

# Making technology work for Participatory Budgeting

Davy Jones Consultancy

[www.davyjonesconsultancy.com/](http://www.davyjonesconsultancy.com/)



[www.public-i.info/](http://www.public-i.info/)

**Authors:**

**Davy Jones** [davy@davyjonesconsultancy.co.uk](mailto:davy@davyjonesconsultancy.co.uk)

**Catherine Howe** [catherine.howe@public-i.info](mailto:catherine.howe@public-i.info)

**Date: 1<sup>st</sup> April 2009**

## Contents

What is Participatory Budgeting?.....	4
The key component of PB.....	4
Different types of PB.....	5
PB and the Empowerment Agenda.....	6
Areas and multi-agency working.....	6
How much difference could the empowerment agenda make? ....	7
Why PB now? .....	8
How Technology Can Help PB.....	10
Benefits of technology.....	10
Social media and Web 2.0: New opportunities for PB.....	12
Use the channels that people like to use.....	13
New technologies and PB.....	14
Game tools and social alternatives.....	16
Examples of PB and technology.....	17
The Cost Effectiveness Case for PB.....	19
Conclusions.....	21

## Executive Summary

- There are strong underlying social and political reasons driving the empowerment agenda – which means that empowerment of citizens to get involved in the decision making process is an idea whose time has come, and it is here to stay.
- Participatory Budgeting (PB) is a way of involving people in making decisions about public service budgets - PB is based on the idea that many people are genuinely interested in what their money is spent on locally. This could mean small community focused budget decisions or wider ranging consultations on the overall Local Authority budget.
- One of the key strengths of PB is its ability to build trust by showing demonstrable results within a relatively small time period. This trust building effect can be further enhanced with the use of technology.
- Using technology to support PB provides an opportunity to engage with new audiences in a medium that reinforces trust and transparency. And technology can increase speed of delivery and cost effectiveness of transactions.
- The Government's empowerment agenda and its recent Local Democracy, Economic Development & Construction Bill resonates with a more general need to make politics more relevant and more local, especially in times of economic crisis. PB is an effective way to make this happen.
- Using the new social web, which sees millions of people talking to each other on sites such as Facebook, provides an opportunity to put PB and other consultations back in the heart of people's lives.
- PB and the use of technology are not a luxury – trusted and cost effective technology can be key in communicating and managing within a difficult economic environment

## **What is Participatory Budgeting?**

Before talking about technology it is important to have a common understanding about what Participatory Budgeting actually is. A widely held definition of Participatory Budgeting (PB) is as a way of involving people in making decisions about public service budgets. It began in Brazil in the mid-1980s as part of a wave of popular participation following the end of the military dictatorship. In cities, such as the famous Porto Alegre example, people were encouraged to attend local meetings to decide which improvements were most needed in their neighbourhoods. Over the years, the process became increasingly elaborate – including local assemblies, city-wide delegate structures, and complex rule books governing the process itself. After 20 years, some 50,000 people per year were attending local meetings to discuss, argue and vote on their priorities.

PB now has worldwide take-up and has been praised by the World Bank, the European Union and the United Nations. In this country, there have been modest PB pilot projects over the past ten years. Now, the Government has launched a national Participatory Budgeting strategy calling for every area to introduce some form of PB by 2012 – the first country in the world to do so.

### **The key component of PB**

PB is based on the idea that many people are genuinely interested in what their money is spent on locally. If they believe it will make a difference, they will come and discuss and argue with other local citizens about the priorities, services and budgets for their local area and this in turn is reconnecting people with the democratic process. The core of PB is the deliberation and discussion process, and eventual decision-making. Usually, the PB process starts with small amounts of money, often with new investment resources. That allows everyone – local people, elected politicians and public servants – to learn this new way of doing things together. Trust can be established, everyone can see that it works and makes a difference, and eventually, more money can be put into the PB decision-making pot.

