

Neighbourhood Power

Devolution with a difference



The Local Government Association is the national voice for more than 450 local authorities in England and Wales. The LGA group comprises the LGA and five partner organisations which work together to support, promote and improve local government.



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Executive summary

Place-shaping that embraces individual, group and community participation through neighbourhood empowerment can have an impressive impact on community involvement and opinion. This publication examines the ways in which Westminster City Council's Neighbourhood Budget Programme has helped to engage residents to do just this.

The programme allows local people to work with ward councillors to decide how to spend their share of a £2million fund to support local improvements. This has strengthened neighbourhood working, enhanced local leadership and opened up routes for participation for residents. It has also seen the number of people who think the council takes account of local views rise from 41 per cent to 47 per cent in three months.

Elected members, officers and residents play equally important roles, while data, feedback and well-managed review mechanisms support their work. The programme has a sound statutory and democratic basis. While Westminster's model reflects its own unique circumstances, it also provides a template for other local authorities to work from and adapt.

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Since the council introduced the scheme it has seen a significant increase in interest in council issues. Most strikingly, there has been a 50 per cent increase in the number of residents attending neighbourhood forum meetings. At these meetings, residents help ward members select projects that will make a real difference to local communities, from extra supervised play sessions to community gardening projects. In just three months, the number of residents who think that the council takes account of local views has increased from 41 per cent to 47 per cent.

While the programme is not a panacea for political apathy, it has allowed Westminster to target its resources better by using the taxpayer as the guide. And, while interest groups have lobbied members, the transparency of the process and the range of interests represented has prevented any one group from dominating ward decisions. The opportunity to directly influence local public spending has precipitated greater debate and interaction with the council. This must be encouraged if local democracy is to grow.

Cllr Colin Barrow, leader of Westminster City Council



It's always great to see local government going back to its roots and trusting the people it serves. Indeed, this programme is part of a wider movement as the role of councils and councillors undergoes a period of change.

Westminster's neighbourhood budgets idea addresses an emerging area of agreement between all political parties – the importance of localism. Each party has its own slightly different take on localism, and is often sceptical about the localist credentials of their rivals. But all three parties can call upon strong localist traditions: the Conservatives, with their firm commitment to individuals; Labour, with their belief in fostering stronger communities; and the Liberal Democrats, with their creed of community politics.

There is a growing realisation across local government that politics and political ideas are not a weakness to be compensated for by officers but a strength to be encouraged by politicians. What is so interesting about this scheme is that it reflects the political values of the council which implemented it. However, I suspect that not only will Conservative councils be looking very carefully at the results to see if their own authorities can mirror such a scheme, but that councils of all parties will be curious to see how this latest twist for localism turns out, and if it can be adapted to match their own priorities.

Kate Priestley, chair of the Leadership Centre for Local Government

Westminster Council's Neighbourhood Budget Programme

The Neighbourhood Budget Programme provides each of Westminster's 20 wards with a share of £2million to spend on discretionary projects. Each ward gets £100,000 per year. Ward councillors make spending decisions based on public consultation, the council's annual survey of public opinion, local service performance data and their own local knowledge.



Every ward and every community is different; each has its own difficulties and advantages. Now each ward is able to access its own local funding to address these differences. Proactive engagement between ward councillors and the communities that they represent identifies key local priorities and shapes decisions on how this funding is spent.

Policy

The policy was agreed as part of a strategy to lead and shape the city. It allows ward councillors and local people to work together to decide how to spend their share of the £2million pot. But it's not just about additional resources; it's also about strengthening neighbourhood working, enhancing local leadership and opening up routes to participation for residents. The process of deciding how to spend the money – local debates, public information and informal lobbying – means that residents can have a real, direct say in how decisions are made.

The programme also strengthens local democracy by giving ward members real power to make decisions with and for their community. This in turn means that they can access greater influence over all public service delivery in Westminster.

Budget

The neighbourhood budget is outside the core budgeting process. One of the council's early concerns was that core funding might be substituted with the new neighbourhood funds, so the budgets were separated and rules set so that local funding could not replace the agreed revenue budget.

