

Participatory Budgeting in Speke, Merseyside

Brief Description

Speke in Merseyside is among five sites that the Home Office has supported to explore the issue of Tackling Serious and Organised Crime Through Strengths Based Engagement. This case is notable for the inclusivity in the voting process and the strong community based strategies used throughout the process.

Problems and Purpose

Speke, Merseyside, is an area of the UK that has fallen on particularly hard times of late. Gone is the industry that previously provided the working class community with job opportunities and consequently poverty and socio-economic deprivation have become increasingly common in this part of the United Kingdom. As a result of this serious and organised crime have been on the rise in the small town of Speke, with drugs flooding the streets, knife crime becoming an increasingly menacing threat and more and more young people becoming involved in crime. This has coincided with the decrease in police funding that has been seen in recent years. As a result of these interconnected pressures Speke was chosen among “five sites that the Home Office has supported to explore”¹ the issue of tackling serious and organised crime via community based engagement. As a result the Speke up Participatory budgeting scheme was created. The scheme had two aims; firstly to help fund new projects to help tackle the issue of serious and organised crime within Speke and secondly, to help the local community network and develop relationships to help mitigate their concerns around serious and organised crime.

Background History and Context

Merseyside is a region famed for its docks, they have historically been the lifeblood of the local area and one of the key providers of jobs and opportunities to the communities within the county. However modernisation, technological advancements and globalisation have converged to ensure the opportunities provided to the region by the ports are far fewer than they once were. Furthermore other opportunities provided to the local, primarily working class, communities by industry in the form of factories and mining have long since dissipated as a result of the aforementioned processes. These factors, combined with the recession that followed the 2007 global financial crisis and the subsequent cuts to police funding that followed the election of the Conservative government in 2010, have led to seemingly ever growing crime rates in the region with offences such as knife crime, drug trafficking and “the sexual and criminal exploitation”² of vulnerable people all dramatically on the rise over the period.

Although the Speke up scheme was the first time participatory budgeting had been used in Speke specifically, there are earlier examples of similar schemes being used in Merseyside, one such earlier example was the Parr Investment Grant in St Helen's during which “Parr

¹ Fisher, A., 2019., *Speke Up – Participatory Budgeting in Merseyside 2019* (PBnetwork.org.uk)

² IBID

Neighbourhood Management in St.Helen's, UK, implemented a participatory budgeting process to allocate its investment grant, with the hopes of engaging local residents in democratic processes and improving their connection to elected officials.”³ The aftermath of which left the locals feeling satisfied that they had an influence on proceedings with subsequent events of a similar nature being hosted. This demonstrates that similar communities in the local area have had success using participatory budgeting schemes and helped lay the groundwork for what was to come in Speke.

The UK’s home office have continually shown that they view participatory budgeting as a key strategy for keeping the community safe moving forward. In 2008 they released a green paper which “stated their support for participatory budgeting, and in November 2008 provided nearly £500,000 between 27 police forces, police authorities or Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships to pilot PB under the theme of ‘community safety’.”⁴ This indicates that there is some history of the home office supporting this form of mini public and that this is not the first event of it’s kind.

However, Britain on the whole does not have as strong a history of providing political power at the local level as countries like Brazil do. “Local government in Brazil has greater power than local government in the UK, and despite the UK’s longer history of representative democracy, it appears that Latin Americans, who have more recently struggled for democracy, are more likely to participate in that system in order to solve social problems.”⁵ Therefore, Britain's history of using participatory budgeting is certainly not as extensive as places like Brazil, whose schemes in places such as Porto Alegre date all the way back to 1989.

Organizing, Supporting, and Funding Entities

The Proceeds of Crime Act (2002) allows for government seizure of property that is thought to have been garnered through illicit means or is thought to be earmarked for such purposes. The defendants will get an opportunity to prove that this is not the case, however, if they fail to do so the money becomes forfeit and 50% of it will get recycled into the police budgets. It is estimated that between April 2020 and March 2021 over £3.5 million⁶ was seized by Merseyside police as a result of the POCA, illustrating the scope of the issue in the region. It is from this portion of the police budget that £26000 was earmarked for the ‘Speke up’ participatory budgeting scheme. An organising committee was formed by members of the local community.

