



Participatory Budgeting Case Study

The City of Edinburgh Council and the Leith Neighbourhood Partnership

The Democratic Society
May 2017

Summary

In Autumn 2016, the City of Edinburgh Council ran the seventh year of participatory budgeting process in the Leith Neighbourhood Partnership area launching e-voting for the first time by testing digital tool Participare developed by Change Tomorrow. Participare provided an alternative to the traditional offline voting to support the Leith Decides voting process. To submit an online vote, participants were required to register in voting website where all projects available to decide on were listed and then to make a few clicks to submit their vote. Also thanks to this digital innovation, Leith Decides in 2016 achieved the highest participation level throughout its history.

Key stats

- 1,781 participants
- 1,503 eligible votes
- 736 (49%) people voted online (Participare website)
- 767 (51%) people voted offline (paper ballots)
- 80% of respondents agreed the voting website made it possible to participate at a time that suited them
- 43% of respondents disagreed the voting website was easy to use

Key learning points

This case study provides some key learning that can be drawn from the City of Edinburgh Council and the Leith Neighbourhood Partnership's experience with regard to online voting process and lowering the barriers to participation.

Inclusion, convenience and engaging new participants

Using the digital voting tool made it possible for participants to vote anytime that suited them, from the comfort of their home or from accessible public spaces. It effectively engaged busy people who would not get to vote otherwise and made the voting more convenient for disabled people as well.

Providing information and time to deliberate

Access to information is key to assist people with decision making. The online voting site kept project information gathered together which allowed people to access more details about projects. The site also provided participants the opportunity to think about projects prior to voting, thus aiding deliberation.

Improve navigation, layout, and user experience

Some participants felt there was a lack of clarity about how to vote on the site, and some found the way projects were displayed confusing. Others felt there was too much technical language or too many clicks required to get to vote. This made it difficult for some participants to use the website. As a result, number of changes were suggested for the processes in future.

Complex voting system

Complex voting rules and too many options to choose from might be cumbersome and even deter people from voting.

Long registration process

Time consuming registration and some uncertainty around providing personal data highlighted the need to carefully consider what relevant information is required to ensure a smooth and secure voting process.

Verification

The digital voting tool made the counting process easier, however, verification took long time as it included dealing with online voter enquires and manual validation of registration. To make the whole process easier, Participare has developed automatic postcode verification which has been used successfully in other councils across Scotland.

Next steps

While there were some issues with this initial attempt at using online voting, Leith Decides wish explore the further use of online voting along with traditional paper methods to ensure a 'balanced' approach to participation.

Case Study

This case study presents the experiences of The City of Edinburgh Council and the Leith Neighbourhood Partnership’s use of digital tools as part of the £eith Decides participatory budgeting initiative during Autumn 2016. The initiative encouraged people to vote for community projects to receive funding from the £44,184 Community Grants Fund made available by the Leith Neighbourhood Partnership. The Council was supported by a team from [The Democratic Society](#) to select, embed and test a digital tool. This was provided through the ‘Digital Tools for Participatory Budgeting in Scotland’ programme, made possible through grant funding from Scottish Government to The Democratic Society.

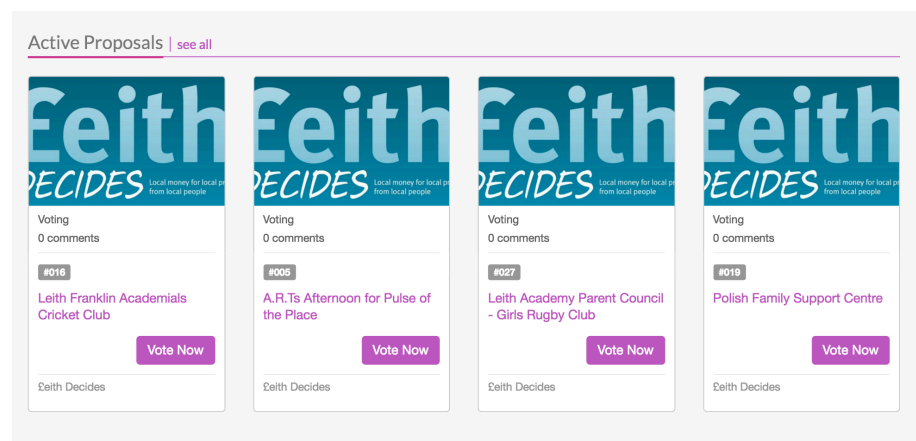


Figure 1 - Screenshot from £eith Decides voting website: Edinburgh.participare.io

