

Participatory Budgeting Seminar

Introduction

On the 25th October representatives from a wide variety of local authorities gathered in London to discuss Participatory Budgeting (PB). The purpose of the day was to:

- To explore and debate the issues around PB
- Shape good practice in PB
- Share experiences across local authorities
- To contribute to local and national government thinking

There was representation from the following local authorities at the seminar:-

Authorities Represented	
Brighton & Hove City Council	Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council
Buckinghamshire County Council	Plymouth City Council
Calderdale Metropolitan Borough Council	Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council
City of London Corporation	Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea
Doncaster MBC	Solihull MBC
Greater London Authority	Somerset County Council
Hampshire County Council	Southwark Council
Haringey Council	St. Helens Council
Leicestershire County Council	Suffolk County Council
London Borough of Camden	Surrey County Council
London Borough Of Haringey	Swindon Borough Council
London Borough of Islington	Tameside MBC
London Borough of Lewisham	Wakefield MDC
London Borough Of Merton	Westminster City Council
London Borough of Sutton	Wiltshire County Council
London Borough Of Waltham Forest	Wolverhampton City Council
Newcastle City Council	

The authorities represented a real mix in terms of PB pilots, those who have already expressed an interest in PB via the PB unit, and those who have so far had no direct involvement in PB initiatives as far as DCLG or the PB unit were aware. This report represents a summary of the discussions from the event, words in italics are direct quotations from participants.

Response to PB

In principle enthusiasm

In general terms, those who attended were positive about the PB agenda and they had come with a keen interest in learning how best to take the initiative forward. There was a high degree of enthusiasm about citizen engagement in local authorities in the widest sense, and many of those at the seminar were keen to take the engagement work they currently deliver further. Some suggested that PB - especially if it were delivered on a large scale and became part of all mainstream services planning - could have positive benefits in terms of local councils' relationships with those they serve.

It could be a potential virtuous circle...

Understanding of PB

There was some confusion about what constitutes PB. Many of those present felt that they are already delivering PB but have not been calling it that. Much of the confusion seems to derive from a lack of understanding about the points of difference between PB and engagement more generally. Some reported that, across their local authority, there was a requirement already to engage service users in the shape and scope of services and that this, consequently, fed into decision making about budgets and spending. However, when probing on this it appeared that the many of the activities being referred to did not involve citizen participation in the allocation of funds.

It is repackaging what we already doing and calling it PB

There was a lot of interest in the idea of linking PB to the LAA process, but people were very unsure about how, in practical terms, this could be achieved.

Getting the terminology right

There was a strong feeling in the room that the term Participatory Budgeting was not citizen friendly and that a better term should certainly always be used with citizens, but that a change in the language may even be useful to make the process sound more appealing for Council staff and elected members. In Newcastle, PB is called 'You decide'. There was consensus agreement that this branding of the PB initiative could make it more accessible to citizens. However, many participants also queried whether PB should be delivered at the same level in each local authority. Given this, local authorities may need to consider coming up with their own 'brand' of PB and naming it appropriately.

Overall concerns

Some of those present did have some concerns and doubts about PB and these included:

- There were doubts over whether the Brazilian model will ever be appropriate or replicable in the UK. There was widespread admiration of the PB work in Brazil. However, some of those who took part felt that PB had been developed in Brazil in response to the unique issues Brazil faced at the time.

Are the terms of reference from Brazil right? The context is so very different. Is the concept right for us?

- Some participants called for clarity on what is driving the PB agenda in the UK. These participants questioned the need for PB and what particular problems it would respond to and address, in a UK context. Some felt that a link between community involvement and better services and satisfaction was being assumed but had not been proven. They wanted to know more about the evidence base on the benefits of PB, both for local authorities and for citizens.

'What is PB the solution to, exactly?'

- It was generally felt that PB would incur some costs and participants raised concerns about how PB would be afforded. Significant concerns were raised by those who were less clear about how PB is carried out, what processes it involves and how it can best be achieved.
- There was general uncertainty about the scope, scale and level of PB that was expected by DCLG. Many of those who participated in the seminar felt strongly that, if PB is to be meaningful to participants, PB would need, certainly in the longer term to go beyond small budgets and become part of mainstream planning.
- Some expressed concern about the extent to which PB genuinely permitted citizens to decide on budgets. These participants felt that PB should mean that the final decision on allocation of funds should rest with citizens. They felt that, if after engaging citizens in PB, the local authority then allocated funds in a different way to how the public wanted them to, the process would lose meaning.

If you want the process to be seen to be a valuable process you have to show the public you have spent money on those things that they have asked you to spend the money on.

