

TEN YEARS ON: THE CASE FOR PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING

A review of the outcomes delivered via PB projects in the UK



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Ten Years On: The Case For Participatory Budgeting

“It (PB) is a tool for educating, engaging and empowering citizens and strengthening demand for good governance. The enhanced transparency and accountability that participatory budgeting creates can help reduce government inefficiency and curb clientilism (sic), patronage and corruption” - Anwar Shah, World Bank 2007; “Participatory Budgeting”

In 2000, some community activists went to Porto Alegre in Brazil, the birthplace of Participatory Budgeting, and brought back their experiences and the concept of PB to Salford and Manchester. Ten years on, there have been around 120 PB projects implemented in the UK, enabling local people to allocate a total of over £24million of public spending in their neighbourhoods. These initiatives have involved children and young people, disabled people and carers, ethnic groups as well as those many members of the community who want to make a difference to their areas.

PB has evolved and innovated in the UK; it's not the same model as the original created in Brazil or that found in many other countries around the world. This is the strength of PB - that it is a locally developed process, sensitive to the context in which it is being implemented - and, although there is no 'one size fits all', the basic principles and benefits of what started in Porto Alegre live on in the UK experience. This paper provides a summary of the outcomes PB has delivered and documents the impact it has had in this country over the past ten years.

They include:

- An improvement in the relationship between local people and service providers.
- Real benefits from working in partnership.
- An increase in the number and spectrum of local people getting involved in the decisions that effect them.
- Enhanced social cohesion and empowerment of individual citizens.
- A strengthening of local democracy.
- Engaged children and young people.
- Better service delivery.

What is it?

This paper assumes a basic understanding of how PB works. However, for clarification, it is an empowerment tool which brings all sections of a community together to discuss their priorities and decide directly how part of a (usually) public budget is allocated to projects and services in the area in which they live.

It is practised in many countries across the world and is recognised as good practice by institutions such as the World Bank, the UN and DFID. Recent research into a number of empowerment techniques, by De Montfort and Southampton Universities, concluded that only PB (and citizens' juries) showed clear evidence of empowering the wider community and not just those that participated.

“The bite in PB is that it is not a simple consultation device but an exercise in deliberative democracy that empowers citizens to make a significant contribution to public spending decisions.” - “Empowering communities to influence local decision making: Evidence based lessons for practitioners and policy makers” June 2009.

Improved Relationships

PB projects have made a significant difference to the relationships between elected councillors, council officers and residents by creating a space for them to work together in the interests of their community. A greater understanding of the other parties’ roles and perspectives has emerged, together with the recognition that they share a common aim to make the neighbourhood a better place to live. Quite often, an initial reluctance to share power with residents has quickly been broken down where councillors, rather than stay disengaged, have chosen to play a full part in the project and trust local people with decisions.

A recent Newcastle evaluation identified improved relationships between participants and councillors in the longer term. Involvement in PB voting events and road shows changed residents perception of councillors and raised awareness of the work they do, providing them with a platform to be more visible in the community. Councillors reported full surgeries with many submitting lists of issues they wanted to discuss beforehand.

“See the difference we’ve made, as a community, as a ward with our councillors on board, backing us; but, you know, it’s not just the councillors backing us, we’re backing them.” - member of PB Working Group, Newcastle

In Eastfield, in Scarborough, residents started the process feeling very sceptical about the value of their involvement. They felt that decisions had previously been made behind closed doors and that their involvement was just tokenism. In turn, officers were shocked at the level of mistrust in them felt by local people. Through a mediation workshop the issues on both sides were identified and the steering group was subsequently set up with a resident chair and a resident majority on the group. By airing their differences both residents and officers were able to understand the other’s perspectives better. Officers have reported that they are now able to perform their roles more effectively because of the improvement in relationships and the residents feel much more confident to interact with the service providing agencies.

“the PB programme has changed our relationship with agencies (for the better) beyond all recognition” -resident of Eastfield, Scarborough

Partnership Working

By presenting a practical opportunity to work together in a joint venture and even pool resources, PB has demonstrated the value to communities of partners working together. In Dulverton, a small town in West Somerset, the PB project resulted in the town council, District Council, County Council, Police Authority, Fire Service, PCT and National Park

Authority getting together round the same table to discuss the resources expended and delivery of services in the town. A by-product of that was the realisation that there were five different grass cutting contracts in place for the town, which, in several cases, involved bringing in the equipment from many miles away. They have now been rationalised to two and there will soon be only one, saving money and improving the service for residents.

