

€300K Have your say: South Dublin County Council Pilot Participatory Budgeting Exercise

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Brief Description:

In September 2017, the South Dublin County Council piloted the first-ever participatory budgeting process in the area. Dubbed “€300K HAVE YOUR SAY”, allowing residents to directly participate in allocating local public finances.

Problems and Purpose:

The participatory budgeting exercise was initiated to allow residents in the Lucan-Palmerstown area to have a say in spending €300K of available funds to improve their community. The goal was to give residents the opportunity to develop project proposals for their local area and vote on shortlisted proposals to select winning projects to be implemented in the area. The PB process was piloted by the South Dublin County Council to assess its effectiveness and popularity. The exercise aimed to engage the community, promote transparency and accountability, and enhance local democracy. The PB process also aimed to address the disconnect between citizens and local government by encouraging greater ownership and participation in local decision-making.

Background, History, and Context:

The South Dublin County Council's "€300k - Have Your Say" PB exercise was the first participatory budgeting initiative in Ireland. It was proposed at a Council meeting in 2014 and piloted in 2017. Before this, the concept of PB had gained international recognition and had been applied in various countries. PB is a fiscal decision-making mechanism that involves citizens in decisions on the allocation of municipal budgets and/or the allocation of municipal funding, promoting better public spending decisions, transparency, accountability, and citizen engagement.

The drive behind this effort stemmed from the need to make local democracy stronger and to get people more involved in how money is spent. This matched the principles outlined in the national policy context, specifically the Open Government Partnership (OGP) National Action Plan from 2016 to 2018, which aimed to enable further citizen engagement in local authority budgeting. Moreover, this initiative showed a continued effort to promote transparency, accountability, and citizen empowerment in local government decision-making.

The PB was the first to be formally implemented in the Lucan electoral area, which includes Palmerstown and Adamstown. Its adoption reflected a broader global trend of involving citizens in budgetary decision-making and promoting participatory democracy. The successful outcomes of the PB exercise in South Dublin County Council indicated its potential for wider implementation across local government in Ireland, with 94% expressing their willingness to repeat the process if given the opportunity. The process involved consultation, workshops, and online submissions to gather project proposals from the community. These proposals were then

shortlisted and presented for public voting. The winning projects were implemented within 12 months. The initiative was seen as a success and received positive feedback from participants. The process was evaluated by the Institute of Public Administration (IPA) to inform the future development of participatory budgeting at the South Dublin County Council.

Organizing, Supporting, and Funding Entities:

The South Dublin County Council proposed and initiated the PB process in 2014 and allocated €300,000 to the project. The Council formed a steering group of elected members and SDCC staff to oversee the process. The steering group was responsible for planning, communication, and decision-making throughout the PB exercise.

The Council collaborated with the Institute of Public Administration (IPA) to conduct an independent evaluation of the process. The IPA provided guidance and expertise in evaluating the PB initiative and documenting its outcomes. The Council also engaged external companies for branding and video production to promote the PB process. These companies helped create a strong and consistent visual identity for the initiative and produced videos to explain the concept and track the progress of the process. The Council interacted with community groups, stakeholders, and residents through various communication channels, including emails, advertising in local newspapers and radio stations, social media, leaflet drops, and a dedicated section on the SDCC website. They also organized workshops in different locations to gather project proposals and encourage participation.

Participant Recruitment and Selection:

Participation in the €300K PB is open to all residents of the Lucan electoral area; there are no age barriers to taking part, and every proposal is treated with respect.

The oversight of the process was the responsibility of a steering group, which consisted of elected members selected on a cross-party, independent basis and supported by SDCC staff. Alongside the Mayor, 6 elected members were selected: 2 members from the Lucan electoral area and Tallaght South, and one member each from Templeogue/Terenure and Clondalkin. Members of SDCC staff on the steering group included the Chief Executive, Director of Services for Corporate Performance and Change Management, Director of Services for Housing, Community, and Social Development, Head of Finance, Head of Information Systems, Lucan Area Committee Coordinator, and a staff member from the Communications Unit.

