

A Feasibility Study to Explore the Potential for Participatory Grantmaking (PGM) in North Yorkshire



Case Study: Devolved Decision Making in Teams & Dunston (Gateshead)

Supported by North Yorkshire Council and the UK Shared Prosperity Fund

Skyblue Research Ltd

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Background

This is one of three case studies based on triangulated interviews conducted by Alan Graver (Skyblue Research Ltd) between June and December 2023.

These 'deep dives' contributed to, and complemented, the UK Shared Prosperity Fund feasibility study which was completed by Skyblue in January 2024. A detailed report, short summaries and 'PGM learning together workshop' slide packs were also produced and are available on request from Marie-Ann Jackson, Head of Localities, North Yorkshire Council.

Case study 3: Devolved Decision Making in Gateshead

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the 4 individuals interviewed for this case study. They shared different perspectives; two coming from different place-based funding organisations that provided collective resources for a community pot of money that could be decided upon by participants; a 'Bridgebuilder'¹ with local lived experience and community development expertise to lead on a local inquiry and engagement approach; and a community interest company dedicated to transforming systems to work better for people and communities. This began as one of several projects that were part of Lankelly Chase's² devolving decision-making' partnership with Gateshead.

Overview

'This is an ongoing project that started in 2021 that is about local residents and communities making decisions about what matters to them and building community strength and cohesion. It focuses on the Teams and Dunston community in Gateshead, who have been allocated an unrestricted pot of funding to spend as it wishes on initiatives that will build on the strengths of the community and help it address things that residents want to see change.'

Between June 2021 and February 2023 (21 months) operational costs were covered by The National Lottery Communities Fund whilst funding for the 'community pot' has been provided by Lankelly Chase (£115,000) and The Ballinger Charitable Trust £15,000).

Aims at the start of the Project were:

- New projects will be chosen, created and actioned by people living in the area
- Test this new approach to tackling issues and opportunities
- Help the community become more resilient, in part as a response to COVID-19
- Strengthen relationships within and across Teams and Dunston communities.

- Build an increased sense of community power and agency by bringing local people into the decision making process around funding¹.

Whilst involving participatory grantmaking (PGM) principles in the Project's approach, it is more accurately described as a learning experiment in devolved decision making (DDM).

What started it all?

Lankelly Chase, an independent charitable foundation and network reported that their:

'PGM journey started in 2017/18. The Trustees felt unmoored from the grants they were deciding about and what the grants were doing so they devolved the decision making to the Lankelly Chase Staff Team; who similarly went on to feel that the decisions should be made by people closest to it.'

They decided to go on a journey of losing control and saw an opportunity to re-imagine outcomes and solutions in systems and communities.

Lankelly Chase were actively investing in numerous parts of the UK including Gateshead, and that had spawned relationships with the local authority and the Collective Impact Agency (CIA) who together were trying to find different ways

¹ This role has been inspired by [Bridge Builder's Handbook - Relationships Project](#).

² [Overview – Lankelly Chase](#)

‘with community and doing what’s right for the community.’

Together, there was agreement that people far removed from Gateshead shouldn’t be making decisions about the things affecting people’s lives in Gateshead. That was the common ground and basis for new conversations.

One interviewee explained that:

‘This was also partly driven by the local authority who were recognising that they were all working in silos, departments and asking the same people in the same communities ‘tell us your problem.’ It was felt that there should be a combined attempt to support individuals.’

This new approach – which would include ingredients of a community development worker, operational support and a community pot - was consolidated by the CIA who had built strong relationships with the National Lottery and in the North East including with the Ballinger Charitable Trust whose Board felt:

“It was an interesting experiment. And if the National Lottery were willing to invest in the community development aspect of the approach and Lankelly Chase would put up the major funding the Trust were OK to hold the Lottery money and add in £15,000 to the pot so long as ‘our’ bit was getting into the hands of the community and them deciding what to spend it on – not the overheads or community development costs of the staff at CIA doing that work up-front.”

There is no perfect way of distributing money to a community of need. CIA said, ‘why not experiment in Gateshead’ and we thought why not – especially with other investors on board. An interesting way to see if it could support a community to decide how to use money for itself.”

Subsequently a proposal was developed by CIA to The National Lottery who agreed

to cover the operational costs of the proposed Project between June 2021 and February 2023. This covered salaries², rent, professional fees, training, volunteer costs, equipment, marketing/advertising, general expenses and events. The main investment was in a skilled local person appointed as a community development worker by what is now called the Gateshead Community Bridgebuilder (GCB) team and initially placed in Teams Medical Practice. This role would be about building relationships and trust in the chosen community, gathering people’s experiences and laying the foundations for later bringing people into a decision making role for the ‘community pot.’

