

Agenda item 5

For decision – Update on the The People’s Budget: Town Vote, our work with Public Square and how to proceed in future

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Summary

Over the last six months we have been working in partnership with Public Square to co-design and deliver an improved People’s Budget: Town Vote. The objective was to use the experience to improve our understanding of public engagement and consider how to proceed with a People’s Budget Town Vote in future years.

This work and the lessons learnt from it will be written up by Public Square and will be published as an exemplar case study for other councils which we will present at the Public Square conference in January.

The primary purpose of Public Square’s involvement with The People’s Budget was to explore ways to improve citizen participation in decision making at the local level in Frome by focusing on the idea generation phase of the People’s Budget: Town Vote. The attached reports Appendix 1 and 2 are authored by Public Square with our input and represent the experience of co-designing projects. Their reports include a series of conclusions and reflections that we are primarily interested here.

The conclusions indicate that to arrive at truly meaningful bottom up engagement around the People’s Budget, the vote needs to be around an idea that is either deemed important (such as the loos) or controversial (such as the water slide). Voting simply because you are asked to vote appears not to be a sufficient reason to vote and the ideas generated in this instance were far more nebulous than anticipated.

This implies that the outcome is more important than the process – which was to provide our residents with real opportunities to spend part of our budget (£10k). This raises question as to whether £10k is a meaningful enough amount for people to feel is important. Given that we have not allocated all our grants budget (circa £120k) to the People’s Budget to vote on, is it seen as profligate to have a portion of our budget, however small, spent on an as yet undefined project at the whim of residents?

Our interpretation of the research is that, rather than happening as an annual occurrence, organising a Town Vote to allocate funds should be saved until there is a meaningful decision to be made. This can be delivered in at least two ways:

- i. Consider a problem that we need an answer to thematically, such as how do we support young people or how do we deliver carbon neutrality by 2030. We could use a platform such as Your Priorities to identify solutions and then vote on them; and/or
- ii. We wait until an opportunity/problem presents itself where there is a genuinely no right answer, present the options and organise a vote.

Collecting ideas from the residents was a good exercise in engagement but we concluded that there must be more to it than that. It is proposed, therefore, that we keep the skills learnt for other engagement activities but do not proceed with a yearly town Vote as a matter of course. Instead, wait for the right opportunity for a meaningful vote to arise and then embrace it.

For reference re Public Square and the Town Vote see:

<https://www.frometowncouncil.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Agenda-Item-8-For-decision-PB-Town-Vote-2019.pdf>

Recommendation

Hold back on launching another People's Budget: Town Vote until an opportunity for a meaningful vote is identified.