

Discussion Paper: Participatory Budgeting (PB) Scheme Update and Proposal for Expansion

1. PURPOSE

This paper provides an update on the progress of the Participatory Budgeting (PB) scheme in Torfaen and outlines the proposed delivery process. Additionally, it presents a proposal to expand the scheme to additional areas within the PB delivery region.

2. BACKGROUND

Participatory Budgeting (PB) is a globally recognised method for allocating public funds democratically. In Scotland, the government aims to allocate 1% of local budgets to PB, reflecting the widespread adoption of this approach. In Gwent, PB was introduced in 2019/20 through Public Service Boards (PSBs), who aligned the roll out to the Integrated Well-being Networks (IWN) programme, whose initiative aims to identify and develop well-being assets in specific community areas.

2.1 Participatory Budgeting Activity in Torfaen

The PB scheme in Torfaen was initially implemented in Blaenavon, managed by Blaenavon Town Council in partnership with the Integrated Well-being Networks and through the Healthy Blaenavon initiative. A pilot launched in February 2022, titled 'Community Brew,' using the VocalEyes online engagement platform to allow residents to generate and vote on project ideas. Key statistics from the pilot seen:

- £67,186 awarded in collaboration with Blaenavon Town Council.
- 14 projects funded.
- 19 projects submitted for consideration.

3. TORFAEN OVERVIEW: PB COMMUNITIES CHOICE SCHEME

Following the loss of the IWN, additional resources were secured through TCBC Adult Learning and the Multiply grant to support the PB delivery in Torfaen. The PB Communities Choice Scheme will engage residents in allocating funds across three areas: Blaenavon, Trevethin (and surrounding areas), and Thornhill, supporting the Community Wellbeing Strategy Objective 1, enhancing community participation, improving well-being, and addressing local priorities through targeted action.

3.1 Funding Allocation

Current available funding for the PB Communities Choice Scheme has been allocated as follows:

- Blaenavon: £73,450 (population: 6,484, equating to £23 per head).
- Thornhill (Upper Cwmbran 1 & 3): £81,850 (population: 2,572, equating to £32 per head, due to higher deprivation levels).
- Trevethin, St Cadocs & Penygarn: £175,000 (population: 5,543, equating to £32 per head, reflecting local deprivation).

3.2 Proposed Delivery Process

The proposed delivery model for the PB Communities Choice Scheme builds on lessons from other PB initiatives across Gwent and aligns with the Multiply grant's focus on

community learning. It is designed to be flexible and adaptable to the specific needs of each area.

To begin, community leaders and groups will be identified by engaging with existing organisations and well-being networks. A Task and Finish Group will be formed in each designated area, comprised of residents and community representatives. This group will be empowered to lead community discussions, identify priority needs, and design the engagement and decision-making process for their respective areas. Engagement will be carried out through a mix of digital and in-person methods. Digital engagement will utilise existing platforms such as Connect Torfaen and Facebook, while in-person efforts will include public meetings/events and door-to-door outreach to ensure broad participation. To support financial literacy and informed decision-making, members of the Task and Finish Group will complete a Level 1 Numeracy qualification. This training will help participants understand financial outcomes and track the funding allocations.

The next step in the process involves oversight by a Steering Group, which will consist of representatives from TVA, TCBC, ABuHB, and other local partners. This group will review and provide guidance on proposed projects before they are shared with the public for voting. The Steering Group will work closely with the Connecting Torfaen Operational Group (CTOG), which will offer governance oversight and ensure that the process remains transparent and aligned with community needs.

Voting and decision-making will follow this oversight, with project proposals being presented to the public through both digital and non-digital methods. An online voting system will be integrated into the Connect Torfaen platform, while physical engagement events and other non-digital approaches will ensure inclusivity for those who are less digitally connected.

Once projects are funded, monitoring and evaluation will occur regularly to assess their impact. The outcomes of each project will be reviewed, and lessons learned will inform improvements for future PB cycles. This structured approach aims to foster community involvement, ensure the effective use of resources, and build skills within the community throughout the process.

