

How Good is Our Rothes Play park?

Participatory Budgeting in Moray Council

Background

As part of the evaluation of a pilot Participatory Budgeting project at Moray Council, Community Support staff suggested looking at the HGIOCLD4 framework to shape how it could be evaluated.

Rothes Playpark Participatory Budgeting was a project to improve a local play park in a rural village in Moray and was delivered as a partnership between Open Spaces staff, Community Support staff and a community steering group. The park was identified as part of the improvement plan for Moray Council play parks and £50k was awarded from the Capital Improvement Fund.

After considerable community engagement the community steering group went on to raise an additional £115k to realise the aspirations of their community. A number of designs went to a public vote and the design with the most votes was awarded the funding.

The park was officially opened in September 2022 with a community launch event.

Indicators and challenge questions

Those involved reviewed the quality indicators and selected those that would provide us with an evidence-based approach

Challenge questions seven, nine and ten from QI 2.1 were selected as a focus as partners felt they were most relevant to us as a group. Challenge questions four and nine in QI 4.1 felt relevant for both Open Spaces and Community Support staff as it focused on the relationship between the community steering group and council officers.

The challenge questions selected were suited to the types of evidence we collect regularly but made us think about the challenge questions we couldn't evidence so well and how we should incorporate that into our planning in the future.

What we did

A self-evaluation and peer review of the process was completed by Community Support staff in a CLD whole service development session. The format was to fill out the self-evaluation form ahead of the day, focusing on a recent piece of work and an indicator of your choosing and scoring yourself on the six point scale.

A focus group session was held with Open Spaces staff, Community Support staff and the community steering group members who completed an evaluation questionnaire. The second evaluation was a focus group session with Community Support, Open Spaces staff and the Play Park steering group. We didn't use the exact wording of the challenge questions but used an adapted version as evaluation of the project was also influenced by the PB Policy Statement and Framework at Moray Council. We used a round table question and answer format, using a questionnaire as a prompt and we also used the six point scale.

The community steering group undertook impact evaluations with the wider community. The community evaluation focused on QI 2.1 and challenge question ten.

We had spoken at the start about evaluating this project and the group had suggested doing a before and after picture diary. We also agreed to ask for three words to describe the park when we did our original engagements and then on completion we could revisit those three words. It was a really simple way of showing that community involvement had created a change in the values associated with the park. The primary school children also did this for us with their teachers at school. Finally, a community questionnaire also was distributed locally. It asked some really important questions that gave the group validation that the community felt they had influenced the project and had genuine decision-making powers.

Using the Framework

Using the framework to evaluate really highlighted some great things in our process and practice – and we found the illustrations really useful too.

Positives

There was a change in values associated with the park, from negative to positive.

Relationships – There are really good relationships between the council officers and the community steering group. The group also have established lots of connections in the community that they didn't have before.

Capacity building – members of the group have joined other groups one is now chair of the Rothes Council, another is now chair of the Rothes Primary Parent Council. One of the group left the area but she has been in touch about improving another park in her new village. Collectively they have their sights on reinvigorating a local fireworks night and a Christmas tree lights switch on, improving the local primary school playground and supporting a seasonal tuck shop to run out of the park pavilion

Number of volunteers – from litter picking, hosting fundraisers, making a tattie bogles, delivering newsletters and supporting events. Although the core group driving the project was small, there were a huge number of people who supported through volunteering opportunities

Knowledge of supports – the group hadn't worked with Community Support staff or Open Spaces before and feel they could work with them in the future. The group also weren't aware of the Unpaid Work Team and met with them to discuss additional grass cutting for the park. As a result, they shared this knowledge and the Unpaid Work Team are now helping at the school to remove old fencing and to create a garden area.

What the framework highlighted

Inequalities - While gathering inequalities data was discussed, the community group felt the gathering of such data was a barrier to participation and it was removed from this process. There is still a balance to be found with this as it is often used as evidence of targeting resources appropriately in a local authority context.

Time and Resources - The evaluation highlighted that this kind of process is resource intensive so we discussed creating toolkits, learning sessions for multiple groups and a peer network rather than working with individual groups, basically working a bit smarter and not being the gatekeepers of knowledge around council processes.

Timeline - The local authority dictated the timeline for this project to fit in with a financial year – that was really hard on the community and we have since looked at phasing projects so that we can manage this pressure.

Reflection

There's an independence to using the framework to evaluate which is useful when multiple parties are involved.

Evaluation can feel overwhelming sometimes, especially if it is a project that has lasted a long time. As part of your evaluation process you can focus on one indicator or one or two challenge questions and see what you learn from that. It can be quite an efficient way of evaluating your work with a specific focus.

Lastly the framework gave us confidence that we were engaging in good practise but that there was room to grow and it directed us to where those focus areas were – so incredibly valuable overall.

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