

The Radical Potential of Participatory Budgeting

Summary of event, September 5th 2024

On September 5th the Community Empowerment Group of Community Planning Aberdeen and the Grampian Engagement Network hosted a workshop session entitled, “The Radical Potential of Participatory Budgeting”. The event was open to both practitioners and community members. Local funders, including those previously involved in participatory budgeting (PB) exercises, also attended. The meeting was hybrid, with approximately 10 people joining online and 20 in person.

Scottish Community Development Centre delivered a presentation providing an overview of PB, its origin, its uses in Scotland, links to legislation (in particular, the Community Empowerment Act) and examples of where it has been applied nationally and internationally.

ACVO presented examples of participatory budgeting exercises that have taken place in Aberdeen, including the Just Transition Fund.

Participants went into discussion groups, to explore:

- 1) What are your experiences of being involved in participatory budgeting?
- 2) What is the potential of participatory budgeting?
- 3) How do we make the most of participatory budgeting, in terms of engaging and empowering communities?

There was an excellent range of conversations. Some of the key feedback captured included:

Some challenges with PB

- Can be hard to get applications
- Can turn into a ‘popularity contest’
- Not always a good uptake
- Relies on word of mouth – need to raise awareness
- Shift to 1% of budgets set aside for PB not yet realised, often still seen as small pockets of funding
- Communities sometimes need support to turn ideas into an application for funding

The potential of PB and what we would need to do to make the most of it

- It brings the community together; it offers the opportunity to be very creative and connects people and ideas together enabling sharing of resources
- There are opportunities for grass roots delivery
- Potential to create ‘taster pots’ of PB for existing funds – i.e. HIF has several ‘rounds’ of funding per year, could one/some of these be delivered using PB?
- It can be delivered in partnership – opportunities to create collaborative videos to show support and understanding

- We need to consider how to build trust in the process, and this includes ensure there's transparency in decision making
- Using PB to engage young people in particular – a group that might not otherwise engage with community decision making
- PB can be an effective tool to increase local democracy
- We need to build on existing relationship and partnerships to help ensure we reach the harder to reach groups
- Community building work needs to be done before the actual exercise – capacity building, trust building, explaining the processes, identifying interest at an early stage, rather than launching something and then engaging people just to vote on their favourite project
- We need to consider what significant PB exercises with large budgets mean for public sector bodies in terms of relinquishing control and finances
- Competitive versus deliberative. Some typical ways of doing PB leave many as “losers” in a competition. Is a better approach something more collaborative that involves the community in making decision in a deliberative setting.

Next steps

Feedback from the event will be shared with local funders to generate further discussions on using participatory budgeting and similar processes to promote community empowerment.

Further resources on PB

“What is Participatory Budgeting” – a 60 second guide from PB Scotland.

<https://pbscotland.scot/what-is-pb>

“Your local budget: unlocking the potential of participatory budgeting.”

https://media.nesta.org.uk/documents/your_local_budget.pdf (English context)

Two short blog pieces on “Using PB to challenge the poverty of participation in Ferguslie Park” on the PB Scotland website. Part 1 [here](#), and part 2 [here](#)

“Evaluation of Participatory Budgeting Activity in Scotland 2016-2018” – link [here](#) – this is 93 pages but key sections include pages 5-15, pages 25, 27 and 31, 41-51, 52, 57, 64, 70, 78 and 86-87.

Podcasts

Participatory Budgeting & Citizens' Assemblies, with Dr. Rebecca Rumbul, Head of Research at mySociety. “What is participatory budgeting, and what does it have to do with a small Brazilian community 30 years ago?” (note: only part of the podcast is about PB)

<https://www.delib.net/practical-democracy/podcast-episodes/episode-1>

The Next System Podcast - Participatory budgeting: When government really is by the people.

Deepening democracy in our communities through participatory budgeting and participatory decision making more broadly (in a U.S context) . <https://podcasts.apple.com/tz/podcast/ep-31-participatory-budgeting-when-government-really/id1266849200?i=1000432441801>

Remake – The Power of Participatory Budgeting. <https://www.remakepod.org/episode/046-shari-davis-the-power-of-participatory-budgeting> (U.S context)

Videos

The Atlantic - “What if You Controlled the Budget? An Experiment in Democracy” -
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DHhm6W0sD7M&pp=ygUXcGFydGljaXBhdG9yeSBidWRnZXRpcmc%3D>

“What if you could help decide how the government spends public funds?” Shari Davis (featured on 3rd podcast) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wk5_W0EFYTc

EURACTIV – “The Scottish take on participatory budgeting”.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U7tgJcu6vQk>