
Supporting Communities Fund – Participatory Budgeting pilot evaluation

1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 It was agreed by Council on 27 September 2017 that the Supporting Communities Fund be distributed via a Participatory Budgeting (PB) approach for 2018/19 as a pilot. The investment in this approach has wider benefits for the future of engaging with communities in funding distribution including informing the Council's approach to decision making for its budget.
- 1.2 The purpose of this report is to highlight key points from an evaluation of the completed pilot project with the Supporting Communities Fund, acknowledge the learning and potential for future use of this, and to seek agreement on the future distribution of the Supporting Communities Fund.
- 1.3 The associated costs with running a PB project, as exemplified in the pilot project, are not proportionate to the size of the Supporting Communities Fund (SCF) being distributed. PB may be a feasible option for decisions involving larger funds. A national online platform is being considered in 2018/19 by COSLA and Scottish Government. The recommendation is not to distribute the SCF via PB in 2019/20 and to contribute our learning to discussions on the national platform and to any internal Council discussions considering PB for larger fund distribution.
- 1.4 Participatory Budgeting is one tool for community participation in financial decision making, it was viewed positively in the evaluation of the pilot as something to be used again in financial decisions for grant funding – as long as this does not reduce money available from the fund itself. PB should be considered alongside other tools when the Council is looking at how it can meet the requirement, set out in the Scottish Government's Programme for Government 2017-18, for at least 1% of Council budget to be distributed by Community Choices by end of financial year 2020/ 2021.

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2.0 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 61 community organisations across Argyll and Bute were awarded funding through the Supporting Communities Fund pilot project in 2018-19. There was a high level of engagement with the pilot project, shown by the numbers voting, and an evaluation was undertaken which has highlighted the strengths and weaknesses. The purpose of the pilot project was to test Participatory Budgeting (PB) as a tool for community participation in financial decision making to inform the council's requirement to allocate 1% of budget through Community Choices by end of 2020/21. There has been significant learning in undertaking the project and this will contribute to future discussions of its potential use as a model of engagement and decision making.

3.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Council note the outcomes from this successful pilot project and agrees:

- 3.1 That for 2019/20 Participatory Budgeting will not be used as a method to allocate the Supporting Communities Fund for the reasons detailed in paragraph 4.7 related to disproportionate costs against grant funding available; and notes the work currently underway to consider a national platform which would be available to local authorities.
- 3.2 Improvements be made to the Supporting Communities Fund, taking on board feedback through the evaluation to increase awareness and transparency in the grants process as detailed in paragraph 4.8 of report.
- 3.3 The Council shares the learning from the PB pilot with dedicated COSLA Officer and COSLA Elected Member Groups looking at Community Choices and PB to inform best practice and national considerations for a PB platform.
- 3.4 Options for how the council can meet the 1% requirement of budget distribution by 'Community Choices' by 2020/21, including where the use of PB may be appropriate, be brought to a future meeting of Council.

4.0 DETAIL

- 4.1 In September 2017, the Council agreed to a pilot project where residents in Argyll and Bute, aged 16 and over, could vote for the projects they wished to have funded within their administrative area. This direct participation in financial decision making is often referred to as Participatory Budgeting (PB).
- 4.2 The Supporting Communities Fund, previously known as the Third Sector Grants, is a long standing fund distributed by elected members at Area Committees and supported by the Community Development Team (Community Planning and Community Development; Chief Executives Unit). The fund has reduced over the past 3 years, and the amount available to be awarded in 2018/19 was £24,500 per administrative area. Funds unspent and returned to the council, from previously funded projects, brought the total amount in 2018/19 to approximately £110,000.
- 4.3 With funding from the Scottish Government and access to software used in a similar pilot project carried out the previous year, in relation to a Gaelic Grant, a working group with officers from Community Development, Finance, ICT and Communications set out to deliver the project phases outlined below:
- **Ideas Site** – website where all residents and community organisations could post project ideas and suggestions.
 - e.g. 45 ideas were shared on this for Bute and Cowal. Some of these ideas developed into applications to the fund.
 - **Projects forward to the public vote** – applications received and scored by the Community Development team, and agreed to go forward through Area Committee.
 - **Public Vote** – within the month of April 2018 promotion and support to vote was carried out.
 - **Evaluation** – undertaken by Social Value Lab with Area Committees informed of the outcomes from this at their meetings in September.
- 4.4 In recognition of inequality of access to digital, a focus group of representatives from groups identified as potentially having a lower equality of access to online voting sites informed a 'paper voting' approach which ran alongside.
- 4.5 The pilot project produced the following positive outcomes:
- Met the purpose for which it was agreed
 - Significant support and input from communities, elected members, council officers and partnership working with the Third Sector Interface.
 - Delivered on budget

- Significant engagement with 4,686 residents voting.
- Officer information and knowledge enhanced to inform future approaches.