Each year the council reviews its overall budget against the priorities and concerns identified in its annual survey of resident opinion. The majority of these are common to most local authorities – crime, clean streets and education – and the programmes to address them are covered using mainstream council resources. However, there remain some very local issues and priorities that are not picked up in city level planning.

Support

Members are supported by a senior council officer, who guides them through the process, and a support team, which writes the expenditure reports. The council's finance team provides a price list of the services, which councillors can purchase from the authority. In addition to these services, councillors can recommend other projects for spending.

Success

The ward budgets initiative started in April 2008. Cllr Audrey Lewis, Cabinet Member for Customers and Neighbourhoods, says: "The projects are so varied and show how ward councillors and residents know what is best for their area. An example of where this funding has improved not only the local area, but the borough for all, is when three wards banded together to set up a community gardening project to tackle elderly residents' gardens and canal side gardens. Another ward is funding additional coaching at a climbing wall and archery centre. Yet another is seed-funding the establishment of a business improvement district. Lots of approaches, highlighting the huge diversity of needs and priorities within our communities, has been the positive outcome.

"I know that Westminster's neighbourhoods programme will enhance our ability to respond to what local communities really want. It has also enhanced the role of elected councillors in their constituencies, giving them a real say in what happens, which is a fundamental objective of our work in this area."



Law and process

The issues around governance, powers and other legal aspects of the scheme required considerable thought. There are a number of ways in which local ward councillors can be empowered to take decisions at the local level. For example, under the Local Government Act 2000, it is possible to set up area committees consisting of ward councillors for the relevant ward or wards to discharge specific functions.



Alternatively, new powers not yet in force will allow authority to be delegated to individual councillors. However, Westminster chose another path.

Colin Wilson, the council's director of legal and administrative services, says: "We decided to set up a process whereby ward councillors' spending recommendations are signed off by the Cabinet Member for Customers and Neighbourhoods under existing constitutional arrangements. The advantage of this is that a consistent approach can be adopted, while allowing local priorities to be met, within the parameters set out in the Council's guidance on using ward budgets."

Members' feedback

Westminster's leadership team designed the concept and its policy and legal teams provided the framework. This was followed by a period of consultation with leading members. John Dimmer, the council's head of policy, highlights some of the issues raised by members: "Our cabinet wanted maximum flexibility for ward councillors to determine their spending priorities but at the same time it was important that projects did not undermine existing council policies. They wanted to keep the bureaucracy to a minimum and were keen to avoid creating another grants round. They also wanted to make sure that what they spent their money on was over and above the existing base budgets rather than making up a shortfall. Overall, members wanted the process to be as transparent as possible."

Departments

Some smaller departments faced significantly increased demands as a result of these proposals. A good internal communication programme can help to prepare them. While departments may need to reallocate resources, greater local and member engagement will ultimately allow them to better target officers' time and mainstream resources more effectively.

Process

Ward councillors make spending recommendations which are then approved by the Cabinet Member for Customers and Neighbourhoods under existing constitutional arrangements. The Cabinet Member must be satisfied that spending is consistent with the overall policies of the council, is legal and doesn't replicate existing spending. Where relevant, the staffing implications of proposed projects are also taken into account. This approach allows consistency, thanks to one member handling the approvals, and operates within the parameters set out in the council's guidance on using ward budgets.

Ward councillors are supported by senior managers who act as "ward champions" by advising on projects and helping to resolve difficulties, while neighbourhood officers provide administrative support, help co-ordinate reports to the Cabinet Member and monitor delivery.

All ward champions are senior officers from different services across the council. They each approach their role in their own way, but there are some fundamental responsibilities. Vic Baylis, one of the champions, says: "My job is to get out from behind my desk and understand the ward. I try and think about the priorities from a resident's point of view and work with the ward councillors to translate their good ideas into action. I'm there to act as a translator between the councillors and the bureaucratic machinery of the council and its partners".

