



22 October 2020

Aileen Campbell MSP
Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government
The Scottish Government
St. Andrew's House
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Edinburgh
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— By email: CabSecCLG@gov.scot

Dear Aileen,

I wanted to write to you to express how much I welcomed and enjoyed the opportunity to hear the views offered to us by the Participatory Budgeting National Strategic Group on the 8th of October. It is encouraging and energising to hear the passion for, and commitment to, Participatory Budgeting (PB) as a critical approach to enrich and support participatory democracy and policy development. This is crucial in the current challenging times.

At the outset of the pandemic public health measures to control the spread of the virus were established and we saw communities providing vital support to people shielding or vulnerable to the effects of the virus. These efforts demonstrate the strong role civil society can play within our communities. The work of local communities must be supported and enabled by central and local government. The work of our communities throughout this period also demonstrates a unique opportunity for Scotland to embed community empowerment and participation in recovery and renewal from the pandemic. I am looking forward to hearing more of the discussions which flow out of the Strategic Group and engaging in conversations to broaden our understanding of the role that PB can play in the reform of public services and democracy.

There is much to celebrate and to build upon as we consider the PB journey we have jointly taken to date. Despite the challenges that Covid-19 has presented us with, it is important to highlight the many significant achievements which have been made.

Until the start of pandemic, progress against the PB Framework Agreement was steady. Despite the pressures caused by Covid-19, some councils have continued to progress and develop PB programmes. This has been in the context of small grants and local authority recovery planning.

Continued and increased use of CONSUL over the last year has also been positive, with many councils increasing use of the platform to enhance and facilitate community engagement. Digital participation is an important element of the increasing interest in participatory

democracy and building digital access and capacity is a critical part of supporting progress, now more than ever.

COSLA has specifically referenced PB and Participatory Democracy (PD) in its blueprint for Scottish Local Government, and council leaders are committed to maintaining momentum towards establishing PB as a tool to assist and measure empowerment and participatory democracy, where citizens have a direct say in decisions that affect their lives locally. PB is also a recognised part of Scotland's Social Renewal Programme as recognised via the Social Renewal Advisory Board.

That said, we are living through particularly difficult times. That the Strategic Group recognised the considerable challenges facing councils as they work to reset budgets because of their pandemic-related work is welcome and helpful. Delivering emergency responses and support to communities through this period has had a significant impact on local discretionary spend for both statutory and non-statutory services. The pandemic has also cost us to date a period of seven months or more against the focussed progress towards allocating 1% of budgets for PB councils had agreed to make before the end of March 2021. Before many councils can re-establish their full focus on this shared ambition, some time will be required to revisit budgets and local priorities, establish some stability, return staff to their 'business as usual' roles and create a new form of normality.

Given this picture it would be reasonable to conclude that some councils may be delayed in reaching the agreed 1% investment in PB by the end of March 2021. However, despite the setbacks there are others that appear likely to achieve success within or near to the original timeframe of the 1% agreement. Because of this it would be helpful if the target remains as is, so that those who may achieve it can be offered the kudos of having done so, while extending the season to meet the target for the remaining councils by at least another year, if not two. This feels broadly in line with the consensus that was developing in the PB National Strategic Group on the 8th of October.

Equally, to make progress, I would appreciate it if you would consider this suggested approach outlined in Appendix A. It is further supported by a short summary of councils' delivery of full PB processes over the fiscal year 2019/2020 in Appendix B. Reaching an agreement on the next steps will assist local government, and communities more broadly, in continuing their shared journey towards delivery of the aspirations of both the PB 1% Framework agreement and the placing of PB in wider national conversations. I share your view that promoting participatory decision making is a key part of delivery on recommendations from the Christie Commission, realising human rights and reducing inequality.

As part of our combined support for this work it would be helpful for your officials to discuss and agree the levels of funding resource to be released, enabling the COSLA PB team being funded by the Scottish Government currently, to continue and extend the necessary support to councils towards the mainstreaming of PB until at least summer 2022.

