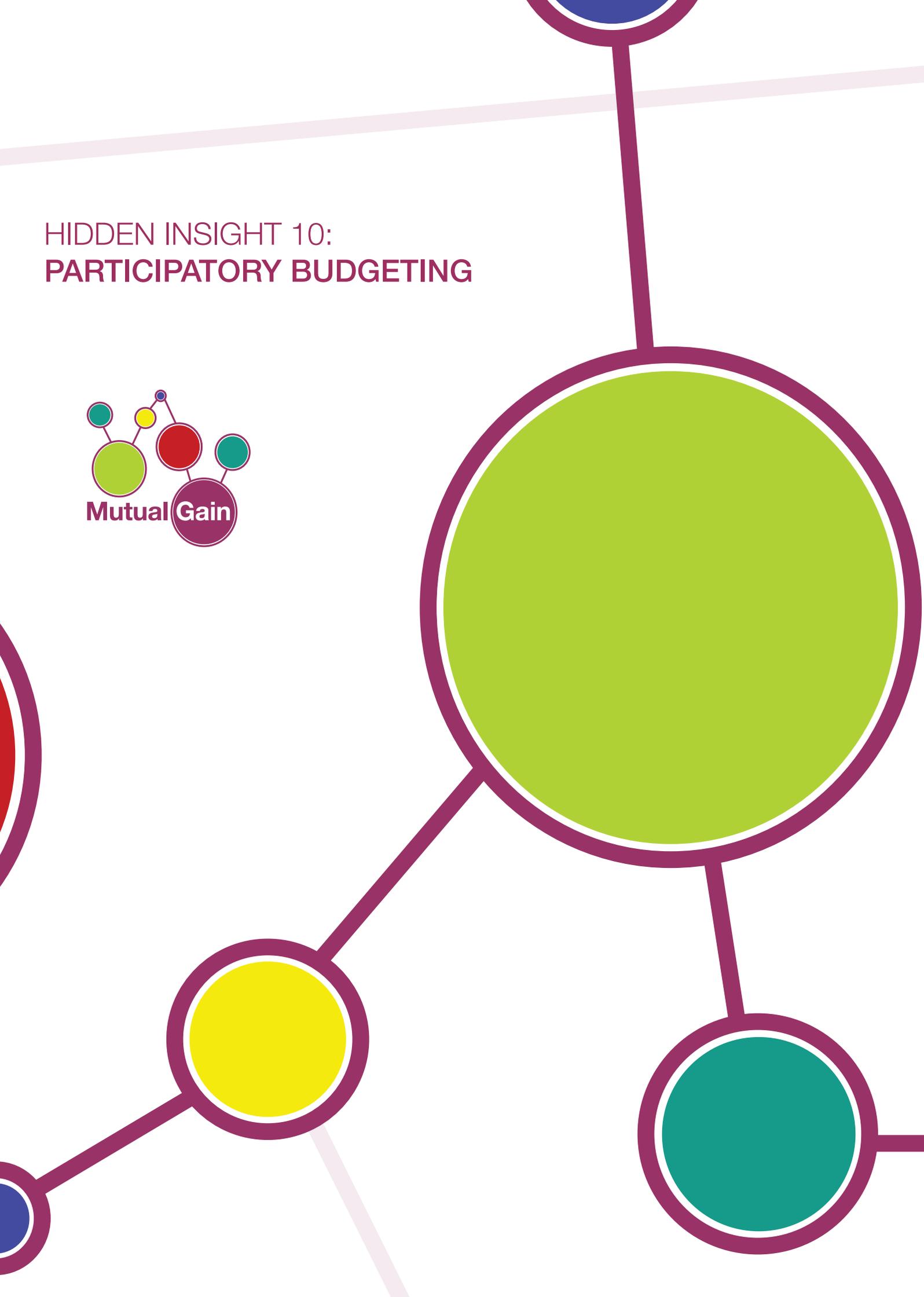


HIDDEN INSIGHT 10:
PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING



This Insight outlines the principles and techniques of participatory budgeting and considers how a public sector team working with their local council successfully utilised participatory budgeting to engage with a “hard to reach” community. It considers how the team moved from a belief that they could not engage with the local community to a position where they were able to empower the local community to take more responsibility for improving their local area.