Background

The £eith Decides Participatory Budgeting initiative has been running in the Leith Neighbourhood Partnership area since 2010. Over the last seven years it has enabled local people to allocate £166,820 to local projects.

This year, a total of £44,184 was made available for participants to allocate as part of £eith Decides 16/17:

- £8,000 for grants of up to £1,000
- £36,184 for grants of up to £3,000

The Leith Neighbourhood Partnership report ‘Developing Participatory Budgeting in Leith’, published March 2016, noted that

“participants have been requesting online or electronic voting methods since the second year of £eith Decides”

and that

“the seventh £eith Decides programme (2016-17) would seek to utilise the learning and financial support opportunities becoming available, to

develop digital e-engagement for the Leith Neighbourhood Partnership area.”

The Digital Tools for Participatory Budgeting in Scotland programme, managed by The Democratic Society, enabled the Council and the Leith Neighbourhood Partnership to test the digital tool **Participare**. This was used to support the Leith Decides voting process between 8th and 22nd of October 2016.

Set Up and Planning

The City of Edinburgh Council began exploring the potential of digital engagement tools for PB in August 2015 when The Democratic Society presented research and enabled Council staff to try out a range of digital engagement tools. In March 2016, staff from the City of Edinburgh Council met with The Democratic Society to discuss the possibility of using a digital tool to enhance engagement in Leith Decides. Options were presented to the Citywide PB Development Group in June 2016 and Participare was selected for the voting phase of Leith Decides. A series of planning meetings were held between Council staff, Participare and The Democratic Society in June and July 2016, where it was further agreed that Participare would provide an additional means of voting, along with paper ballots, at the community event and during a two-week voting period following the community event.

The Democratic Society delivered a training workshop to the City of Edinburgh Council staff and members of the Leith Decides Steering Group at a joint training session in August 2016. The training introduced the Participare PB Platform and guided attendees through processes for set up, administration, moderation and verification. The skills learned in the workshop enabled staff to use Participare to support the Leith Decides process.

The Process

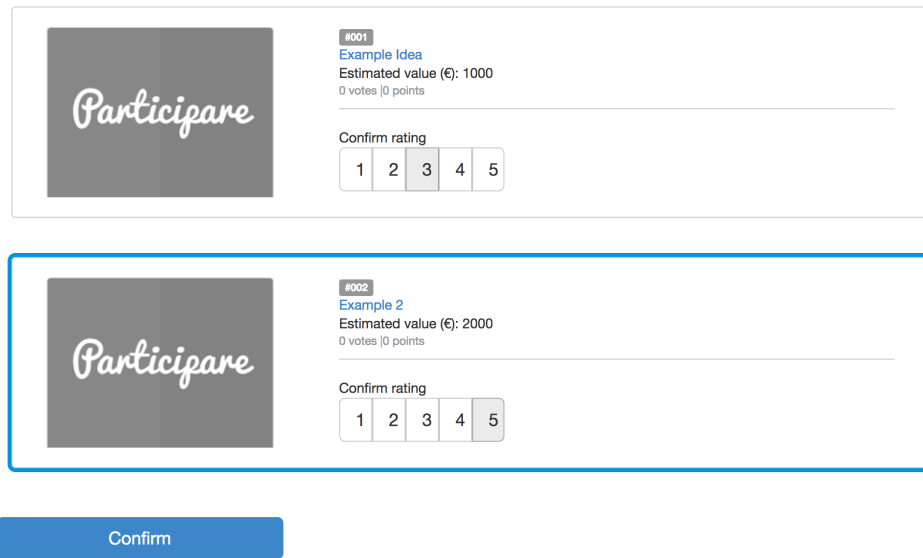
Anyone aged 8+ who lives, works, volunteers or studies in the [Leith Neighbourhood Partnership area](#) was eligible to vote in Leith Decides 16/17. Online voting could be accessed by visiting Edinburgh.participare.io during the voting. Voting computers were also made available at the community event and in local libraries.

