



Public Square talks to... Peter Macfadyen, Independents for Frome

This is an edited version of our chat with Peter, you can listen to the whole conversation here: <https://audioboom.com/posts/7764086-public-square-talks-to-peter-macfadyen>

How did you encourage people to take part?

Sticking to that promise of going with what the community decides is absolutely key to building that different kind of relationship between elected officials and the public.

We did quite a lot of participatory budgeting. It was public money, so legally the council had to make the decision but we just said, we will do what you ask us to. At one point people chose to spend money on fireworks. Personally I didn't want fireworks. But the people said they wanted it, so we did it. And it was great actually, and I had to eat my hat. But if I'd later said I don't like the environmental implications and overturned that decision, or had the debate and won, people will never turn up again. They'll just go back to the normal way. You've got to have constant feedback. You've got to respect the people.

If you respect and listen to people, and actually trust people, they will accept that trust and behave with it. It was never abused. Where we let people speak in a way other councils traditionally wouldn't, it was never taken advantage of.

How did you convince people who don't see the value of taking part?

They'll always be some people whose reaction is: I voted for you, it's your job to make the decision, why are you asking me. Because they're still stuck in that mould. But we found that actually people really welcomed being asked even relatively simple things. We had an issue with vandalism of a public toilet and we asked people what they wanted to do about it, out of a set of options. We put a lot of effort into social media, postcards, went out to people, and over 1000 people got involved!

What things did you realise you could differently once you were in power?

A good examples is, we had a 10 year waiting list for allotments. Everybody always moaned about it. So we bought a field and that was the 10 year waiting list gone. You can do that. You can borrow money, you can raise taxes, you can buy a bit of land. If it hadn't worked we could have just sold the land again, we'd have lost a couple of thousand quid, but it would have been worth a try. That's what's needed. Why did no-one else do that? Because they were too busy doing twinning and tea parties?

"...tradition is peer pressure from the dead. I'd like that tattooed on my back"



It's really difficult to get into this whole world of councils, especially for new councillors, there's a whole set of language, rules, tradition. I came across this phrase the other day: tradition is peer pressure from the dead. I'd like that tattooed on my back. A lot of this stuff is just done because it's the way it's always been done.

For example: it's absolutely standard for councillors to go onto the boards of other groups in the town like school governing boards or the theatre. In the first meeting there's usually a huge long list and people get allocated. We went, hang on, we're not going to do any of this. If any of these groups can tell us exactly what our role is, and why it will be useful, let them come back to us and we'll consider it. We are not just going to do it just because it's always been done. One or two did and it was perfectly useful. Previously it wasn't even clear why they were there, it was nonsense. But all over the country thousands of councillors are elected onto outside bodies and have another bloody meeting to go to. Nobody knows why.

We did quite a lot of participatory budgeting. And we suddenly realised that you could involve 10 year olds in the process. We were making decisions about what events should happen in the town and young people were involved in these as much as the adults, so why not ask them. So they had an equal right to vote.

Was there anything that didn't work well?

We were too cocky, particularly in our relationships with the next level up: the district council. They control planning and have a lot of power over what happens in our town. We kind of went to war with them because they were highly politicised, very slow and difficult. And so they just stopped doing anything, and that didn't serve the people of Frome. We should have recognised that we needed to compromise and play their game.

Did you have the resources you needed?

Very quickly we attracted some really good staff – there's a couple of people who would never normally have worked for a council who took on roles at the council and took them into a whole new area. We were blessed. Not least because we as councillors didn't see ourselves as having power over staff; we wanted to work with these people who we recognised had a whole set of skills we didn't have. I've seen so many horror stories where councillors take power and staff, who've been there for ever, are obliged to do what they're told and find ways to undermine things.

Also at this level, we can raise taxes by as much as we like, unlike all other levels of government. So we increased taxes significantly. You can also borrow as much money as you like, virtually. And so we borrowed significant sums of money as well. And we sort of specialised in working with the community to get grants in from the lottery, other funders, and the NHS. By bringing in staff with the right capacities, we were then able to bring in a lot of money.

Where there are blockers or barriers?

There is limited money, though Frome is a large town in terms of town councils. More recently Covid-19 has stopped lots of things happening.

But the main block is that we've got so used to the status quo. People tend to drift back to what was going on before, unless you keep things going. You get a bit of councillor turnover, staff turnover and the whole thing can drift back very easily. It's so strong, that feeling that councils don't really do much, and councillors haven't got very much of a decision-making role. It's agonising watching some councils that have been really exciting or have so much potential then drifting back to where they came from.

What's holding people back from this way of working?

I find it frustrating that community levels of councils don't get the recognition they deserve. Top decision-makers don't see that this is where decisions and actions have to be taken and will be taken. So everything stops at a district level.

Now district councils are being taken out, so in Somerset the County Council will be based a couple of hours away and only one of two of them might have been to Frome. So it's really crucial that more happens here. Yet, as I see it, there is no real plan to properly resource councils at this level.

If you're just left with looking after the park and emptying the bins, why would you bother. There has to be more decision-making power if we are going to bring people in. If you don't trust the people, and you haven't got the resources to do it at other levels, then it will collapse.

How well have you reached into different parts of the town?

I would say the vast majority of people have no idea what we're going on about. It comes back to not making massive decisions – we won't kill anyone, but actually we're not doing anything that's going to massively affect their lives. So why would they bother to get involved? There's still a good chunk of the population who see all councillors, at all levels, and MPs as basically the same lot and don't trust any of them.

There's two big travelling communities we put a lot of money into trying to consult, and I think completely failed.

I think that Frome is way better than most places, but there is a long way to go. Participatory budgeting has brought in different people. We did a 'Dragon's Den' style event at the football club where 100 people turned up and were voting, and it was great to see people who clearly had never been involved in something like that and were from parts of the community that weren't my bubble.

We've had some councillors from different sectors of the population. I persuaded a single mum to become a councillor, we gave support with childcare, but in the end it was too hard alongside other pressures in life. That's also why we work with other groups and engage with people in different places – not everyone will come to a council meeting.



How much have you managed to listen openly to what people want to work on?

Not enough. In extinction rebellion they use what they call 'People's Assemblies' a lot, which are just people coming together, and then having small groups of discussions, and then feeding back. I'd like to see more of that done to get back to what people's key issues are. We did it a bit with 'panels', like the one we did on sport. I'd like to see more of that.

There's one council, Torrridge in Biddeford who've been using People's Assemblies right though. They're becoming almost like direct democracy, they're in a constant process of talking to people.