*#Participatory budgeting #Empowering local communities #Community engagement
#Devolved power #social capital #Partnership working.*

Participatory Budgeting (PB) is a community engagement process that enables and empowers the community to allocate part of a public budget. Popular worldwide, it has largely manifested itself in the UK as a more transparent method of allocating community grants to local ideas.

It can, however, be used on the allocation of mainstream budgets used for policing, councils, housing and NHS services. It is often associated with ‘additional’ pots of money in the UK and something to do when times are good, but this is a narrow position to take: PB was established during a period of unrest and austerity in Brazil, and is an excellent and transparent way of engaging the community in tough decisions around budget allocation.

The local council in one area where we worked was seeking to support the development of PB with other public sector partners: they had extensive experience of PB hosting 40 events and had been a trailblazer for the concept of participatory budgeting for many years.

For the other public sector partner, however, it was a new concept. The MutualGain cohort learned about Participatory Budgeting as part of a 5-day training programme. At first sight it is often not obvious to frontline staff how PB could help with front line service delivery.

When the teams met at their monthly Action Learning Sets they discussed who they wanted to engage, why they wanted to engage them, and how they planned to develop a new relationship with their community using the learning from the five day course. The local team agreed that they wanted to engage with residents from a local “hard to reach” community.

Those residents defined themselves separately to others in the area, and generally preferred no relationship with those in the statutory sector. They were a group whose relationships with public sector organisations had been tenuous and sensitive over the years. As a result, securing information and intelligence from the community had proved to be challenging.

After exploring possible techniques of engagement the MutualGain students opted for the more traditional model of engagement through clubs for youths – cooking, fishing etc. Whilst these were good things to do in their own right, they weren’t a technique we had introduced on the course, and the purpose of this course was to experiment with new techniques of engagement. The team was challenged on why they hadn’t wanted to use one of the new techniques and try something different. They responded with a popular public sector response of ‘the community isn’t ready for that...they’re a closed community and we don’t think they will engage in that way’.

The Action Learning Sets were designed to be a fun, safe learning environment where individuals become each other's 'critical friends'. Adopting that role, and in the spirit of fun, the team manager was challenged by the MutualGain team: "I bet the community would respond to a participatory budgeting process and that you could do a successful event". He accepted the challenge with a £20 bet! And so the PB journey PB began...

After conducting focus groups with the community to explore confidence and perceptions of the public sector, the team started to build a new relationship with the community who were previously disengaged. The 'matriarch' of the disengaged community worked with the team to facilitate meaningful dialogue about how the community felt about living in the community and the organisation. She has subsequently engaged with the Council and is working to establish a constituted residents' group.

She and her peers mobilised the community to think about how they could take greater responsibility for their area in a positive and productive way. The energy in the community produced positive results in terms of building positive relationships with a community that was previously hard to reach, and the results could be seen in crime reduction in the area.

A PB event was conducted with all enquiries being handled by the Council, as were all practical and logistical support to help new groups become constituted. This was a big leap forward for the partnership working in that area and resulted in additional resources. The initial £10,000 grant from the organisation was further bolstered by a £10,000 "Our Place" grant and a local budget of £6,000, jointly provided by local councillors. The council managed all the additional funding with the other public sector organisation sharing their preferred outcomes.

The results of the work meant that the community engaged differently with the organisation and council in a way that meant they enjoyed devolved power and a new thriving positive relationship with those who are there to serve them. So from 'not possible' new relationships have developed which devolve power to the public to take more social responsibility for improving their area.

The team were excellent in their openness to challenge, and reflection, and despite the extended timescales required for partnership working at times, they worked productively within the community and with the council.

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