



Participatory Budgeting Case Study

Fife Council

The Democratic Society
May 2017

This case study presents the experiences of Fife Council's use of digital tools for the 'Oor Bit Fife – Places and Spaces' participatory budgeting initiative in the Cowdenbeath area, which took place in late 2016. The initiative provided the opportunity for people to suggest ideas that could receive a proportion of a £250,000 funding pot made available by the Cowdenbeath Area Committee.

The Council was supported by a team from [The Democratic Society](#) to select, embed and test two digital tools which were provided as part of the 'Digital Tools for Participatory Budgeting in Scotland' programme.

Funding for the digital tools and support was made possible by provision of grant funding from Scottish Government to The Democratic Society.



Image (above): banner produced by Fife Council for promotion

Background

'Oor Bit' is a participatory budgeting initiative that gives people in the Cowdenbeath area of Fife the opportunity to propose and vote on ideas around a particular issue.

Fife Council approved plans for an Oor Bit participatory budgeting exercise at the Cowdenbeath Area Committee meeting in May 2016. It was agreed that **£250,000** would be made available to spend through a participatory process involving local residents.

The Digital Tools for Participatory Budgeting in Scotland programme, managed by The Democratic Society, enabled Fife Council to test **two digital tools** throughout the process: Your Priorities for the **idea generation phase**; and D21 for the **voting phase**.

The 8 localities involved in the exercise were: Benarty; Cardenden; Cowdenbeath; Crossgates; Hill of Beath; Kelty; Lochgelly; Lumphinnans. Kingseat was originally included, but there were challenges with engagement and no ideas were generated for the area. Support for projects there is taking place in another way.

Process

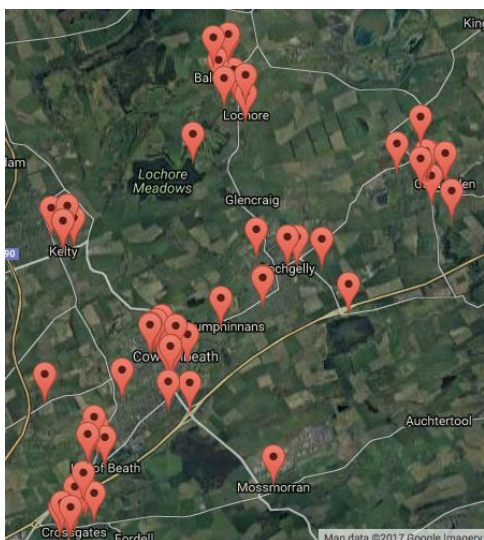
Set up and planning

A **steering group** comprised of community representatives from localities across the Cowdenbeath area was formed. They met regularly to plan and make decisions about the process. The group was supported by staff at Fife Council, Coalfields Regeneration Trust, and The Democratic Society. The group agreed that the environment ('places and spaces') would be the focus of this exercise, and that they would use both online and offline engagement methods.

Training around digital engagement and use of the tools was delivered to the steering group by The Democratic Society. Written user guides were also circulated.

Idea generation phase

The **idea generation phase** of the exercise was open for public participation from Saturday 18th June to Sunday 4th September 2016. The steering group selected **Your Priorities** as the digital tool for this phase. The public were invited to submit their ideas for projects to improve places and spaces in two ways: online, through the Your Priorities website (which kept an open public record of the ideas and allowed people to comment); or offline, by submitting their ideas in writing using freepost **postcards** provided by Fife Council. Submitting ideas online required registration.



Community participation in idea generation

A total of **166 ideas were generated**.

99 were generated online (Your Priorities website), from a total of **116 registered users**

67 were generated offline (postcards)

Demographic data was not collected.

Image (left): map showing the geographical location of the ideas submitted online.

Duplicate ideas were removed and 138 ideas progressed to the **sifting process**, which was conducted by members of the steering group.

During this process, themes emerged related to plans already underway in the local area: play parks (24 ideas); transportation (21 ideas); and town centre improvements (16 ideas). These ideas were removed from the process and delegated to areas responsible for related work streams in the Council A spreadsheet was created to inform people what happened to the ideas. **32 projects progressed to the voting phase** with a combined total of £448,500.

