

A Glasgow Centre for Population Health report for Glasgow City Council:

Evaluation of Glasgow City Council
Parks and Greenspace:
'Wee Green Grants'
Participatory Budgeting processes
2019-2020

Chris Harkins

Glasgow Centre for Population Health

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info@gcph.co.uk or on **0141 330 2747**

For further information contact:

Chris Harkins, Public Health Programme Manager, Glasgow Centre for Population Health

Email: christopher.harkins@glasgow.ac.uk

Key points

- Participatory Budgeting (PB) has the potential to energise and empower communities and to transform and enrich the relationships between citizens, community groups, community anchor organisations and all levels of government and public service.
- This report details the key learning points from an evaluation of the 'Wee Green Grants' PB processes led by Glasgow City Council's Parks and Greenspace department.
- The evaluation finds the Wee Green Grants initiative to be another example of a strong, authentic and democratic PB process led by Glasgow City Council. Significant time and resources were spent on dialogue and deliberation among community members which directly influenced the quality of the PB process overall.
- A key strength of the Wee Green Grants has been the values of dignity, respect, patience, and compromise which underpinned the Panel's inception, development and working throughout. The PB Coordinator embodied these values in all interactions with the Panel and in the way in which the capacity building workshops and PB process were designed and developed.
- Amid the technocratic and mechanistic language that can surround PB at times, this 'human touch' is what contributed to the Wee Green Grants being a high-quality process.
- Like all local democratic approaches, the Wee Green Grants had limitations – it was acknowledged that the diversity of the PB panel could have been improved. A key concern of PB Panel members was a lack understanding as to how this PB process connected with the wider PB mainstreaming agenda within the Council.
- The ability of PB to support action and embed community capacity on priority issues such as climate adaptation, has perhaps been underplayed in national narratives to date. The Wee Green Grants initiative demonstrates that PB can offer what could be described as a 'natural community cascade' of information, awareness raising and capacity.
- A citywide PB consultation or learning event to inform the overall direction and development of a PB strategy across Glasgow is recommended. As per the recommendations in the 'Just Transitions Commission' Report, we advise that a scoping exercise be undertaken on the role of PB in climate adaptation in Glasgow City. To enhance representation and inclusion we also advise that future citywide PB work should directly involve expert equalities agencies. To support effective evaluation and organisational learning, we further advise that future PB evaluations should be commissioned at the outset of the PB process.

“PB – I don’t call it Participatory Budgeting, I call it Power Broadcasting, getting power to people, to normal citizens, that’s where the magic can happen.”

Parks, Greenspace and Openspace PB Panel member

Introduction

In recent years, the Scottish Government has set out an unprecedented level of political, legislative and investment support for community empowerment, participation, and the strengthening of local democratic processes^{1, 2}.

Participatory Budgeting (PB) has emerged as a principal approach in achieving these goals and has gained significant traction and support across Scotland in recent years^{3, 4}. At its core, PB is a process that involves citizens in deciding how to spend public money⁵. PB tends to have an inequalities focus, which is driven by the desire to reallocate public money locally and democratically within disadvantaged communities to priority initiatives, projects and services identified by local people⁶.

In broader terms, PB has the potential to energise and empower communities and to transform and enrich the relationships between citizens, community groups, community anchor organisations and all levels of government and public service⁷.

Like all democratic processes PB is imperfect; however, when it works well it can be a process of significant learning and collaborative development for those involved. Through the opportunity for ‘dialogue and deliberation’, PB enables communities to learn more about the challenges and constraints inherent in public spending and service delivery⁸. Such dialogue and deliberation through PB can also provide public services and anchor organisations with rich insights from equality groups and communities as to the complexity of promoting equitable engagement and meaningful participation among ‘easy to ignore’ communities, such as people with disabilities or those facing multiple inequalities⁹. PB can illuminate community aspirations and priorities and provide clear direction as to the ways in which service delivery can be improved and potentially co-produced¹⁰.

Purpose and context

This report details the key learning points from an evaluation of PB processes led by Glasgow City Council’s Parks and Greenspace department. The focus of this latest iteration of PB within Glasgow has been on community access to, use and development of parks and greenspace and related initiatives within the city. Other PB studies have demonstrated how focussing on developing local greenspace, including parks can act as a natural catalyst to consider community responses to climate change, adaptation, and wider issues of environmental sustainability¹¹. Indeed, the role of community participation and deliberation in tackling the climate emergency is recognised in the ‘Just Transition Commission’ Report which recommends establishing Green Participatory Budgeting to empower and invigorate local communities to make decisions based on local needs and priorities¹².

