

BRIEFING NOTE: Better Reykjavik

<https://betrireykjavik.is>

Method

Online Brainstorming

Participatory Task:

Ideas, Opinions

Owner: Citizens Foundation - a non-profit organization in Iceland.

Location: Iceland

Years in Operation: 2011-present

Implementation Level: Local

Platforms: Web

How does it work?

Better Reykjavik is an online platform for the crowdsourcing of solutions to urban challenges launched by the Icelandic Citizens Foundation in October 2011. Following a secure login process, residents of Reykjavik can submit proposals or vote on proposals submitted by other users. To encourage thoughtful deliberation over rancorous debates or “trolling”, Better Reykjavik provides a “pros” and “cons” feature. Here, rather than responding to individual comments, users can make comments either in favor of, or against, a particular proposal. This design also allows other users to see both sides of the debate on a proposal and decide if they want to upvote or downvote it. On the last working day of every month, the five top rated ideas, as well as the top ideas in each category, are collected by a project manager on the Mayor’s Office project management team for evaluation and possible implementation. To make the entire process transparent, every stage of the Mayor’s Office assessment is posted on the Better Reykjavik website.

The evolution from an idea to a decision takes 3-6 months - at the end of that timeline, all the participants, including the proposer and those who voted for the proposal, are notified about the outcome. If an idea has been rejected, the author receives an explanation by email, and an invitation to come to City Hall for further discussion, if requested.

What are the outcomes?

More than half (70,000) of the city's population (120,000) have participated. To date, 20,000 registered users have submitted over 6,800 proposals and 15,000 arguments for and against given proposals -over 600 projects have been implemented as a result of the process. In an audit conducted by the University of Iceland, just over 40% of Reykjavik residents report that they are pleased with Better Reykjavik and My District; 55% of respondents among elected officials and 47% among administrative staff also agreed that the implementation of My District was a success. Interestingly, although the youngest people demonstrate the lowest levels of participation, those who do participate are the most satisfied with the experience. This dynamic perhaps reflects the demand among young people for more direct forms of democratic engagement.

What does it cost?

The Citizens Foundation charges the City €2,500 for its annual service agreement for Better Reykjavik. In addition, the city has spent 1.3 billion ISK (\$12 million USD, €10 million) on the salaries of project managers, advertising and promotional costs for both Better Reykjavik and its participatory budgeting program, both of which run on the same website.

What are the benefits?

- Giving citizens a voice within the policymaking process and the power to influence the outcome of impactful issues.
- Mutual acceptance: after the platform's initial introduction, citizens continually participated online while the Reykjavik government made an effort to incorporate the platform into the already existing policymaking process. This has resulted in over 600 projects being implemented by 2018.
- The guarantee that the Mayor's Office will review the best ideas and the dedication of project management and expert resources to analyzing, evaluating and improving the proposals helps ensure a high degree of quality.

What are the risks?

- Citizen-participants do not have ultimate decision making authority, which could lead to frustration.

- Though the platform was popular when first introduced, the levels of participation have been declining in the past few years (especially within the younger demographic).
 - Google Translate is incorporated to make the website accessible to non-Icelandic speakers, but it is questionable whether this is adequate to ensure participation by non-Icelandic speaking immigrants.
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