Methods and Tools Used:

Participatory budgeting is a fiscal decision-making mechanism that involves citizens in the discussion of municipal budgets and/or the allocation of municipal funding. Residents may identify spending priorities, elect delegates to represent different communities on local authority budgeting committees, and initiate local community projects. Participatory budgeting could result in a direct, stronger, participative relationship between citizens and local authorities, better public spending decisions, enhanced transparency and accountability, and a greater understanding among citizens of the financial circumstances within which local authorities must operate. States such as Belgium (Region of Brussels Capital), Denmark, Finland, and the UK have adopted legislation concerning participatory budgeting. While some such legislation requires the use of participatory mechanisms, they are not compulsory in other cases, and local authorities have discretion on the use of those mechanisms (Department of the Environment, Community, and Local Government, 2012, pp. 160-161).

Have Your Say €300K is the first plot of the local democratic process in Ireland, which facilitates

citizens in a local community to directly decide how to spend a portion of a public budget in their area. It gives people direct power to determine spending priorities to improve their community.

What Went On Process, Interaction, and Participation

The process is organized around an annual cycle, including the following phases:

- 1- Planning, Communication, and Launch
- 2- Consultation
- 3- Share Proposals and Vote
- 4- Implementation and Review

Phase One- Planning, Communication, and Launch:

Phase one involved the planning, design, and launch of the SDCC PB initiative. SDCC staff members conducted background research on international experience with PB and produced a draft work program, which was discussed and adopted at the first Steering Group Meeting in January 2017. An external company was engaged to produce branding for the initiative. This branding was subsequently used on all promotional material and the website. A variety of communication methods were used to promote both the launch night and the consultation phase. This included emails to community groups, advertising in local newspapers and radio stations, leaflet drops, the use of social media, and a dedicated section on the SDCC website. A launch event was also held to promote the initiative.

Phase Two- Consultation:

The primary method of consultation during this phase was workshops. Three workshop venues were selected to cover the entire electoral area and to encourage participation. Workshops were held in Adamstown, Lucan, and Palmerstown in March 2017. The workshops were open to everyone and information regarding dates, venues, and 10 INSTITUTES OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION background information about the PB process was widely circulated before the workshops. Workshops were independently facilitated, and group discussions were supported by SDCC staff members. Proposals could also be submitted online, via SDCC's consultation portal.

The online submission portal was open for three weeks. Submissions were then assessed by SDCC staff and approved by the Steering Group. The final selected proposals were approved by the full council before being represented on the website for the public to vote on.

Phase Three – Share Proposals and Vote:

During this phase, the public voted for their priorities up to the value of €300,000. Following the closure of the voting period, those proposals receiving the highest vote with a combined value of €300,000, were chosen to proceed to completion within the following 12-month period. Voting took place both on and offline. No age limit was placed on voting, the aim being to encourage wider community engagement, including the young. SDCC staff prepared information on shortlisted projects and had a media campaign to publish choices and details on the voting period and how to vote. The online voting was open for 5 days between the 22nd and 26th of May. There were also paper voting stations in Adamstown, Lucan, and Palmerstown. Voting in these locations took place on Thursday 25th May. The results of the vote were announced at a

public event in the Clarion Hotel, Liffey Valley, on Thursday, June 1st.

Phase Four – Implementation and Review:

SDCC intends to implement the chosen projects within 12 months. The entire process will also be reviewed by the full Council, including consideration of this report, to consider the expansion of the pilot initiative.

Influence, outcomes, and effect:

The initiative had several intended results, including promoting community engagement, enhancing transparency in decision-making, and empowering citizens to have a direct impact on local projects and services. The outcomes aligned with the project's theory of change to a certain extent, as evidenced by the positive feedback on the role of local representatives, the high turnout at workshops, and the generally positive view of the communication and advertising campaign.

This pilot study had a notable influence on public policy by introducing a new approach to decision-making and resource allocation within the local council. It also impacted the social fabric of the community by encouraging individuals and groups to participate in the decision-making process and take ownership of local projects. The initiative's influence on non-governmental institutions, business institutions, and individual attitudes and behaviors was less explicit but may have contributed to increased civic engagement and awareness of local issues.