Voting phase

The **voting phase** ran from Monday 31st October until Sunday 27th November 2016. The steering group selected D21 as the digital tool for this phase. All residents of the Cowdenbeath area aged 8 years old and over were invited to participate in one of two ways: online, through the D21 website; or offline, by completing a paper ballot at one of 8 voting events organised in different localities or by responding to outreach activities.

The steering group chose a weighted multiple votes approach for the **voting system**, dividing the localities into three ward areas. They decided to have no verification process to encourage as much participation as possible, and expressed a high level of trust for their communities. To vote, participants just had to select their ward.

The online process was monitored throughout for potential fraudulent activity (e.g.

multiple votes from the same I.P. address). There is no evidence to suggest that the outcome was compromised as a result of this approach.

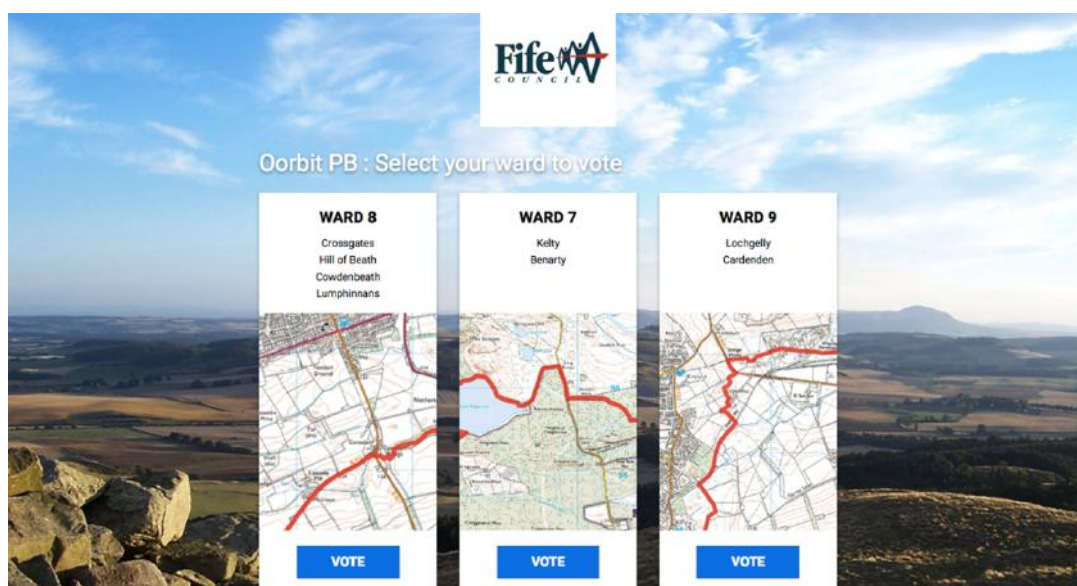


Image (above): screen shot of the D21 voting website landing page

The steering group did not want to set up online voter booths at the voting events as they expressed concern that this would change the nature of the events, negatively impact face-to-face interactions, and be affected by poor Wi-Fi access at the venues. Paper ballots were therefore produced by D21 in such a way that they could be scanned into the system later by Council staff, which enabled an overall digital tally.

Promotion and outreach

To support promotion, **posters** and **flyers** were designed and printed by the Council. Information and invitations to participate were disseminated at **local events** during the summer period, through **local media**, and shared on **social media**. Examples of the coverage can be viewed in [appendix E](#).

The Democratic Society provided support by promoting the process on Facebook and Twitter, **mapping** out local groups and pages to contact in the process. The Council's internal communications team were provided with a list of draft tweets.