Context

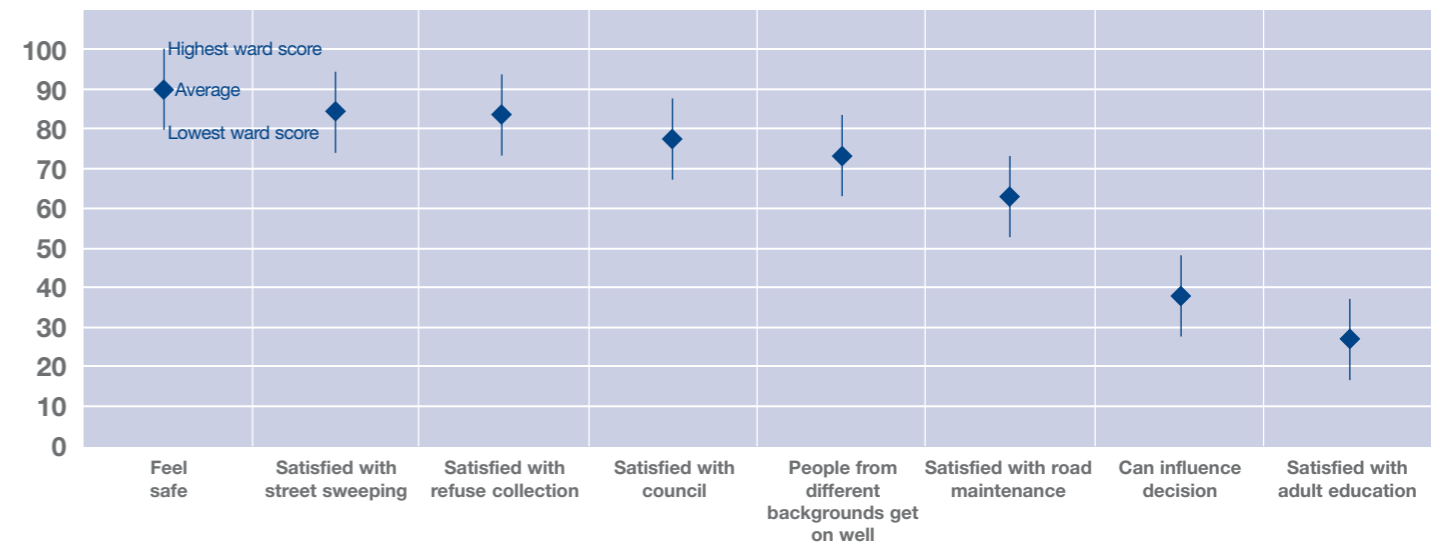
Decisions need to be rigorously assessed to ensure that they are sound and that they are not inappropriately influenced by political or other interests. All decisions are looked at within the context of information from the annual city survey of resident opinion and a rigorous system of performance management.

Westminster conducts an annual city-wide survey that includes 150 interviews in each of its 20 wards. This showed that there is on average a 20-point gap between the highest and lowest satisfaction scores on a range of measures (see graph, below). Previously this had been hidden by the average score across the city. Many of the issues also varied from ward to ward; for example, the ward with the lowest rating on road maintenance had one of the highest ratings on adult education.

The results from the survey were included in detailed ward profiles provided to all ward councillors at the start of the programme. They also contained demographic and socio-economic data, crime statistics and information about the performance of statutory partners. This gave ward councillors comprehensive area-based information to help them with their spending decisions. This information is also held online and regularly updated.



Ward differences



Source: 3,044 Westminster residents aged 16+, c.150 interviews per ward, 3 November 2007 to 27 January 2008.



Demonstrating community engagement

Westminster's existing system of area forums had provided helpful – if not dynamic – sounding boards for local opinion since 2001. Each forum covered six wards and involved around 50 local people discussing issues of concern. The meetings were chaired by a councillor and supported by service officers.



The neighbourhood budgets decision provided the impetus to reinvigorate these meetings, which were renamed “MyWestminster forums”. The forums do not themselves have the power to make spending decisions, but ward members have to listen and discuss spending proposals there. Councillors are also able to lead debate on topics of local importance.

Local forums

The MyWestminster forums are designed to be inclusive. A chief officer attends each meeting and ensures that all recommendations are fed back into the council's decision-making processes. Outcomes are reported to forum members individually or via the newsletter that is sent out after each meeting.

A surgery is held at the same venue as the forum immediately before the main meeting. This gives attendees the opportunity to speak to a council officer on a one-to-one basis about any service issues that require attention. If the designated officer cannot answer the resident in full on the evening, they are committed to providing an answer after the meeting.