4.6 A summary of the evaluation highlights were shared with the Area Committees. The evaluation highlighted the following positive strengths and opportunities:

- The ideas site was viewed well by those who participated
 - Higher than anticipated turn out of voters.
 - Respondents valued the voting page for finding out about projects in their area and the openness of the process.
 - The marketing materials were well thought of.
 - Applications were received from community groups who had not previously applied.
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- Suggestions that budgets could be on a smaller geographical level – however this distribution would mean small or negligible budget available in areas given the size of the grant fund available and the number of communities. It would also exacerbate the ‘time groups spent on applications’ versus the ‘benefit from the fund’ balance which is currently seen by some to not be favourable.

4.7 The evaluation highlighted the following concerns:

- Challenges with communities experiencing an element of competition within one another across a large area which was seen by some to be divisive and a perception of disadvantage – even if this did not materialise in the final voting results and projects funded.
- The least represented were young people and older people. Future work needs to consider specific engagement of these groups.
- Costs of approximately £50,000, which is the highest end estimate, to deliver this approach. This includes officer time and appointing an independent evaluation, delivering a range of engagement sessions, marketing materials and getting the software for the voting sites. It should be noted that costs are expected to be higher in a pilot due to the trialing of a number of approaches, for example in marketing and engaging, to seek those most cost effective to repeat out with a trial and that these costs would not continue to same extent in future years due to the learning gained. Nonetheless, for a budget distribution of £98,000 these costs are disproportionate.

4.8 Distributing the Supporting Communities Fund in 2019/20.

It is recommended that due to delivery costs being disproportionate to the funding available that the previous method of distribution (applications scored by Community Development, decisions at Area Committee) be reverted to with the following improvements:

- 100% funding of projects up to maximum of £2,500 remain
- The application form be simplified
- The fund be wider promoted using social media and existing budget to increase openness of process to public.
- Consideration be given to an online Ideas webpage for communities to share project ideas and support one another with comments and sharing of experience.

4.9 Using the learning from the pilot project and considering how best to meet the requirement of the 1% council budget distribution by Community Choices by end 2020/21.

The method of PB was well received by some residents and many would like to see this approach being used again – providing it did not take funds away from the amount to be distributed to communities. Further, there has been significant learning in officers involved in the pilot project from ICT, Finance, Community Development and Communications.

The learning from this will be of value in the future and next steps are going to be looking at what may happen nationally and use our learning from the project to input to discussions on PB with Scottish Government and COSLA, and looking internally across the council with other services to explore where PB and other means of empowering communities in financial decision making is possible.

5.0 CONCLUSION

- 5.1 The pilot project was very successful in meeting its requirements and we are grateful to the participation of the community, members and partners in supporting and promoting the pilot project. As COSLA is looking at a potential national platform for PB this may allow feasibility of re considering the grants allocation via this method in future. For 2019/20 improvements to the original process are recommended.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 Policy: Pilot project in response to legislation within the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 requiring Councils to consider Participatory Budgeting in financial decision making

- 6.2 Financial: The pilot project received Scottish Government Community Choices Funding and a digital support package. Costs of digital PB engagement need to be proportionate in relation to funding being distributed.
- 6.3 Legal : none
- 6.4 HR : none
- 6.5 Equalities: Potential inequality in accessing a digital voting site was recognised and accommodated within the project. The voting results show that those under 25 years and those over 65 years were underrepresented and engagement on the fund in the future will take consideration of this.
- 6.6 Risk: Undertaking the pilot project with funding support from Scottish Government sought to mitigate financial risk.
- 6.7 Customer Service: customers were offered opportunity to engage in evaluation at point of contribution to Ideas Page and at Voting Stage.

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13 September 2018

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