The online voting complemented the traditional Leith Decides paper ballot process. Paper ballots were available at the community event and in libraries during the voting period. This ensured that voting was available to people regardless of their ability to access the internet.

Participants had the opportunity to score projects from two ballots relating to separate pots, or tiers, of funding: Tier 1 offered grants of up to £1,000 as in previous years of Leith Decides. However, tier 2 offered larger grants of up to £3,000 for the first time.

Voting System

Leith Decides has always used a **scoring system** for voting, with participants scoring each project out of five. To ensure continuity between previous processes, Participare programmers produced a scoring voting process especially for the Leith Decides. This scoring voting process is now available as standard across Participare platforms and this enables other Participare users to experiment with an additional voting option.

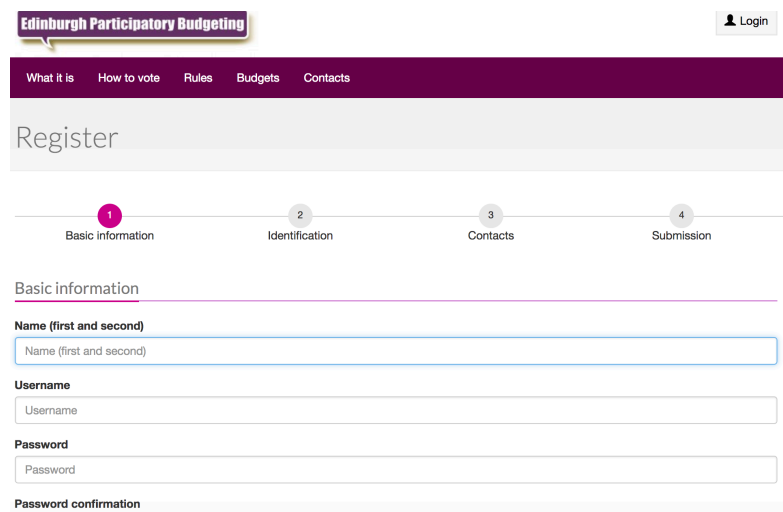


The image shows two examples of the Participare voting interface. Each example consists of a grey square with the 'Participare' logo on the left. To the right, there is a header with a small ID box (e.g., #001), the title 'Example Idea', and the text 'Estimated value (€): 1000' and '0 votes | 0 points'. Below this is a horizontal line and a 'Confirm rating' section with five buttons labeled 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5. The third button (3) is highlighted with a grey background. A blue 'Confirm' button is located below the second example.

Figure 2: Example of Scoring voting system on Participare

Verifying the voters

Participants in the Leith Decides online vote were required to **register** and provide their name, date of birth, address, postcode and their connection to Leith. Once again this was identical to the offline voting process and ensured continuity with previous processes. Once registered, participants could vote straight away with Council staff verifying registrations in the administration portal of the platform.



The image is a screenshot of the 'Edinburgh Participatory Budgeting' registration page. At the top, there is a purple navigation bar with links for 'What it is', 'How to vote', 'Rules', 'Budgets', and 'Contacts', and a 'Login' button on the right. Below the navigation bar is a large 'Register' heading. A progress indicator shows four steps: 1. Basic information (highlighted with a red circle), 2. Identification, 3. Contacts, and 4. Submission. The 'Basic information' section is expanded and contains the following fields: 'Name (first and second)' with a text input box, 'Username' with a text input box, 'Password' with a text input box, and 'Password confirmation' with a text input box.

