication, branding and publicity matters.

The Working Group decided on a strong brand at an early stage which became well known in the pilot areas as 'Udecide'. This led to more people attending the events.

8. A clear structure to the events ensures clarity for everyone.

The early PB process was clearly structured into two pilot projects, with clear responsibility for each via working groups. An overarching learning group provided some reflection on the process. Electronic Voting equipment has been a fun way of getting people involved and has also allowed the gathering of information (age, sex, social class, postcode etc) to provide evidence of the benefits of the process and to dispel some of the myths.