Why Teams and Dunston (Gateshead)?

A variety of explanations were provided.

“Teams and Dunston is an area of deprivation³; also divided by a main road with underpass structures, so physical things that divide the community. It’s a splintered community. There are people in difficult circumstances. There’s a half way home for people coming out of prison; there’s addiction-supported housing; it’s fragmented and divided as a community.”

“Teams and Dunston was selected because of highest suicide rates in men; generational unemployment; low literacy levels and specifically there are ‘lay lines on the map, unwritten, but there, where people from one part won’t talk to a person from another part.’ There are 35 languages in the area; refugees, asylum seekers. North of West Street wouldn’t talk to South of West Street.”

Furthermore:

“One of the people at the CIA lived there so we felt we knew the area well so at the Trust we thought it might work better because of that local insight. This gave the Trust’s Board enough reassurance to invest and experiment.

From the CIA’s perspective:

“We were always trying to make the community stronger – strengthen connections and relationships. This was an experiment – an exercise in learning about devolved decision making – the idea of sub-devolving money into a smaller locality than ‘Gateshead’ – into Teams and Dunston was novel and getting to the point where local people could decide what to do with money.”

What happened?

Community engagement

The Project team thought carefully about what matters to the community which included the community centre in the centre of Teams; and the pub which acted as a useful congregation point for the Bridgebuilder’s conversations.

“We knew we couldn’t rely on people coming to any building so our Bridgebuilder got to know everyone she could out and about.”

The Bridgebuilder was pivotal in sparking interesting conversations in the community to find out what people felt was strong, wrong or mattered. Not everyone was ready for that conversation though and more work had to be done to build trust across different parts of the community.

A huge amount of effort went in to engaging with ‘people services typically struggle to connect with – often the most hurt, angry, with addictions and least money with little by way of connection to services or ‘the local system.’

“In this community they are in plain sight – it’s not that they are hard to reach, it’s often that no one is listening.”

The conversations surfaced tensions, stigmas and unhelpful dynamics between those in power and those whose difference had not been sufficiently accounted for.

The Bridgebuilder learned about these attitudes and behaviours and spent time

meeting many of the different local groups where connections were already present or showed potential. This provided an understanding of the underlying trauma within such groups as well the things that bind them.

Despite being trusted, local and embedded before taking on the Bridgebuilder role, she nevertheless had to work hard to win trust in new parts of the community.

Slowly, through quiet (often 6 months or longer) trust-building the Bridgebuilder was ‘let in’ by the groups and the Project’s aims alongside the power of money provided a useful inroad. The Bridgebuilder later shared that local people in groups that eventually ‘let her in’ said they were more reassured that she was not *“not one of them that wants a glass for her can of pop are they?”* (i.e. an outsider).

Top tip from the Bridgebuilder

“Before bringing a panel together or spending money, with help from The Relationships Project, I was taught to put on my TRINOCULARS! That means:

- 1: Find out what’s already there in the community e.g. we found the ADHDDivas folk working with neurodiverse people.
- 2: Find the ‘sparkle’ in the community – could be a person, a place, something that creates a sense of belonging.
- 3: Acknowledge the grief and trauma in a community.

TADA Festival

The Bridgebuilder joined in February 2021. The first few months were about building those relationships and local connections, and this led to the Project

organising the TADA Festival in September that same year. This was an opportunity for different community members to have conversations about how people felt about Teams and Dunston. But importantly it was a day about creativity and fun too where people could enjoy music, food, art and even circus skills! It drew some, but not 'a full representation' of the community and the Project wanted to put even more effort into attracting and engaging with the diversity of the area.

The Four Horses

From the TADA festival and follow up events in October 2021, participants identified 4 things that really mattered:

- Mental health
- Community living room/s
- Children and young people
- '2k22s'.

This gave the Project some steer for how best to expend energy next. It invested in mental health first aid training for people who would later go on to make decisions about the community pot. This investment was a means of building group cohesion through bringing strangers together in a shared learning experience.

The 'living rooms' concept was all about creating time, space and the conditions for people to come together. The work with children and young people is still developing and the 2k22 refers to events held in 2022 where typically a dozen community members being supported to make decisions, including how to spend £2000 on the community.

These groups don't just make the decision though, they are also invited to help make that decision happen which is an interesting model. You have all 3 aspects being experimented – community

members generating ideas, deciding on funding and activating them rather than one role being separated from the other. This is forged from a belief that working on a shared project is a brilliant way of building good relationships.

