



LEWISHAM PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING PILOT 2007-8.

OBSERVATION/FEEDBACK RE 'VOTING DAY' 29/09/07

"This sort of afternoon makes me very proud to be a local Ward Councillor".

Heidi Alexander, Deputy Mayor.

BACKGROUND:

Participatory Budgeting (PB) is a process whereby local people have direct control over a proportion of the public budget. The idea originated in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre and is now being practised in over 80 cities in Brazil, as well as other South American countries, Europe and the UK.

The Brazilian model typically involves a small percentage proportion of the municipal budget being allocated by means of a deliberative, city-wide process, whereby local people, usually through some form of assembly/delegate mechanism, effectively commission work from mainstream providers. The process operates to an annual cycle, and is mandated/signed off by the Council executive.

The UK model, as developed in for example, Bradford and Newcastle, can, at this stage, be more properly described as 'participatory grant making'. Discretionary, rather than mainstream funds have been allocated at events where service providers (usually, though not exclusively voluntary/community sector organisations) bid for funding: people vote on the day – either peer voting, ie organisations vote on each others' projects, or by resident vote, where residents vote on projects presented to them.

(NB the Participatory Budgeting Unit, funded by the Dept of Communities and Local Govt to support PB initiatives in the UK, is exploring ways of developing the Brazilian approach in a UK context)

The Lewisham pilot, which is the first Participatory Budgeting/Grant making initiative in London, was designed as a 'peer – voting', grant making exercise. The Lewisham Community Development Strategy Group (comprising Council representation and voluntary and statutory sector partners) initially acted as steering group for the pilot. There had been discussions within this group as to how to allocate 2007-8 NR small grant funds, and a PB mechanism was proposed and agreed.

£45K of NR funding was allocated to be distributed, and it was agreed that Voluntary Action Lewisham/Lewisham Community Network would lead on delivery of the pilot.

In addition, Lewisham Council contributed £10,000 to cover event costs (including filming).

THE PROCESS:

ORGANISATION PRIOR TO THE VOTING DAY:

From the outset, (as reflected in the make up of the steering group and the funding support) the pilot was developed as a partnership between the Council and the Voluntary Sector. Brian Wagenbach, Voluntary Action Lewisham's 'Change Up' Officer (with responsibility for developing community group infrastructure) was the de facto project manager for the pilot: he worked closely with Lewisham Council's Community Sector Unit who were also looking to develop Ward Assemblies as part of their community engagement strategy. Other key partner organisations included Lewisham Council's Neighbourhood Management Dept, the Primary Care Trust and Lewisham Refugee network. Technical support to the process throughout was provided by the Participatory Budgeting Unit, and Bradford Vision, the LSP responsible for delivering the Participatory Grant – making programme across Bradford District.

- Two wards (Bellingham and Evelyn) were selected (budgetary constraints precluded the pilot being rolled out to the whole borough) on the basis that
 - a) there was a good geographical spread
 - b) they benefited from a functional neighbourhood management structure
 - c) they had sufficiently different profiles in terms of demography and aspects of deprivation to provide robust feedback in terms of learning from a pilot process.

- Project proposals were invited from local community organisations – including groups working with young people, women, people with disabilities, environmental and community arts projects
(see appx 1 for list of organisations and amounts awarded on the day)

'The applications are very reflective of thecommunity, things for young people, the elderly, minority ethnic groups, arts projects....'

Participant.

- The existing community forum network was used to distribute the invitations
- Organisations were invited to submit proposals costing up to £2000. In all 18 bids were received from Bellingham ward, (totalling £33,000) and 22 from Evelyn total £39530) The allocation of £45k was split in two, allowing for 22,500 to be available per ward. (In the event, Bellingham ward councillors made the decision on the day to augment the Bellingham pot by £6,000 from the Ward locality fund. The Evelyn Ward Councillors offered unsuccessful applicants the opportunity to meet later to submit proposals for funding from this source.)

THE VOTING DAY:

The day was divided into morning (Bellingham) and afternoon (Evelyn) sessions. Organisations gave short (up to 3 minutes) project presentations and voted on each others' proposals. The presentations were supported by written 'information sheets' relating to each proposal, which included brief project descriptions, budget breakdowns, and reference to which themes and outcomes the projects would address under the 'Safer, Stronger' LAA headings.

The participants seemed to understand the process well enough: the explanation of the process was clearly presented, augmented by powerpoint information: it was emphasised that voters should consider the quality of the project, rather than the presentation.

The styles of presentation varied from straight 'speaking from a script' to dance demonstrations:

In all, 30 of the 40 projects presented on the day received funding, (see appendix 1 for details) including three low scoring projects, which eventually received full or partial funding after the successful projects were asked at the end of the voting, whether they could 'give back' some of their award. Over £3,000 was returned .