I look forward to hearing your thoughts on these proposals and continuing our discussions.

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "K. Parry". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping flourish underneath the name.

Cllr Kelly Parry
COSLA Community Wellbeing Spokesperson

Annexe A: Proposed Action Plan COSLA PB Team

Proposed workplan 2020/21 – following COSLA PB Team return to substantive posts

- Encourage widescale adoption of local participation in budget decision making throughout the pandemic/recovery period. We will support the roll out of PB processes across a range of service areas to help embed participatory processes as part of the service reform agenda. A positive development which highlights how embedding PB in different service areas has been the engagement of Education Scotland, and some Head Teachers, with PB who are now allocating PEF funding using PB methods.
- Review data and information evidencing LA's progress (2019/2020) towards meeting the 1% Framework Agreement, producing a report which demonstrates LG commitment to PB, and the positive impact participatory processes have had for local communities.
- Establish agreement with elected members on data capture methodology going forward to demonstrate delivery on the ambitions of the 1% PB Framework Agreement.
- Capture the impacts of and outcomes from PB processes in respect to the achievement of national and local strategic priorities, including equalities outcomes.
- Continue to work with local government officers, via the PB Officers Working Group to share learning and innovative practice.
- Develop an updated local government position on the role of PB, and participative democracy more broadly, for local councils and statutory partners as local government rebuilds following the pandemic. This should also reflect the broader context of local governance reform and the enhanced role of digital within service delivery.
- Support and develop expansion of, and broader access to, digital participation via CONSUL.
- Work with the Participatory Budgeting National Strategic Group to represent Local Government and the work of local authorities.
- Strengthen awareness of, and reporting against, participation processes including PB and outcomes, in the context of democratic rights and fundamental human rights.
- Agree, develop and issue a joint letter between COSLA Community Wellbeing Spokesperson and the Cabinet Secretary to local authorities which outlines the agreed route forward for Mainstream Participatory Budgeting.

Proposed workplan 2021/22 – to be developed following outcomes from 2020/21

- In gauging progress towards the 1% Framework Agreement, capture small grants, and mainstream PB processes carried out in 2020/21. In addition, we will include, as part of demonstrating work towards the 1% Agreement all participatory decision processes which have involved the allocation of resources/budget. This will require councils demonstrating that deliberation and engagement with the public materially affected final budget/resource allocations.
- Work with the Participatory Budgeting National Strategic Group and our LA PB Officer Network to enhance the current definition of PB, as outlined in the 1% Framework Agreement, to better reflect Scotland's recovery and social renewal journey. The emphasis would be to ensure those furthest from democratic processes and facing the most barriers to participation are able to direct the use of local resources, across the public sector through methods of engagement that best suit their needs.
- Convene a series of round table sessions, codesigned with local officers to review progress to date and explore how uptake of PB across the wider public sector can be progressed. We have agreed that PB progress must not to be limited to local authorities alone and so we also intend to have an end of year conference to evaluate and celebrate the progress made. We believe this will provide an opportunity for leadership to be grown across the

public sector, and will be led by community planning strategic partnerships, organisations and service delivery partners across the public sector.

- Continue to develop the CONSUL platform as a platform for participation, deliberation and engagement and provide support to local authorities.

Annexe B: Overview of PB Activity – Scottish LA's 2019/20

The number of completed PB initiatives undertaken 2019/20:

Between April 2019 -March 2020 Scottish local authorities completed 20 PB processes. At the time of surveying, several councils reported that projects scheduled for March 2020 onwards had been paused owing to public health measures or as a result of redirecting staff to support the COVID-19 pandemic response. Projects subject to delays have not been included within the above total.