Participant Recruitment and Selection

The Speke up participatory budgeting scheme is open to all the residents of the local community. “bids of up to £2,000 were agreed, and they had to be from voluntary or community

³ Particepedia., 2019., *Parr Investment Grant Voting Day: Participatory Budgeting in St. Helens, UK*

⁴ PBnetwork., 2009., *Participatory Budgeting in the UK – A toolkit* (pbnetwork.org.uk)

⁵ Blakely, H., 2008., *Participatory budgeting in the UK: a challenge to the system?*

⁶ Mulligan, S., 2021 *Merseyside Police seize £3.5 in 'ill-gotten' cash since first lockdown* (Sthelensstar.co.uk)

organisations. Multiple bids from a single organisation would not be allowed and the applicants could be from constituted and un-constituted groups. Bids were accepted from anywhere as long as the final product benefitted the people of Speke.”⁷ In order to apply an organisation would simply have to fill out the form that is readily available online and provide basic information as to what their organisation does and the name of their project. Everyone over the age of 11 was allowed to vote in the process, with the reasoning being that it would be these younger age groups in particular that they would be trying to support with this process. In order to vote people simply had to turn up to the PB event on the morning of the 19th of March 2019.

Methods and Tools Used

“In order to hear the voices of Speke and galvanise them into helping the fight against SOC, a two process programme was undertaken.”⁸ The first of these processes was a world cafe which is “is a user-friendly method for creating meaningful and cooperative dialogue around questions that count. As an organizational or social design process the World Café offers a practical way to enhance the human capacity for collaborative thought.”⁹ This world cafe event was organised by “Organised by the Speke Venny Adventure Playground, in partnership with Onward, South Liverpool Homes and Merseyside Police, the event was an opportunity for residents to share their views on the area and provide suggestions on what could be done to improve it.” (Onward., 2019) This initial event was a success with 80 people attending, 19 of whom went on to play an active role in the communities participatory budgeting planning group which was “designed to ensure local ownership of the PB process.”¹⁰ This ensured that the Speke up scheme would very much be a community led process, rather than one that was led by bureaucrats.

The second Process was the Participatory budgeting voting morning mentioned earlier. During this the attendees would be briefly presented each of the proposals and take part in a ranked voting process where the most supported projects would be awarded a portion of the £26,000. Additionally, there was a community steering group who would meet on “four occasions to debate decisions in relation to the bidding criterion, with the steering group determined to encourage bids from as many voluntary and community groups as possible.”¹¹ Ensuring that the deliberation and decision making processes were always undergone with a community focused aspect.

What Went On: Deliberation, Decisions, and Public Interaction

As was touched upon in the previous section the first of the two processes undertaken was a world cafe event. This was held in late 2018 with 80 people attending and 19 of those going on to play a role in the organisation of the participatory budgeting process. This was important as “the majority of those who stepped forward to be part of the group were engaged in some sort of

⁷ Fisher, A., 2019., *Speke Up – Participatory Budgeting in Merseyside 2019* (PBnetwork.org.uk)

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⁹ Schieffer, A., et al., 2004 *The World Café: Part One*

¹⁰ Fisher, A., 2019., *Speke Up – Participatory Budgeting in Merseyside 2019* (PBnetwork.org.uk)

¹¹ Fisher, A., 2019., *Speke Up – Tackling Serious and Organised Crime Through Strengths Based Engagement in Speke Merseyside* (mutualgain.org)

voluntary work, either running sporting groups, supporting people into employment through training or helping to protect those who may be vulnerable to online criminality.”¹² This allowed for people within the community who were involved in the fight against serious and organised crime through different means to network and develop relationships, illustrating that this process was not only designed to help finance pivotal local projects designed to help mitigate the effect of criminal activity in Speke, but was also playing a role in helping the local community network and share ideas.

On March 19th 2019 “around 300 people attended the PB event to listen to 29 groups pitch for a share of £26,000.”¹³ Indeed the interest in the scheme was far greater than the organisers initially expected. Originally they planned to hold the event at a local church that could host over 100 people, however, the feedback they had received had made it clear that the organisers would need a bigger venue to host all those that wished to attend and engage with the process. This event was also key in allowing members of the local community to network with one of the bidders, a sewing group, offering to help supply another, a majorette group, at a massively reduced cost. Another “used their three minutes to state that they would not be accepting the money on offer if they won.”¹⁴ Instead they used their platform to promote the importance of mental health and encourage the local community to engage with their local mp’s and encourage them to press this issue. In the end 16 of the 29 projects were granted funding.

