Citizens' Assemblies and Participatory Budgeting – Tools to help Northern Ireland 'Build Back Better' post-COVID

Report of seminar
20th November 2020

In partnership with .....
Event information

This event was organised by the Community Foundation, in partnership with Involve, Community Places and NICVA.

It was a follow up event to the Roundtable Discussion on 23rd October: “Building Back Better - Involving the Public in Shaping Northern Ireland’s post-COVID Recovery” – the report of this event can be accessed [here](#).

A closed invitation was sent to elected representatives (MLAs and Councillors) as well as key departmental officials.

The event took place on Friday 20th November from 9.30am - 10.30am via Zoom. A video recording of the presentations can be accessed [here](#).

**Agenda**

**Welcome and background** - Paul Braithwaite, Community Foundation NI.

**Guest Speakers:**
Kaela Scott, Head of Democratic Innovation, Involve Citizens’ Assemblies

Jezz Hall, Director of Shared Future CIC
Participatory Budgeting

Discussion
Welcome – Paul Braithwaite, Head of Innovation and Voice, Community Foundation

Paul Braithwaite, Head of Innovation and Voice at the Community Foundation began by introducing the contributors and providing some background to the event in terms of the Foundation’s strategic work around Community Voice. A recap of the 23rd October seminar was provided by way of highlighting the proposals that have been put forward for consideration by the NI Executive, as summarised in the slide below:

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### Public Participation in post-COVID Recovery

**Context:**
- New Decade, New Approach commitment to “structured civic engagement”
- Post COVID Recovery – “Building Back Better”

**Proposals:**

- **Regional Citizens’ Assembly**
  - To examine issues spanning economy, public policy and public services relating to COVID recovery
  - Representative group of the public, reflective of NI society
  - Deliberative forum – learning & dialogue, leading to recommendations to decision-makers
  - Needs cross-party support and statutory footing
  - With adequate planning and support could be delivered spring 2021 onwards

- **Local Participatory Recovery Funds**
  - To enable people to decide what immediate actions are needed to aid recovery in their local area
  - Participatory Budgeting – local people deciding how to allocate a public budget
  - Can reach large number of people and new voices
  - Immediate, tangible benefits & stronger communities
  - Opportunity to pool existing resources and support inter-agency & cross-sectoral working
  - Build on existing work, opportunity and need to significantly scale up

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Paul then explained that the purpose of this event was to provide attendees with further background on the specific methodologies of citizens’ assemblies and participatory budgeting. Both these methodologies have been increasingly used in the UK and Ireland in recent years, including in NI, to involve the public in decision-making.

Paul then introduced the speakers who are experts on these respective approaches, Kaela Scott from Involve and Jezz Hall from Shared Future CIC.
Kaela Scott, Head of Democratic Innovation, Involve

Kaela Scott is Head of Democratic Innovation at Involve, a role focused on developing the theory and practice of public engagement and new forms of democratic participation. With a background in local government, since joining Involve in 2015 she has led on a wide range of engagement and research projects, with a particular focus on how to involve the public in dialogue and deliberation around complex and technical issues.

Jez Hall, Director Shared Future CIC

Jez Hall is Director of Shared Future CIC. For over 25 years Jez has worked in diverse communities, facilitating deliberative and participatory democracy processes and delivering research and policy work. He specialises in participatory budgeting, co-production and social enterprise.
CITIZENS’ ASSEMBLIES
A democratic innovation whose time has come

WHAT IS A CITIZENS’ ASSEMBLY?

- Randomly selected members of the public are brought together to consider an issue;
- They learn in depth about the issue, hearing from witnesses;
- They discuss the issue with people from all walks of life;
- Together, they reach a collective decision.
“Suppose an advanced democratic country were to create a ‘minipopulus’ consisting of perhaps a thousand citizens randomly selected out of the entire demos. Its task would be to deliberate, for a year perhaps, on an issue and then to announce its choices… one minipopulus could exist for each major issue on the agenda…” – Robert Dahl, 1989

ALL DIFFERENT…

But some common features…

- Random selection
- Demographic representation
- Expert evidence
- Facilitated dialogue
- Collective decisions
ALL DIFFERENT, but....

Not all assemblies of citizens are citizens’ assemblies
– and neither do they need to be.

• While it’s important that rules/definitions do not curb innovation, it’s critical that methods are not watered down beyond recognition.
• Involve have been leading a process among practitioners and commissioners in the UK to developed some draft standards for citizens’ assemblies
WHAT IS NEEDED TO MAKE A CITIZENS’ ASSEMBLY MOST EFFECTIVE...

FEATURES IN SET UP...

- Clear remit
- Institutional ownership
  - The assembly is commissioned by an authority with responsibility for the issue in question
- Independent oversight
  - Impartial facilitation and independent advisory group scrutinizing the planning
- Random selection and demographic representation
  - 50 – 150 people (although can be bigger)

WHAT IS NEEDED TO MAKE A CITIZENS’ ASSEMBLY MOST EFFECTIVE...

FEATURES IN DELIVERY...