4. EXTERNAL EVALUATION

An external evaluation conducted by Shared Futures CIC, commissioned by the Gwent PSB from December 2022 to March 2023, assessed the impact of Participatory Budgeting (PB) using the Wellbeing of Future Generations indicators. The findings from this evaluation highlighted several key outcomes. PB enhanced mutual understanding and collaboration between communities and public services, supported the equitable distribution of public resources, and increased community empowerment by giving residents a greater voice in decision-making processes. Additionally, the initiative succeeded in improving participation from previously inactive members of the community, fostering greater inclusivity and civic engagement.

Building on these findings, it is critical to continue measuring the long-term impact of the PB scheme to ensure its ongoing effectiveness. To achieve this, we have allocated funds to commission the services of an external evaluation consultant. This consultant would be responsible for carrying out a comprehensive evaluation of future PB activities, using a robust framework to assess outcomes against key performance indicators. This process will ensure that the scheme remains transparent, accountable, and able to demonstrate its value to both the community and funding bodies. The consultant will also be tasked with identifying areas for improvement and making recommendations to refine the PB process for future iterations, ensuring that the scheme continues to meet community needs and priorities.

5. DISCUSSION POINTS

5.1 Proposal to Extend Area Allocation

The proposed expansion of the PB scheme to additional areas aims to extend its benefits and further enhance community engagement across Torfaen. By expanding into more regions, the scheme could promote greater inclusivity, empowering a broader range of residents to participate in shaping their local environments. Evidence from the Gwent PB evaluation found that 72% of participants believed PB strengthened community cohesion and trust. Broadening the geographical scope of the initiative could build on this momentum, fostering stronger local networks and increasing participation in underrepresented communities.

However, expanding the scheme will inevitably have an impact on staff resources. Currently, only one staff member is dedicated to managing the PB process, with an additional recruitment underway. The inclusion of new areas will significantly increase the coordination, outreach, and management responsibilities required to deliver the scheme effectively. As a result, additional staff may be necessary to maintain the quality of service and engagement that the community expects. Without this added capacity, there is a risk that service delivery could become overstretched, potentially affecting the outcomes of the PB initiative.

To support the expansion, the Community Resilience Team could play a key role in assisting with local engagement efforts. By leveraging their localised expertise and connections, the team could support community-specific tasks such as attending meetings, facilitating discussions, and gathering feedback. This would allow core PB staff to concentrate on strategic oversight, ensuring that the expansion is rolled out smoothly and that governance processes remain robust. Additionally, incorporating the insights of the Community Resilience Team aligns with the recommendations from the Gwent PB evaluation, which suggested deeper involvement of community representatives to ensure fairness and inclusivity in the voting and engagement processes.

The recruitment of an Integrated Well-being Networks (IWN) officer for Torfaen, which has been discussed in the past, could also be revisited considering this proposed expansion. An IWN officer could bring valuable expertise in identifying and developing community well-being assets, fostering local partnerships, and enhancing cross-sector collaboration. Their role would be instrumental in ensuring that the expansion of the PB scheme aligns

with the broader well-being objectives of the community and builds on the previous success of the IWN programme. Reintroducing aspects of this role would not only strengthen the PB process but also support the overall resilience and sustainability of community networks in the expanded areas.

5.2 Proposal to Stay the Same

Alternatively, focusing solely on the current areas: Blaenavon, Trevethin, and Thornhill, could ensure a more concentrated impact, allowing for deeper engagement in these communities before considering expansion. This approach would build on the successes already seen in these areas and allow the scheme to refine its processes.

5.3 It is important to note, that for areas not allocated funding, the framework could be adopted, establishing a core group and identifying local needs and working through they can be addressed, and if required support applications for external funding.

6. Conclusion

The PB Communities Choice Scheme clearly demonstrates its potential to empower communities, improve well-being, and foster collaboration between residents and public services. Expanding the scheme could further these goals, though it would require additional staff resources and collaboration with the Community Resilience Team to ensure successful delivery. Alternatively, maintaining the focus on current areas allows for deeper engagement and sustained impact.

This paper recommends further discussion on whether to expand the PB scheme or continue refining the current areas before pursuing future growth.