Despite the expression of some of these general doubts, for the most part those present were keen to learn from those authorities who were more advanced and to gain detailed guidance from the PB unit.

Challenges and barriers

The overall reactions highlighted above indicate some of the immediate concerns that those present expressed. The table discussions examined challenges and barriers in more detail and key areas of concern included:

- **Buy-in of local councillors** and particularly backbench and ward councillors. Our entire audience for the seminar was made up of officers and very many were concerned that local councillors could potentially see PB as a threat rather than an opportunity. Reasons for this were varied and included:
 - Councillors seeing this as an erosion of their own role and fearing the process
 - Councillors believing that they are already adequately in touch with local communities and know what they want, so they do not need to go through a PB exercise
 - Councillors' roles (particularly on the backbench) having been reduced since the loss of traditional committee structures and this being seen as another reduction
 - Councillors not seeing the wider potential benefits and seeing participatory democracy as being in conflict with representative democracy rather than enhancing it

They think they know what people want because they talk to people, but they are only hearing from the vocal people. And it is convincing them that they are getting a much more robust picture by doing this.

Members have concerns about challenges to their legitimacy. They think they know what people think - they know what the people they talk to want. It's a challenge to what they think their mandate is.

- **Resourcing PB activities** was a real concern for many participants. There was general consensus that the cost of PB should be proportionate to the service(s) budget that is being allocated.

Spend half a million pounds on deciding what to do with a million. It is proportionate really, how do you keep it in proportion?

Some participants suggested ways in which the costs of PB could be kept down, such as using existing engagement structures and exercises and tapping into services who already have a 'face' with citizens (such as the youth service). However, this gave rise to concerns around only engaging in PB those citizens who are close to local authority services and those who are most likely to contribute anyway. Another suggestion was that general engagement work and PB should become more joined-up, and that money currently spent on engagement could be distributed to PB.

We could make use of the things we already have like existing community engagement structures.

If you brought together all the different budgets for community engagement like the police community engagement pot and so on, there wouldn't be a cost

In addition, those present were very conscious that to build capacity for this kind of work there would be a need for upfront investment and that this would be very challenging to resource. There was a call from some, for Government to support the initiative with specific additional funds.

- A further major discussion point was that whilst small scale local level budget allocation exercises would be the easiest to resource and manage; the bigger prize in making the process real for people would be if mainstream budgets could be included. However, the **central constraints on Local Government in terms of statutory spending** and performance targets meant that local decision making on these budgets could not easily be achieved. There was a call for Government to allow much more freedom for Local Government on mainstream budget decisions in order that PB can become more meaningful and that it can be undertaken with reference to much broader budgets.

It's only meaningful if it is mainstream. It can't be at the moment – there are too many structural and legal barriers.

- There was concern that a major **culture change** was needed to go down the PB route and that this would be challenging to achieve. Local authority staff and members need to become open to being challenged and having a debate with those that they serve and in many cases the will to do this does not exist. Some felt that where culture change does not occur, authorities will simply re-label their existing consultation processes as being PB, even if they do not involve any more in the way of genuine participation in budget allocation (this relates closely to the fact that some present were unclear as to where consultation ends and PB begins).
- **Lack of broad community appetite** for participation was raised by many as a barrier and there was much discussion about how to engage those who do not normally participate. Some felt that citizens in their area would not be interested in becoming involved in PB. This was thought to be for two main reasons: general disinterest and mistrust of government; and, the feeling that the local authority already knows what citizens priorities are.

We know what residents want. They know we know. They just want us to deliver it.

However, it is worth noting here that, again, some degree of confusion about the exact nature of PB and how it differs from general engagement work may have impacted on this view. It is likely that if PB was better understood, perceptions around citizens' interest might have been different.

For the most part, participants felt that if they are to successfully engage a broad cross section of citizens and not just the 'usual suspects' in PB, some kind of incentive for citizens might be necessary. Ultimately, there was a feeling that many citizens would not be sufficiently interested to become involved in PB without this kind of recompense.

Ways forward

Key practical suggestions on ways forward to aid Local Government development on PB were as follows:

- Some national evaluation work being done to show cost vs. benefits of PB, in order to make persuasion of members and less enthusiastic staff easier
- A toolkit to be developed to give practical advice (the PB unit advised that this is in development)
- It was raised that some form of compulsion to do PB may be required, before some local authorities will pursue this route
- Additional resources being made available specifically for PB
- Defining PB more clearly and highlighting the difference between this and budget consultation
- Giving local ward councillors direct responsibility for designing the PB process for their local budget, with officers to support them (this model is being developed within Westminster), was suggested as a way of enhancing member buy-in