In Manton, Nottinghamshire, partnership working has improved as a result of bringing service providers together in a dialogue with residents. The PCT, Police Authority and District Council have all been involved with the PB project which is now in its third year. The PCT has allocated £10,000 of their budget to the process without any restrictions, because they recognised the potential health benefits from the improved sense of well being residents get from being involved in decisions.

“PB for us is not just an exciting process for allocating public money; rather it is also a community cohesion and democratic activity that underpins localism. As I mentioned we have married PB with our neighbourhood agreement and this will eventually result in a much closer relationship between PB and changing mainstream services.” - Richard Edwards, Neighbourhood Manager, Manton Community Alliance

Increased Participation Levels

All too often, people complain of “consultation fatigue”; they are frustrated at being regularly consulted by service providers, only for nothing to change as a result of the views they have expressed. In PB, participants are engaged in a genuine dialogue, decide directly how money is spent and see the projects or services being delivered in their local areas within a given period.

Typically, therefore, more people have participated in a PB process than in other engagement processes. The facts that they are being asked to allocate “real” money, that the decision making is entirely transparent and that they can see the direct correlation between what they voted for and what then subsequently happens in their community have helped counter scepticism and provided proof that it is worthwhile being involved in decisions.

“People in the local community have been given the choice and been able to vote for what they want, instead of it being decided for them.” - resident of Brinnington, Stockport

In St Peter’s ward in Tameside they have usually had about 30 people turn up for a community engagement or consultation event. They knew that PB increases the number of people who typically participate so, when they implemented a project, they were prepared for up to 100 participants. On the voting day nearly 200 people took part in the voting. In Eastfield, the residents association reported the same experience. Used to no more than a handful of people attending their meetings, they were shocked that over 80 residents - most of whom had never got involved in any community activity before - took part in their PB project and are very confident that the number will be much higher this year.

The level of participation increases over time. In Manton, in the first year of PB, they had over 300 people participating. In the second, the numbers increased to 850 and this year

24% of residents (1500 people) have taken part in the PB project, a higher turnout than in the last local elections.

Because PB is so transparent, it encourages those groups within a community which are generally disengaged to take part. Of course that can only be delivered through conventional community development practice, taking time to talk to those groups and explain that their voice will be heard and their vote counts as much as anyone else's.

In Keighley, Bradford, over 250 people turned out to vote on how to spend funds in their area. The event was held against the backdrop of BNP electoral success at local government level in Keighley. The majority of the participants were from the Asian community, largely women who traditionally weren't involved in the wider community, but the two projects with the highest votes were submitted by groups from 'white' areas of the town. There was also evidence of increased co-operation *within* the Asian communities, as a result of attending the event.

In Scunthorpe, the neighbourhood management team, by holding consultation events at a variety of places, were able to meet with a range of people from marginalised, 'hard to reach' groups who do not traditionally engage with public agencies. This included speaking to young mothers at places they meet and talking to people with addiction issues who were visiting the pharmacy at Westcliff Co-op. They recognised another overlooked and traditionally disengaged section of the community; males aged 25 – 60, who they involved by visiting local public houses!

"The participants profile information collected at registration to the event shows that there was a good spread across gender and age with similar levels of participants in all age groups. The ethnicity profile of participants was broadly representative of the ethnic profile of the area. This demonstrates that they were successful in getting a good range of the community to participate" – Greater Manchester Police evaluation

Community Cohesion and Capacity

"This event is a great way of bringing communities together".

"The best thing about today is lots of different groups getting together and learning about each other. Wonderful".

"Everyone getting together, meeting other folk and learning about projects in the community" - (all of above) residents of Brinnington, asked what was their best experience of PB.

One of PB's principle objectives is to build social cohesion and empower individual members of the community. It has done this in a number of ways and there are numerous examples of how.

One of the successful bids in Keighley was from a group of young Asian women who wanted £3,000 for some computer gaming equipment. They had been initially very reluctant to take part in the PB project, because their perception was that money always went to the more established community groups. Their participation gave them the knowledge of how to draft

a funding application and the confidence to apply to the Youth Opportunities Fund, for a new-build community facility (to house the computer games), and they were granted £60,000.

