

# Leith Walk By-Election – Susan Rae blogs



*It's time for "participatory budgeting" to move up a notch argues Green Candidate, SUSAN RAE.*

I cannot ever imagine a time when participatory budgeting will be sexy. I'd love to see a march on the City Chambers with banners declaiming "We demand participatory budgeting! Now!". But I concede I might wait a while.

It's a pity, in a way, because behind the clumsy label is an idea that is both simple and radical. It is simple because it says that people who are most directly affected by a decision about how to spend money are best-placed to make that decision. And it is radical because it involves council officers letting go of that decision.

What is participatory budgeting? Well, it is not merely consultation or feedback or research where citizen's views are just "taken into account" but the decision itself remains with the council. In participatory budgeting the decision itself is handed over.

Here in the Leith Walk area we have had participatory budgeting in the shape of "Leith Decides" for 5 years now. Pioneered by former Green councillor, Maggie Chapma, and enthusiastically backed by council staff and the community alike, it involves setting aside a part of the annual neighbourhood grants fund (typically £20k out of a total fund of £40k) to be voted on by people from the Leith community. It is modest in scale but as a tool for engaging people from Leith in the process it has been very successful with over 1,600 people voting in the last round on which grant applications should be funded.

Building on that success, the city council has adopted a participatory budgeting action plan, designed to roll out the process in each of the neighbourhoods in Edinburgh – not necessarily in the same form as *feith Decides*, but focusing on particular age-groups, such as older or younger people, for example.

The Scottish Government has also shown special interest in *feith Decides* as part of the context for its Community Empowerment Bill.

So, given that progress, what next for participatory budgeting?

Firstly, I'd like to see all 12 neighbourhoods adopt participatory budgeting as a core part of how they distribute grants to local organisations, with an expectation that at least half of the funds available for grants should be decided in this way. Neighbourhoods could also look at how other local funding decisions, including local grants known as NEPs, could be allocated in a participative way.

Secondly, I believe there may be opportunities to think about how some centrally-driven budget decisions could be opened up. Future capital projects perhaps? How best to support the cultural sector in the city or grassroots sport?

Thirdly, there's the council's own annual budget process. At around a billion pounds, by law the council has to set its budget and, of course, by law there are many things the council has to do, whether it is securing a primary school place for a five year-old or home care for a 90 year-old. Even within that, however, I'd like to see progress towards identifying 1% of the budget which could be opened up for participatory methods.

Earlier this year, Green councillors in their budget amendment, secured support for additional help for participatory budgeting, recognising that it can still seem

unsettling for budget-holders used to keeping control. I hope that this support can help achieve a step change in how the people of the city can influence spending decisions in their name.

Meanwhile, if anyone can come up with an alternative, sexier label – please get in touch!

*Susan Rae lives in Pilrig and is the Green candidate in the Leith Walk by-election [on 10 September](#).*