Angus Council Case Study Executive Summary

Angus Council ran a participatory budgeting process in Brechin throughout the summer of 2016, trialing a digital tool (Dialogue by Delib) which provided an online site to widen participation in their PB process. The site was used for the idea generation stage; people could submit ideas, discuss and comment on ideas. People then needed to submit an application form for the idea to go through to the offline voting day in October. The Council worked in partnership with the Steering Group made up of members of the community.

Key stats

- 35 users registered on the site
- 27 users submitted ideas
- 34 ideas submitted online
- 15 applications made offline (paper hard copy) that progressed to the voting day (offline)
- 21 comments on ideas
Key learning points

This case study provides some key learning that can be drawn from Angus Council's experience with regard to online and offline integration and lowering the barriers to participation. Key learning points include:

- Integrate online and offline processes (start planning for this at the beginning).
- A prescriptive process can make it difficult to implement digital engagement tools. In this case, the online site was not fully linked into the PB process and was not publicised widely to be used by many members of the public.
- Strong foundations for PB in Council and community are necessary, consider capacity and resource needs, and plan a timeline of the PB process.
- The staff team and Steering Group were limited in their capacity and on reflection, could not spend as much time on engagement as would be necessary. Planning for engagement can be difficult to estimate but detailed engagement strategies can better prepare a team for the reality of delivery.
- Coherent communication, promotion and engagement strategy targeted at reaching wider audiences. A lack of promotion/awareness raising offline and limited online promotion through social media leads to low participation. In this case, limited promotional activity resulted in a lack of awareness and low levels of participation.
- Early collaboration with partners (Steering Group, community etc.)
- Making decisions with community members on digital tools and training on how to use the site can help to grow confidence. In this case, decisions were made with the community members but there was some uncertainty around the tool.

Next steps

Angus Council plan to use digital tools for their PB processes in the future and are exploring further digital engagement options for the wider Council.
Case Study

This case study presents the experiences of Angus Council when they used a digital tool for a participatory budgeting (PB) initiative, which took place in June – October 2016. The initiative provided the opportunity for people to suggest ideas that could receive a proportion of a £20,000 funding pot.

Angus Council was supported by The Democratic Society to select, embed and test one digital tool which was 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.

Background

‘Your Budget Your Choice’ is an approach used by the Angus Community Planning Partnership to allocate funds to local areas to address inequalities, using PB. The Brechin and Edzell ward was selected for this process as one experiencing unequal outcomes. The community and the Council were building on the experience of running a PB process in 2015 in the same area.

The PB process was organised by the local communities team from the council and a Steering Group with volunteers from the local community to take responsibility for development and delivery of the project. People could submit ideas and applications from 11th June – 30th September 2016, for a total of £2,000. The voting day took place on 22nd October, where people could vote for projects at the offline event.

Approach

The Digital Tools for Participatory Budgeting in Scotland Programme, administered by The Democratic Society, enabled Angus Council to test one digital tool: Dialogue by Delib.

Angus Council wanted to use Dialogue for the idea generation stage of their PB process. As well as an offline option (filling in application forms), they wanted an opportunity to enable people to participate online. The purpose of using the digital tool was to ‘widen the engagement and participation’ (Council Lead) and they aimed to source ideas from the people of Brechin about how to make Brechin better. They also used the online tool to involve the non-English speaking community (predominantly Polish) by translating ideas into Polish and making this visible on the site.

Angus Council began exploring the potential of digital engagement tools for PB in March 2016 with a discussion with The Democratic Society (7th March) about the possibility of using a digital tool to enhance engagement in Brechin. Angus Council confirmed their participation on the programme. There was a broader tool selection workshop with members of the community and council staff (26th April 2016) to select an appropriate tool. Several options were presented, and Dialogue was selected for the idea generation
phase of Your Budget Your Choice. Delib delivered training to the Council Lead (26th May 2016) which introduced the Dialogue site and guided them through processes for set up, administration and moderation to support the idea generation process. The tool was showcased to the wider community at a Learning Event in Forfar (17th June 2016) to give people a chance to see how it worked and take part in an interactive demonstration. Support materials (such as User Guides and social media promotion advice) were produced in June and a series of planning and advisory meetings were held between Council staff, Delib and The Democratic Society in June and July 2016 throughout the project lifecycle.

![Welcome screen for 'Your Budget Your Choice: Make Brechin Better'](image)

Figure 1: Welcome screen for 'Your Budget Your Choice: Make Brechin Better'
Outcome and evaluation

The Brechin offline voting event had 188 people (around 1% of population) with roughly a 50:50 gender split, although there was overrepresentation of the older demographic. The previous Brechin PB exercise in 2015 had about 70 people participating at the event. This year through offline and online processes, they managed to increase the number of people engaging; 188 at the offline event and more people engaging online in the idea generation stage.