The Parks and Greenspace PB processes described and discussed in this evaluation report are built upon strong foundations. Glasgow City Council has a strong history of PB development and innovation. Some of Scotland's first forays into PB were in Glasgow¹³ and in 2016, the Glasgow Community Planning Partnership carried out PB processes in each of the then 21 Area Partnerships with funds provided by the Council and match funded by the Scottish Government¹⁴. Building upon this and with a view to informing this mainstreaming of PB within the city, in 2018 Glasgow City Council committed £1 million to the development of four PB pilot areas¹⁵. Delivered as a partnership approach by the Council, local anchor organisations and third sector specialist equalities groups. These successful pilots were underpinned by an acute focus on addressing inequalities and the engagement and participation of often excluded or vulnerable groups within PB¹⁶.

Community participation, PB and the pandemic

Community mobilisation and participation has proven to be an essential mechanism in the collective response to COVID-19¹⁷. From the initial emergency volunteer-driven response, compliance with lockdown, to the local recovery and adaptations that needed to be taken as restrictions ease. Communities rallied when needed and clearly wanted to help one another and those most vulnerable during the pandemic. Within the UK, it is estimated that in excess of one million people volunteered to help the pandemic response¹⁸. Highly localised mutual aid groups sprung up all over Scotland, with community members supporting one another with tasks such as delivering emergency food aid, dropping off prescriptions to community members who were shielding, and checking on the wellbeing of neighbours during lockdowns¹⁷.

The impact of the pandemic on Scotland's PB development journey remains unclear. The pandemic response within communities has cultivated a fertile landscape for PB to further embed and flourish, with impressive grassroots action and renewed community participation and cohesion¹⁹. However, whilst local and national governments have reaffirmed their commitment to PB²⁰, the pandemic has conceivably shown PB to be a rigid, time consuming and overly formal and mechanistic process which was not greatly utilised within early pandemic responses or during recovery efforts – meaning its profile and the urgency of its development and 'mainstreaming' may have faltered²¹.

Methods and approach

In-depth telephone interviews were conducted with seven members of the Parks, Greenspace and Openspace PB Panel (henceforth PB Panel) who led the PB processes. Detailed notes were taken by the evaluator during the interviews followed immediately by a write up of key information relating to the timelines of the PB processes alongside the evaluator's early reflections on key learning points emphasised by the Panel members. The evaluator interviewed the PB Coordinator on three occasions and undertook analysis of documents relating to the PB process. On completion of the interviews and documentary analysis, the evaluator used a thematic analysis approach to identify the consistent, high-level learning and reflection themes emerging²². These themes formed the basis of the findings and are contextualised within Scotland and Glasgow's PB development journey.

Summarising the PB processes, proved challenging as this was carried out retrospectively several months after the process took place.

Summary of the PB processes

In the financial year 2019/20 the Neighbourhoods and Sustainability department of Glasgow City Council were allocated £150,000 of funds to be specifically spent through PB to support community initiatives relating to Parks, Greenspace and Openspace. The allocation of funding to a particular citywide theme which was administered and supported by a council department was innovative and designed to inform the Council's approach to mainstreaming PB across other departments.

Informed by previous evaluation of PB within Glasgow¹⁶, the Parks Development team prioritised the evolution and delivery of the PB process being underpinned by quality dialogue, deliberation and democratic decision-making involving community members and council staff. Community members were engaged through the Glasgow Parks Forum and other greenspace groups across the City which were area-based or attached to specific parks.

Initial PB workshops began in May 2019 and set out to explain and discuss the principles and delivery of effective PB and how it could relate to and be applied within parks, greenspaces and openspaces across Glasgow's communities. Further support for the workshops and the subsequent development of the PB process was provided by COSLA, Strathclyde University, other team members from the Parks Development team and colleagues from Glasgow City Council Empowerment Services.

As the workshops progressed a PB Panel was established which comprised of eight community members from across the city. The Panel self-selected by the end of the third workshop. Subsequently a declaration to represent all Glasgow Parks, Greenspace and Openspace and not specifically their own Park's 'friends group' or local space was developed and signed by Panel members. The Panel started meeting regularly from September 2019 and was responsible for leading all aspects of the PB process. This included deciding the funding criteria, planning and delivering the funding process, devising funding applications and related materials, assessing applications, awarding funds, and working closely with key departments across the Council at all times, including for example, the finance department. The Panel's decision making was deliberative and democratic and without influence from the PB Coordinator.