It takes a lot of time, effort and resources to do PB well. Most people don't understand much about public service finances, so "budget literacy" education is essential. People are often sceptical that their involvement will make any difference so significant "capacity-building" and "trust-building" is needed. And the process itself needs to be organised – venues, meetings, visual and printed material all have to be paid for and rules are needed for how the process itself will be organised. It all takes time and money. But experience around the world has shown clear benefits:

- Once people get a taste for this decision-making and they can see it making a difference, more and more people get involved and enthusiastic about it.
- PB has the potential to let people see quickly that their involvement is taken seriously and has made a real practical difference.
- It has a proven track record of restoring faith for some people in the democratic process.
- It can support the role of the representative in working with his or her constituents.

### **Different types of PB**

The different approaches to PB can be broadly categorised as:

- Widespread priority setting for annual budgets
- Small scale PB to agree expenditure of small amounts in a specific area
- Targeted PB around a specific section of a local plan

More specifically there are various successful UK examples of PB:

- a) In Newcastle, young people have been taking decisions on how youth budgets should be allocated, culminating in a major event in Spring 2008 where over £2m was allocated;
- b) In Southampton Thornhill, local residents met and decided which public health projects to fund from a £50k pot;
- c) In Keighley, 250 residents spent a day assessing which projects to support to improve the environment and community safety in their communities from a pot of £130k;
- d) In Harrow, 300 local people spent all day discussing what should be the budget priorities for their local council.

What is noticeable from the UK PB examples is the relative lack of technology that has been used which is unusual in that the UK is leading the field of eParticipation work in many other areas. This paper aims to explain some ways that technology could be used to extend the reach and cost effectiveness of PB projects.

## **PB and the Empowerment Agenda**

The Government's commitment to introducing PB in the 2008 Empowerment White paper is symptomatic and part of its commitment to a much wider agenda of empowerment. It is important to grasp the significant scale of this shift in thinking – it has profound implications for local public services.

This shift is long overdue. England has perhaps the most centralised system of local public services in the Western world. Successive governments had stripped local services of autonomy and tax-raising powers, imposed performance indicators and targets, and reinforced a tight regulatory regime of inspections that has no parallel in Europe. "Local" services had become more accountable to central government than to local citizens. Cautiously, Government is bending the stick back the other way and there are many signs that this is a view shared by all major political parties.

### **Areas and multi-agency working**

Local Strategic Partnerships now play the key over-arching role. They are politically led by the Council, but involve all the major public services, together with representatives from the business and voluntary/community sectors. They are responsible for drawing up the key local strategic documents – the long-term Sustainable Community Strategy and the shorter-term Local Area Agreement, which is negotiated and agreed with Government. Legally, the main public services now have to work together around agreeing and implementing the targets included in the Local Area Agreement – no more buck passing! Inspection agencies are changing too. Government has legislated to move them away from "whistle-stop" assessments of particular agencies, towards a more long-term relationship with all the local partners, informing a new Comprehensive Area Assessment.

Citizens are now expected to hold services to account and Government has introduced a series of initiatives to help them to do so. From April 2009, councils (and fire and rescue services) will have a new legal "duty to inform, consult and involve" local people in both their day-to-day work and in their major decision-making. Government has announced its intention in the Local Democracy and Economic Development and Construction (LDEDC) Bill to extend this duty to local police and probation services too. Local health services already face similar legal duties. The Bill also proposes a new duty to promote local democracy and to respond to petitions – having an e-petition scheme may well become compulsory. Even the new performance and inspection regime will measure how well services are involving local citizens and service users. There are

specific performance indicators looking at citizen involvement and how well people feel they can influence local decision-making. Last but by no means least, Comprehensive Area Assessment will give significant weight to how thoroughly and efficiently local people are informed, consulted and involved. CAA will become a major driver of the empowerment agenda.