Figure 3 - Screenshot of Edinburgh Participare registration page

Participare supported Council staff to verify participants by providing sophisticated anti-fraud mechanisms that detected suspicious users and voting patterns, including users registered on the same computer or IP address, users registering with similar information, or multiple registrations attempted in a short period of time. Council staff were also able to cross reference paper ballots with information on the Participare voting system to ensure no duplicate votes were processed via multiple channels.

Promotion and Outreach

The £eith Decides Participatory Budgeting process was promoted through local networks, encouraging applicants to promote the process, lamppost wraps throughout the Leith Neighbourhood Partnership area, voting booths in libraries, local press and a digital campaign included targeted Facebook advertising and promotion on Twitter. Local elected members also promoted the £eith Decides process to their constituents.



Figure 4 - Example promotional tweet from an elected member

Outcome

The participation levels achieved were the highest in the history of £eith Decides with a total of 1,781 participants casting 1,503 eligible votes:

- 736 (49%) people voted online (Participare website).
- 767 (51%) people voted offline (paper ballots).

The spread of online participation by postcode area, below, indicates that online voting enabled participation from across the Neighbourhood Partnership area.

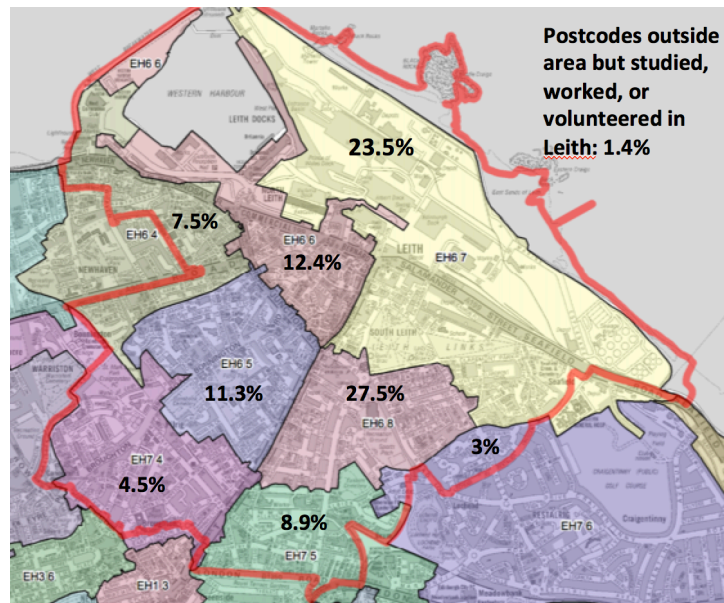


Figure 5 - Participation in Leith Decides online voting by postcode area

The data shows that the opportunity to participate online was taken up throughout the Leith Neighbourhood Partnership area. The variation in postcode participation must also take into consideration, variables such as housing density and the boundary of the Leith Neighbourhood Partnership only taking in parts of certain postcode areas.