Since 2018 Scottish local authorities have committed to allocating at least 1% of mainstream council budgets through PB activity by 2021. Whilst progress towards this target has been delayed owing to the pandemic, much of the PB activity across councils in the 2019/20 year focused upon integrating participatory budgeting approaches across council services e.g. grounds maintenance, roads, transport or community libraries. Many councils reported that there is a strong ongoing commitment to ensure participatory budgeting processes are embedded as Scotland responds to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Overview of Thematic issues explored, and communities of interest/place involved:

PB projects carried out throughout the 19/20 period ranged from projects focused upon geographic regions e.g. villages, towns or electoral wards, to those which intended to address local community priorities identified via local outcome improvement and community plans.

It should be noted that of the 20 completed PB processes, several were conducted across multiple wards based on thematic issues e.g. in Stirling Council the participatory budgeting process was conducted across 7 wards, with £100,000 devolved for decision making in each ward. PB projects focused upon supporting geographic communities often involved community councils as community stakeholders and were informed by local outcome improvement and/or community plans.

Projects focused upon thematic issues were also frequently defined by geographic regions. In working towards the Mainstreaming Participatory Budgeting Agreement some councils reported using participatory budgeting activity to integrate community involvement in reform of public services. Areas of service delivery which utilised PB included; grounds maintenance, infrastructure, environmental services, community facilities and libraries, youth services and alcohol and drug services. Within these processes' deliberation and coproduction of project ideas was taken forward through joint working between local authority officers and community members via strategic planning and working groups.

Thematic issues participatory budgeting projects across Scottish local government during 2019/20 included;

- Healthy living
- Food poverty
- Climate change and sustainability
- Local Heritage
- Social isolation and loneliness

- Poverty
- Skills and capacity building
- Tackling inequalities
- Mental health and wellbeing
- Child poverty

CONSUL Progress and Development

CONSUL has allowed local authorities to continue their engagement and participation with people and communities throughout the pandemic and development work in recent months has intensified.

COSLA has been working with colleagues in the Digital Office for Scottish Local Government and Improvement Service to progress and enhance the platform for use by local authority officers and community users. This includes the integration of My Account to improve the user experience and enhance the ability of the platform to collect vital participation data. Collaborative work has also started with local authorities to streamline security and data protection policies.

Work is underway with the Alan Turing Institute at Warwick University, funded by NESTA, to apply and test artificial intelligence modules to CONSUL to improve the capacity and functionality of the site both for officers and community users. This project will have significant benefits for the platform in Scotland and the outputs of this project will be shared globally with organisations also using CONSUL.

North Lanarkshire Council have been using CONSUL to engage with young people on their experiences throughout Covid-19; to develop their new Local Housing Strategy and shortly to collaborate with communities on the design of mainstream participatory budgeting. Whilst Argyll and Bute Council are using CONSUL to discuss the community response to Covid-19 and the wider impacts of the pandemic for people and communities.

The importance of digital tools, access and participation is widely recognised as a crucial part of recovery and renewal across Scotland. CONSUL forms a vital part of the digital offering and COSLA will continue its work with local authorities and partners to deliver, develop and support its use to ensure meaningful and accessible opportunities for participation, deliberation and decision making.

Has COVID-19 impacted on PB plans and activity?

Of the 22 councils responding to the survey, nearly all noted that the pandemic had impacted the delivery of PB activity. Of those reporting no impact of COVID upon PB activity all were in an early planning phase. In many instances officers responsible for delivering on PB were redeployed to other service areas to provide direct support to local communities e.g. via community hubs to ensure provision of support, advice and assistance. Despite the delays resulting from the redeployment of staff, continuing to deliver on ambitions surrounding PB remained a priority. Councils indicated that whilst some projects had been delayed, there remained a continued commitment in delivering on the Mainstreaming Participatory Budgeting Agreement which will see Scottish Local Authorities allocate at least 1% of their budgets via participatory processes. Following the pandemic many councils acknowledge that the focus of mainstream PB projects going forward will prioritise social recovery and renewal from the pandemic.

