

Participatory Budgeting Children's Play Facilities in East Devon



Objectives

Five case studies have been commissioned by the SW Council to showcase effective community engagement at neighbourhood level. The objective of all five case studies is to highlight excellent partnership working with communities and other service providers, to identify common problems and find solutions through effective engagement and a commitment to resolve local issues.

“To empower communities to develop and deliver change in their own neighbourhoods”.

About Participatory Budgeting

Participatory budgeting (PB) is a process of democratic decision-making, in which residents become involved in deciding how to allocate part of a public budget.

It allows the residents of an area to participate in allocating part of the local Council's or other statutory agency's budget. Its aim is to make local government more accountable and transparent and to encourage understanding of its affairs amongst local people. It also creates social inclusion by encouraging involvement from all parts of the community.

The amount allocated to PB is an agreed proportion of the local Council's budget and the actual process is developed to suit local circumstances.

PB enables people to become involved with setting priorities and deciding the way some services and projects are delivered in their neighbourhood. The process involves engaging residents and community groups from across the community and giving them the opportunity to discuss spending priorities, make spending proposals, and vote on these. It also gives local people a role in the scrutiny and monitoring of the process and results. This in turn can be used to inform subsequent PB decisions.

Various studies have suggested that participatory budgeting results in more equitable public spending, higher quality of life, increased satisfaction of basic needs, greater government transparency and accountability, increased levels of public participation (especially by marginalized residents), and an increase in the skills of the local population.

About East Devon

The district of East Devon is on the Devon coast in the South West of England. The East Devon District has an area of 314 square miles. It sits between the River Exe and outskirts of Exeter to the west, Somerset (inland) and Dorset to the east. At the extremes, the District stretches 30 miles east to west and 15 miles north to south.

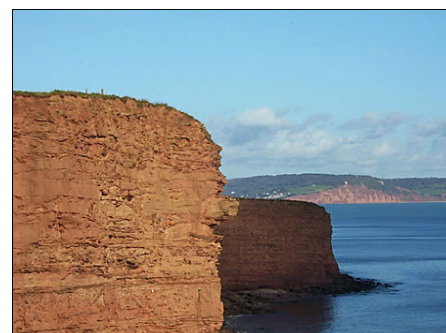
East Devon is the largest of the eight Devon districts with a population of 125,522. East Devon is also one of the largest English districts by population and there are 68 town or parish councils across the whole district.

The main towns are the coastal resorts of Exmouth (Devon's largest town – pop. 34,000); Budleigh Salterton; Sidmouth; and Seaton. In the mainly rural inland area the settlements are Honiton; Ottery St Mary; Axminster and Broadclyst. A new community called Cranbrook is also planned in the west of the district. Exeter International Airport is located in the District and main line rail services and the national motorway network are easily accessible.

Two thirds of the District is recognised as being nationally important for its high landscape quality and is designated as Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

The East Devon AONB covers some 270sq km of stunning landscape between Exmouth, to Lyme Regis and up to Honiton, whilst to the north of Honiton you will find the Blackdown Hills AONB.

The coastline forms part of England's first and only World Heritage site designated for its natural environment



East Devon's Jurassic Coast

Section 106 Funding

Section 106 (S106) of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 allows a local planning authority (LPA) to enter into a legally-binding agreement or planning obligation with a landowner in association with the granting of planning permission. The obligation is termed a Section 106 Agreement.

These agreements are a way of delivering or addressing matters that are necessary to make a development acceptable in planning terms. They are increasingly used to support the provision of services and infrastructure, such as highways, recreational facilities, education, health and affordable housing.

East Devon Council imposes a charge on developers depending on the size and number of dwellings being built and this money is used to develop facilities to support the additional residents living in the community. The average charge per dwelling is around £3,500 and it is normally payable prior to occupancy.

This includes providing funding for sports and play facilities which is the area we are looking at in this case study.

About the Project

This project looks specifically at the money provided for play facilities through section 106 funding. The ethos of East Devon District Council is that it should be for the community to decide what facilities they would like to buy with their money, in particular the young people who are going to be using the play areas.

The money allocated for play areas has to be spent in a specific area, within approximately 600m of the new dwellings. In a rural parish this may be a bit further away from the homes, but on a larger development it will be within the development itself. The money can be spent over a period of time and it may be possible to find match funding to increase the amount available.