The process encouraged citizens and community groups to take action on their own by submitting proposals, participating in workshops, and advocating for their ideas. This engagement was driven by the goal of the initiative to build social capital and community capacity, as well as the desire to have a direct impact on local decision-making processes.

The initiative's influence on others is evident in the evaluation approach, which drew from international examples and literature to adapt the participatory budgeting process to suit the local context. This suggests that the initiative served as a model for similar exercises in other regions, potentially influencing the design and implementation of participatory budgeting initiatives elsewhere.

Analysis and lessons learned:

The initiative's strengths included the positive feedback on the role of local representatives, the high turnout at workshops, and the generally positive view of the communication and advertising campaign. However, shortcomings were identified in the planning phase, with some stakeholders feeling that more time and engagement in the scoping and exploratory phases would have been beneficial.

To expand on the successes and address the shortcomings in future initiatives, organizers should consider providing more clarity regarding project eligibility at the proposal stage, engaging with identified groups before workshops, and allowing more time for detailed deliberations. Additionally, efforts to encourage individuals and smaller groups to submit their ideas and advocate for them should be prioritized, potentially through the introduction of sessions where participants can explain their projects in detail.

Participants' satisfaction with the outcome varied, with some expressing positive views on the feedback received, while others found the feedback limited or received none at all. Addressing this discrepancy in feedback and ensuring that participants' expectations are met should be a focus for future initiatives.

Democratic and Institutional Good

Based on the Democratic Institutional Good of Graham Smith's (2009) book, we will evaluate the “€300 Have Your Say ”case using the framework: Inclusiveness, popular Control, Considered Judgment, Transparency, Efficiency, and Transferability as follows:

Inclusiveness:

The imperative for inclusiveness was evident in SDCC's concerted efforts to involve a diverse array of community groups and stakeholders, disseminating the initiative across multiple communication channels, including newspapers, radio stations, social media, and leaflet drops. The noteworthy attendance of 120 participants at the workshops attests to the community's engagement, affording them a platform to deliberate and cultivate project ideas for their respective localities. An additional avenue for contribution was provided through the option to submit project proposals online via the consultation portal. Facilitated by well-informed SDCC staff and independent facilitators, the workshops aim to prevent the dominance of particular individuals or groups, ensuring a balanced and productive discourse.

However, the success of the participatory process faced scrutiny at the shortlisting stage, with 58.82% of respondents securing success and 41.18% facing disappointment. While a majority (94%) expressed a desire for the process to be repeated, 6% opposed its recurrence. Feedback from survey participants indicated that over 50% felt that participating in the participatory budgeting process facilitated networking within their local communities.

Despite generally positive sentiments, some negative comments highlighted concerns about limited community awareness and turnout, as well as insufficient information on projects. The Council's unanticipated decision to exclude a project initially chosen by the steering group was perceived as correct.

The voting process, conducted online for a week, garnered a substantial number of votes. While various communication channels were deemed appropriate, challenges like unverified online votes and the need to augment paper ballot participation were identified. A notable operational gap in effective participation was acknowledged, especially in reaching out to individuals who typically wouldn't attend workshops, emphasizing the need for broader community engagement.

Disagreements emerged regarding the representation of the public participation network (PPN) in the steering group, revealing tensions between its role in facilitating engagement and direct involvement in decision-making. Both the steering group and survey respondents highlighted the potential for enhanced engagement from marginalized and disadvantaged groups, traditionally less involved with the Council. Operational challenges persisted in informing and involving the community effectively, as indicated by negative comments about limited awareness and turnout. The voting process encountered challenges in ensuring integrity and limiting multiple voting, with the low turnout for paper voting prompting a need to explore strategies for increased participation and encouragement within the community.