### **How much difference could the empowerment agenda make?**

This is a huge culture shift – similar to the change towards a performance management culture in local services that occurred over the previous 20 years. Just as it is now routine that managers and staff monitor how well they have delivered services, similarly, the aim is that it becomes a routine “part of the day job” that services inform, consult and involve their users and other citizens. The goal is to make empowerment part of the life-blood of local services. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century citizens and service users will expect and tolerate nothing less. The days of “take it or leave it” services are past. Just as individuals requiring services are increasingly being given the tools and budgets to choose their own services and suppliers, so citizens now expect to be offered information, to be consulted on and, where appropriate, to be involved in collective decision-making on issues affecting their local area.

There is also growing evidence that empowerment “works” – particularly in terms of increasing community cohesion and strengthening social capital. There has been much research on the notion of “well-being”, which shows that once people’s basic economic needs have been met, there is no significant increase in their life satisfaction from additional income. Many factors affect well-being, but feeling that you can have some say and influence over important aspects of one’s life definitely have an impact. And an increase in participatory democracy can begin to re-engage people with more traditional forms of representative democracy. For all these reasons, it is unlikely that citizen empowerment is merely a temporary fad, linked to the fortunes of the existing Government or, more narrowly, of the current Secretary of State, Hazel Blears. All the main parties are broadly committed to the new local services agenda of less centralised Governmental control, a multi-agency and area-based focus, and more say for local people. The language and emphasis may differ across the parties, but the agenda is here to stay.

## Why PB now?

Participatory Budgeting uniquely presses all the right buttons for the current legal and policy context for local services. It fits the agenda almost “like a glove” and seems likely to develop strong roots across the country in the next few years.

There have been many attempts to develop a “spectrum of engagement activities” or a “ladder of participation”. In some ways the new “duty to inform, consult and involve” is itself such a spectrum ranging from:

- the pre-requisite of providing people with a regular flow of information about priorities and services in their area and the opportunities to have a say about them;
- through to consultation about these priorities and services with citizens and service users to better inform the choices made by Members and service providers;
- right up to directly involving citizens and service users in making such choices themselves.

Clearly, PB fits at one end of this spectrum, where citizens or services users are invited to make decisions on how some money is spent locally.

### **PB and the new duties**

Local councils will be looking for ways to demonstrate that they are responding to the new “duty to inform, consult and involve” to ensure that they perform well in the new Comprehensive Area Assessment. In the short term, many will look to PB as an imaginative and relatively easy way to show that commitment. In the longer term too, PB provides an obvious route, along with other tools such as citizens’ panels, for involving people in ongoing, cyclical processes on the important local decisions on priorities, services and budgets. It can also arguably be a powerful way of re-engaging people in local democracy more generally.

PB provides a visible and high profile way to demonstrate to local citizens that their councils and their LSP partners are really serious about devolving power. Events at which citizens debate about and then vote directly on which projects to fund in their local area can have a powerful impact on those who participate. It can revive a sense of civic pride and responsibility and begin to restore trust with local service providers. If successful and publicised widely, they can have a similar impact way beyond just those who attended the event. PB can therefore represent a useful “quick win” for those

who wish to demonstrate commitment to the new empowerment agenda.

### **Community cohesion and PB**

One of the unexpected but significant by-products of some of the recent local PB pilot exercises in the UK has been their impact on community cohesion. By bringing together different parts of the local community in a collective discussion and decision-making process on priorities and budgets, old fears, myths and antagonisms were dispelled and overcome. Participants have used phrases such as the PB process “restoring their faith in human nature” to describe this revelatory experience. PB has long been praised by organisations such as the World Bank for the transparency of its decision-making processes. In the current economic climate, PB again seems to fit the bill particularly well.

## How Technology Can Help PB

In the case of PB as with all other areas of online consultation the view must be that less is more. Complex processes and technology do not necessarily bring more sophisticated results and benefits – though the use of the right technology will increase the impact of PB projects as well as increasing reach to your audience.