Key statistics:

- 35 users registered on the site
- 27 users submitted ideas
- 34 ideas submitted online
- 15 applications made offline (paper hard copy) that progressed to the voting day (offline)
- 21 comments on ideas

The number of comments on the site shows some online discussion and deliberation took place with the public evaluating and discussing other ideas, and the council staff moderating this by facilitating discussion and encouraging comments.

Learning point: Community management by the council can be effective in encouraging discussion and deliberation with the public e.g. responding to ideas and comments.

Learning point: The number of individual visits to the website (using google analytics data or similar data) was not collected because this is an optional set up request with Delib which was not requested by council. In future, it would be good to consider using the information and data from Google analytics to better understand and evaluate the project (collecting number of site visits/tracking where people found out about the website). This can be requested in advance from the tech provider.

Lessons Learned

This section provides a thematic synthesis of the lessons from the following evaluation sessions:

- An evaluation survey for participants who registered on the online site.
- An evaluation meeting with the steering group (31st January 2017)
- An evaluation meeting with the Council Lead staff member (16th November 2016)
- Observations, experiences and feedback between The Democratic Society, Angus Council and the steering group throughout the process.
Offline and online processes need to be integrated

The online and offline processes were not fully integrated which caused separation or a ‘split process’. This may have resulted in the online site not being used by many people or utilised to its full potential. It’s relevant to note at this point that this is the primary reason that the online process wasn’t successful in this case, as highlighted by a quote from the Council Lead:

‘No one was put off by digital; the process itself just didn’t generate the conversations online or offline’.

It’s also important to note that while there was some confusion about the process, it did not disrupt the PB process which continued successfully offline; ‘Some people thought putting ideas on the page would be an application but we wanted a hard form. It was confusing but it didn’t stop anything from happening’.

The Steering Group decided to only take ideas submitted in hard copy application form through to the final public vote. This meant that ideas submitted online were excluded from the voting stage unless a paper application form had also been handed in. This rigidity of the offline process prevented the online process being properly integrated.

As outlined above, 34 ideas were generated on the online site, but the PB process received only 15 applications altogether in the end. Two main reasons for this can be identified;

- The lack of integration with the offline process meant that only small number eventually went through to the vote day because of the criteria made by the Steering Group that a paper application must be made in addition to the idea on the site.
- The council were adding some ideas they had heard of in previous engagement exercises and issues they knew about in the community. The idea for staff to post some content on the site was a good way to populate it at the beginning so it wasn’t empty and bare when public came to look at it, however, this meant that there was no group to take ownership of the idea to submit an application.

Learning point: Online and offline processes need to be integrated; they should work together and complement one another. Dual processes result in one process becoming redundant. Planning the linkages between the two processes at the very beginning of the planning stage is important.

Ensure foundations for PB are in place, consider capacity and resource needs, and plan timeline of process

There are capacity and resourcing issues to be considered when planning a digital PB process and assuming that solid foundations exist and that everyone is on board can lead to difficulties in delivery of a digital PB project. In this case study, both the Council and the Steering Group indicated that strong support for participatory budgeting from within the Council and the community is essential to running a successful process.
The Council had clear buy in from leadership with elected members being supportive of using online digital tool, and an elected member on the Steering Group. However, the Council Lead indicated that other Council-wide priorities can make delivering a PB process more challenging; ‘working in the context around public service reform and austerity meant there was always going to be a struggle with buy in and capacity’.

The Steering Group noted that it takes time to establish a PB process, and adding digital is a big step; ‘Don’t feel you have to do the website in a year. Spread it out and get the foundations right and become familiar with it first.’ Others emphasised the need to involve the community all the way; ‘Expansion should be gradual and understandable. We need to take the public with us’. They emphasised the importance of making sure the process is appropriate for the local community and is well explained in clear language, and proposes that there should be opportunities for people to participate in a way that suits them; ‘don’t do this just because you can. Do it the way folk understand. Digital cannot be the whole thing’.

In terms of capacity, there were two members of staff working on this project and one staff member who helped with the Polish interpretation (translation is resource intensive). All staff spent most time doing offline engagement with 10-14 hours a week each. Admin and promotion probably took about an hour a day 7 days a week as ‘things don’t stop at weekend’. One staff member might be enough if they were working on it full time.

The Steering Group felt similarly stretched, with 6 members at any given meeting, there was a lot of work for them to cover. They hope to expand in the future.

**Learning point:** Ensure buy in through a process of awareness raising and training. Consider how much time will be needed for the project. Plan for capacity and resources through the detailed timeline to make the process achievable. Prepare a communications and engagement strategy that is integrated with the timeline. Ensure team roles are clearly defined especially when working with community members to deliver this. Plan how to deal with interactions outwith standard working hours and at the weekend.