- Balanced information
- Expert witnesses
  - Members determine their own questions for witnesses and time to question them
- Inclusive
- Sufficient time
  - At least equiv. 4 days, but often significantly longer
- Collective decision-making
WHAT IS NEEDED TO MAKE A CITIZENS’ ASSEMBLY MOST EFFECTIVE…

FEATURES IN FOLLOW UP…
- Public report to decision-makers
- Consideration in a suitable forum
- Formal response to recommendations

WHEN HAVE A CITIZENS’ ASSEMBLY?
- Tackling complex issues
- Breaking deadlock
- Multiple possible answers
- Potentially conflicting beliefs/values
- Trade-offs are required
- Rebuilding trust
- When there is genuine commitment to listen and respond
Participatory Budgeting
Jez Hall, Director, Share Future CIC

Click here to watch a video of the presentation

Citizens' Assemblies and Participatory Budgeting
Tools to help Northern Ireland 'Build Back Better' post-COVID

Participatory Budgets for Structured Civic Engagement
Jez Hall: Shared Future CIC

PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING?

Participatory budgeting (PB) is a process through which citizens participate directly in budget formulation, decision-making and monitoring of the budget execution. A channel for citizens to give voice to their budget priorities.
(World Bank)

“Local People deciding how to allocate part of a public budget.”

A way for citizens to have a direct say in how public funds are used to address local needs.
(NI PB Works website)

‘If it feels like we have decided, it’s PB.
If it feels like someone else has decided, it isn’t.’
(Resident involved in PB)
7 defining characteristics of PB

1) Public budgets are the object of the process... (its about real money)
2) Participation has a direct impact on the budget... (it is not a consultation)
3) The process has a deliberative element... (more than just voting)
4) Citizens influence rules governing the process... (its co-designed)
5) Redistribution is embedded in the process... (it promotes equity)
6) Designed so that citizens can monitor spending... (fosters Open Govt)
7) The process is repeated (e.g. on a yearly basis)... (PB grows and learns)

(Credit: Tiago Peixoto, Senior Public Sector Specialist at the World Bank)

“The truth about our aspirations isn't found in our vision, its found in our budget.”
(Credit: Brett Todenan, City Planner, Canada)

NOT ALL OF THE BUDGET!!

Only a percentage of any public budget will be allocated using PB

The PB process is always formally mandated and ‘signed off’ by the relevant elected legislature

1. **Supporting** Representative Democracy
2. **Improving** and reforming how public money is spent
3. **Building** Stronger Communities
Growth Of Participatory Budgeting

History going back 30 years

Spreading across the globe

Over 11,000 DIFFERENT experiences

Americas, Europe, Asia, Australasia, Africa

Growth Of Participatory Budgeting

Different Scales, Different Contexts, Different Challenges
Scotland’s PB Journey

2015
Community Empowerment Act (Scotland)

2016
Community Choices Funding
Embedded the Test & Learn Culture

2017
Agreement between Scot’ Gov’ and COSLA
That at least 1% of budgets will be subject to PB by 2022
All Scotland’s 32 Local Authorities committed

2018
Developing the PB Equalities Framework
Enable Deliberation and Reduce Inequality

2019
Development of a PB Charter for Scotland (2019)
Co-produced within the PB Scotland Network

It takes time to embed PB Values and Principles
Sustaining PB requires your ‘Buy-In’

The importance of authentic and sustained ‘buy-in’ from politicians
Balanced by public sector and civil society ‘buy-in’
PB has to flourish for long enough for positive impacts to show
PB is always prone to being overcome by ‘events’
Citizens lose trust if a process stops and starts
Measurable results take time
Hence a need to embed a culture of participation?

= “Structured Civic Engagement”

Benefits of Participatory Budgeting

• Better alignment between needs of citizens and public investment
• Reduction in inequality (through pro-poor expenditure)
• Improvements in public health and well-being
• Increased tax revenues
• Improved democratic culture (turnout and trust)
• Trust building (reduced social conflict)

It is worth noting that this process is both
a political and a technical process

and a balance needs to be struck between the two

Senior Elected Politician at an international PB conference in 2015
What might Government do?

What?
- **Promote** innovation (Technical support + resources)
- **Enable** localities to try PB (Remove regulatory burdens)
- **Act** quickly (Create momentum)
- **Connect** PB to social justice (Evaluate outcomes that matter)
- **Educate** through ‘doing democracy’ (Lead through example)

How?
- Connect Deliberative and Participatory Democracy (Structured)
- Do PB Grant-Making plus PB ‘Mainstreaming’ (Blended)
- Identify and support PB Champions (Active)
- Challenge everyone to do better (Ambitious)
Attendees:

Organisers and speakers:

Paul Braithwaite, Head of Innovation and Voice, Community Foundation NI
Kaela Scott, Head of Democratic Innovation, Involve
Jezz Hall, Shared Future CIC.
Gemma McCaughley, Community Foundation NI
Rebekah McCabe, Involve
Geoff Nutall, NICVA
Dearbhla Sloan, NICVA
Louise O’Kane, Community Places

Other attendees:

Elected representatives and staff of the following political parties were in attendance:

Alliance Party
Green Party
Sinn Fein
Social Democratic and Labour Party
Ulster Unionist Party

Representatives of the following government departments were in attendance:

Department for Communities
Department of Finance
‘Building Back Better’ – Involving the Public in Shaping Northern Ireland’s post-COVID Recovery & ‘Citizens’ Assemblies and Participatory Budgeting – Tools to help Northern Ireland Build Back Better post-COVID’ are part of the Community Foundation’s advocacy campaign aligned to our Strategic Priority, Community Voice

Everyone has the right to participate in the decisions that affect their lives and shape the society they live in. Public trust in government and politics is extremely low and there are few opportunities for people to influence the decisions that affect their lives – with the right support civil society and government can work together to change this by reinvigorating civic participation and deepening democracy.

For further information or to discuss contact Paul Braithwaite, Head of Innovation and Voice, at pbraithwaite@communityfoundationni.org