The forums are open to anyone who lives, works or studies in Westminster. They don't have to join up to attend, but people are encouraged to so that the council can keep them updated about meetings and, importantly, what happens as a result of their suggestions.

Cllr Nickie Aiken describes one meeting: “We expected to be lobbied from all directions, and there were some good ideas, from more arts provision to a local website, but there was a consensus in our meeting that the local shopping area and particularly the market needed to be reinvigorated. It was a sensible discussion and a great opportunity to meet people face-to-face”.

Community cohesion

The forums have also become something of a social event, thus strengthening bonds between residents. This in turn opens debate and helps to improve community cohesion as people share their thoughts and hear other views. In one example, a resident who initially requested more dog wardens later retracted the suggestion in favour of more youth outreach work thanks to the strength of neighbours' arguments. Such debates give people a feeling of responsibility for their own area and an incentive to become actively involved.

Communication

Effective communication is critical to the process. Surveys indicate that three Westminster residents in five would like to be more involved in decisions made in their local area, but that only one in five of those interested residents want to attend meetings. It is therefore vital that the neighbourhood programme consults residents in a number of different ways and does not just speak to those who attend forums. A leaflet went out with this year's council tax information advising residents of the £100,000 allocated to their ward; it explained how to get involved and provided an email address for them to send in their ideas.

Some ward councillors have added other forms of communication as well. For example, members in one ward had leaflets printed and delivered while those in another received 400 responses to a questionnaire asking residents to rank pre-identified issues in order of importance. Approved decisions are publicised through the council's media team to the local press.

Other communication activities associated with the programme include stakeholder briefings and articles in the council's magazine.

Resident satisfaction

Since launching the initiative, those who think that the council takes account of residents' views when making decisions has risen from 41 per cent to 47 per cent, while 52 per cent agree that they can influence decisions affecting their local area. Four residents out of five (80 per cent) support this initiative to recognise change on a more local level.



Projects in practice

After extensive consultation, the council decided on three rounds of spending. By July 2008, 13 wards had submitted first-round proposals to the Cabinet Member for Customers and Neighbourhoods (see appendix). These proposals totalled around £800,000 and covered a wide range of projects, from entry phones to dog training.



Some wards did not submit proposals in the first round for a variety of reasons, such as wanting to carry out further consultation or because they were preparing complex proposals that needed more development.

The programme has also helped the council improve the way in which it allocates mainstream funding and has secured match funding from partners.

Lancaster Gate

Lancaster Gate ward's long-term priorities influenced the division of the neighbourhood budget, allowing a wider spread of beneficiaries. Projects included:

- Enhancing the streetscape via a business improvement district
- Providing additional education support and a summer programme of sporting activities for younger people
- Providing additional policing to reduce antisocial behaviour and crime and to increase the feeling of safety
- Increasing the facilities for older people with an emphasis on reducing loneliness, in line with the Every Older Person Matters policy

Cllr Susie Burbridge says: "We tried to keep a broad spectrum of projects and I think that the ideas put forward are exciting. The challenge is to make a difference and to bring more hope of good things to come. It has taken up more time than I anticipated and will need more in the future, but I guess it all depends on how committed you are to seeking a great result."

"Each year we will get more experienced and be able to deliver ongoing achievements. It's a partnership between councillors and neighbours. It will be indeed interesting at the end of the year to see if we have managed to make a difference and put a smile on some faces, and to hear, 'can we please do that again'."

Queens Park

Transparency was the byword in the Queen's Park ward decisions. A spread of spending allowed the councillors to contribute to:

- Improving the local environment
- Improving community cohesion
- Providing additional activities and services for young residents
- Developing ward-specific advice services for residents
- Developing and promoting active citizenship

Cllr Paul Dimoldenberg says: "The ward budget process has enabled us to engage with local residents on a new basis. The prospect of £100,000 to improve the ward has encouraged many people to put forward ideas and proposals – and not just from the usual suspects. The ward budget process has also helped to unlock money from the council's mainstream budget to the benefit of the local area."