Many PB pilots have already embraced some elements of new technology with effective use of in-meeting voting systems and the use of video technology. While not wishing to ignore important channels such as digital TV or mobile phones, in this paper we want to look at ways that the web, and in particular the social web can help PB projects.

Before doing this however the extent of the “digital divide” should not be under-estimated. This divide is most significant in relation to income/class and to age. According to a study published less than a year ago in 2008, over half (51%) of those on low earnings (up to £10,400 per annum) had NEVER used the internet. This compares to only 6% of those earning over £36,400. The same study revealed that 71% of those aged 65 or over had NEVER used the internet, compared to just 4% of those aged between 16 and 24. While the gaps may well be narrowing, nevertheless these facts are a very stark reminder that whatever advances have been made in recent years on spreading new technology, deep inequalities have stubbornly re-asserted themselves here too. That being said there is a clear and growing trend towards use of the internet for social and transactional purposes and so these two effects need to be managed in parallel.

That is why PB (or indeed any other form of public or user engagement) cannot be reduced to an online/technological process, without threatening to substantially exclude the poor and the elderly. Technology generally, and web-based technology specifically, can therefore never be a “magic bullet” that solves all the engagement problems. It can never replace altogether more traditional forms of involving people. It always has to be considered alongside a whole range of other engagement tools and used in appropriate circumstances.

### Benefits of technology

An online dimension to any kind of engagement activity definitely brings some direct benefits:

- **An opportunity to engage with new audiences:** people who are housebound and who have no other means to engage with the outside world; the growing number of mainly 18-30 year old professionals, often with young families, traditionally

considered “hard to reach” by the democratic process, who vest a great deal of their social interactions online.

- **An opportunity to use a medium that reinforces trust and transparency:** Most people, given the choice, prefer to watch and not read content. Technology is now available to enable Local Authorities to reach out and use video and other multimedia tools.
- **Speed of delivery:** Information can be uploaded and communicated far faster in an online environment than it will be off line, and it is easier to communicate in a targeted and regular way than it would be without the internet. By reducing turnaround times you can gain greater feedback in a shorter amount of time with more iterations of the consultation process.
- **Scalability:** Online processes are usually cheaper and easier to repeat than their offline counterparts

### **Tackling the digital divide**

Local government has been dealing with the “digital divide” for some years and there are many effective initiatives in place that mitigate the problems of universal internet access:

- Access is now good through community centres / libraries and civic centres;
- Programmes for computers in schools can provide access for the whole family;
- Mobile phones increasingly have web browsing and internet access capabilities (and mobile phone ownership is more widespread amongst some of those that are currently largely excluded from internet usage).

The existence of the “digital divide” needs to be acknowledged but should not prevent those seeking to inform, consult and involve their local citizens and service users from making more and more information and processes available online.

Using these community facilities to provide access to PB rather than technology can bring two benefits:

- Increased access to decision making
- Additional opportunities for training and take up of IT services and improving the skills of participants
- Making democracy a central part of the digital inclusion agenda

## **Social media and Web 2.0: New opportunities for PB**

Web 2.0 is a term to describe the evolution of the internet, as highlighted by the innovation and popularity of websites such as Facebook and YouTube, in terms of the effects that it brings about – the rise of social networking and the growth of user-generated content. A web 2.0 approach tends to concentrate on getting content out to its audience and there is less reliance on traditional websites. Related terms might include multimedia, RSS, tagging, discussion boards or online communities. Social media is another way of describing this which is perhaps more useful to the non-technical person. The term social media tends to really highlight the types of site which are set-up and designed to be social – such as Facebook – as distinct from sites which want to develop user generated content – such as YouTube. This is a very fine drawn distinction and in many ways the two terms can be used interchangeably.

