Hugh Barnard   02/06/21

Newham Participative Budgeting: A Critical Look

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Update

This document was originally prepared and submitted in October 2021. Since then I have been involved as a volunteer in one of the projects. As such I have added to the document some reflections on the projects process and on monitoring.

The 'official' forms themselves limit some commentary to 'positives' (see We Are Newham and 'at the heart of everything we do' and other 'comms' idiocies, try plain speaking folks, people prefer it) and to 300 word maximum, so more cannot be said (pace Wittgenstein[1]).

Introduction

I've just finished attending all working group meetings for the Forest Gate participative budget. Here's a rough analysis and critique. I haven't tried to correct the criticisms, that's for a later and more general discussion. However my purpose is that of a *critical friend* rather than the *enraged gadfly[2]*.

This is a revised version of this after the 5th October working group meeting. More footnotes too to provide wider background knowledge and *some fun*, in places.

£100K in total, £70K to existing groups, we'll have a complete list soon[3]. £30K to residents. 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 and justifiably) a bit of murmuring about mid-stream changes in rules.

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1   In his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein ends his book with the phrase: *"Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent"*.

2   The term "gadfly" (Greek: μύωψ, mýops) 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.

3   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.

The forms and application process is (anecdotal evidence, from one or two people) over-complex and burdensome, even compared to 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[4] are potentially stifled.

The main difference here is that a 'working group', containing many councillors and paid officials and *some* residents will make some decisions as to the 'winners' who are often 'usual suspects'[5]. This means it's competitive and doesn't naturally encourage cooperation or synergistic projects, just more gatekeeping, especially given the Orwellian term 'engagement'.

Specific Commentary

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[6] in Forest Gate have voted, let's say about 1% or less. I believe 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. It's increasingly corrosive and, of course, opens the way to bloc (single interest, single identity as opposed to public good) voting, see Tower Hamlets for the result. Lack of civics within schools and serious books about politics in the libraries doesn't help either[7].

Scarcity and Competition Narrative

Some affairs that are also clearly public goods or services can be conveniently forgotten as being 'low priority' since we are maintaining the narrative of competition and scarcity. In the case of Forest Gate, containing 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 a do a fair amount of this myself, from a position of relative privilege, but I don't want the activity systematically *virtue-shamed* onto poorer people who could do with *actual jobs and money* though. See the Preston Model[8], for example.

I've also suggested that, during the preparatory meetings, groups should be encouraged to *cooperate* and form consortia (something that we *insisted* on in Brussels for big projects, usually from different countries and certainly from genuinely different companies).

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4   Waiting for an answer about this, person in Assembly A wants to propose activity in area of Assembly B. Yes, apparently this is legitimate.
5   People like me, who are present in 'everything' and organisations that have already absorbed substantial grants.
6   The answer given to me was 30K, but I've used 20K taken from the ward count of voters at last election.
7   Books in Newham Libraries are chosen via an algorithm owned by a US for-profit see this FOI and related
    Complete library catalogue and what's currently shelved at any moment, apparently unobtainable?
8   I'm aware that some of the Preston Model has already influenced the Newham community wealth building agenda.

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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[9] 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[10].

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 different fragmentary email newsletters 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[11], 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[12]. My current view is *start with the project*, if it is 'good' then the taxonomies are secondary, a top-down straitjacket. This might imply a much looser initial process[13], for example.

Finally, the project scoring, 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*.

The scoring sheet is another spreadsheet of course (how about folks that haven't actually got Microsoft Office? I use Libreoffice[14], since I don't use Windows or Apple). Also, 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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9   Actually, sophists have quite a bad rap in modern times, worth looking at the Stanford description.
10 I've just (October 2021) had a discussion with a trustee at the Hillcrest Centre same problem, difficult to identify and finance infrastructural initiatives.
11 Seeing Like a State
12 Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge
13 For example, unconference style
14 Libreoffice, 'mainly' compatible with Microsoft Office and free

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Specific Critique of Process

These are the 'technical' criticisms of the current process. Some of these duplicate the commentary above, but this is the more condensed TL;DR (too long, didn't read) 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 essay 'Why I Hate Planters'[15]). 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[16] 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 upload and scoring come immediately to mind.
- Lastly 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.

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15 Why I hate planters
16 Restart Project Website

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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[17]?) 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[18] 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, flashy and information poor (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[19] tester and some mystery shopping for comprehension.

Also, abstract words in the menus (something that caused a lot of difficulty in Ovide[20] 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.

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17 GNU General Public License, version 2
18 'You are free to do as we tell you'
19 Gunning fog index
20 Tender for Ovide II. No documentation for Ovide I?

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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 spend here[21], 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?[22] Who knows, but a *good big think* beckons for the 'next time around'.

As I've revised this for the working group, which is is still convened, to some extent, need also to think about the role of the working group when it's not 'working' directly on the budget. Maybe it's something related to or within the above?

Critique of The Project Process (2022)

These are quick notes on the process, based on the observations within one project:

- *Money isn't actually awarded*, so, for example, a project owner (this is the Brussels title, useful) cannot choose contractors based on value for money or (for example) genuine green credentials. Most highways contractors solve anything with tarmac, for example, a heat sink and black body radiator. See the 'improvements' in Talbot Road E7 that will make the whole place much hotter.

- *Money can't be tracked* during or after the project, hence, for example I am currently very reluctant to sign monitoring forms with amounts of money spent. That is, *I have no idea* of the level and progress of spending. One of the explanations is that spending is cross silo, so there's no apparent summary of the whole project available before, during or after the project. However I assume (we know *that joke* don't we?) that the council uses an accounting system and database with expenditure codes and categories, as of 2015 this was Oracle ERP, so, I'm guessing that this is available:

What is Oracle Fusion project management?

Oracle Project Management is a complete and integrated solution that dramatically improves the way project-driven organizations work, enabling efficient and effective project management while ensuring smarter business decisions based on a single source of project truth.

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21 [Summary Report on CIL Spending 2018](#)
22 [This is always such a great question, isn't it!](#)

In short, Newham and the other councils participating in OneSource should be able to easily follow and report on projects, even fairly small ones.

- *The physical project can't be tracked either*. One of the valuable aspects of community led projects is on-the-ground and detail thinking. For example at the Norfolk Road end of the bridge, some trees were cut down to leave stumps, some of the stumps could be higher to permit adults to sit comfortably. I've just heard an objection that it will permit street people to sit, however they'll always find somewhere, unless they are pushed into another borough (see fly tipping). In general communication is bad or non-existent at this level, so no detail project contributions can be made.

- *Same priorities are used currently, year after year*. Thus this doesn't really represent the original ideal of community participatory budgeting, it's more Debord's Spectacle. It's also had the result that 'usual suspects' participants *have reheated submissions to re-access this year's (tiny, once shared) pot*. Probably, a fair rule would be 'loads of cash last year, none this year' to give some newcomers a chance, *even if they fail, they learn something[23]*.

So, in short, the project owner, in most cases, does not participate in any meaningful sense.

July 2022 Conclusion

I've personally dropped out of all this, this year, although I'm informally helping a couple of projects that are not in this process. In its current form I regard it as being worse than the very straightforward small grant processes that preceded it.

The borough is very, very defensive and unreceptive to any criticism (about anything) and is now settling down to a comfortable four election-free years using KPIs and comms slogans. No (radical) change there then.

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23 http://download.101com.com/pub/tdwi/Files/BI_Maturity_Model_4AA1_5467ENW.pdf