Popular control:

Residents wield significant influence in the participatory budgeting (PB) process, dictating the selection of projects and fund allocation. Through active involvement, they contribute project proposals and vote on shortlisted ideas, determining the implementation of winning projects in

their localities. The execution of the eight winning projects exemplifies this community-driven approach. Notably, the installation of a playground in Watertown Park, for €120,000 and garnering 1184 votes, has successfully enhanced recreational spaces for families. Similarly, the feasibility study for the restoration of Silver Bridge in Palmerstown, costing €15,000 and receiving 1148 votes, has been conducted in collaboration with Fingal County Council. The introduction of Christmas lights in Lucan Village, funded at €17,000 with 1076 votes, created a festive ambiance with an official lighting ceremony on December 3rd, 2017. The initiative to plant native apple trees, costing €5,000 and securing 935 votes, resulted in the planting of 70 apple trees across various locations. However, challenges persist in the implementation of the project, improving access to the church and graveyard at Mill Lane, Palmerstown, due to issues with public ownership. The establishment of free library book banks, with a budget of €3,000 and 865 votes, successfully delivered books to various locations in 2018. The completion of the Multi-Games Wall in Lucan, costing €100,000 and garnering 860 votes, provides a versatile venue for sports enthusiasts. Meanwhile, the ongoing restoration of King John's Bridge in Griffeen Park allocated €20,000 with 806 votes, involving continued conservation work following the successful treatment of tree roots. This comprehensive overview underscores both the successes and challenges within the PB process, revealing the community's active role in shaping and executing initiatives for their localities.

Considered Judgment:

The process showcases commendable aspects regarding considered judgment. However, an examination of the communication methods employed reveals potential biases. While the approach was diverse, the reliance on online and social media sources might skew participation toward individuals already familiar with digital platforms. To ensure inclusivity, it is crucial to diversify communication strategies, considering demographics less inclined towards online engagement.

While workshops were generally well-received, managing the influence of community development workers to avoid unintentional bias is crucial, requiring comprehensive training for effective and impartial facilitation.

Transparency:

The transparency of the PB process in Ireland was evident from its inception. The selection of the pilot area, Lucan, was conducted through a public lottery during a council meeting, showcasing a clear and inclusive method for determining the project's region. The use of diverse communication channels effectively increased public awareness, and detailed information about PB process specifics, including dates and venues, was widely disseminated before workshops. These workshops, facilitated by SDCC staff, ensured an impartial environment during group discussions, maintaining a balanced approach to participant engagement. The voting process, designed to be accessible both online and offline, is aimed at broad participation and inclusivity. The approval process involved scrutiny by the full Council before presenting selected proposals on the website for public voting, further solidifying its legitimacy. However, challenges in transparency arise in the online portal as concerns about data privacy are raised due to registration requirements. Ensuring clear communication and transparency regarding participant data handling is crucial for establishing and maintaining trust.

While criteria for shortlisting projects reflect a positive step toward systematic selection, there is a need for clearer communication of exclusion criteria to prevent potential misunderstandings. The publication of shortlisted ideas on the SDCC website contributes to transparency, yet the limited detail on ballot papers, especially regarding project locations, raises concerns about differing public opinions on implementation. Improvements are necessary to ensure fairness and transparency, address issues like biased project descriptions and potential undue influence from councilors or external groups, and enhance the overall integrity of the PB process.

Efficiency:

The participatory budgeting (PB) initiative undertaken by the South Dublin County Council engaged a significant number of participants, with a deliberate focus on including marginalized individuals and communities (women & children). The process was completed within a relatively short time frame of six months, showing its ability to achieve its goals on time.

In addition, the initiative's efficiency as a pilot study was evident in the substantial feedback received, providing valuable insights on how to enhance the process and implement it more effectively in future studies.

Besides that, there was no mention of information about the cost of the process.

Transferability:

The PB process used in this case was adapted to suit the local context of South Dublin County Council, drawing from international examples and literature. This adaptability highlights the transferability of the PB process, demonstrating its potential to be applied in various contexts and adapted to different countries or specific localities. The successful implementation of PB in this local community serves as a model that can be replicated in similar communities, providing a framework for similar steps while commencing with a pilot study. The initiative's transferability is emphasized by its potential to influence the design and implementation of similar initiatives elsewhere, showcasing the broader applicability of the PB process and its adaptability to diverse settings.

Webography:

<https://www.sdcc.ie/en/have-your-say/past-winners/lucan/>

https://www.ipa.ie/_fileUpload/Documents/SDCC_300k_REPORT2017.pdf