

# Newham Participative Budgeting: A Critical Look

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## Introduction

I've just finished attending all working group meeting for the Forest Gate participative budget. Here's a rough analysis. I haven't tried to solve most of my criticisms, that's for a later and more general discussion. However my purpose is that of a *critical friend* rather than the *enraged gadfly*<sup>1</sup>, that I am seen as in some quarters. This is the final version of this, though it could do with some tidying up and deduplication.

## Outline

£100K in total, £70K to existing groups, we'll have a complete list soon<sup>2</sup>. £30K to the unwashed. This means, given the procedure, it isn't different from the grants system, just an additional grant process. This was changed on-the-fly due to lack of entries in some areas, but there was (of course) a bit of murmuring about mid-stream changes in rules, because of that.

The forms and application process is (anecdotal evidence, from one or two people I'm trying to encourage) over-complex and burdensome, even by the standards of (some of) the grant processes. Also, I'm figuring out this currently, since it's siloed by assembly (apart from the other silos and restrictions, that are numerous), cross-borough or cross-assembly projects<sup>3</sup> are potentially stifled.

The main difference here is that a 'working group', which contains a great many councillors and paid officials and *some* residents will make some decisions as to the 'winners' who are often 'usual suspects'<sup>4</sup>. This also means it's competitive and doesn't naturally encourage cooperation or synergistic projects, just more gatekeeping, especially give the term 'engagement'. We have lots of 'engagement' activity because of borough wide ('nothing ever changes') dis-engagement. I doubt that this is the (only) way to change this.

1 The term "gadfly" (Greek: μύωψ, μύωψ) was used by Plato in the Apology to describe Socrates' acting as an uncomfortable goad to the Athenian political scene, like a spur or biting fly arousing a sluggish horse.

2 Incidentally, there doesn't seem to be gold standard list of third sector organisations in the borough. Many of them are tiny and there's no uniform info@xxxxx.org.uk way of addressing them. To be done.

3 Waiting for an answer about this, person in Assembly A wants to propose activity in area of Assembly B. Yes, apparently this is legitimate.

4 People like me, usually white/middle-class who are present in 'everything'.

## Specific Criticisms

### Low Participation

Open to correction or adjustment on this, but according to an exchange in the working group, about 150-200 adults of a population about 20K<sup>5</sup> in Forest Gate have voted, let's say about 1% or less. I think these are almost certainly 'usual suspects' too, such as myself. So, unhappily, and I'm not pointing fingers, this hasn't broadened out, currently.

Some of this is perennial 'nothing changes' cynicism too. Newham Labour doesn't worry too much about this, since it keeps people away from most of the elections, but it's increasingly corrosive and, of course, opens the way to bloc (single interest, single identity) voting, see Tower Hamlets for the (bad) result. Lack of civics within schools and books about politics in the libraries (such as they are (not)) doesn't help either.

### Scarcity and Competition Narrative

Also, of course, the mainstream scarcity narrative is maintained, our 'top three' priorities, meaning that some affairs that are also clearly public goods or services can be conveniently forgotten as being 'low priority'. In the case of Forest Gate, containing probably the most resolutely middle-class wards (some million pound houses, for example), 'cleanliness and waste' come out on top, but these are council responsibilities anyway, not the responsibility of volunteers (unpaid employees, to de-Orwellise this) and third sector (bosses of unpaid employees, but we get to feel good about ourselves). I'd add that I do a fair amount of this myself, from a position of privilege, but I don't want the activity *virtue-shamed* onto poorer people who could do with actual jobs and money though.

I've also suggested that, during the preparatory meetings, groups should be encouraged to form consortia (this was something that we *insisted* on in Brussels for big projects, preferably from different countries too in that setting, 'faiths' could be one element here?).

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5 The answer given to me was 30K, but I've used 20K taken from the ward count of voters at last election.

## Silos, Taxonomies and Superfluous Inflexibility

Second, and we were aware of this in the working group, the tags used in co-create are local and national government categories, meaning that they're abstract and silo-ed, see above. As with grants, we can no doubt shoehorn stuff into these, using our *sophistry*<sup>6</sup> *superpower*. But, I suspect, some of the best ones will be a bad fit, because, for example they provide collateral benefit in several categories, they are *infrastructural*, for example.

Two examples, both close to my heart, a) pan-Newham space/room booking so that all these miscellaneous spaces in play are used efficiently and regularly, without too much of the current gatekeeping/hoarding b) near real-time events and activities listing rather than all the fragmentary emails etc. currently. It's interesting that some of b) is actually a by-product of a) too, since *bookings are (often/usually) for events*. But, these ideas cross ward and assembly boundaries and belong in a number of different silos too.

This<sup>7</sup>, in spite of the criticisms about high-modernism, is a pretty good book dealing with this. Funnier, but the same point about slicing and dicing, taxonomies, here<sup>8</sup>. My view is *start with the project*, if it is 'good' then the taxonomies are secondary, a top-down straitjacket.

Finally, the project scoring, I'll be one of the scorers, is intuition-based and vague. If 'we' must do this (I'm against for projects of this small size and type, it's a form of intellectual dishonesty, *arithmetic pretending to be fairness*), then *specific yes/no questions are needed with a score or points value for each*. In the outside world *this is how tenders are framed and assessed*.

I've now had sight of the scoring sheet, another spreadsheet of course (how about folks that haven't actually got Microsoft Office?). Actually, to look backwards, it might be better if this part of the process was anonymised, now impossible because the mini co-create web submission has an identifiable author. Not clear how to deal with declared interest either. We apparently only see the complete submissions 'on the night', so very short timescale for reflection too or maybe we're very *quick readers*?