In Dudley recently, two different community groups applied for funding to improve their meeting facilities, including storage. A third group involved in the PB event was a local woodworking club, made up of retired joiners and carpenters, that the other groups weren't aware of. The result was that the two groups, having been allocated funding, commissioned the woodworkers to carry out the work and the money they received for work in turn allowed them (the woodworkers) to buy the new tools for which they were initially seeking money. An added bonus came from the woodworkers mentioning, during the event, that they had been discouraged from involving local youngsters in their activities by the amount of bureaucracy (CRB checks etc) they had to navigate. A youth worker, hearing this, offered to handle all that on the club's behalf and that will hopefully result in future opportunities for young people to learn practical skills.

Many individual participants have acquired confidence, knowledge and new skills as a result of getting involved in PB projects, whether learning about budgets and how money is spent in the area, preparing a bid for funding, presenting at an event or helping with the organisation of the project. We receive many reports of young people, in particular, starting to think differently about themselves and their communities once they have heard the experiences and perspectives of others probably for the first time.

“What I enjoy most about this is helping older people.” - young person volunteering in a garden club for older people, after hearing about it at a PB event.

“It's been really good, especially for the intergenerational work that the team do. They want to prove that there are young people out there that are willing to make a difference in the community and that not all young people are out to cause trouble. We've had a fantastic band of young people and we've had feedback from the residents saying how much the area has improved (as a result of the PB project)” - PB project organiser

“I thought that it was a wonderful idea, especially for young people to get involved in, to enable them to take some responsibility and authority.” - local vicar, in Cornwall, talking about a project put forward by some young people.

In North Lincolnshire, the local drop-in centre that was used for some of the meetings gained five new young volunteers as a result of their finding out about it through the project. In Norfolk, one 17 year old, who had been very nervous about presenting a bid for funding at the PB event, was so energised by the experience that he went away vowing to stand for election as a local councillor at the earliest opportunity.

Finally, in this section, the following is an extract from the evaluation report from the “UChoose” PB project in West Middlesbrough:

“Residents who took part, either by proposing or voting on projects felt far more positive about their ability to affect the future of their neighbourhood. Their involvement also had the additional benefit of increasing how positive they feel generally about the area in which they live. “UChoose” helped bring people together with a common goal and shared

sense of purpose. It enabled them to put aside perceived barriers to working together, such as “membership” of a particular area or neighbourhood, and see the potential of working together harnessing community feeling and directing it in a positive and proactive direction. Through an increase in residents working together and sharing ideas, more ideas for projects were generated. Beyond the programme, the imagination of residents has been fired to consider what they can do in future.”

Local Democracy

“Public involvement doesn’t end with voting for a government. It’s just the beginning. It’s our responsibility to be involved because it’s our lives they’re governing and we need to make sure they do what we want them to do.” - Ruth Hunt, Coventry LINks member

Gerry Stoker, Professor of Governance at Southampton University, has pointed to the growing degree of consensus that representative democracy needs engagement with participative democracy and vice versa. And PB has shown that, when elected members of the council are engaged and supportive, the direct participation of residents in the decisions that affect them enhances, rather than undermines the role of representatives.

PB’s transparency and immediacy builds trust in the democratic process. ***‘The voting system is slick, effective and gives really quick feedback. People actually cheered!’*** It also serves to increase people’s knowledge of public budgets and helps them understand the difficult choices that are often faced by their representative politicians. In Scunthorpe, the project team felt that the discussions they held with participants and voters throughout the PB process contributed towards increasing budget literacy, as people began to understand the difficulty in prioritising limited funding.

“It helps the public understand the elected member’s role. I personally think that everyone has learnt a lot of ways of how to spend money on useful resources and having one of these every year will help more and more people to come along and participate.” - resident of Tower Hamlets

It gives councillors the opportunity to develop a more visible profile in their community, to be seen by more of their constituents than just those who turn up to surgeries. A willingness to trust the community with decisions actually legitimises their role and working together has built more constructive relationships between residents, officers and councillors. Through working in a more mutually supportive way, Newcastle has experienced a change in people’s perception of the council and its services and a greater awareness about how democracy works.