The PB initiative was called the 'Wee Green Grants'. The funding criteria and invitation to apply for the grants was sent out through existing networks in February 2020. A total of £90,000 was allocated to the PB grants in the first instance with the Panel deciding to use the remaining funds to support network development, possibly through the development of a specific role. The Panel were also keen to host a PB event to celebrate the initiative. Grant applications closed at the end of February 2020. At which point all applications were checked against the funding criteria. Public voting on the applications was opened on the 6th of March 2020. Voting was made possible through the online platform CONSUL²³ and

closed after two weeks. Successful grants were announced by the end of March 2020. PB funds were awarded to 28 applicants by October 2020.

The pandemic derailed the PB process to a degree – in particular, the planned investment in network support and development failed to gain momentum particularly within Glasgow City Council during the challenging initial emergency response to the pandemic. In the end the funding was allowed to rollover into the 2020/21 financial year and another round of Wee Green Grants was developed and delivered through a near identical process in early 2021; with a further 23 projects being funded by the end of March 2021.

Learning and reflection themes

The following themes were identified through the interviews and documentary analysis as key points of learning and reflection:

The ‘human touch’ – feeling valued and supported

From the outset PB Panel members were unanimous in praising the overall approach taken by the PB Coordinator in setting up the workshops, the gradual building of PB capacity, the subsequent dialogue and deliberation and the establishment of the Panel. In general terms the Panel members were keen to highlight the importance of the ‘human touch’ in enabling a positive, supportive and nurturing environment from which to undertake a quality PB process²⁴.

A key point that was mentioned consistently was the ‘feel good’ factor around the work; that Panel members felt valued and respected at all times as well as a feeling of being ‘invested in’. Investment was referred to in terms of the amount of time dedicated to develop PB capacity and understanding, but also in terms of the effort made to form effective relationships. Small details like holding the workshops in attractive settings and interesting venues and providing catering alongside having plenty of time for discussion and reflection also contributed to the Panel members feeling valued and that their skills development, contributions, and insights were appreciated.

Panel members reported feeling encouraged to speak honestly and to share their views at all times and this was seen as both a positive culture being embedded in this PB process as well as a developing skill across the Panel; which directly contributed to the quality and democracy of the PB process. One Panel member described very clearly the increasing confidence and skill with which they could provide honest input into discussions as the PB process developed. Another Panel member described the ‘*authenticity*’ with which members could communicate the diversity of ‘their truths’ and lived experiences without any of it being ‘*jarring*’ or disruptive; this was attributed to the positive and supportive culture. The supportive and honest culture was important in the early development of the PB process but also as relationships developed with other Council departments and as obstacles were encountered along the way.

The PB Coordinator reflected that her role was to support the group rather than to lead discussions. The emphasis on the quality of discussion, deliberation and capacity building

was designed to develop a PB process that the Panel genuinely believed in, and one in which their experiences, skills and views were valued and encouraged. The PB Coordinator was clear that this approach drew directly upon the learning from previous PB processes in the city, including the evaluation of the 2018/19 PB pilots.

PB capacity building

Significant PB capacity building has been developed among Panel members through the workshops, related discussion and in the development and implementation of the PB process. The commitment of Panel members to this PB initiative was clear. In particular, members reflected on a continuous learning curve over several weeks that was built upon strong foundations in terms of developing an understanding of the theory and principles of effective PB and local democratic processes. As this knowledge developed, discussion naturally gravitated towards thinking about how these democratic principles could be applied within the context of Parks and Greenspace PB, the community groups involved, the City Council and within the Panel members' views of the culture of Glasgow City.

A key discussion point that was considered and often revisited was the development of PB capacity building and related skills that would support the move towards 'mainstreaming' PB beyond the context of Parks and Greenspace and across other Council departments. Panel members reflected on many aspects of their new skills which might contribute to mainstreaming. Reference was made to improving digital skills and being able to effectively set up the CONSUL online voting platform, others mentioned a greater awareness of local democratic structures and a more tangible understanding of their human rights. Some Panel members cited their developing participation within detailed dialogue and deliberation as the core part of their skills development.

One of the successes of this PB process was the direct contact of Panel members to other parts of the Council involved, especially Financial and Business Services who administered the funds. Through regular contact with Financial and Business Services, PB Panel members became more proficient of financial processes and safeguards. Two Panel members reflected that they had previously misunderstood financial diligence and its related processes as a lack of responsiveness or versatility within Council systems. This greater transparency, understanding and the personal relationships developed were seen as positive for future PB.