**Coherent communication, promotion and engagement strategy targeted at reaching wider audiences**

Some promotional activities that were carried out included online promotion through social media accounts by both the Council and the steering group (Your Budget Your Choice (YBYC) Twitter and Facebook; Engaging Angus Council run Twitter.) The Council also published a blog about the process through the Housing department.
The Council Lead said that the site was “not promoted” and felt that a lot more promotion would have been useful. The Council Lead was expecting a lot more ideas, conversation and engagement on the site, saying they were ‘guilty of thinking that it will just happen’. They did not engage with people they hadn’t previously engaged with and reach people who would be regarded as ‘hard to reach’.

There was no offline promotion of the website, and limited reach through Facebook promotion in the Your Budget Your Choice Facebook page. The Engaging Angus Twitter account promoted links to the site. These offers to participate were not integrated; the opportunity to submit paper hard copy applications was promoted online by the YBYC social media accounts, and the opportunity to submit ideas online was promoted by the Engaging Angus Twitter account.

There were some online and offline engagement efforts with the non-English speaking community, as the ideas were translated into Polish and put out through the council interpreter’s networks, and some engagement in the local community (knocking on doors to tell people about it). There were no members of the non-English speaking/Polish community at the event so it is likely that this did not encourage the Polish community to come to the event. It is unknown if this encouraged people to submit ideas as that demographic information was not asked on registration on the site.

The learning from this might also be that establishing a process and involving more people in the process takes time; ‘We [the Steering Group] got feedback [that non-English speaking communities] didn’t want to make an effort to take part in the voting because they don’t feel included. As time goes on and the kids get integrated in the schools [this might change] - it might take a whole generation’

The Steering Group noted the importance of language and coherent messaging; they felt that the language on the online site ‘sound[ed] more complicated and like council speak. We were trying to make the language friendly and we tried to explain in Plain English, not officer speak’. Others said; ‘All the council speak made it look like a council project. The minute it went on the screen, it felt like a council project’. They felt it was important that this should be seen visibly as a community led project, saying; ‘If it is a council led thing we’ll just leave it alone. If it is a community led thing we will take part’.
Learning point: Posters and flyers were created for the offline event, but no offline materials were printed for promoting the idea generation stage. These materials did not have the link for the site or other information so it was not promoted. The Council Lead highlighted the learning from this, saying; “If you want people to click on a link it has to go online”.

Learning point: The Council did a small piece of research work on the feedback from the Polish community to see if they had been engaged in the process, and discovered that they had not managed to engage the community despite the translation. The learning point that can be taken away from this experience is nicely summed up by the Council lead; “Just because you translate something doesn’t mean you are engaging people”.

Learning point: Engagement strategy for online and offline activities, use same brand, promote online opportunity through social media/online communications through council and community groups etc. The same wording and language should be used throughout which should be directed at the community and should avoid sounding official.

Early collaboration and planning with Steering Group

There are some lessons that can be taken from this experience of working in partnership with Councils and Steering Groups. As discussed above, the idea to take ‘highest rated’ ideas from the online site through to voting stage did not work with the Steering Group’s offline process requiring hard copy application forms to apply for funding. This led to some confusion although they tried to alleviate this, with the Steering Group reflecting; ‘Some people thought putting ideas on the page would be an application but we wanted a hard form’.

Figure 3: Facebook post on YBYC page for application forms
There were some concerns in the Steering Group about the suitability of using digital in this area because ‘not everyone is online’ and the area has an older demographic and voiced their concerns that; ‘There are a lot of old people in Brechin who don’t use computers’.

The digital tool presented a challenge to some members of the Steering Group; ‘The online tool was beyond me’. One steering group member was present at an interactive demonstration of the site at the Learning Exchange (17th June). Opportunities for training and exposure to the tool might not have been communicated to the members, with one member saying ‘It would have better to have you here for training. We just got a URL and told to get on with it. I sometimes felt like we were swimming in mud. I could not make sense of it.’ The difficulties here could have been alleviated somewhat through training, talking through the site and building up confidence in the team.

Learning point: With the Dialogue tool there is little hands on moderation needed, and only one or two admins are recommended to run the process. The limited digital skills within the Steering Group also perhaps led to a lack of confidence in the digital process. Delivering training on how to use the site may have been useful. The team supporting the implementation of the tool could benefit from training to run through it so they feel confident showing others how to do it and guide others through the registration process and adding ideas.

