



EURO  
CITIES



## Antwerp introduces participatory budgeting

# Citizen-led process stimulates solutions and influences policies

Antwerp has developed a unique approach to participatory budgeting that gives citizens autonomy to spend public funds of €1.1m a year. By focusing on face-to-face debate, consensus decision-making and hard-to-reach residents, the city has been able to activate individuals and connect communities to help realise bright ideas for enhancing all aspects of city life.

Antwerp had long been interested in the principle of participatory democracy as a way of enabling citizens to directly contribute to the administration of their city not only as voters. It had already undertaken a number of projects in its name, learning along the way how easy it is for people to become frustrated if their input doesn't appear to make a difference. When local elections led to a coalition government that found it could unite behind participatory budgeting, it became a priority.

The city decided to introduce a democratic process in which the 190,000 inhabitants of the central district of Antwerp would choose how 10% of the public budget is spent each year on roads, culture, sport and parks. Determined to make the process transparent and truly empowering, to overcome past problems, the participation team worked with the university of Antwerp and a panel of experts to research, test and refine a process based not on online votes but a series of live events.



We ask a lot of our citizens, they have to give their time, talk to people they don't know and be prepared to be persuaded by other residents' perspectives - and they are only willing to do this if they know their voices are the only ones that count



**Hanne Bastiaensen,**  
*project leader, city of Antwerp*

### Achieving consensus

Everyone in the district is invited to take part in these events, where people come together to talk, learn about each others' needs and unanimously agree how to spend the money. At the first event, participants sit together in small groups to agree the topics they think are most important from the city's selection of 93. These include themes like better cycling lanes, youth training, help for the elderly and art in the community. The 12 most popular are taken forward to the district forum where poker-style 'chips' are used by participants to apportion the €1.1m across the topics.

cities in action

August 2017

where: Antwerp, Belgium  
what: participation  
when: 2014 - ongoing

The third stage of the process focuses on the projects to be funded under each theme. Individuals and non-profit organisations can submit ideas for projects, specifying whether they, or the local government, should implement them. These ideas are first vetted by the city to make sure they fit their criteria and then debated and selected by consensus at the final event, the Citizens Budget Festival. An informal contract is made between the city and each project leader and city services get involved as needed with advice and support.



Sometimes I didn't agree with other views on our table but after 50 minutes I could be influenced to change my mind, as when I wanted to fund cycling schemes and a disabled lady said it was obvious I wasn't familiar with the transport needs of people like her. It was a constant eye-opener

**Liesbet Smeyers,**  
citizen of Antwerp



## Unlocking ideas

Since the participatory budget project was initiated in 2013, around 500 projects have been put forward and 60 year implemented. Many are original and ground-breaking, bringing to the fore fresh thinking previously untapped by the city and problems previously hidden within communities. Projects range from rickshaw rides to help the elderly re-engage with their community to coaching for volunteers so they can organise sports in city squares and transforming grey sidewalks into colourful walkways with mosaic decorations.

One particularly popular project, chosen two years in a row, sees two artists take a customised cargo bike out onto city streets, bringing fun and engaging art education to children in neighbourhoods where access to the arts isn't easy. Another novel project enabled citizens with a migration background to make a film with a professional director exploring their stories and the meaning of home. The film was shown publicly to start a conversation with neighbours about migration and what it means to feel at home.

## Ongoing adaptations

Antwerp has succeeded in developing a process that gives people real power and lets them make real decisions. It encourages citizens to add new topics not yet on its radar, such as homework support for children from migrant backgrounds. It announces projects five minutes after they are chosen, proving city approval is not part of the picture. It has also proved there are no groups that can't be reached, encouraging unprecedented participation among young people, migrant families and the poor through conversations and debating courses.

Over the past four years there have been a couple of major learnings relating to local government resources and roles. Not knowing in advance what departments the chosen projects will touch means there needs to be manpower flexibility and widespread willingness to ensure each project gets the support it needs. As a result, the participation team has ensured project support is a recognised part of certain jobs and that there is always someone available to look after extra projects where departments can't cope.

The central district of Antwerp sees participatory budgeting as an integral part of how it operates. It is aiming to increase the number of citizens involved each year. And it intends to use citizens' valuable advice about the city's needs to adapt its strategies and policies where needed. While other districts watch what is happening and other cities visit to find out more, the team is hopeful that its success will encourage future politicians to retain a participatory process that is serving the citizens and the city so well.