PARTICIPANTS' FEEDBACK:

Participants were asked to complete an evaluation of the process:

Representatives of 29 groups responded:

question	yes	no	Unsure /no reply
Was the money allocated fairly?	18	2	9
Would you like to see more money allocated this way	25	1	3
Are you confident in participants'	22	4	3

ability to make these kinds of decision			

Some' comments from participants:

'Excellent Morning. Very worthwhile experience'

'A very good event and concept. Needs to be used more

'More structured scoring needed for requirements rather than one overall mark'

'Nervous, but I would do it again now'

(See Appx 2 for detailed participant feedback)

ISSUES TO CONSIDER::

Political/infrastructural support:

'Absolutely fascinating.....watching difficult decisions being made, rather than having to make them myself!'

*Sir Steven Bullock,
Mayor of Lewisham.*

In general terms the political 'buy-in' seemed strong and genuine throughout, Councillors (including the Mayor and Deputy Mayor) being present on the day, as well as providing additional funding from the Ward Locality Fund.

There is often a perceived tension between representative and participatory democratic processes. The Brazilian experience demonstrates unequivocally that trust and confidence in elected members who support a PB process increases dramatically. In the UK, politicians who have engaged with the various pilot processes have been generally supportive – it is to be remembered that a) only relatively small sums of money are allocated by this means and b) the Council executive retains overall responsibility for mandating and signing off the process. Local involvement in decision making can act to inform and therefore strengthen existing political processes, as well as creating 'added value' benefits in terms of community cohesion and shared learning regarding what is actually being delivered into localities. One of the over-arching aims of PB is to foster a culture of shared responsibility. People come to realise (as per the Mayor's quote above) that resource allocation is difficult, and will tend therefore to engage in debate with politicians and providers in a more considered manner. |

It needs to be stressed however, that building consensus around this work is painstaking, and not without its ongoing challenges!

Process and procedure:

1) Planning and Design

A unique feature of the process (in terms of the UK Grant-making model) was that applicants were provided with information relating to targets within the LAA safer, stronger communities theme, and asked to specify how their projects would help address these targets. This approach is an important step towards a fully-fledged participatory budgeting approach, in that targets drawn up on the basis of deprivation indicators were incorporated into the process. In practice, some of the projects submitted were more relevant than others in terms developing safer/stronger communities, and it is arguable whether votes were cast on the basis of how effective the proposals might be in addressing these themes. The information was however incorporated into the bidding process, and would have contributed to the quality and 'thought-throughness' of the bids submitted. In terms of the learning aspects of this process as a pilot exercise, this additional layer of information seemed to be readily assimilated both at the application and voting stages of the process.

2. Fairness/robustness of voting process:

The question as to what extent presentations, or 'emotional content' rather than factual information influences voting decisions was raised anecdotally: one Council officer commented privately that a particular project which scored well on the basis of the highly charged nature of the work to be undertaken, may have done less well before a grants panel of officers with local experience, as the organisation in question had not, in fact, delivered well in the past.

Also, in the Bellingham session, although the demographic within the room was roughly a 50/50 split between BME and white organisations, the 'white' projects tended to score better overall. Voting patterns indicated that the white groups had tended to 'score up' each others' projects, whereas the BME vote was more evenly spread. This initially rather alarming finding seems to have been the result of the 'white' organisations having stronger mutual networks, whereas the BME organisations tended to operate more in isolation from each other, (rather than there being any more sinister motive. The fact that many of the successful 'white' projects elected to return some of their funding during the 'give back' to support unsuccessful BME bids, strongly suggests there was no racial motivation per se.) The question arises, however: under this method do people therefore vote for who they know rather than what they see? As one unsuccessful applicant from a BME organisation put it, 'I'll know to vote tactically next time!

From an observer's perspective, it seemed clear that the initiative was well-planned and delivered, a testament to the hard work, commitment and ability of the organisers. The feedback received from participants on the day certainly supports this view. In common with feedback received from other events of this type, peoples' concerns tended to focus on process problems (which are inevitable in any pilot exercise) rather than concerns about the underlying principles.

There will always be questions regarding the potentially flawed nature of participatory resource allocation: However, in the current climate of concern about levels of engagement generally, from low turnout at elections to 'the usual suspects' monopolising community activity, the potential of this process to re-engage in a positive way remains impressive. The feeling in the room on the day, the sense of shared involvement in a worthwhile process, was overwhelmingly positive, from politicians and officers as well as participants.

Any pilot process by its nature is designed to be learned from and built on. There seems to be the will within both the statutory and voluntary sectors, as well as significant political support, to develop this work further, either through rolling out the grants programme to more areas, depending on funding, or to consider more deliberative mechanisms via the developing Ward Assemblies. (Technical and practical support from the PB Unit is available to help facilitate any next steps.)

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