Learning point: There exists a possible tension between implementing top down expertise by the Council on one hand, and on the other hand, letting people do things themselves, take ownership of the process, regardless of the Councils desires. This was realised in the ‘Your Budget Your Choice’ PB process and presents an interesting learning point about ownership of PB processes. Responsibilities should be clearly outlined from the beginning, early in the set-up of the process, so that online and offline processes can be fully integrated and agreed upon by all responsible.

Learning point: When Councils and communities are working in partnership, it is important to create joined up processes and ensure good working relationships. Support time with The Democratic Society could be used to talk to Council staff and Steering Group members/community members about buy in and joined up strategy.

Learning point: Establishing a culture around PB and establishing the process takes time. The Steering Group pointed out that; “A year is a short time in a community”; people need time to learn about PB and embed in community, and adding in digital is new step in relatively new process. This sentiment is reflected in the feedback from the Council Lead that PB should be seen as more of a long-term process because making PB ‘the norm’ takes time, adding that; “Digital PB is not a project it is a way of doing things”.

Other

Lack of financial incentive might have been a barrier to participation relating directly to process. Grants capped at £2,000 might have been considered to be too small to encourage a range of diverse applications, engaging the wider community. With more money up for grabs, there might be more opportunity to engage people. Similarly, with
grants capped at £2,000 and £20,000 available, in this case, almost every applicant received funding which eliminates a competitive aspect to a large extent. The council lead suggested that mainstreaming PB in the future (using PB to decide delivery of services) may be easier than small grants because mainstreaming of services would involve more people and communities of interest may achieve wider reach.

Reflections and evaluation

Evaluation with Council Lead

Digital engagement was exciting for the Council to try because it was a new idea about ‘doing things differently’. The driver of support and encouragement in Scottish Government support ‘really helped with buy in’ for the Council team. They saw the opportunity for traling digital PB as an opportunity to ‘win hearts and minds’ in using PB to ‘transform how we work with communities’. The ‘biggest benefit’ to the Council was trying something new that the council hadn’t ever tried before. The support around this helped; ‘Working with external organisations like The Democratic Society and Delib was really interesting and eye opening for the council. And shows the potential of what new types of engagement can be done’. The council staff lead thought that doing the exercise was worthwhile as they ‘wouldn’t know what we know now’ and community development is all about learning.

Evaluation with Steering Group

The Steering Group discussion focused on the use of the digital tool, their feedback on the digital tool and their future plans for digital. There were some aspects that the Steering Group liked about the digital tool including the accessible repository of ideas: ‘It allowed folk to see what other folk were thinking. If you do it by flyer or email people can’t see each other’s ideas’.

There were further comments that the interface needed to be ‘more user friendly and inviting’ in a ‘forum’ style that might be more familiar than the box layout. They also commented that the URL could have been more memorable. There were some who felt that people should not need to register to post an idea, saying that ‘the security side was over the top for what we were doing’. The Steering Group didn’t have control over changing something on the site; ‘we had to email someone at the council and took three or four days for a response’. They felt that the steering group could do moderation in the future, negating the need for tight security and registration processes. They also felt the tool’s main function was about rating ideas, rather than inviting comment and discussion. There was one member who commented that they felt it was not suitable for their needs; ‘We felt the choice to use Dialogue was put on us. I don’t feel they made the right decision’. There were others in the group who were willing to use it again in the future; they thought there were positives to be derived from having a digital option and felt that with planning, greater lead in time and improved access to the platform it could help them to reach more people and improve their process.

The Steering Group were positive about the learning from this experience and looked to using digital in the future saying; ‘We are quite happy to keep [using the digital tool] going’.
One member of the Steering Group proposed how the digital tool could be better integrated in the future which would include a stage before applications, proposing that:

‘(We) could use website to generate ideas to encourage people through spring to summer and then people would be better able to take forward ideas. This gives time to show people what’s happened, share stories and encourage people to put forward new ideas’.

Evaluation survey findings

Feedback was gathered from the community through an online survey. Half of the respondents thought that the website was quick and easy to use. The layout and presentation of information was well received, with one respondent commenting that ‘it was also good to see the contributions that others had submitted all in one place’. Most of the respondents raised comments in relation to communication. Some did not know it existed as it was ‘poorly advertised’ and thought the process was ‘disorganised this year’. There was also a positive comment proposing how to use the tool in the future:

‘We need to find more ways to direct traffic to the site and encourage people to see the site as a place in which they can have an online conversation with a range of people’.

This data is based on the four responses that were received.

Next Steps

Angus Council are planning to carry out a PB process using digital tools for the next year of PB. The Steering Group also indicated they would like to continue using the online option. Angus Council are currently exploring where and when they should deliver the next round, based on an evaluation of the 2016 PB process.
Further information

Online tools

Idea presentation tool, Dialogue ‘Engaging Angus’ site

engagingangus.dialogue-app.com (no longer live)

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

The Democratic Society

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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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