Bayswater

Streetscape schemes and enhancing the local shopping areas were balanced with ideas for improving opportunities for local young. Specific projects included:

- Improving streetscapes
- Youth employment opportunities through developing work placements with local organisations
- Access for young people to facilities and activities
- Enhancing the shopping offer through initial work towards a business improvement district

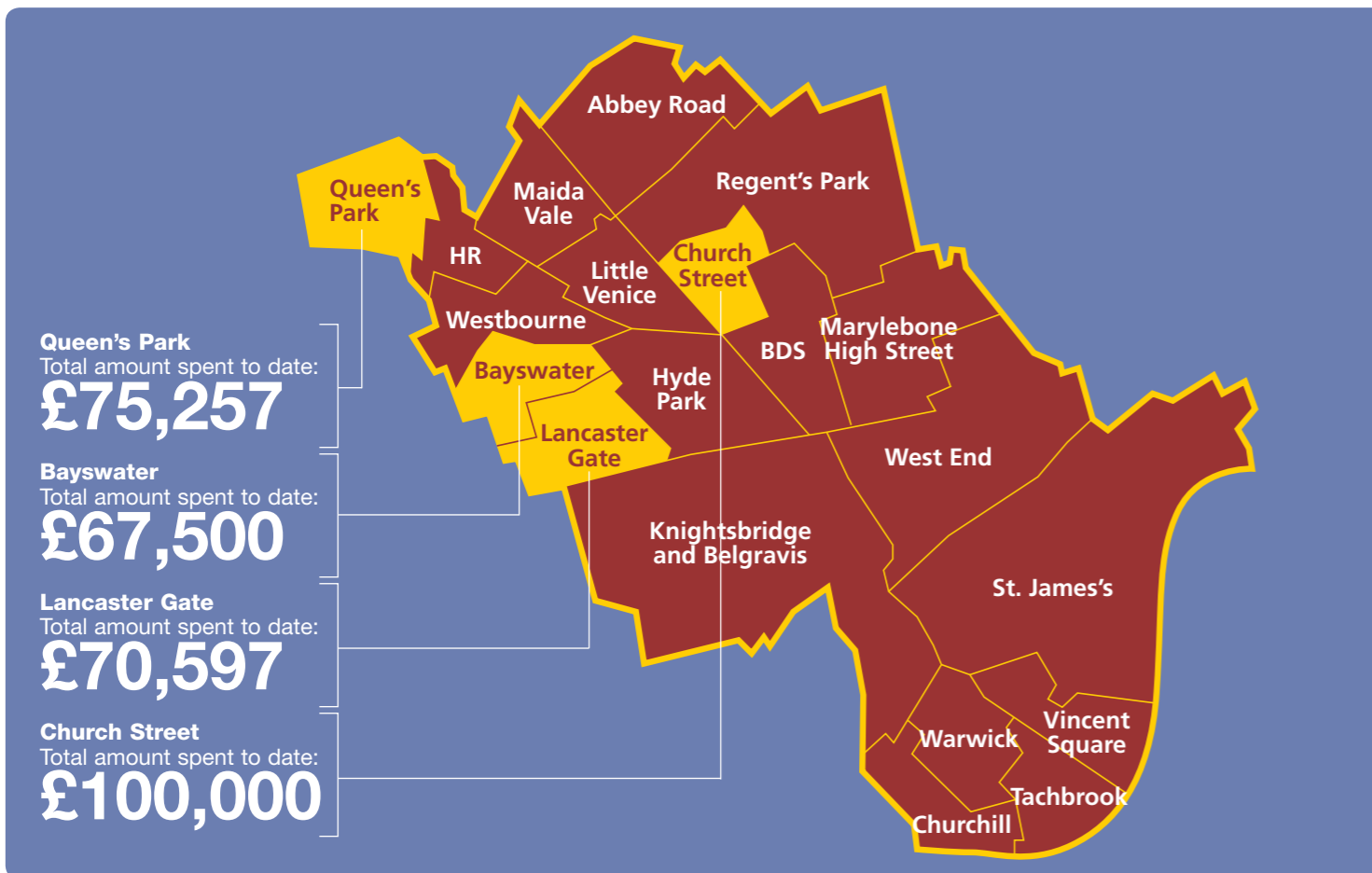
Cllr Brian Connell says: "We're providing extra employment opportunities for young people, improving the local streetscape of the road network as well as getting more youth workers out into the community to assist and support younger residents. We are funding a number of projects that support those aims and we hope that they will make a real difference to the quality of life for residents and businesses."

