

Review of three community budgeting pilot projects in Tanshall, the East Neuk and West Fife

Summary

- Three community-based Community Budgeting pilots were undertaken.
- Each explored a different approach to both Community Budgeting and the involvement of community members.
- The pilots identified a range of both process and data issues.
- The project in Tanshall was successful in identifying expenditure on services to children and young people, and is being used to inform future policy and service development.
- The four projects in the East Neuk focussed on a range of locally-generated issues, and had mixed success, but some are now being taken forward by Fife Council and community members.
- The project in the West Fife villages was successful in delivering a range of community projects. The group is seeking to continue its work.
- A range of key messages were identified through the pilots relating to the need for: clear ownership of the issues; clarity of roles; levels of commitment and expectation to be clear at the outset; a medium to long term view to be taken; high quality time series information, and external facilitation for groups.

Background

Community Budgeting is part of a wider set of Scottish Executive initiatives designed to engage local communities directly in decision making processes relating to public funds. The Fife Partnership was granted £424,000 over two years to pilot Community Budgeting within Fife. One strand of this initiative involved undertaking three pilot projects in the West Fife villages, in the East Neuk and in Tanshall. A total of £105,000 was allocated to the three pilot projects (Tanshall £30,000; East Neuk £25,000; West Fife £50,000).

Aims and Methodology

The research was commissioned by Fife Council and was carried out by Reid Howie Associates. Its objectives were to describe the projects and assess the key lessons arising from the process in relation to any wider implementation. A range of methods were used, including: examination of project-related documents and interviews with Fife Council staff, local participants, elected members and contractors involved in the process.

Tanshall

The Tanshall project was designed to gather and assess information about children's services in the area. The key features of the project were:

- The information gathered in the pilot project was designed to assist on-going work to assess and develop children's services in the area. Virtually all of the services which work with children participated in the pilot project.
- The work was overseen by a multi-agency officer group and was carried out by CRSIS, based at Heriot Watt University.
- The main tasks carried out by the contractors were the development of an area profile, an assessment of decision making processes within and across agencies, the identification of services' expenditure, and the development and analysis of a dataset. A validation exercise was also carried out with the participation of local residents.

The key findings on the process and the wider implications for Community Budgeting are set out below. In terms of benefits, the pilot suggested that Community Budgeting can:

- Help influence the deployment of resources and can generate both public and organisational debate about the fairness of spending. It can also legitimise workers' opinions about resource deployment.
- Make a significant contribution to monitoring of progress towards goals.
- Assist officers become better informed about communities and services.

A number of data issues were also identified, including the following:

- Although disaggregation of budgets may be possible, there are other issues which may have an impact, including the extent to which *control* is disaggregated.
- There are issues about the extent to which community members can process and engage with data of this complexity.
- It was clear from the research that different services were more or less able to provide information, and often this varied between parts of the same service.
- Information was easier to access at an area level wider than Tanshall.
- Children's services is a complex area and some participants suggested that this was too complex for a pilot project.
- At present, the capacity of structures to process and deal with this information is not fully formed.
- Some interviewees felt that they had no way of knowing whether or not the data was reliable.
- Comparison areas were not easy to identify and may be subject to data issues.
- It was also noted that the work was a one-off snapshot, and that, without trend data, it would be difficult to use this in a decision making context.

A number of process issues were identified:

- Although the steering group was viewed as successful, there was concern that more participation by the voluntary sector and community members would have been beneficial.
- It was suggested a champion (a senior officer who could have acted to remove problems faced within the process) could have been beneficial.
- The process was time consuming, and it was suggested that services had not been given clear information about the level of commitment required.
- A number of comments were made about the "vast amount of data" which was presented at each meeting, and the complexity of some of the issues.

Overall, there was a positive view about the research. Most participants felt that the contractors had developed a valuable dataset and most services also indicated that they had received benefits. A small number of issues, relating to replicability, the role of the community (and the extent to which they would be capable of processing information of this complexity) and the on-going cost implications were also raised.

East Neuk

The East Neuk project had a number of objectives, namely to:

- Test how quantitative and qualitative information should be provided to maximise effective use by different communities of interest and location.
- Develop with four communities of interest, appropriate formats across a range of data sets.
- Support four communities of interest to undertake participatory appraisals, integrating experiential, qualitative and quantitative information.
- Identify and test ways of addressing individual and community needs in the use of local information in decision-making.
- Foster and test new approaches to widening and developing local participation in community planning.

The key features of the project were:

- The delivery of the project was through four community-based groups. The groups were assisted in making choices about the issues to be addressed.
- A team of consultants, Rocket Science, was appointed to provide such support to the process as was necessary, and to provide a final report.
- Each of the groups operated on an autonomous basis, with the links being provided by Rocket Science, and by Fife Council staff members.
- In most cases, an initial meeting was held to scope the work required, Rocket Science carried out research on behalf of the groups (and the groups in some cases, also carried out research at their own hand), and a further series of meetings were held in order to discuss the emerging findings.

The main issues relating to the process and implications for Community Budgeting were:

- In relation to preparation, it seems quite clear that at least some members of the groups were unaware of what was expected of them, and the role of Rocket Science may have been too loose and unclear to group members.
- There was perhaps an unrealistic expectation of what could be achieved in a short time, particularly given that each group had fluctuating membership.
- It is clear that there were a range of data concerns which, to some extent, undermined other benefits.
- One of the key issues was the perception in two groups that information was either out of date or simply wrong. There is a strong argument that the data was as good as it could have been, but it does illustrate a difficulty in managing the expectations of community members.

