Story: participatory budgeting in Cheshire

Participatory budgeting is a democratic process that deepens democracy, builds stronger communities and creates a more equitable distribution of resources. After starting in Brazil in the late eighties, participatory budgeting involves community groups pitching their ideas to their own local communities, before those communities then cast votes that decide which of these receive funding. Members of a community get to decide how part of a public budget is spent. It gives people real power over real money.

Participatory budgeting involves community groups pitching their ideas to their own local communities, before those communities then cast votes that decide which of these receive funding.

In Cheshire East, the council allocated £400,000 from its public health budget to doing this. The Public Health department wanted to use participatory budgeting to improve the health and wellbeing in eight areas. The focus was on projects that would address issues such as obesity, lack of physical fitness and mental wellbeing at a very local level. Each project had to be sustainable. Community groups pitched their ideas to local communities, and people then cast votes to decide which projects received funding.

The approach was localised so that instead of everyone bidding for the full £400,000 pot, the borough was split in to eight sub regions, with a budget allocated to each based on its requirements. This link between public health and communities meant the project was particularly successful.

Final funding decisions were made at events organised in each locality and supported by the council's communities service. Local people had the opportunity to choose which projects they felt would make the biggest difference to their area, with each attendee given one vote.

Residents reported feeling more informed and more connected to where they lived, with networks, connections and partnerships strengthened.