Church Street

Church Street ward chose to spend the majority of its money on public spaces. Councillor Barbara Grahame says: "We had already created a development plan with the residents' association. The ward has dense housing so we looked to make the best use of the very limited open spaces to benefit all the community".

The intention is to improve and increase open spaces for use by the community and to support older people in their enjoyment of the environment by funding a gardener.

The remainder was allocated to activities at local young people's clubs and a promotional campaign on recycling.



Lessons learnt

1. Canvass the opinion of all ward councillors.

The programme will only work if ward councillors feel that they have designed the approach. Westminster offered ward members a range of options and conducted a formal consultation process. This involved a number of different meetings at range of times and locations, an online questionnaire, a telephone hotline and one-to-one meetings.

2. Ward budgets are the start of a journey, not an end in themselves.

Ward budgets provide a catalyst for engaging ward members in the council's business planning process. Westminster's service budgets have been reprofiled on the basis of this knowledge and ward members have drawn in match funding from both other statutory partners and the private sector.

3. Delays will kill the process.

Officers must make sure that projects go ahead promptly. Delays or a failure to explain how long the process will take leaves residents disillusioned and exposes ward councillors to critical local comment. Use a clear timetable of rounds and decisions to maintain the programme's momentum.

4. Articulate local priorities.

Ward councillors should set out their priorities and hoped-for outcomes at the start of the budgeting process so that selected projects can then be seen in context. This, combined with transparent decision-making, demonstrates that money is not being spent on pet projects.

5. Keep it simple.

Ward councillors are the local experts with the contacts and day-to-day experience of what is happening on the ground. They need maximum discretion to decide what the money should be spent on in order to best meet local need. This applies equally to all members, from backbenchers to cabinet post holders.

6. Incorporate meaningful resident engagement.

The best projects are those with the strongest local engagement. This can be facilitated through the local forums, one-off meetings, surveys and a range of other activities. It is also essential to keep people informed once the decisions have been made; newsletters and forum feedback sessions are useful.

7. Additionality matters.

Members do not want officers lobbying them to make up for cuts in their service area. To ensure this does not happen, a senior member of the finance team should check all proposals to ensure that ward money is being used in addition to existing budgets.

8. Secure stakeholder support.

Ward budgets will affect a range of different stakeholders including members, officers and partners. Ongoing consultation is essential to ensuring a balanced result and that all key players had a chance to contribute to the development of the final proposals.

9. Produce a reference guide.

The council's ward budget guidance contains a simple list of dos and don'ts as well as more detailed information about financial terms and issues such as timescales and cross-ward proposals.

10. Obtain senior sponsorship.

Corporate buy-in and support is key. Ward champions and a senior officer-working group helped Westminster to build support and understanding across the council.

Conclusion

Westminster's neighbourhood programme represents real choices and involvement for ward councillors and communities. Ward budgets offer a tangible solution to the issue of different local priorities.

The use of neighbourhood champions from the highest level of management emphasises the council's commitment to delivering visible change, while the MyWestminster meetings ensure a consultative approach and maximise public involvement. Finally, providing each ward with an annual budget of £100,000 gives the programme real substance.

While neighbourhood budgets in this form may not suit all local authorities, we hope that Westminster's experience will help inspire others to see what could be achieved in their own areas when influence, information and access for residents is married with enhanced ward member decision making and leadership.