Influence, Outcomes, and Effects

It is hard to gauge how successful this event has been in actually reducing serious organised crime figures due to how recently the events took place. The world cafe event was successful in that it allowed for the idea of a Participatory budgeting scheme to get off the ground in Speke. The nucleus of what would become the planning group was formed as a result of this event meaning it was pivotal in not only ensuring the event took place but also in ensuring it was a community led project as was always intended.

Additionally the PB was successful in that £26,000 was shared across 16 projects that the local community of Speke feel will help keep kids off the street and away from serious and organised crime. But arguably more importantly, as touched upon previously when highlighting the fact that many of the groups saw the monetary gain as a secondary goal of the process, it allowed voluntary groups within Speke to develop key relationships that will help them form a more cohesive front in dealing with the issues that are important to the local community. This is highlighted by the fact that the local neighbourhood inspector stated that “He knew of eight community groups when the process started, now he knows of 31 and that number continues to grow.”¹⁵ Which demonstrates the key role this process has had in helping this community develop bonds that will help them tackle this and other issues moving forward.

¹² IBID

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Individuals involved in the planning of the process were awarded a certificate of commendation by Merseyside police as their “enthusiasm and commitment to community engagement and collaboration undoubtedly led to the success of the event and has resulted in increased community resilience and social capital in Speke.”¹⁶ Further demonstrating that this event was successful in bringing the community together and developing strategies for dealing with this issue in the community.

Another outcome of this event that is worth discussing is the fact that it is still being run as of 2021, albeit with seemingly reduced funding, lower maximum bids and less interest from bidders. This could either illustrate the success of the project in that previous iterations were so successful that the need for such a process is no longer as prevalent as it was, or that the bidders found that the process was ineffective and not worth being a part of.

One of the key differences between this event and most other Participatory Budgeting mini-publics is that Speke is a small town with a population of around 33000¹⁷ people whereas normally participatory budgeting mini publics are “in cities where the mayor and the municipal councillors are elected by direct vote in a system of universal suffrage.” This is evidenced by the example of Porto Alegre, which has a metropolitan area of around 1,400,000¹⁸ million people. The success of this event indicates that this particular democratic innovation can be used in a wide variety of communities varying from small to large in size.

Analysis and Lesson Learned

In order to accurately analyse the successes and impacts of this case and derive the lessons learned an analytical framework must first be established. Graham Smith offers one designed to compare six “democratic goods”¹⁹ These 6 goods are; inclusiveness, popular control, considered judgement, transparency, efficiency, and transferability. It is therefore appropriate to analyse each of these individually with the hope of establishing whether or not the Speke up scheme was successful in each of these key areas.

The importance of inclusion to the Participatory budgeting process has been a key principle to the entire notion behind the concept since its inception. This is supported by Wampler who states “The ideas associated with Participatory Budgeting percolated across Brazil during the 1980s as political reformers sought to move beyond the political exclusion stagnation, and corruption associated with Brazil’s military dictatorship”²⁰ In this regard the Speke up scheme was particularly successful, they quickly established that the main group that was to be affected by the participatory budgeting process was also one that is often ignored by the democratic

¹⁶ Lofthouse, K., 2019., *Residents have Speke-n – team awarded for ‘outstanding’ project* (onward.co.uk)

¹⁷ *Neighbourhood Profiles: Speke & Belle Vale, Summer 2018* (Liverpoollccg.nhs.uk)

¹⁸ *Porto Alegre: Brazil* (Britannica.com)

¹⁹ Smith, G., 2009., *Democratic Innovations: Designing Institutions for Citizen Participation* (Cambridge university press., New York)

²⁰ Wampler, B., 2012. *Participatory Budgeting: Core principles and Key Impacts*. Journal of Public Deliberation, 8(2).