Overall, it is clear that positive outcomes were achieved, and that lessons relevant to Community Budgeting have been learned. The main concern from some groups was that the pilot projects appeared to be completed without a clear way forward having been agreed, but some issues are now being taken forward by Fife Council as part of a wider work programme in the area.

West Fife Villages

The third pilot, in the West Fife Villages, was slightly different to the other two in that the focus was on wider community development. The aim was described as “to enable a new approach to local community planning in West Fife Villages”. A group was established in September 2003 to take the work forward, and has been meeting on a monthly basis since that time. Support was provided by Stewart Seale for the period of the pilot.

The key features of the pilot

- Resources were provided to support training and capacity building for the group, and to endow a small grants fund to be used for community benefit.
- The group has a completely open membership.
- Membership has been fluid over this time. There has been, however, a core group of members, together with the locality manager, who have provided continuity. As far as possible, every village in the area is represented.
- The group met for one year as part of the pilot, and has continued to meet following the “official” end of the process. The group is clear that it sees a longer term future for itself, and has been seeking funding to support this.
- All members of the group are equal, decisions are taken on a consensus basis and projects supported have to benefit the whole of the area.

The key findings of this pilot in relation to wider Community Budgeting were:

- The Partners took something of a risk, and were rewarded with a well managed, effective process. These risks would remain if this approach was replicated, and it is not clear that another group would operate as effectively.
- The group had much longer to work through issues and this clearly brought some benefit.
- The role of the external contractor was very clear to all involved, and was viewed very positively, as was that of local Fife Council staff
- The projects supported were clearly successful and the process has had a significant impact on civic pride. It is clear that some members have benefited on a personal level.
- It is not clear that the group considered structured information to any extent.
- The lack of a strategic review, leading to an action plan, was a source of discomfort to some observers. It is not clear whether the issues pursued really are the most significant.

The West Fife pilot was, in its own terms, highly successful. It did raise wider issues in terms of the risks involved in delegating authority for public expenditure to an unconstituted community group, but in this case, the work was effective and well-managed.

The group is continuing to take forward its work. This has presented something of a challenge in itself, as the group has had to become, in effect, a “traditional” organisation (with a constitution, office bearers, a management structure and a bank account) in order for their applications to even be considered by funders.

Overview

The Scottish Executive set out four effective tests for Community Budgeting, and it is worth assessing the extent to which these were met by the pilots. The “tests” were that Community Budgeting should:

- Deliver a better understanding of the resources spent by public sector providers and the outcomes achieved at the local level
- Assist in identifying priorities for investment, and consider the most effective use of resources
- Involve the community in ways which maximise the benefits of the investment and ensure that services are responsive to the needs of the communities
- Be developed both on a geographical basis and for “communities of interest”.

In the case of “a better understanding”, the following was identified:

- The pilots showed clearly that there are two basic kinds of data required, contextual information and public sector expenditure information.
- There are issues with both of these in terms of their currency, accuracy, ease of access and credibility, although it is fair to say that recent work by Fife Council has led to considerable improvements in each of these.
- A key question is the extent to which anyone, officials or community members, is able to, or is likely to, make use of the information generated.

In the case of “identifying priorities”, the following was identified:

- In the West Fife villages, the group did identify priorities, but whether these were the only, or the most important priorities, is impossible to say.
- In the East Neuk, it can be argued that, although groups were initially empowered to choose their priorities, it became clear to them, as the work progressed, that the level of influence they had in reality was small.
- The situation in Tanshall was somewhat different. It is clear that the community was not expected to have influence on priorities, however, the report will have a significant influence on future developments.

In the case of “involving the community”, the following was identified:

- In the case of Tanshall, this was relatively marginal to the overall process and their role was more one of validation.
- In the East Neuk, the involvement was more direct, although there were issues relating to the extent to which members were empowered to influence public services, and the lack of any action planning.
- The situation in the West Fife villages was different again, with the community being, effectively, in overall control of the entire agenda.

In terms of taking an approach which encompassed both “geography and communities of interest”, the following was identified:

- Tanshall involved both area-based approaches and a focus on young people
- The East Neuk was very largely issue based. The only “area” focus was chosen by the group in St Monans.
- The West Fife group took a very obviously whole area focus, but within this, undertook work on young people and the housing needs of older people.

Key Messages Emerging from the Process

Overall, this was a valuable and worthwhile process, which identified a wide range of issues relevant to taking forward Community Budgeting in Fife in the future. There are a number of key messages which have emerged from the process and which may relate to wider Community Budgeting initiatives. These are summarised below:

- The choice of areas / issues is critical.
- It is clear that community groups must “own” the issues.
- For area based work, it seems essential that work takes place in areas where there are relatively mature and representative community structures.
- The policy context within which the work takes place must be set out clearly.
- One of the main lessons of the processes involving community members in the East Neuk and West Fife is that external facilitation is essential.
- One of the main success factors in West Fife was the clear definition of roles.
- A standard briefing pack could be prepared which summarises the main issues for participants.
- Expectations in terms of time commitments should be clear at the outset.
- It should be recognised that the process takes time.
- It is clear that Community Budgeting pilots in isolation do not lead to change.
- Finally, the pilots illustrated that groups do it “their” way. This can be challenging for public agencies.

Further Information

Full reports and Findings on each of the Local Pilots are available on request from

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For more information on Community Budgeting in Fife go to www.fifedirect.org.uk and search ‘Community Budgeting’