The PB Coordinator reflected that putting PB Panel members directly in touch with other Council personnel as required was a deliberate and worthwhile step in capacity building and in moving towards mainstreaming PB. The Coordinator felt that a traditional way of engaging with communities through one single point of contact i.e. the Coordinator's role, may become outdated and ineffective within a mainstream PB model. This traditional approach was thought to be precarious and carried risk – in the event of the PB Coordinator moving job for example, the connection between PB Panel members and the Council services involved would be lost. Credit was given to Council workers in other departments for the ease with which they took to working directly with community members.

Dialogue and deliberation take time

As PB capacity was building and consideration turned towards the type of PB that could be implemented, Panel members described the worthwhile time and effort that was taken for dialogue and deliberation. Dialogue and deliberation were referred to as '*when the magic happens*' by one Panel member. It was viewed as such an important step in the PB process in terms of reconciling different views and opinions as part of the overall vision for the PB process. The difficulty and complexity of this was recognised, not least in the range of views and perceptions of what different parks and greenspace in diverse areas of the city meant to local residents, how they were used and what local priorities were.

Panel members had different views on the PB process and how flexible and responsive they could be. Some appeared to want to deliver a high quality 'contained' PB process that delivered funding to grassroots initiatives that meant local initiatives and improvements were enhanced or able to begin. Other Panel members, whilst cognisant of the local impacts that could be achieved, tended to consider larger scale issues such as mainstreaming PB, democratic innovation and the role that this PB process could play in aligning communities with climate change and environmental sustainability.

These divergences and many others were reconciled through effective dialogue and deliberation over several sessions. More information was required at several junctures to inform Panel members and their discussions moving forward. Panel members were unanimous in praising the PB Coordinator for her facilitation, patience, people skills and work ethic which were all deemed to be vital alongside the commitment of Panel members. Panel members reflected positively on the decisions that were reached through the dialogue and deliberation and reflected that their skills in discussion and reconciling differences were enhanced as the process went on. The PB funding criteria that was developed reflected the compromises that were reached, demonstrating a localised focus with a view to consideration of larger societal or global issues such as volunteering, skills development and climate change and adaptation.

Lack of citywide PB coherence

A recurring theme when speaking to the PB Panel members was that they were keen to understand or contextualise this PB process within an overall framework or a sense of direction for PB across the city. Dissatisfaction was raised at the apparent lack of a clear citywide strategy for PB and how this process could potentially inform that. Some Panel members felt that their efforts within this process whilst worthwhile and satisfying, were still peripheral and unconnected. Relatedly, some Panel members felt that the communication on these issues from the Council was inadequate, however it was recognised that the pandemic had a bearing on this from March 2020 onwards.

Panel members were clear that they saw the benefits of moving towards a mainstreaming of PB where community members were represented at all stages of strategic development within local government and in key budgetary decisions. Panel members reflected on the distance to be travelled to reach this point and the challenges inherent in mainstreaming PB. However, there was consensus that the democratic participation made possible through

mainstream PB would strengthen decision making and transparency and lead to better value within local authority expenditure.

Diversity and representation

Panel members were reflective that there was a lack of community diversity within the process and that, moving forward, if the Panel were to be continued this could be an area of development. One Panel member described the participants as being white and middle aged and already active within their community. It was acknowledged by some Panel members that the community and parks issues that they felt were important locally, which informed the funding criteria and the projects funded, might be completely different for a young person, a disabled person or a person of Black and minority ethnic background.

One Panel member described that there might not have been the time or capacity to do some '*deeper*' community engagement which would have increased diversity and representation on the PB process. Another community member was cognisant of learning from the 2018 Glasgow City Council PB pilots, recognising the role that expert equality agencies could have played in supporting the participation of more diverse community members. On reflection, it was described how the starting point of engaging with community members already connected to their local parks network, in a sense dictated the profile of the Panel.

Local to global

The most strategic learning theme to emerge from this PB process was the ease with which PB enabled the consideration of important global or societal issues at a community or local level. As previously discussed, a strong example of this within the Wee Green Grants relates to climate change, adaptation and sustainability at a community level.

The dialogue and deliberation phase of the PB process facilitated some important learning and detailed discussion on local climate change and adaptation issues and how this could be part of the funding criteria. Discussion centred around how within the remit and resources of the Wee Green Grants, local community awareness and action on climate change and adaptation could be taken forward. It was clear that this was an aspect of the Wee Green Grants that Panel members were passionate about. Some Panel members reflected that they had developed significant knowledge and awareness of environmental issues and the role PB can play in supporting community capacity, awareness raising and positive action therein.