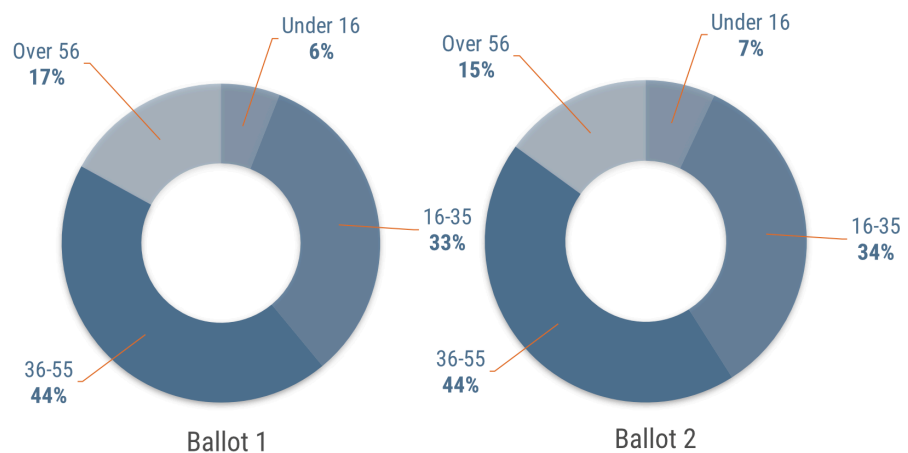


Figure 6 – Online Participation in ballots by age

Evaluation

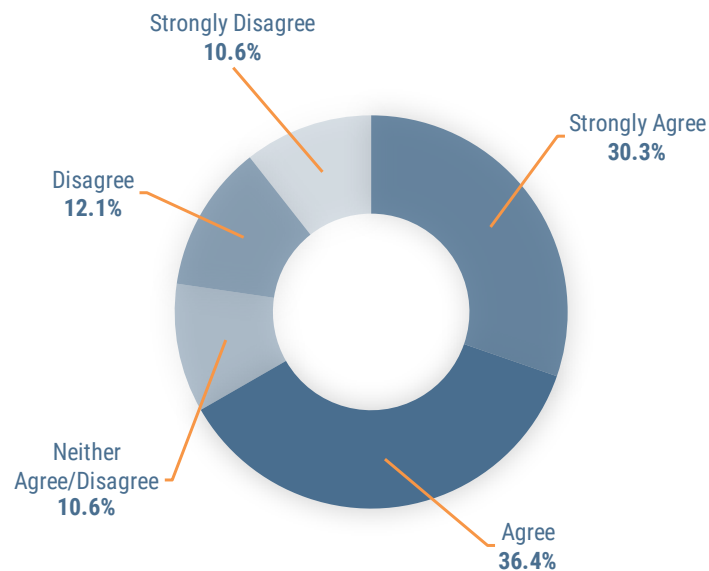
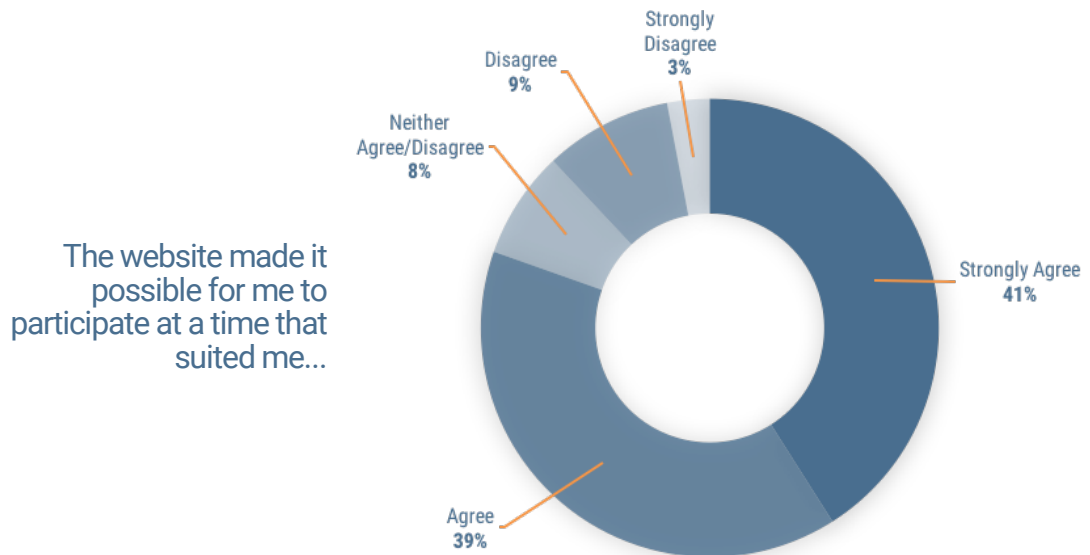
The following section provides a thematic synthesis of the lessons learned from:

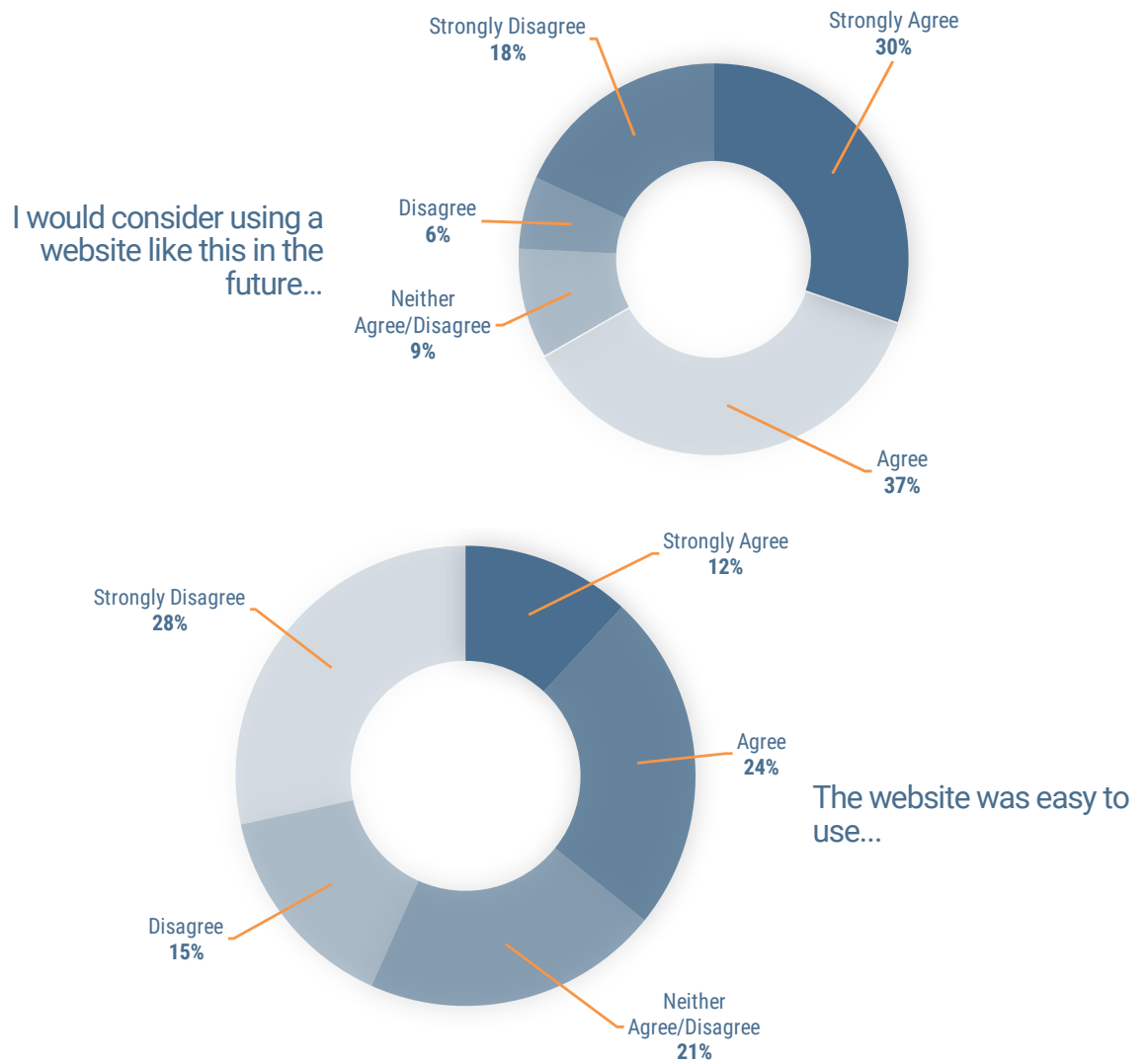
- An **evaluation** survey for participants in the online voting phase of the Leith Decides process, which was sent to all participants, and received 68 responses, a 9.2% response rate.
- An **evaluation meeting** with staff and steering group members on 22nd March 2017

- **Observations, experiences and feedback** between The Democratic Society, The City of Edinburgh Council and the steering group throughout the process.

