



*A packed audience in Morecombe watch projects presenting their bids*

# Putting your mouth where your money is:

## An introduction to participatory budgeting

***Ruth Jackson, Information and Research Officer with the Communities and Local Government sponsored Participatory Budget Unit (PBU) explains the origins of participatory budgeting and encourages councils to consider taking steps towards local participatory budgeting strategies.***

Participatory budgeting is briefly, 'local people deciding how to spend part of a public budget' – it's giving people a direct say over how part of a budget is spent in their local area.

The upshot is people being empowered to take action in their community and personal lives – whether it's healthy living choices or community volunteering.

The Participatory Budgeting Unit (PBU) is a charity project committed to promoting and supporting the implementation and development of participatory budgets across the UK. We

are central government's lead organisation (supported by the Department for Communities and Local Government) to deliver their policy on participatory budgets but we are now also looking to develop our work in Scotland and Wales.

Central government is committed to participatory budgets as a real way to empower people, as demonstrated in their '*Communities in Control: real people, real power*' white paper and '*Giving more people a say in local spending – participatory budgeting: a national strategy*'. This has generated increasing momentum locally. The government's aim is that every area will be doing participatory budgeting by 2012.

Currently, there are over 80 different projects going on across the UK, including a number of community safety pilots funded by the Home Office.

Whilst participatory budgeting hasn't had the same profile in Wales and Scotland, impetus is now growing locally with lots of community councils projects in North Wales supported by 'Together Creating Communities' or TCC for short. In Scotland, COSLA (Confederation of Scottish Local Authorities) are working with a number of councils to start some participatory budget pilots around community safety and the Scottish Government is reviewing policy in this area.

One of the pioneering pilots that the PBU have worked with is Newcastle's "UDecide" project for children and young people. They targeted 'hard to reach' young people; and opened up the process to all aged 5-13 years to decide how to spend £115,000 in 2007. This approach worked so well that in 2008 over 450 young people were involved in allocating £2.25 million of Youth Opportunities Funding. The project won the Academy of Sustainable Communities Innovative Engagement Award in 2008.

Over 93% of those involved said they enjoyed the process. The project challenged partners' ideas about communities' engagement with public budgets and dispelled notions that participative approaches cannot be transferred to more rigorous decision making. The project also acted as a driver for local providers to think differently about their services and give

more priority to the views of young people.

Newcastle are now developing a 5-year plan for participatory budgets and are looking at ways to use more mainstream council and partner funding – to increase sustainability and really change the way that services are delivered in local areas.

A recent example of participatory budgets innovation is in Tower Hamlets. They recently allocated £2.4million through participatory budgets across the whole of the borough. Instead of focussing on community grants which directs the money out of the council, they used the money to 'top up' public services such as an extra neighbourhood police officer for a year, or community tree planting or early language GCSEs for children who are fluent (mother tongue). These are services which can't be funded through core service provision but meet both



*A project working with disabled children in Newcastle*

local priorities and those in the Local Area Agreement.

Using this amount of money, focussed on developing public services around neighbourhood priorities in a much more strategic way. This a much closer model to the original Brazilian method and one the PBU welcomes and encourages. It's this kind of participatory budgeting that can have a real long term transformative effect on communities.

In an economic recession there may not be 'extra' pots of money to use as community grants, but there will always be service budgets. By opening up a proportion of these budgets to participatory budgeting councils, police, primary care trusts, housing associations and other public service providers can give people a real say in what services they want to see in their local area, and gain public support in setting priorities when resources are limited.

Many people may see empowerment activities like participatory budgeting as a nice 'extra' to the day job, but really, at a time when resources are limited, empowerment is even more important or local resilience can be lost. And participatory budgeting can help not only in creating strong communities in tough times but also in actually gaining community support for those hard decisions.

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*For more information on participatory budgeting visit the PBU website at [www.participatorybudgeting.org.uk](http://www.participatorybudgeting.org.uk) or email [ruth@participatorybudgeting.org.uk](mailto:ruth@participatorybudgeting.org.uk)*



*Children in Newcastle decide how to spend £1.25m*