Where social media is exciting however is the way in which it can create strong online destinations that to a great extent 'feed' themselves. Online community members can feel passionate about that community and these environments should be considered to be as 'real' as a physical meeting place. The advantages of the online space, especially when used in conjunction with offline can be great:

- Physical meetings can be intimidating and difficult for people with little experience of public speaking. Online, people can craft and develop a response and post it when they are ready. This opens up the process both in terms of personality types but can also open things up for non-native speakers who may struggle to get their views across. This can make online meetings an excellent adjunct to their physical counterparts;
- The anonymity which is possible online can help conversations around difficult topics and can be used to engage new groups of people. However this anonymity needs to be managed responsibly and without losing sight of the value of accountability in any consultation;
- A parallel set of interactions online can remove barriers of time and place which are imposed by physical meetings. You may not be able to physically attend a meeting but you are now able to view and comment on it at a time and place which is convenient for you.

**Use the channels that people like to use**

The main argument for using the internet and increasingly for using video is that this is how a large segment of the population chooses to digest information.

Video, in particular, is direct, compelling and easy to use. It transcends problems of literacy and brings a directness and authenticity to communication which is essential to building trust in the democratic process and engaging people in democracy. This should not be done through highly produced and scripted content but with the use of informal vox pops and talking heads from participants in the process. It can comprise tools such as webcasting to ensure that the whole process is available online for those people who can't get to the physical events, and as a complete archive of decisions and the way in which they were reached, which again can help to increase trust and learning.

## New technologies and PB

With specific reference to the PB process there are a number of ways in which technology can be used to enhance a project. In no case are we suggesting that a PB project be run entirely online but all of these project ideas are a valuable adjunct to more traditional “offline” activities.

In the table below we have identified different stages within a consultation process and then mapped the new technology options alongside the existing physical activities.

<b>Stage of Project</b>	<b>Physical activity (Offline)</b>	<b>Technology options (Online)</b>
Communication of core activities: Initial launch of the PB process and ongoing marketing.	Leaflets, press coverage, posters and phone calls.	Most projects will already involve provision for a website. We believe that this should include a video element which makes the communication more transparent and more accessible.
Informal sharing opinions and ideas.	This is the stage that currently happens informally in the pub or other casual ways – most consultations do not use informal sharing of ideas despite the power that this has to build consensus and community cohesion.	This is an informal stage of the process and ideally you want to use tools which may already be familiar from the public domain. The most usual technology choices for this would be discussion boards. Blogs with comment features can also be used to initiate debate. One of the simplest and most effective ways of getting people to share opinions can be a simple petition. This is also an opportunity to find out more about your audience than you would get before the formal conversations.

<p>Gathering responses to proposals: Putting formal proposals together.</p>	<p>Generally, this would start with publicity to seek formal project proposals and the filling in of template forms.</p>	<p>This is a formal stage of the process where you need to get a set of proposals and you want to get feedback on these. Though you will want to retain the informal participation of the last stage you will need to introduce more formality in the content formats and presentations so that they can be fed into the formal decision making. This is where more structured tools such as online survey or document management systems can be useful. Specifically for PB, tools such as budget bingo and budget planning simulations can also be effective (see below).</p>
<p>Decision making and deliberation.</p>	<p>Meetings and voting.</p>	<p>Discussion, online questions from those watching the webcast.</p> <p>Online voting.</p> <p>Petitions.</p> <p>Contributions for formal survey tools.</p>
<p>Communicating results.</p>	<p>This might now be achieved through formal committee reports, local publicity and maybe some months later a DVD.</p>	<p>This is a vital stage of the process and is even more important with respect to repeated processes such as PB as you want to ensure that you retain your audience for future iterations. In addition to the methods used to communicate the initial project this is the stage</p>

		<p>where you would want to migrate participants into an ongoing discussion environment.</p> <p>At this stage it's not just about communicating where the money has been spent but about getting the local community involved in seeing the benefits of where the money has been spent again through the use of vox pops, etc</p>
--	--	--

### **Game tools and social alternatives**

There are specific game type tools already in play and PB provides the opportunity to use specific tools to illustrate the process and the decisions to be made. For example:

#### **Online PB bingo cards**

- The bingo card modelling tool which many small scale PB exercises use translates well to an online environment, where in addition to the highly visual set of choices these can each have a short explanatory video to help support the idea. It is also easy to run multiple iterations of the choice process with participants able to save their responses after each public meeting or additional discussion

#### **Digital voting**

- Once you have a user registration system in place then it is simple to ask participants to rank their project preferences online in order to extend the reach of the voting process.