process, young people. Many of the bids were designed to aid young people, get them involved in the community and keep them off the streets. As a result of this the voting age for the participatory budgeting event was lowered to 11 years old. This allowed them to be directly involved in the decision making process that was designed to support them. This was a key impact of this particular event as this high level of inclusivity wherein people that young were allowed to vote is something that has very rarely, if ever been done before and is not something that is touched upon heavily in the existing literature if other examples do exist. Furthermore, there were no restrictions as to who could bid as long as the pitches were designed to help aid the fight against serious and organised crime in Speke

Participatory budgeting is a mini public that in which popular control is a major factor within the process. In the Porto Alegre model “delegates are elected and they then elect councillors.”²¹ However due to the size of the community of Speke there would not be enough people or resources to hold elections for the organising committee. However during the Speke Up event popular control was always a key, intrinsically important aspect. This is showcased by the fact that, as touched upon previously, the organising committee was made up of local volunteers from the community with no restrictions as to who could take part. The rules and processes were designed to allow effectively anyone from within the local community to vote.

Ganuza illustrates how traditional participatory budgeting events ensure considered judgement is undertaken. He illustrates this when talking about the Porto Alegre model stating that “the public decision-making process was organized on the basis of a multi-stage process in which decisions were adopted progressively.”²² The Speke event also undertook decision making in a multi-stage process. Firstly the world cafe event allowed them to form an organisational committee with the community at heart. This committee analysed every application from bidders to ensure that their application met the criteria and would help deal with the issues at hand. The fact that considered judgement was used is showcased by the fact that a couple of pitches were rejected for not meeting its criterion. Only after this was the PB morning held, during which each bidder was given 3 minutes during the event to pitch to those in attendance. This ensured all of those in attendance would be properly informed as to the merits of each pitch and would be able to balance all the facts presented to them before making their decision.

The importance of transparency to participatory budgeting was highlighted by Mansbridge who argues that a lack of transparency can cause these processes to “fail.”²³ The whole process in Speke was intrinsically transparent. With pretty much anyone being able to attend the voting morning, local press reporting heavily on the event and many locals commenting as to how satisfied they are with how the process had been undertaken.

²¹ Cabannes, Y., 2004. *Participatory budgeting: a significant contribution to participatory democracy. Environment and urbanization*, 16(1), pp.27-46.

²² Ganuza, E. and Baiocchi, G., 2012. *The Power of Ambiguity: How Participatory Budgeting Travels the Globe*. *Journal of Public Deliberation*, 8(2).

²³ Mansbridge, J., et al., 2012. *A systemic approach to deliberative democracy. Deliberative systems: Deliberative democracy at the large scale*, pp.1-26.

Efficiency has been a key aspect of the idea of participatory budgeting since its inception in Porto Alegre. This is supported by Sintomer who states that the process in Porto Alegre was designed to “ensure that the priorities of the districts are taken up in the budget to the largest extent possible.”²⁴ The comparatively small scale, voluntary, community focused nature of the event were all factors that contributed to ensure that it was, on the whole, very efficient. Great expenses were not required to recruit organisers as these were, as has been established, primarily volunteers. Furthermore, people who were passionate about the process continually offered their support to ensure that there would always be places to meet that would not inhibit costs. This was essential as the budget for the bids was only £26,000.

In regards to transferability this scheme was certainly transferable in regards to certain aspects. Firstly the voting age is quite a unique aspect of this case that can certainly be used in other events moving forward, specifically those that affect young people. Furthermore, the community centric approach is definitely replicable across other, small-scale, participatory budgeting schemes. However it is certainly not transferable to larger scale schemes in bigger, more metropolitan areas, such as Paris and London. Additionally the nature of the issue that was trying to be tackled, with serious and organised crime becoming an ever growing threat within the community, interest was always likely to be high for this event. This may mean that it will be hard to replicate the interest that made this scheme successful to other participatory budgeting schemes.

Overall, the outcomes of this event are promising, it has illustrated that including a younger demographic in the democratic process can be a useful tool when tackling issues that affect them and that a community based approach can be implemented in smaller local areas.

Word Count: 3178

²⁴ Sintomer, Y., Herzberg, C. and Röcke, A., 2008. *Participatory budgeting in Europe: potentials and challenges*. International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, 32(1), pp.164-178.

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