Evaluation Survey Findings

Below is a summary of the results from the participant evaluation survey that provides a snap shot of opinion from a sample of 9.2% (68 responses) of participants who voted online in Leith Decides 16/17. Eighty percent agreed that the website made it possible to participate at a time that suited them:





The results of the evaluation survey show that over two-thirds of respondents agreed that the Leith Decides voting website ‘provided a good way to take part in decision making’. A similar number of respondents also agreed that they would consider using the website again in the future. Over 80% of respondents agreed that the voting website made it possible for them to participate at a time that suited them. However, 43% of respondents disagreed that the voting website was easy to use.

Respondents were given the opportunity to highlight, in their own words, what was good, and not so good about the voting website, and provide suggestions for improvement. Evaluation of responses provides an indication as to why some users found the website difficult to use and also points to positive outcomes and key lessons that should be kept in mind for future digital engagement processes.

Lessons Learned

Inclusion and Convenience

Respondents indicated that they found the website ‘convenient’ and that it allowed participants ‘to complete voting at anytime.’ Some noted that ‘they may not have voted’ if

it wasn't for the online voting option. Others explicitly highlighted that the website made the Leith Decides process more inclusive by providing increased 'accessibility if you are unable to get to the venue to vote' and by making it 'easier and quicker for wheelchair users.'

"A vast improvement on the paper forms and so much easier to get people involved with the voting process."

Providing information and time to deliberate

Respondents to the evaluation survey indicated that the website provided 'easy access to information' and provided insight about the 'interesting array of charities and services' running in the Leith Neighbourhood Partnership area. Others found that the website allowed them to 'take the time to choose' and 'think about' the projects they were voting for. One respondent noted the experience of online voting encouraged a wider discussion with her family about what was happening in the local community.

Improve navigation, layout, and user experience

Respondents felt that too many clicks were required to get to the voting section of the website. Some felt this was down to being directed to a general Edinburgh Participatory Budgeting page, as opposed to a specific Leith Decides page. This was because the URL (Edinburgh.participare.io) directed users to a home page designed to promote multiple PB activities from across the city. It was only when the user clicked on the 'budgets' menu option, or an active proposal, were they redirected to begin the voting process.

Others felt it wasn't clear how to navigate the site and that perhaps further guidance should have been available as 'instructions were lacking' in the 'How To Vote' section. Others felt the 'budgets' menu option should be changed to make it obvious where voting could be completed. Some users found it difficult to compare projects, partially because of the 'drabness of presentation' which included all the projects being accompanied by the same standard image (see Figure 1 above).

There were other participants who highlighted that they felt the site was 'easier to use and less time consuming than the paper forms used in the past' and that it was 'relatively straightforward' and 'reasonably clear as to how to participate'. One user noted that 'once I knew what I was doing it was easy' to use. Many respondents recommended further user testing and to redesign the site 'with usability in mind.' Others recommended reducing the amount of technical language and replacing it with 'informative and inviting' descriptions.

Complex voting system

Respondents noted that the voting system 'was confusing' and requested for it to be simplified. Reasons for finding the voting process difficult included the introduction of 2 separate ballots, for grants up to £1000 and £3000, and the requirement to vote on every project, which some users found 'cumbersome', 'too complex and time consuming'. Other respondents felt that there were too many voting options, with 40 projects listed in ballot 1, and 16 projects listed in ballot 2. Respondents requested that the voting system could be changed perhaps to giving participants a certain number of votes allowing participants 'to only vote for their favourites, and scoring every project out of 5'.

Analysis of the voting data indicated that if scores higher than 4 or 5 were treated simply as single votes, it would not have dramatically changed the outcome of the voting process. In other words, it would be possible to change the voting process to a more traditional voting system that allows participants to vote for their favourite projects and not disadvantage other projects. Participare provides this simple voting methodology as standard, and a change to the voting system is being considered for future processes.