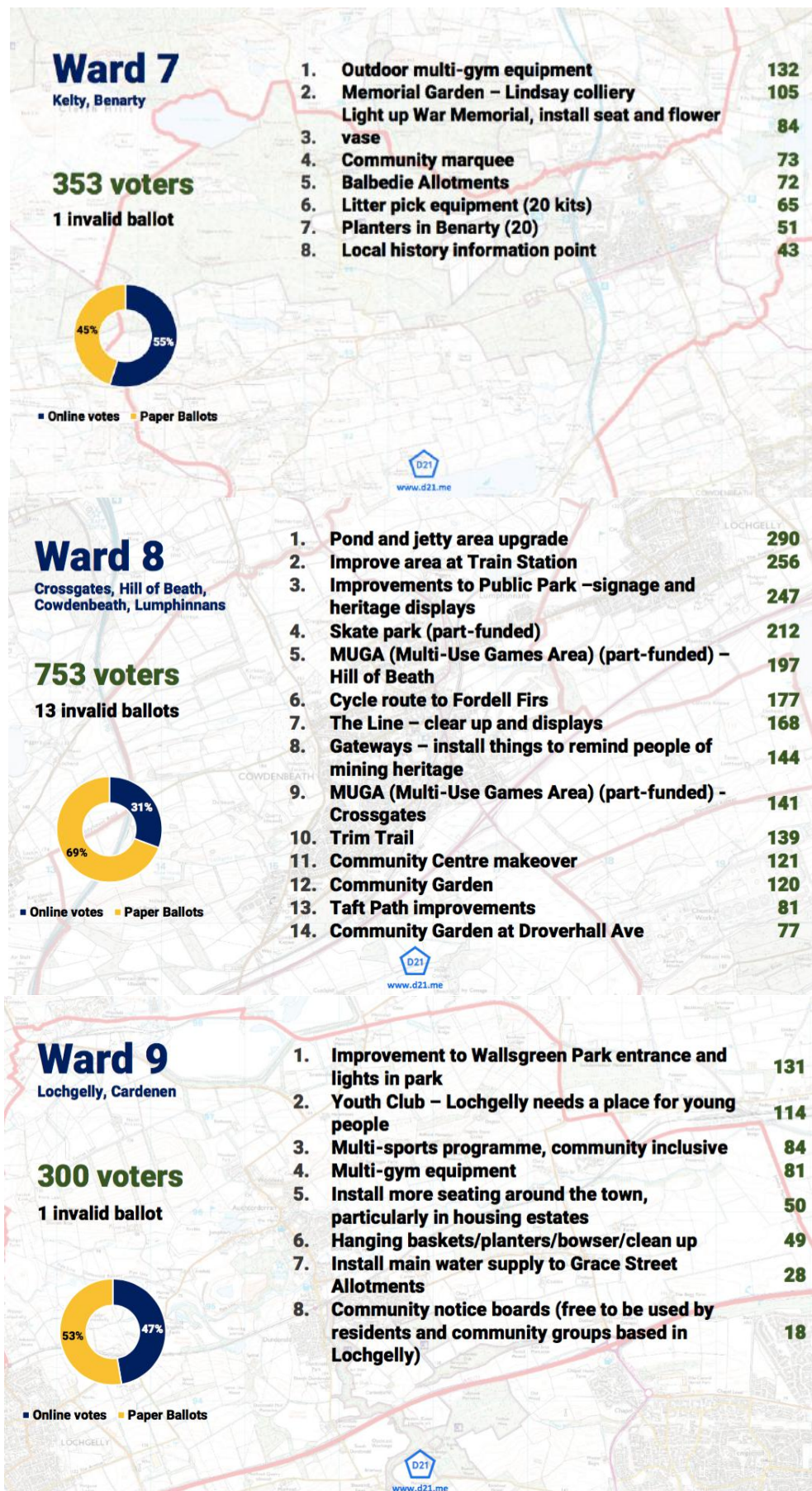
Outreach with **schools** across the area happened during the voting phase. The Council contacted school heads by email to request that they inform students of the vote. Notes were circulated to form tutors to read out in their morning sessions, giving permission for students to use phones or other devices to vote at a dedicated time.

Outcome

A total of 1,406 votes were cast during the voting phase:

- 568 (40%) were generated online (D21 website).
- 838 (60%) were generated offline (paper ballots).

Council staff understand this to be **Fife's largest participatory budgeting exercise to date**. To compare, the 2015 budget consultation received 867 individual responses.



Information about winning projects can be viewed in [appendix C](#).

The steering group felt that the exercise was successful in involving people in a decision making process [how to spend a pot of money] and getting them to share their ideas. This cycle has raised awareness of participatory budgeting and planted a seed for future phases.

The evaluation report submitted to the Cowdenbeath Area Committee on 25th January 2017 concluded that:

“The Oor Bit PB exercise was very worthwhile. It proved that we can scale up initiatives of this nature and engage with more and different people than would normally get involved. It also proved that the model could be used Fife-wide and in different types of community. If it is to be scaled up in this way then it will need a policy under-pinning and the allocation of dedicated resources – budget and staff time in the main.”