#### **Budget simulation**

- There are various examples of trials of 'Sim City' type approaches to PB where the participant is able to alter spend in various parts of the budget – and is required to balance additions with appropriate reductions in other areas. This can again be a highly visual approach and is

more flexible than similar offline approaches using monopoly money and the like.

However these tools on their own do not unlock the “social” element of the web that facilitates people talking to each other and creating shared solutions. Rather, it goes back to a model where you are dealing with citizens as individuals and not as a community. Social networks online have this added ‘connection’ aspect which means that they are doing more than just returning data. When successful, social networking is all about building a community which compliments one of the core tenets of PB – that is shared decision-making.

### **Examples of PB and technology**

Below are three project scenarios of the way technology can be used alongside PB. These are not intended to be mutually exclusive and could easily sit alongside each other in a single PB iteration – or you could pick one of these ideas and run it as part of any existing PB project.

#### **The digital meeting:**

The public meeting is at the heart of the PB process and will be perhaps the most expensive and time-consuming part of the process overall. The difficulties with the physical meeting are well understood:

- It can get ‘hi-jacked’ by the more articulate or aggressive participants;
- It relies on participants having the time and inclination to attend;
- It is difficult to convey the richness of the debate to the wider public after the decision has been made.

Technology cannot remove these issues but it can mitigate them.

The digital meeting works by firstly creating (or using an existing) website where information can be made available before the physical event. This needs to be more than just the agenda; video clips of previous meetings can help participants prepare for their presentations and the site can provide more background information on each of the project ideas. You can also ask users of the site to log in and vote for projects, or just ask questions of the project owners. All of this information is then available for the actual meeting and extends participation beyond the attendees. By then

webcasting the meeting – i.e. live streaming the video – the meeting has become a permanent, accessible and fully transparent record of events which can be used to both communicate results and prepare people for future events.

### **Online debate and community building**

Good community consultation is about, in essence, good community conversations. There is no panacea for the need to grow these community conversations for all kinds of reasons but technology does offer one tactical opportunity in that people can be shown to be increasingly willing and able to take part in online conversations. Message boards and other social tools can be used alongside face to face conversations in order to widen reach and also give a voice to people who find it hard to get heard in the traditional process. This may be because of accessibility, timing or the fact that their age means they don't want to be hanging around community centres in the evening! A simple way of using online discussions is to open a social board prior to your PB process to start people talking and then help people put their project ideas online in advance of the decision meeting so they can be discussed. The discussions need to be moderated and we suggest you recruit members of the community so that they can host, encourage and moderate discussions – making them more of a community owned tool and also making them more sustainable for you. If the community is successful it can be used to maintain your connection to the community in between projects and reduce your cost of recruitment for the next cycle – as well as providing a valuable community tool.

### **Online deliberation**

Once a website has been established as an online destination for PB conversations then you can look to move more substantial parts of the process online – at all times in parallel with the face to face process. Video pitches for specific projects can bring ideas alive to the wider public and iterative voting rounds can help to hone in on the community choices by taking the PB bingo idea online.

## **The Cost Effectiveness Case for PB**

In a time of growing economic gloom it is important to be clear that participation and empowerment are not just policies for the “good times”. The serious world economic crisis makes citizen empowerment more and not less important. There are a number of sound arguments in favour of empowerment when economic times are tough.