"There was also a concern that creating a panel whose sole role is to decide who gets money and who doesn't often serves to exacerbate local tensions, rather than diminish them one of our funders challenged us early on to consider how we would avoid exacerbating existing community tensions."

The £2,000 was just a starting point. If the group generated further ideas more funding was available from the pot.

In March 2022, the first 2k22 was held, the first of many that year which enabled community members to come together and start to generate small scale ideas for funding, subsequently awarded. The TADA Next Steps Group also formed itself, meeting monthly, to help shape and steer the Project – a space where those involved are becoming 'organic' community leaders.

Decision making

The Project explained how it was interested in changing normal decision-making patterns as part of the 2k22s and so the Bridgebuilder sought to create time and space for people to think about:

- What decisions they felt able to make in their lives
- What decisions they felt unable to make.
- How to feel a sense of power and agency when typically denied these by current structure.

Then opportunities were created for ideas to be discussed asking questions like 'which ideas do you think have legs?' and 'which excite you?' and 'which would you like to do?'. For some participants, they had uncomfortable feelings of

accountability towards money when making decisions and there was almost a need to unlearn this for some people.

Learning about decision making

“When I was doing my community engagement activity, I came across women who had been victims of domestic violence. Their decision-making power had been taken away. They would be in a supermarket and couldn’t remember what they liked to eat or drink or struggled with knowing what they were able to do on their own independently. So for these people, who we were trying to involve in the DDM approach, we had to go right the way back to decision making and ask ‘who makes good decisions in your lives, who makes bad decisions in your lives, who is responsible for it?’

We put together a pack of stuff around their responses. Often, in fact 99% of the time people would say ‘the Council’ makes the decisions that affect their lives. Then they would say the Council isn’t good at making good decisions. But when we asked ‘what decisions would you like the Council to make better’ the residents were not sure about that. There was a lot to unlearn and learn to equip people for decision making.”

Interestingly, they decided they would not organise decision-making panels in the same way they – and other community members from a local walking group - had experienced in the Big Local Gateshead approach. This is because they had had a negative experience and worry in relation to spending money.

“We didn’t create a single panel and invite people to bid. Instead, we built on pre-existing discrete community groups and the way they developed ideas together. If you have PGM with a panel it can become a bit gimmicky, Dragons Denny.”

Members of the Project team felt this approach had proved to be successful saying:

“Different ideas are coming forward from the individual and increasingly connecting groups in the area that our Bridgebuilder has nurtured.”

What ideas were generated?

A group of residents had facilitated time to look at what the problems were in their community and come up with solutions. Then they voted on what they really wanted to do. Examples included these activities that then led to each one being taken on by a sub-group

- A sensory library for community centres
- A community bench upgrade
- A community map of local groups, services and gatherings
- Fairy doors for the new fairy door trail
- A seaside trip for the walking group
- A pottery course for a support group called ‘U, Me and ADHD’
- A trip for ‘The Men’s Group’ and team building and social activity – a meal, a ghost tour and bowling together
- A defibrillator at the Teams Life Centre
- Mental health first aid training
- A 12-month skill swap where 12 women each take a lead on running sessions at the local community centre
- The setting up of a craft club
- Printing of ‘You are not alone’ signposting card to show people where to go for help, especially in mental health crisis
- A ‘blues-busting event’ developed by the ‘dishwasher stress’ group and the ‘Cup of tea, a tab and a scone’ group

3k23 events followed in 2023 with the opportunity for community members to decide on projects and activities up to £3,000 of spend. Ideas emerged around:

- Transport for elderly folk
- First aid and defibrillator training
- Deaf awareness.

By February 2023, the community had decided to spend c£9,000 of the available £130,000 community pot. There had also

been some underspend relating to the Project operational costs. This led to some useful reflections from the funding organisations.

The Project team said: *"We didn't want to simply replicate the existing funding decision-making structures, just with local people 'pretending' to be the funders. We tried to experiment with creating significantly different infrastructure.*

And from a funder's perspective: "It produced the results we expected as a Board as we wanted the community to decide how to spend the money available to them."

But for balance, and although the estimate of distributed money is slightly different from that described above:

"We gave out £75k to infrastructure to give out £20k. PGM – or DDM - is not the quickest way to get money into a community. In the time taken for the PGM approach in T&D we could have been funding the pre-existing charitable infrastructure. I don't think that PGM was a better way of giving grants to the community."

"It's not just about coming in to a community with a bag of money – that's extractive, colonial."