Appendix

Ward budget spending: priorities, projects and total spend to date

| Ward | Ward members | Priorities and projects | Total spent |
|------------------------|---|--|-------------|
| Churchill | Andrew Havery Nicholas Yarker Sarah Richardson | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Children and young people: youth club project to renovate a minibus to be used for trips; a DJ stage which will allow teenagers to promote their skills; additional play sessions at a local library Improving the local environment: gardening project on a local estate Community cohesion: increasing capacity at citizenship classes for young people | £23,692 |
| Marylebone High Street | Harvey Marshall Mark Page Ian Rowley | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improving the local environment: a range of activities, including the installation of hanging baskets and bird boxes; improving recycling rates; installing trees around the ward; increasing the amount of open space; reducing rubbish dumping | £100,000 |
| Lancaster Gate | Robert Davis Sir Simon Milton Susie Burbridge | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reducing antisocial behaviour and crime: commissioning extra police time so that residents feel safer Activities for younger people: additional education support and a summer programme of sporting activities for young people Enhancing Queensway and Westbourne Grove: initial work towards developing a business improvement district Every Older Person Matters: increasing the facilities for older people to reduce loneliness | £70,597 |
| Bayswater | Michael Brahams Brian Connell Suhail Rahuja | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improving the streetscape Improving youth employment opportunities: commissioning work to facilitate access to employment for younger people in the area Enhancing shopping: initial work towards developing a business improvement district Youth activities: increasing young people's awareness of facilities and classes | £67,500 |
| Church St | Barbara Grahame Mehfuz Ahmed Aziz Toki | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improving the local environment: increasing/improving open spaces for use by the community, for example by funding a gardener; promoting community cohesion Activities for children and young people: development of a garden by young people; children and young people's gardening and open spaces activities in schools | £100,000 |
| Queen's Park | Paul Dimoldenberg Mushtaq Qureshi Barrie Taylor | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improving the local environment: numerous projects, including a three-ward community gardening scheme; dog training sessions and a dog show; installing micro-recycling centres in every polling district; consultation on tree planting projects Improving community cohesion: literacy project for teenagers and adults Providing additional activities and services for young residents: apprenticeship scheme; bike maintenance workshops and a Doctor Bike session; additional boxing training during the summer holidays; four-day soccer school Developing ward-based advice services for residents: regular welfare benefits advice in Arabic; provide advice and information on setting up a residents association Improving community cohesion: running a cross-cultural healthy eating event for residents in partnership with other stakeholders | £75,257 |

| Ward | Ward members | Priorities and projects | Total spent |
|-----------------------------|---|--|-------------|
| Harrow Road | Ruth Bush Guthrie McKie Sharan Tabari | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Additional provision for young residents: continuation of work done by a local partnership with people from black and minority ethnic communities Isolated and vulnerable residents: reduce isolation and vulnerability by identifying and engaging with lonely and vulnerable residents Provision of ward-based advice services: a ward-specific advice service on income maximisation Improving the street environment: a three-ward community gardening scheme | £76,684 |
| Harrow Road | Ruth Bush Guthrie McKie Sharan Tabari | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improving the local environment: a three-ward community gardening scheme | £12,000 |
| Regent's Park | Daniel Astaire Gwyneth Hampson Tim Joiner | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Every Older Person Matters: providing additional activities that encourage older residents to remain socially, physically and mentally active, including four tea dances; a regular coffee morning; a weekly Silver Surfer session at a local library; additional adult education classes; an arts project Every Child Matters: additional training for staff; various activities and projects for children at a local youth club; additional sports activities; extended schools services at a local school Increasing the rate of recycling: door-to-door promotional campaign | £70,555 |
| Knightsbridge and Belgravia | Frances Blois Anthony Devenish Philippa Roe | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improving the local environment: reinstall iron railings around a local garden | £5,000 |
| Abbey Road | Lyndsey Hall Cyril Nemeth Judith Warner | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reducing antisocial behaviour: new security doors in properties managed by the council's housing organisation Reducing litter: install more litter bins Additional benches for the elderly: install more benches Additional sports provision and classes for young people: to be provided on local estates | £100,000 |
| Bryanston & Dorset Square | Angela Hooper Caroline Keen Audrey Lewis | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reducing crime and antisocial behaviour: targeted deployment of street wardens Increasing community engagement: a range of activities for children and young people, including youth outreach projects and art activities Reducing isolation of older people | £23,144 |

Further information

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Joseph Rowntree Foundation

www.jrf.org.uk

The Young Foundation

www.youngfoundation.org

Involve

www.involve.org.uk; www.peopleandparticipation.net

Participatory Budgeting Unit

www.participatorybudgeting.org.uk

Communities and Local Government:

Practical Guides for Using Neighbourhood-Level Data
www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/pdf/932145.pdf

Transforming Neighbourhoods:

lessons from local work in 15 areas, by Nicola Bacon with
Saffron James and Vicky Savage

London Civic Forum:

Together We Can Empower Communities
www.londoncivicforum.org.uk/news.asp?sid=9&id=318

