

PRIDE AWARDS 2017

Category: Best Use of Digital

Company: Newcastle City Council

Entry title: A digital blueprint for local democracy

Brief and objectives:

To create an online tool to encourage the public to engage with the council's draft budget proposals. This engagement has always been difficult because it's a struggle to get:

1. People interested
2. People to better understand local government finance
3. People to appreciate the dilemmas councillors face when setting the budget

For the past seven years, councils up and down the country have faced significant budget pressures which has resulted in services being removed or reduced.

Unless people are aware of this and understand it better, they are not inclined to get involved and the process ends up being very negative and attracts criticism of the council.

Our goal was to create a digital platform which:

- Allowed members of the public to get a better understanding of our budget
- Make our residents aware of the difficult choices facing the council
- Empower local people in the decision-making process

Rationale behind campaign, including research and planning:

Effective community engagement can significantly increase public confidence and trust [1]. Also when those who serve listen to the citizens, they become better informed of what is needed by the community and generally make better decisions. [2] So the key to this campaign was to radically change the existing process and create a digital platform that would simplify the council's budget and the proposals that were put forward to be considered by our residents. It was imperative that this digital solution would empower residents in the decision-making process and put them in the seats of councillors, to understand the scale of the challenge, and that every decision has consequences.

The existing process meant the public had to read 20 individual documents consisting of 750 pages, and then directing them to a survey to have their say. We needed to find an easier way to present this information which would allow people to just 'get it'.

It's no surprise that in 2015/16, our budget consultation process generated only 3,500 unique visits to our consultation website and 193 people completed a survey. Due to

workforce reductions, the council stopped facilitating drop in sessions with about 10 staff where the public used to go and find out more information on the budget and have their say.

Strategy and tactics, including the types and variety of digital media utilised, creativity and innovation:

We created a digital platform and called it The People's Budget. We wanted it to be as simple as possible. We took the principles of Sim City and applied it to the simulator which was the only way we were going to get residents to understand that every decision has consequences. This was achieved by introducing a breaking news ticker.

We made the platform as interactive as possible and converted council jargon into everyday language so that residents could appreciate the difficult choices facing the city.

We also needed to find a way to explain the difference between Capital and Revenue spend to counteract the argument that 'you're spending this money on shiny buildings when you could be spending it on social care'. And this was built into the simulator.

And we empowered our residents by allowing them to submit their own budgets. Individual budgets were then collected and the aggregate budgets created the People's Budget, the sum total of all budgets submitted. We made this public to enable transparency and greater accountability.

Implementation of tactics:

We had just over 1 month to implement this platform.

- Phase 1 – Research and analyse previous budget consultation exercises
- Phase 2 – Produce brief
- Phase 3 – Design wireframes and mock ups
- Phase 4 – Collaborate with service managers across the council to produce content and budgetary figures
- Phase 5 – Develop and test
- Phase 6 – Launch
- Phase 7 – Invite residents and stakeholders to submit budgets

Measurement and evaluation:

Over 46,000 unique visitors interacted with the platform in the 3 months it was live, an increase of 1231% in visitors from our consultation website in 2015/16. This resulted in 539 budgets being submitted or people giving up, an increase of 179% from last year's budget consultation.

Residents were not only able to interact with the platform and get a better understanding of our budget position, but they influenced a council tax rise of 4.95% in the city to deal with the cuts.

For the first time, residents were able to influence which services could be protected and which services could be cut. This level of intelligence and insight from what our residents wanted has been revolutionary. And it has helped our councillors to listen to what our residents have to say.

The People's Budget platform also sparked a lot of social media conversations which resulted in 300,500 reach on Facebook and 49,980 video views on all the videos we posted on the budget. On Twitter we had 116,621 impressions.

Budget and cost effectiveness:

The cost to develop the platform was £5,000. But the money we're now saving from no longer holding the drop-in sessions has been estimated at £5,000 per session, and we used to deliver three to four every year.

The cost effectiveness is in the trust we've now built up with our residents which has been invaluable. For the first time, we received lots of positive comments.

Using digital technology, we've radically changed the culture of the organisation by empowering residents to influence decision making in the council.