Evaluation

The following section provides a thematic synthesis of the lessons from:

- An **evaluation** survey for participants in the voting phase of the process, which was open from 31st October 2016 – a link was built into the D21 voting website
- An **evaluation meeting** with the steering group on 18th January 2017
- **Observations, experiences** and **feedback** between The Democratic Society, Fife Council and the steering group throughout the process.

Evaluation survey findings

An online survey to gather feedback from the community was opened during the voting phase (a survey was not carried out for the idea generation phase). This was accessed through a link at the end of the voting process on the D21 website. 53 people took part. The raw data is available in [appendix D](#).

In general, people thought that the voting website was quick and easy to use. The layout and presentation of information was well received. Some comments were made in relation to the voting process and communication (‘The website was good but I didn’t find out about it until late’).

The majority of respondents either agree or strongly agree that the voting website was easy to use (76.92%); that it was possible to participate at a time that suited them (82.96%); that the website was a good way to take part in decision making (90.38%); and that they would consider using a website like this in the future (88%).

Lessons learned

The steering group model strengthened the process

The steering group model worked well for this process. It enabled the Council to bring together volunteers from different areas of Cowdenbeath for direction and support. There were additional benefits as this exercise provoked interest in developing cross-area work, and enabled sharing of local knowledge and experiences.

Plan training, support and information before the process starts

A longer lead in time before starting engagement activities would have been welcomed by the steering group to ensure that those leading engagement activities could receive necessary information and training. The steering group also felt they needed better information from the Council to be able to explain some decisions (e.g. why an idea wasn't taken forward).

Map out and agree the entire process at the beginning

It wasn't clear to everyone how some aspects of the process worked, such as idea sifting. Information about the entire process should be agreed and communicated before the exercise goes public. Process information should be shared with the public.

There's also a need to map and connect all engagement activities and opportunities happening across the area to see what could link into the PB process.

The group also raised issues about the domain and communication of different web addresses (URLs). It was agreed that a 'smooth' domain process is required where a URL is created at the start of the project and only one version communicated.

Provide a clear explanation for any ideas removed from the process

Following the sifting process, a spreadsheet was created by the Council to show what happened to each of the ideas submitted during the idea generation phase. Some of the ideas were removed from the process as they were part of work programmes already underway, although specific information for each of these ideas was not provided. One comment received from the evaluation survey stated:

"The results which are shown on a spreadsheet may not be clearly understood by all. It was not user friendly. In addition, there was no feedback as to why our suggestion had been rejected nor any explanation as to why the winners were chosen. I feel very deflated and let down by the whole process, with a lingering feeling that greater openness and honesty would have been welcome. Sorry!!!"

Allocating resources on a ward basis worked well

The steering group generally agreed that the allocation of resources on a ward basis worked well and that this would be a good model for future processes, although there was not consensus – some preferred one big area vote.

Across the community, there was some variation in preferences for how people wanted to share their votes. Some people wanted to vote for their area only, whereas others were keen to share votes between different villages. It was reported that young people seemed particularly keen on sharing their votes.

Develop a coherent and continuous communications plan

The steering group raised some challenges around communication and want to further explore getting the message out to people. A developed communications plan from the beginning would be helpful, considering information to be communicated to the public at key stages throughout the process (and how). This could be revisited as the process develops, but should be continuous to avoid losing people.

The group felt that word of mouth was 'really powerful'. Social media worked well, particularly Facebook. Members of the group shared the link on their personal profiles and in local groups. The Democratic Society supported the group with Facebook and Twitter outreach. The idea of creating a dedicated 'Oor Bit' Facebook page was raised, but no consensus was reached as to whether this was desirable. The group also expressed preference for a full-page spread in local newspapers next time, which could also include pictures from previous PB initiatives.

The steering group felt that more buy-in was required from the central Council comms team. They could be involved in the comms planning process.

Keep the community informed

It's important to keep people informed as the process progresses. People should also be informed of outcomes, next steps or future exercises as soon as possible. The steering group felt it could increase trust in the process by showing the positive impacts on the community. It might be appropriate to arrange an event or a press release.

