
NORTH AYRSHIRE COUNCIL

31 May 2022

Audit and Scrutiny Committee

Title: Participatory Budgeting

Purpose: To update the Audit and Scrutiny Committee on engagement methods used in Participatory Budgeting events.

Recommendation: That the Audit and Scrutiny Committee:

- a) Reviews the engagement methods used in recent Participatory Budgeting events; and
- b) Approves the recommended engagement methods for use in future events.

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015, Community Wealth Building and the Scottish Government's Open Government Action Plan all support the greater involvement of local people in democratic and community activities, increased participation in local financial decision-making and, in particular, the increased use of participatory budgeting (PB) approaches.
- 1.2 Participatory budgeting is a democratic way for people to have a direct say on how public money is spent. A PB process gives people the opportunity to identify and discuss what matters to them in their communities and to vote on their priorities. North Ayrshire Council's PB approaches have been recognised as sector-leading awarding, with successful engagement across grant-making, thematic and mainstream PB, using different approaches. PB has been the successful lead into mainstreaming PB, securing community, elected member and partner support.
- 1.3 Concerns were expressed at the meeting of the Audit and Scrutiny Committee on 14th September 2021 in relation to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic as in-person community engagement and voting procedures could not be carried out in the normal way. This report provides an update on engagement methods to be taken now that restrictions have eased.

2. Background

- 2.1 The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015, Community Wealth Building and the Scottish Government's Open Government Action Plan all support the greater involvement of local people in democratic and community activities, increased participation in local financial decision-making and, in particular, the increased use of

participatory budgeting (PB) approaches. The Council's Statement of Intent to develop a Participation Strategy and Scottish Government's 'Report of the Institutionalising Participatory and Deliberative Democracy Working Group' are both committed to developing PB further.

- 2.2 Participatory Budgeting is all about giving local people a say. Participatory Budgeting (PB) helps the Council to provide equal opportunities for communities to participate and have their voices heard in service choices which affect them. PB developed in Brazil and is widely used in many countries. In the UK, PB is developing from small scale community grant allocations. Voting is a characteristic of PB and the Council has previously used in-person voting and young people have used digital voting via the Young Scot website. However, the public engagement in both the development of the ideas and expressing views regarding the final outcome is as important.
- 2.3 Locality Partnerships have been pivotal to North Ayrshire's success in moving local decision-making into communities. They have each established their own priorities in relation to addressing local inequalities. Grant awarding PB has been the successful lead into mainstreaming PB, securing community, elected member and partner support. Mainstream PB can play a central role in collectively defining services, post pandemic, which meet the changed (and changing) needs of communities.
- 2.4 The Council's vision for PB is embedded in the vision for radical, participatory democracy in which local people take decisions on the things which affect their lives. Participatory budgeting is part of a range of participatory approaches to share municipal power and influence, including:
 - Increasing transfer of financial decisions, ownership of assets, and power to communities;
 - Setting priorities and delegating the resources of £3m Community Investment Fund, recently topped up with further £3m, to Locality Partnerships;
 - Working collaboratively with Young People through the Joint Cabinet;
 - Partnership working with Older People's Forums and Tennant's Participation Forum;
 - Opening up local government to a wider process of continuous participation; and
 - PB is identified as one of 3 CLD Strategic Plan Priorities.
- 2.5 The benefits to using participatory methods include:
 - Much greater involvement in decision making across the Council;
 - Much more transparent;
 - Reach wider range of groups;
 - Improved trust between Council & communities;
 - Increased democratic participation; and
 - Greater sense of ownership and control
 - Real devolved power to Localities.
- 2.6 North Ayrshire Council has attracted national recognition for its sector-leading work in Locality, Youth and Mainstreaming PB, as noted in the 2020 Best Value Audit Report. It is the only Council in Scotland which achieved the Scottish government target of allocating 1% of its mainstream resources through participatory methods.
 - The percentage of Council budget directed via participatory methods during 2020/21 was 1.13% which is £4,044,679.

- Thematic PB events have included – Alcohol and Drugs Related Death, Community Food and Growing, Tourism, Grounds Maintenance, Roads, Street Lighting and Street Cleaning. PB methods have been used in Capital Programmes such as Lochshore and the HRA Revenue Fund involves tenants in determining aspects of budgets for Housing (Tenant-led) Maintenance, Infrastructure and Repairs.
- Mainstream PB has included £1.2m libraries and community facilities and £750,000 grounds maintenance budget to participatory budgeting.
- Different approaches to engage with the public have included a ‘Dragon’s Den’ approach, marketplace presentation, and digital and paper-based voting. In -person events attracted large public support, however, this has not been possible when restrictions on large gatherings were in place.
- In February 2020, the Cabinet approved a recommendation to allocate all future Youth and Community grants by PB via Locality Partnerships (£154,185).
- In November 2021, 4,726 young people aged 8-25, cast 14,178 votes for nearly 100 projects for young people, sharing £97,500 across North Ayrshire localities.
- In the last round of Locality and Arts and Culture PB, in February 2022, £164,000 was allocated to 153 local groups and organisations and 33 local people were involved in short-listing the applications.