But the Project Team learned that the Project both was and wasn't about money. These and other learning lessons are considered next.

Learning

The Project has continued beyond the period supported by The National Lottery. And this is important because it gives clues as to the kind of legacy that is possible to create beyond an 18-21 month focused period of community development work, building trust and starting to encourage different people to make

decisions about small amounts of funding to spend in their community.

Firstly, the Bridgebuilder post has endured,. The Bridgebuilder has joined a team of 7 such Bridgebuilders in Gateshead meaning that the vital role of continuing to build connection, find sparkle and support idea generation has continued. That in turn has seen larger project ideas – such as one for over £20,000 to celebrate the deaf community – come forward because confidence in and across different community groups has grown and matured.

Helpfully, the community pot is retained to support such ideas. It didn't end at a specific point in time just because The Lottery funding period ended. The Charitable Trust has also seen that the benefits beyond the initial period can come in many forms:

"Individuals and small groups within the community themselves are starting to come forward and access small pot funding (without any barriers) to support their development work. The Bridge Builder is there to help encourage, but I realise now (2 ½ years on since the start of the experiment) that more of an 'eco-system' in that community has been fostered from that 18 months Lottery funded community development work by than we had given credit to."

The community pot itself now sits with the local community centre so that anyone wanting to trial, pilot and develop some activity can go and get a bit of that money from there without ever seeing or even knowing about the funders. This evolution prompted one of the funders to give this advice to other organisations thinking of a PGM approach:

"Be available for that time beyond 3 years. If you're lucky it may take 2 years to get the relationships going, but could be 3 years, 5 years or 10 years. As a funder don't expect PGM to work within your timescale, and also calling it PGM is

problematic; maybe better to call it devolved decision making.”

Another of the funders said:

“If you’re giving grants using this method it has to be UNCONDITIONAL. The originator must accept that the money goes where it goes. Also, the group of people that will be making decisions need a bonding, shared relationship experience. Good relationships are what remains and that these people are willing to find a way forward. This is facilitating a shared agreement on how to be together. There can’t be judgement in the approach. We learnt that as a funder you have to be open, transparent and clear – about intentions and the money and the amount available. Paying people for their time has been very helpful too. Our approach has been smaller amounts of money first before making larger sums of money available, which we think has worked. Engaged, enfranchised groups will exist after we’ve gone and the money’s gone.”

The Project Team have learned so many things. Here are just a few of them:

1: The Bridge Builder role has been vital to engage with the community, and the Bridge Builder Team now presents new opportunities for devolving power further to an even more local level, with each one potentially developing their own satellite groups and budget.

2: The work and thinking of The Relationships Project inspired such a human, deep listening and gentle approach and putting on ‘the trinoculars’.

3: The Bridge Builder can be a part of the process of local divides, barriers and tensions to diminish such as when people across the North and South of West Street came together for the Thursday ‘clap for the NHS’ during COVID; and building on the opportunity of that connection. The Bridgebuilder was getting well known and using social media the street would know she’d be walking down at 5pm to take

photos so everyone would be getting ready, looking their best in case they featured on the Facebook page!

4: There was some resistance from local councillors in the community when the project went out with an open invitation for residents to talk about what’s strong and what’s wrong. There was push-back from those in power to suggest it wasn’t correct to suggest things were wrong. Some VCSEs felt that the money being invested in the PGM approach could have come to them instead.

5: That it is possible to build relationships though with such VCSEs who ultimately went on to become a part of the iteration of the project, agreeing to host Bridge Builders and work alongside one another rather than against each other.

“We’re all interested in building our people up but there are so many barriers to power.”

6: Whilst only a small proportion of the community pot had been decided upon within 21 months, the community engagement work had surfaced so much trauma and helped the Project team understand what was needed first to help people come together, trust one another and feel in a safe space to disagree with one another yet still move towards a role of making decisions together. That investment in relationship building amongst people in recovery, ex addicts, ex-army members, people experiencing domestic abuse or violence and many others in a position of adversity appears to generate a dividend around the 2-3 mark in a PGM Project lifetime where bigger ideas start to emerge.

The Project team reflected:

“It’s not about how quickly you get money out the door. It’s about what you’re building in community. There is often not a direct correlation between the two.”

This view might not always or originally be shared by funder organisations though, and having a Project that creates enough time and space to work out together what's important is a part of the learning process. Comparing PGM to other methods, funders interviewed, did initially discuss speed of getting money into a community as an important initial driver for their involvement and willingness to take a risk and experiment. The emphasis on this particular metric demonstrably diminished over the lifetime of the Project.