Ensure consistency between online and offline process

The same details should be requested at the idea generation stage whether the idea is submitted online or offline, such as description of projects and name of the person suggesting it. This helps with consistency and data entry when offline ideas are uploaded to the website. All of the ideas generated offline should be uploaded to the website so the ideas are all accessible in one place. This might require a named staff member(s) to take responsibility for uploading information.

The group agreed that a mix of online and hard copy voting worked well.

Capture contact details of participants

In hindsight, it seemed important to capture participant contact details to ensure that they are kept in the feedback loop and informed throughout the process. This could, for example, be an email address at the point of registration on the idea generation or voting websites and on postcards. This is especially important for the postcards so that people uploading the information to the website later on can get in touch if more information is required.

Have an engagement plan and develop promotional materials

The steering group felt that engagement activities should be increased, with larger numbers of different people, to get them involved at the idea generation stage.

Sessions in schools could be part of the exercise.

The Council should also provide staff and volunteers with more visual aids for events, outreach and engagement. The steering group would also have liked to see the Council do some mapping of local groups to send information mailshots. Contact details of these groups should be kept on an accessible database for the future. A standard letter template for outreach would also have been helpful.

Go where people already are – outreach at community events

Attending existing community events to promote the Oor Bit exercise in the Cowdenbeath area was worthwhile. The steering group felt that the Council should invest in stalls.

Individual events held in the 8 areas across Cowdenbeath had mixed results. The takeaway for the steering group was to 'go where people already are'.

Opportunities for shadowing and supporting events between different areas was also raised as something that would be helpful for all involved, although it's important to be aware of the time commitments required.

Continue using traditional forms of engagement

The steering group felt that they engaged with more people in the community as a result of this process. Several members of the steering group undertook street engagement and door knocking activities. It's estimated that 300 postcards went through doors, and some were collected with ballot boxes. The Council's mini ballot boxes could have been used to make this easier – perhaps a resource list could be shared with volunteers. The group suggested that the Council take responsibility for sending out postcards next time.

Although it was acknowledged that offline engagement is 'a lot of work', members saw an advantage as it encouraged people to engage 'there and then'.

Low verification, high trust worked well

The steering group were pleased with the verification approach taken during this exercise and felt that it possibly helped boost engagement. They stated a high level of trust in their communities from the offset. There was acknowledgement that this felt appropriate for this process, but the approach would be considered on an individual basis for each exercise.

Analysis of participation through the back-end of the voting system did not suggest any suspicious activity, so trust during this process seemed well placed.

Paper ballots were helpful when doing outreach

The paper ballots produced by D21 were useful when doing outreach, particularly with large groups of potential participants. A higher rate of participation was achieved over the course of a lunch break in schools with paper ballots, compared to using the D21 'voting kiosk' mode on iPad, for example.

Steering group members said they did not utilise the 'voting kiosk' mode on the D21 voting website mostly as they were unaware it existed, but also cited reasons about ease, speed and WiFi access.

Support guides were helpful

Support guides produced by The Democratic Society were considered useful. The steering group mentioned that these should be developed and offered to councils as needs arise throughout the process, with key documents supplied at the beginning.

Shadowing opportunities would be welcomed

The steering group and Council staff mentioned that it would be beneficial for different councils and areas going through this process across Scotland to shadow one another, to learn and share experiences.

Next Steps

Fife Council are working on delivery of the winning projects. The steering group have noted that they want to continue participatory budgeting in the Cowdenbeath area and they hope to undertake another exercise in the near future.

Further information

Online tools

Idea Generation Tool, Your Priorities: <https://oorbit-fife.yrpri.org>

Voting Tool, D21: <http://oorbit.d21.me/>

Participatory Budgeting in Scotland

The Democratic Society
demsoc.org/participatory-budgeting-in-scotland

Scottish Government – Participatory Budgeting
gov.scot/Topics/People/engage/Participatory-budgeting

PB Scotland
pbscotland.scot

PB Network (Scotland)
pbnetwork.org.uk/category/geographic/scotland



Better democracy, everywhere

The Democratic Society (Demsoc) works for more and better democracy, where people and institutions have the desire, opportunity and confidence to participate together.

We work to create opportunities for people to become involved in the decisions that affect their lives and for them to have the skills to do this effectively. We support governments, parliaments and any organisation that wants to involve citizens in decision making to be transparent, open and welcoming of participation. We actively support spaces, places and processes to make this happen.



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