Long registration process

Respondents indicated that the registration process was 'clunky', 'time consuming', 'long', 'complicated' and 'frustrating.' Some users felt uncomfortable providing information such as postal and email addresses. A key lesson from this would be to carefully consider what required information is relevant to ensure a secure voting process. Because of the Leith Decides experience Participare now offers automatic postcode verification that helps speed up the registration and verification process.

Make improvements and use in the future

Overall participant feedback suggested that while there were some issues with this initial attempt at using online voting it should still be used in the future:

"I think it is a brilliant idea and worth continuing even if the take up isn't that great to start with."

"It was a difficult experience but I feel with improvements it will be the best way to allow people to vote in the future."

Staff Feedback

Engaging New Participants

Staff felt that digital engagement "absolutely" helped them reach new participants. Analysis of the postcode data displays that online voting was accessed by participants across the Leith Neighbourhood Partnership area. Information from the Leith Decides Evaluation and Development indicates that "more people have heard (about Leith Decides) through online methods... as greater use is made of social media, as well as the online voting pilot this year".

Staff felt that the digital engagement option "allows people to take part who otherwise would not have engaged." However, staff maintained that there "should be a choice of different options to participate" as it is "fundamental to present as many opportunities as possible for people to engage" in a PB process.

Staff were also pleased that the inclusion of online voting "did not reduce people attending the voting event" on 8th October, which was an initial concern that did not materialise.

Process and verification

Staff appreciated Participare for “making counting process much easier” than manually counting paper ballots, as the application keeps a clear log of the number votes or scores cast for each project. However, although this saved time in some areas, the added security and verification processes were time consuming for the staff as it included dealing with online voter enquires and manual validation of voters. The most time-consuming aspect was cross checking street addresses with postcodes and contacting people who made mistakes on their registration form which invalidated their registration. Staff found the work “really intensive going into every profile” to check each potential voter for validation.

Staff noted a marked difference between rejected ballots online versus rejected paper ballots, ‘with 35 spoiled paper forms compared with 250 invalidated online voters’. Staff indicated that this was due to mistakes rather than attempts to defraud the voting process.

Participant feedback indicated that a high number of registration mistakes were due to the online registration form not being clear enough. This added to the pressure on staff time when dealing with registrations.

Staff communicated with all rejected participants to encourage them to correct registration errors. Staff noted that this increased “connection between Council staff and participants” and “transparency” as “people won’t know their vote was rejected when it is on paper, but they will know if it is rejected online” and steps can be made to rectify mistakes to ensure maximum participation while also ensuring the process is secure.

As a result of the time-consuming aspects of postcode verification Participare have since developed automatic postcode verification which has been used successfully by Aberdeen Council and Shetland Islands Council who are also taking part in the Digital Tools for Participatory Budgeting Programme. Staff at the City of Edinburgh Council approved of this improvement. This development could also reduce the number of rejected online ballots in the future. Improvements to registration process to increase clarity would also assist with reducing the number of spoilt ballots in the future.

Changes for the future

After reviewing feedback and evaluating the use of Participare the following points have been identified for any future use of Participare:

- Automatically directing voters to specific project page to reduce the number of clicks for a user to go through to get to voting
- Work with Participare to review the registration process to make it as simple as possible, due to the difficulties experienced with the online registration process
- Use automatic postcode verification to speed up registration process, reduce registration errors, and reduce the amount of time spent by staff verifying voters
- Make use of images to make the site more inviting and to increase distinction between projects on the online voting system

- User testing the system with potential participants before voting goes live
- Exploring the further use of online voting along with traditional paper methods to ensure a 'balanced' approach to participation

Overall, staff found the use of Participare as beneficial citing that the main benefit was that it allowed "people to vote who otherwise would not have participated." They found this initial experience to be a massive learning opportunity and they feel that as they gain more experience with online engagement initial difficulties could be resolved to ensure that citizens and staff can benefit from the opportunities provided by digital engagement tools.

The experience gained during this initial pilot has enabled the City of Edinburgh Council to develop their thinking on digital engagement and they plan to use the learning from this case study to support the design of future PB approaches.

Further information

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

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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