It is now abundantly clear that the 10-year period of significant investment in public services has come to an end. The UK Government had already signalled this with the most recent Comprehensive Spending Review in 2007. The economic crisis means that we are certain to be in a period of prolonged retrenchment and reductions in public service spending. Yet expectations from citizens and service users continue to rise, and demographic changes – an ageing population and the influx of new communities – make new and increasing demands on local services.

This creates a premium on the most accurate targeting of services on those who need them most. It is a myth that this can be achieved by desk-top research and analysis of demographic trends. It can only reliably be achieved through the constant interaction of service providers with their local communities. This involves a continuous stream of information to citizens, service users (and non-users), appropriate consultation and involvement, and listening to all their local communities – both the frequently and seldom heard. Such a commitment may require an initial investment of resources, but is certain to bear fruit in the medium and longer term in more effective and targeted local services.

### **Efficiency savings and public engagement**

There is another efficiency argument that has a significant appeal. There is much evidence that information, consultation and involvement activity across public agencies within the Local Strategic Partnership is un-coordinated, chaotic, duplicated and sometimes downright wasteful. There is considerable scope in most areas for these agencies to audit the scale, efficiency and costs of their current engagement activity, and to draw up a Comprehensive Engagement Strategy across the partnership. Not only is this likely to be more effective, it may well also save money for the partners.

Economic scarcity does not bring out the best in people – quite the reverse. It is likely to fuel traditional fears and insecurities, and conflicts within communities over the perceived fairness or not of the distribution of resources. Community cohesion can all too easily become a casualty in an economic downturn or crisis. It therefore becomes extremely important to find ways to make decision-making

more transparent and accessible to local communities. The more people are directly involved or see others from their communities involved in decisions on the allocation of resources and the choice of priorities, the more willing they are likely to be to accept the outcomes as fair and reasonable.

The same is true in a broader sense too for elected Members. They now face an increasingly uncomfortable role of making hard choices between priorities and services within their local communities. However much people may understand that this is somehow related to an international economic crisis, local Members who make the very visible local decisions may have to face unpopularity and anger. How much better for Members to be able to legitimately claim that such decisions were made with the full involvement and support of the local community?

### **Technology makes PB more cost effective**

This paper specifically focuses on technology and participatory budgeting. It does not suggest that a PB process could be run solely using new technologies, without the risk of disenfranchising many people. Nevertheless, the use of technology in a PB process can, amongst other benefits, save money in a number of ways:

- While set-up costs may be perceived as higher than a paper-based process the fact that you can run multiple interactions from the same investment will be a cost saving over time;
- Large cost savings can be made where it is possible to email or text people rather than writing to them;
- Great savings can be made in recruitment costs where a group can maintain itself through the use of social networks / discussion boards.

The review of processes which is necessitated by new online systems can trigger the kinds of re-engineering which are needed to make processes more efficient anyway.

## Conclusions

This paper attempts both to explain PB and to put it within a contemporary context, which takes into account not only the Government's empowerment agenda but also the way in which people actually behave and interact. Our belief is that PB can provide an entry point into citizen engagement and that the effective use of technology alongside the process can significantly strengthen this.

The most important thing to remember however is that participatory budgeting is not actually about the money. Good PB projects are about people and about bringing them together to agree common goals and ambitions.

We believe that good use of the web based technologies – and in particular social technologies – can provide a way of extending the reach of PB projects to new audiences and also a way of extending the conversation beyond the confines of the projects.

PB is a great way to get the conversation within a community started and provides a much better local decision making tool. It can give people a reason to come to the table to talk and becomes a motivator for discussions at a far more sophisticated level for those making decisions on local and strategic priorities. We believe that the effective use of technology within these projects can provide ongoing benefits in terms of increased community cohesion and scalability of process.

Neither PB nor social technologies present a "magic bullet" to solve the difficult issues of democratic engagement. However together they offer a cost effective tactical process for communities to make more inclusive decisions.