“I don’t see it (PB) as a threat. I see it as a real help. I think it enables us all to make better decisions. I don’t think everything has to be done simply by those that have been formally elected. I think that helps renew democracy” - Councillor John Shipley, Leader of Newcastle City Council

Engaged Children and Young People

Many children and young people have been successfully involved in PB in various ways, whether as enthusiastic participants in general neighbourhood based initiatives - bidding for musical instruments for the community band or improvements to a local youth club - and in projects specifically aimed at them, where they have taken a lead role in the actual running of the event.

“Young people came in and they painted the walls, they laid the flooring, they did every single step of the process, even working on planning applications...That has developed a real sense of ownership in the centre for young people. ... involving people in the process all the way...if you give them the power to make the difference themselves they will do.” - PB funded project organiser in Rotherham

A project in Newcastle brought together 450 children aged 5 – 13 years, from across the city, to help decide how to spend the city’s £2.25m Youth Opportunities Funding. The pilot focused on engaging with harder to reach children and young people. Those involved came from a variety of settings including Pupil Referral Units, Additional Resource Centres, special schools, the Youth Inclusion Project, a young carers group and a number of BME youth groups. Their enthusiasm and commitment demonstrated that with the right approach, these young people were eager to participate, setting a new benchmark for the engagement of young people in the city.

The Police Authority in Northumberland has implemented two PB projects and early indications are that positive activities for young people have grown and improved in the area as a direct consequence of groups getting funding through the PB process, resulting in a significant reduction in youth disorder.

In Walsall, the NDC worked with eight local Primary schools in deciding collectively how to spend £15,000. The money was linked to the “Every Child Matters” outcomes, and the children were free to decide how to spend the money, whether that was to split the money amongst their schools, or put it towards joint activities. The project has enabled the children involved to grow in confidence, to develop new skills such as negotiation, decision making, consultation with peers and communication. It has encouraged active citizenship and community cohesion as the children have been encouraged to work as one group and not as separate schools. The children involved have learned how to make their voice heard, but also to listen to others.

Better Services

Few would argue that involving local people directly, alongside service providers and council officers, in the design and prioritisation of services is likely to result in them being better targeted and focused on local need. Services which are responsive to the views of residents are also likely to deliver better value for money. By enabling that involvement, PB has developed a sense of local ownership and community responsibility, which in turn will produce innovative solutions to problems and ideas for service improvement.

“It proved that by inspiring residents and empowering them with relatively small amounts of money, they can deliver imaginative and practical solutions to problems which benefit all sections of the community. In a deprived, urban environment, it is particularly inspiring to see the community’s pride in the physical improvement of the area.” - report of PB project in West Middlesbrough

In Tower Hamlets, nearly £5million (over two years) has been allocated to mainstream services by residents in each of their eight local area partnerships. Amongst the options people voted on were additional education provision to allow children to take an early GCSE in their mother tongue, work placements for young people with disabilities and/or special educational needs and targeted policing operations.

In Treenere in Cornwall, the PB project focused on wellbeing. For a relatively small amount of money, and no input from local health professionals, the community itself has been able to improve its own health and wellbeing by getting involved and working together on projects that benefit the community.

In East Devon, residents have been able to shape what community facilities are provided, in new housing developments, through allocating the “Section 106” funding that the developers have to make available. The district council have devised an early stage PB commissioning model, through which communities are able to have a real and direct say on what facilities are implemented. Typically, this has involved local people choosing to have a play ground, designing it, choosing what play equipment to install and then commissioning service providers to deliver it through a tendering process.

“This scheme offers communities an unprecedented level of involvement in shaping their future facilities”. Councillor Jill Elson, East Devon District Council

Conclusion

Over the last two years in particular, PB has grown quickly in the UK. Initiatives have been implemented across an increasingly wide range of organisations; local authorities (rural and urban), housing associations, schools, police authorities, parish councils, LSPs, third sector. It is now firmly established and widely recognised as a means of meaningfully empowering communities and delivering real participatory democracy. What we have learned above all else is that local people will make sound and perceptive decisions about how spending should be targeted when they are trusted and informed. PB enables that. This paper has aimed at providing evidence of its benefits from just some of those projects. Looking ahead, we hope to see its potential increasingly applied in giving local people a voice in the commissioning, design and delivery of services and in the difficult public spending choices that have to be made.