7: The infrastructure built by the Project didn't require anyone to submit an application. This was another way the Project deliberately differed from conventional funding decisions.

8: However, a problem encountered is some people's inherent mistrust in a community's decision making ability. 'Won't PGM just lead to people involved and deciding to spend money on themselves?' The Project team would say they have learned to 'let go.' If that's what the decision is then so be it. The things that got funded were ways of building binds and connection without which the growth in each individual would not be such that they would likely be ready or want to make bigger decisions down the line about others in their community. There was a need to feel some agency and power as part of the participation experience.

"I think this part is so important. It's not about what the money gets spent on - that's missing the point. It's about the relationships, power, and agency that can be built if you do all this in a fundamentally different way."

The Project team feel strongly that taking this intentional approach in disadvantaged communities enables the development of an alternative infrastructure or ecosystem.

9: Creating the conditions for people to actually feel good themselves to be able to work together, bond and make decisions

for others was also key so investment in things like MHFA training was an essential capacity building element required before you can expect people with lived experience / backgrounds described to make decisions of the nature anticipated.

10: There is benefit in, and ways of reaching, grassroots, informal and unconstituted groups as they don't always find it easy to apply for funding or the funder eligibility criteria exclude them. The Social Change Nest⁴ is recommended.

11: For community development there is a sense that people need to know money is in place first before they collect ideas otherwise they fear they will be let down. If they know they've got a bit of money they are more likely to sustain their engagement."

11: Success metrics for DDM

"This was never about how we most effectively get money into the hands of community members. This was about building a sense of power and agency in local communities that historically struggle with systemic disempowerment. The money is merely a tool for doing so. The right 'success' question should be: 'How much power and agency did we build?' not 'What was our infrastructure-to-distribution ratio?'"

"PGM is a bit broken. There are bright and shiny blue pottery pieces, the pieces don't fit in with everyone perfectly, we are trying, we are starting, getting pieces that are broken and making something of them, is it good enough? No but it's a great start."

The future?



- There are now 10 people in the Bridgebuilder team comprising 7 Bridgebuilders and 3 Coordinators. They are all working with marginalised communities including refugees, asylum seekers and others performing a common brokerage role.
- Some of the groups engaged in Teams & Dunston Project are now looking to run their own 2k events which presents opportunities for devolving power and money to that most local level.
- Ideas can continue to be supported by accessing the community pot held by the community centre.
- Participatory investment approaches are inspiring the Project Team, based on similar work coming out of Barking and Dagenham.

The belief remains very strong amongst all involved that DDM – including PGM – is the right thing to do with a community.

“Over the last 30 years citizens have become service users or customers to local authorities and others which implies a set of power dynamics – and it’s patriarchal, people have been ‘done to’ for a long time. PGM can give a spark of agency for people who have felt on the margins and passive about how their area has changed – gives them a resource bubble.”

“Our experience has been about focusing on disadvantaged communities, supporting people in those communities to learn and encouraging them to bring ideas

on what to spend money on. Participation teaches everyone that people are worthwhile, and they matter. Who makes the decisions is really important.”

“PGM is confirmation and validation of the fact that people are resourceful and have strengths and that relationships should lead to more than outcomes; and that when people come together they can scratch a collective itch”

Top tips

1: Start slow and let it grow. The bridge Builder reflects: *“I’m 3 years in and only just starting to develop the level of trust needed for something like PGM as part of DDM to work.”*

2: Look after yourselves as a Project team.

“We paid for 1-2-1 counselling not in response to feeling ill or burnt out but as a preventative measure done in advance – because the community work can be hard gathering those stories.”

3: Create space to meet, provide food, hot drinks, biscuits, free accessible transport, childcare, support during day and evening, language/interpreters – all the conditions for conversations that are inclusive for the people you’re trying to put at the heart of the decision making for the future.

Removing all those practical barriers to get involved.

4: Be prepared to do something differently.

¹ Source: Project End Report to The National Lottery, February 2023

² The project team comprised three people with operational support from two people at the CIA. The guiding body was the Gateshead Community Bridgebuilders team (formerly the Gateshead Coordination Team – a group of individuals interested in system change across Gateshead who have devolved decision making power over Lankelly Chase funds for the town. This group used Lankelly Chase funds to seed this Project and continue it after The National Lottery Community Funding period ended in February 2023. This Group appointed the Community Development Worker and assigned the CIA as the stewards of TNCL funding.

³ T&D ward is located in Inner West Gateshead with a population of 9,114. See www.gateshead.gov.uk/imd.

⁴ [The Social Change Nest – The Social Change Agency](#)