The Process

Most parishes in East Devon have a Parish or Town Plan which is produced to a certain standard and with appropriate consultation with and by the people living in that parish. This enables them to determine priorities for the area and to show what it is that people actually need.

Discussions are undertaken with the ward members and parish councillors alongside the Parish or Town Plan, to identify the location of the site where the money is to be spent. This then goes to East Devon District Council's Senior Management Team for approval. Consultation can then take place with the children who will be using the play area to get an idea of the sort of things they would like.

This consultation works on the premise of asking the children what sort of things they would like to do, rather than listing pieces of equipment they could have. This is so that the children are not constrained by what they have seen. They can ask for something that spins, something to climb, slide down etc and the companies tendering for the work can make their ideas as imaginative as they choose.

This consultation is done by visiting local schools and talking to local families.

Once the children have indicated what they would like, the parish/ town council undertakes a tender process, giving prospective bidders a budget and details of what the children have asked for. They then come up with a visual proposal for the residents to consider.

The decision about which design should be chosen is made by the community voting for their favourite option. This usually takes the form of a community event where activities and entertainment is laid on to encourage people to attend.

Residents vote for their favourite option using a ballot paper and election box so there is also an opportunity for children to learn about democracy as part of the process.

Different colour voting papers are used for boys and girls and for children and adults. Priority is given to the children's views unless there is a tie in which case the adults opinions will also be taken into account. Equal weight is given to the views of boys and girls to ensure the play equipment is suitable for everyone.

In choosing their preferred design, the children tend to think about the activities they can do on the equipment and how enjoyable it would be to them and which they feel represents best value. As well as choosing what they want they also consider what would suit their siblings or what other children of different ages and abilities might want.

Once the provider has been chosen, the contracts etc will be put in place and timescales for the work are agreed.



Fun and Games during Community Consultation



All the family can join in

Existing Projects

Normans Crescent, Budleigh Salterton

Normans Crescent is part of a relatively new development in Budleigh Salterton. Accommodation includes family houses, including some affordable housing, and flats which are mostly occupied by older people. An area in Normans Crescent had been designated as a play area in all the plans for the development.

Consultations with local residents identified that there are at least 84 children under the age of 14 living in or closely associated with the 75 households in the Crescent. Each household was also consulted on what materials and colours should be used. In this case a doorstep survey of residents highlighted a preference for natural materials and colours. East Devon District Council Officers also worked with 20 children at the local school round the corner from Norman's Crescent to find out how they prefer to play. They found out that swinging, sliding and climbing were the most popular activities.

This information was put into a document which was sent off to several play companies who then came back with their suggestions on how they would fulfil the wishes of children and residents.

An event was held in September 2009 so the residents could come along and vote for their favourite plan. This was attended by 69 residents, including 29 children under the age of 14. Attractions included free face painting and the opportunity to learn circus skills.

There was a clear winner from the 3 options on offer with the winning design including a slide, climbing wall, stepping logs, a basket swing, spring wobble board, rope tunnel, rope climber and a formal seating area.

The play area was installed and was up and running by the end of the year.

However, there was opposition to the development of this play area by residents of the flats surrounding the area. These flats were mostly occupied by older people, some of whom were not keen to have a play area so close to them. These residents were either unaware that the area was designated as a play area, or were hoping that it would not be developed.

Some of the issues were dealt with during the consultation period as all households were consulted about the nature and colour of the materials used. However, once the play area was complete there was an ongoing problem with the siting of the climbing wall and slide which a resident felt enabled children to see into her flat and reduced her privacy.

There were plans to install screening to resolve this, but the complaint was upheld before this could be done and the slide and climbing wall have had to be removed. They are due to be re-sited in the playground away from the windows.

This situation demonstrates the need to make sure all groups are involved in planning the play area and one suggestion has been to provide an aerial plan for future developments so residents can more clearly see the impact of the plans on their homes.

St Sevans Way Exmouth



St Sevans Before

The area set aside to provide play facilities for the area around St Sevans Way in Exmouth had been designated as a toddler's play area. Some very basic play equipment had already been put in place consisting of wooden poles, a tree painted on the ground and three static mushrooms.

The community event was advertised in the local newsletter and leaflets were put through the letterbox of every house on the estate to encourage people to attend.