2.7 Approach is recognised by COSLA, the Local Governance Review Team and the Scottish Government as good practice and earned the council a place in the finals in the 2017 APSE awards.

2.8 North Ayrshire Council’s Officers play an active role in national PB Working Groups.

2.9 The Covid-19 Pandemic presented challenges in how best to engage with the public in the light of restrictions, staff shortages and building closures. During the pandemic, mainstream PB moved online with increased use of digital channels. It was more difficult.

2.10 As discussed in paragraph 2.2, public voting is one characteristic of PB, however the ability of the public to bring forward their projects and to influence the decision-making is a central component of the process. During the 2020/21 PB round referred to by the Audit and Scrutiny Committee the following public participation took place:

- Youth PB: 3500 young people voted;
- Locality PB: 26 local people took part in the steering group and, (no public vote took place because there was sufficient funding to meet all projects);
- Locality PB - 107 community groups took part by applying for funding; and
- Alcohol and Drugs Partnership Thematic PB - 206 people voted, with 616 unique votes.

2.11 PB events have to strike a balance between tight deadlines, available resources, wide participation and workload. PB can’t be seen as a stand-alone approach and needs to be built into wider approaches; and the Locality Partnerships and Locality Team have pivotal. As restrictions ease, there are more opportunities to resume in-person events and embed PB in regular service delivery. Digital channels have provided alternatives but are not always inclusive. A further challenge is sustaining public interest in PB and motivating engagement by local groups and organisations, as their resource for PB applications is competing with the variety of external covid-recovery funding.

2.12 In future PB events it is recommended that the Council uses a diverse range of approaches:

- Combine PB events and seek partners, where possible, to create larger funding opportunities and streamline process - making the best use of staff resources and avoiding duplication of effort by groups and organisations and improving processes;
- Pre-engagement stakeholder groups to shape the PB engagement;
- Community stakeholder reference group to steer the process;
- Work closely with stakeholder reference groups and partners to make the best use of collective marketing and communication opportunities;
- Informal, local chit-chat sessions with communities, with a mix of in-person and digital;
- Engagement with hard to reach through regular community activities like Redburn Breakfast Club or community food larders;
- Improved use of CONSUL (an online platform used by the Council and supported by CoSLA), Office 365 tools like MS Forms for auto-generated analysis and ranking tools, Young Scot online platform, focus groups and steering groups on zoom and Facebook and Facebook Live;
- Alerts on Council Tax Billing and e-billing, use of press releases and telephone call-backs;
- Hard copy in public buildings, community setting like libraries; and
- Partnerships with community groups to extend reach.

2.13 Officers have been increasing partnership working and awareness raising with Finance, Council's Senior Leadership with sessions for elected members, Chief Officers and Senior Managers. A PB awareness session has been launched within the Council's Connected Leadership OD programme.

2.14 Mainstream PB can play a central role in collectively defining services, post pandemic, which meet the changed (and changing) needs of communities. Locality Partnerships have all reviewed their priorities and continue to work closely with communities to ensure their priorities are at the heart of PB. Islands have had an additional chance to review and consolidate previous work on local needs to support the development of Island Local Action Plans through a post-pandemic lens. The forthcoming Participation Strategy will identify further ideas for developing PB in its consultation and these will be integrated into future provision.

3. Proposals

3.1 That the Audit and Scrutiny Committee:

- a) Reviews the engagement methods used in recent Participatory Budgeting events; and
- b) Approves the recommended engagement methods for use in future events.

4. Implications/Socio-economic Duty

Financial

4.1 PB funding is allocated within existing resources.

Human Resources

4.2 PB is resource-intensive and PB development has to be balanced with staff capacity and resources within local group and organisations to engage with PB.

Legal

4.3 None.

Equality/Socio-economic

4.4 The purpose of PB is increase community involvement in local decision-making. North Ayrshire Council has worked with Locality Partnerships to develop its PB approach which will reduce inequalities, increase community cohesion and advance community empowerment.

Environmental and Sustainability

4.5 None.

Key Priorities

4.6 The proposals contained within the report support the North Ayrshire Council Plan priorities:

- Active and strong communities
- Inclusive, growing and enterprising local economy
- People enjoy good life-long health and wellbeing.

Community Wealth Building

4.7 PB increases democratic ownership of local financial decision-making and allocation of resources.

5. Consultation

5.1 The PB proposals contained within this report have been developed with Locality Teams and through various PB events designed with Locality Partnerships, partners and local people, including young people.

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For further information please contact **Rhona Arthur, Head of Connected Communities**, on **01294 324415**.

Background Papers

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