Discussion

The Parks and Greenspace 'Wee Green Grants' initiative described in this report is a further example of a strong, authentic and democratic PB process led by Glasgow City Council.

The PB process has been directly informed by the evaluation of the PB pilots undertaken by the Council during 2018/19, representing an organisational commitment to learning and development. The Council prioritised and invested significant time and resource on dialogue and deliberation. All PB Panel members describe this investment as having a direct influence on the quality of the PB process overall.

Like all local democratic approaches, the Wee Green Grants had limitations – it was widely acknowledged that the diversity of the PB Panel could have been improved. A key concern of the PB Panel members was the lack understanding or communication as to how this PB process connected with the wider PB mainstreaming agenda within the Council. It was recognised however that the pandemic emergency response and subsequent recovery efforts became a clear priority for Council staff.

This PB process followed a clear and well-coordinated plan and each step was executed effectively. However, a pivotal strength of the Wee Green Grants was the values which underpinned the Panel's inception and development throughout. These values, as illustrated in the evaluation learning points, were dignity, respect, patience, compromise and a commitment to learning about the experiences of others. These values in turn fed directly into the quality of the PB processes, where extensive PB capacity building and deep dialogue and deliberation were able to take place effectively and in a way in which Panel members felt valued and '*invested in*'.

Furthermore, it must be recognised that the described values were promoted and embedded in the PB process by the PB Coordinator, who embodied these values in all interactions with the Panel and in the way in which the workshops and PB process developed. Amid the technocratic and mechanistic language that can surround PB at times, this 'human touch' personified empathy, kindness, warmth, drive and commitment that can so often be the difference between a high-quality process such as the Wee Green Grants and a lesser process²⁴.

National narratives of PB have been concerned with community empowerment, deepening democratic processes within society and allowing citizens to exercise fundamental human rights. However, in pragmatic terms, the ability of PB to support action and embed community capacity on priority issues such as climate adaptation, has been under explored to date.

The Wee Green Grants initiative demonstrates that PB can offer what could be described as three tiers of a 'natural community cascade' of information, awareness raising and capacity²⁵. Keeping with the climate change and adaptation example, community members who form PB Panels represent the highest tier – building climate change knowledge and understanding and prioritising it within PB funding criteria. The second tier is comprised of community groups and members who apply for PB funds to deliver climate change projects and who must demonstrate knowledge and capacity building on the issues and who then go on to tailor the delivery of climate change projects to local community contexts. The third and final tier is comprised of community members who access and use the PB funded local climate change themed projects and who will also gain knowledge, awareness, and capacity. The scale and depth of the community skills and capacity development is likely to depend on the budget of the PB process and the duration of project delivery.

The GCPH was commissioned to undertake this evaluation several months after the PB processes had taken place. This retrospective methodology is useful in terms of broader, reflective learning but is not suitable to capture a robust account of the PB process. Some of

the emergent 'real-time' learning from the process will also have been lost. It is recognised that best practice is to commission evaluations at the outset of project implementation.

Recommendations

- The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted PB development and implementation to some degree. Uncertainty appears to remain among communities concerning the priority attached to mainstreaming this approach and associated timescales. A citywide PB consultation or learning event to inform the overall direction and PB strategy across Glasgow is highly recommended.
- PB is beginning to gain recognition as a mechanism through which community climate adaptation and related green initiatives can be embedded within communities. The Wee Green Grants demonstrates the potential of PB in enabling a 'natural community cascade' of information, awareness raising and capacity. As per the recommendations in the Just Transitions Commission Report²⁶ we advise that a scoping exercise be undertaken on the role of PB in climate adaptation in Glasgow city. This scoping exercise should be cognisant of the significant community capacity developed across the city to date and the clear value that expert equalities agencies bring in terms of supporting equitable and inclusive PB processes within Glasgow.
- Diversity and representation are fundamental elements in any democratic process and must remain a priority in any citywide iteration of PB. Future PB work should directly involve expert equalities agencies as was the approach in Glasgow City Council's 2018/19 PB pilots. For example, the inclusion of Glasgow Disability Alliance in this previous pilot supported disabled people to participate effectively within dialogue and deliberation and the design and delivery of PB processes. This enabled the PB process, its voting and funded projects to be more accessible to disabled community members.
- It is recommended that future PB evaluations be commissioned at the outset of the PB process.

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