The open ground around the play area was used for games, artists, circus skills etc to encourage people to come along so that people could come and vote for their favourite idea. Approximately 45 children came from around the area for the event but only children living in immediate area were eligible to vote. This was determined by their post code.



And After

There were objections to the plans from residents of two of the houses close to the play area but these were dealt with on the day by a district councillor who was supportive of the scheme and the process.

Maer, Exmouth

The Maer is an area on Exmouth sea front which is classed as a nature reserve due to its unique ecosystem.

The area behind the reserve consists of large houses many of which have been redeveloped to create apartments, so attracting Section 106 funding from the developers.

In this project the play area had to be in keeping with the ecosystem of the area with natural materials and colours used to create an organic feel.

During the consultation, the children said what activities they wanted to be able to do and also selected the types of local insects they wanted to have represented by the play equipment.

Due to the unique nature of this project, the council approached several designers for ideas and quotes and local children once again chose the designs they liked best.

The designs in the play area include a cricket, a grasshopper, a butterfly, a caterpillar and a spiders web.

There have been some teething problems following the opening of the play area with some of the equipment not having been finished to the standard required by the local authority and the safety surfaces not covering enough ground around the equipment. Unfortunately temporary fencing has had to be put around the equipment until this can be resolved.

The area is popular with families, especially as this is the only free facility on the Exmouth sea front. Therefore this is a disappointing setback, especially with the summer holidays approaching. However the local community cannot wait for it to be reopened as it is an exciting and challenging facility.

Exton



The Existing Facility at Exton

The playground at Exton was outdated and due for refurbishment. Section 106 funding was identified to do this and Exton Parish Council had already completed the consultation with local children to determine what they wanted. Requests included something that spun, a zip slide and a replacement for the old train. There was also the opportunity for those tendering for the work to include some ideas of their own.

The project was very much owned and developed by the parish. However they were having problems with companies not bothering to do site visits or to submit their tenders in time. East Devon District Council then became involved to enable council officers to lend their expertise in getting the correct processes and disciplines in place to manage the tender process.

The community has recently chosen the design they want for their play area and work on installing the equipment is due to be completed by the end of August.



A Resident Considers The Options

Axminster

The most recent project is in Millwey Rise in Axminster where Section 106 funding and match funding from Playbuilder were combined to give the community around £100,000 to spend on the facility.

In July 2010, the initial consultation took place by forming a steering group of local people and arranging visits to the local schools to get the children's opinions. The community voting event took place on July 27 to enable the children and residents to choose from the designs offered and a winning design was chosen. Footage of this event is shown on the DVD which accompanies this case study (available from October 2010).

Unfortunately since the voting event took place Government has withdrawn Playbuilder funding. As the Section 106 money is available this will be used to complete part of the play area (phase 1) and as other funding becomes available it will be completed (phase 2).

Lessons Learned

Now that a number of projects have been completed, the team involved are able to identify the things that went well and what might be done differently in future.

One of the key measures of success is that the play areas are well used and do not have issues with vandalism or litter.

Hints and Tips

- Don't reinvent the wheel – pick up on the parish plan or local plan
- Get residents on board from the start, focus on local needs
- Don't be too prescriptive – ask open questions about what is important and what people would like
- Offer incentives e.g. entertainment to attract voters
- Get councillor engagement early on
- Give credit to everyone who helped
- Steer clear of the politics
- Get politicians to understand that participatory budgeting is not a political process
- Combine events – canvas opinions on other issues while you have the opportunity e.g. this is a great opportunity to update the Parish Plan.
- Its far simpler than people expect!

The Future of Participatory Budgeting?

In a climate of tighter budgets, spending cuts and a reduction in services, participatory budgeting can offer value for money by giving people the opportunity to say how their money is can best be spent.

The new UK Government is placing considerable emphasis on “The Big Society” which aims to give communities more power and to encourage people to take an active role in their communities and to shape their neighbourhoods into the sort of places they want them to be.

Giving people direct control of part of their local budget and to letting communities decide what is important to them is an important way of achieving this.

The benefits of PB include engaging more people, being better able to target services and ensure they are cost effective and the ability for people to have a mature debate about priorities. It also encourages local ownership of projects, budgets and decisions and can be a tool in rebuilding local democracy and trust between residents and service providers.

The concept of participatory budgeting therefore fits very well with the vision of “Big Society” and is one of the key tools available to help deliver this agenda.

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