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6 Actually, sophists have quite a bad rap in modern times, worth looking at [the Stanford description](#).

7 [Seeing Like a State](#)

8 [Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge](#)

## Specific Critique of Process

These are the 'technical' criticisms the current process. Some of these duplicate the commentary above, but this is the more condensed TL;DR version:

- Artificial and unrealistic timescales, potentially unfair to both submitters and reviewers
- Slightly bizarre and very subjective scoring system
- Convoluted manual process for submission, easy to put online
- No formal process for declaration of interest
- Convoluted manual process for scoring and aggregating score, also (fairly) easy to automate
- No formal drop-ins pre-proposal for Q&A, shaping and coaching, low quality submissions
- Bias (70K/30K) towards existing (often complacent) structures, no 'renewal' or upskilling stimulus for smaller groups/projects.
- Multi-siloed, as discussed above, so nothing much that is infrastructural (see Democracy Commission on digital, for example) can emerge
- No mechanism for combination of similar, smaller initiatives, destructive, zero-sum competitive framework, artificial scarcity rules
- No borough mechanism for project cross-talk, everything goes 'via the borough' perhaps that's preferred though for reasons of control?
- Immediate grabs by bigger well-established groups for £20k (probably hoping for £10K) see above, maybe 'cash already absorbed' should be a criteria too?
- 'Fit' with existing Newham ambitions, plans and projects for 'bigger' ideas. I'm thinking specifically of 'planters on Woodgrange'. Like most I want it greened but planters are unsustainable and tokenistic, for example (see forthcoming essay 'Why I Hate Planters'). But this is a wider problem, green jigsaw and green pieces
- 'Fit' with existing London (and wider) initiatives, for example the repair workshop proposal is good, though it doesn't fit into the priorities, but also Restart Project already exists as a national (worldwide) project, larger jigsaw and pieces
- Project 'waste', some projects are good, viable, useful but don't fit into the voted priorities, so these should be encouraged, coached into alternative grants and funding sources *rather than being forgotten*. Points to the virtues of a rolling always-live ideas process too.
- Co-create is hard to navigate (finding/using deep links), uses high fog index (18-19 year old, considering second language and levels of literacy in Newham) language that is also often abstract.
- Co-create also does not automate some of the day to day stuff that would be very useful to automate, project submissions and scoring come immediately to mind.
- Last Co-create is both flashy and clunky in a 'bad' way lots of reasonably irrelevant photos for very little text and use of the non-explanatory 'like' too. Better if all commentary was explanatory.

## Asymmetric Co-Creation and Platform Problems

The co-create platform itself from [Citizenlab](#) is, at least, apparently open source (though I can't see a specific licence on the website, GPL2<sup>9</sup>?) and is, I suspect, run as a platform service by Citizenlab itself. Anecdotal feedback suggests that navigation is very confusing, though I suspect that this *might* be a reflection of the convoluted process chosen by Newham, this time around. I've spent decades in IT and find it 'annoying', it's hard to find stuff, for example. Many people can't find, without help, where/how to submit, however not many people are aware of it, at all.

The other interesting aspect is *asymmetry*, the front end for the proles and the backend, full of interesting statistics and insights for the borough, Bill Hicks<sup>10</sup> asymmetric co-create. I'm being a somewhat unfair here, in that I acknowledge the privacy and GDPR problems in freeing the complete backend. But, nevertheless. As a result, everything seems to get dumped out onto spreadsheets too, deeply inconvenient and leading to my creation of this ugly little thing: [Search Forest Gate Submissions](#) I feel that a great deal is clunky (over use of pretty and quite large pictures, under use of text).

Also, it's rather anti-privacy, I'm constantly being prompted to *complete my profile* that is give away, into who-knows-where *more data than I wish to provide*. For many this may be a deal-breaker.

Language for the interface has not been testing or considered 'manage your budget' probably just needs to be about voting. Need to go through the whole thing with a fog-index<sup>11</sup> tester and some mystery shopping for comprehension.

Also, abstract words in the menus (something that caused a lot of difficulty in Ovide<sup>12</sup> when we first showed it). Too much menu depth.

All communication is hierarchical (citizen -> council -> citizen), very 'poor' possibilities for citizen <--> citizen (except the stupidity of 'likes'), so somewhat disempowering.

No general free-floating feedback mechanisms.

Last, it's clear from the submissions that coaching and guidelines were needed, with examples and that they will be needed for the actual project submissions. I've argued and am still arguing that pre-submission guidance meetings will be helpful.

## CIL Capital-Only Constraints

Because of the CIL constraints towards capital-only spending (I haven't looked through the Localism Bill, to check this), about 75% of the useful opportunities are not available, because they will involve manpower and revenue spending. Incidentally there's a report of a total about £3m

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9 [GNU General Public License, version 2](#)

10 'You are free to do as we tell you'

11 [Gunning fog index](#)

12 [Tender for Ovide II. No documentation for Ovide I?](#)

spend here<sup>13</sup>, but no detail. The green spaces spend looks as though it should be spent from regular budget too?

However, finally, computers need trainers (not 'digital champions'), musical instruments need teachers, soundproof/affordable rehearsal space (not just Hendrix plaques and I love his music) and an adventure playground (good idea but £100K by itself) needs supervision, outdoor gyms need maintenance and (safety at very least) oversight. I've seen too many projects in the East End with grant-funded shiny stuff and photo ops and, after a year or so, left to rot, because of this type of funding constraint.

## **What's Next**

Что дѣлать? Who knows, but a *good big think* beckons for the 'next time around'.

Hugh Barnard May 2021