



When residents could choose their estate improvements, something changed

We try to build community attachment through events and campaigns. But people become invested in a place when they have had a hand in deciding what happens to it.

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The Government has spoken for some years now about shifting from governing for the people to governing with them. The harder question is what real participation asks of citizens themselves.

If we want more active citizens, we need to give people something meaningful to decide. Participation is limited if citizens are asked only what they want. It becomes more meaningful when they are asked to weigh what they are willing to give up under real constraints.

SIX PROPOSALS, MONEY FOR THREE

In Spottiswoode Park earlier in 2026, residents faced exactly such a choice. They were coming up with ideas and collaborating with their neighbours to improve their estate. There were six feasible proposals on the table, which would have cost nearly \$550,000. The residents had \$200,000 to spend.

They opted to go for a reflexology pebble path, stone seats and a redesign of void deck spaces for rest and informal gatherings.

As a team from the Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS) Policy Lab, we ran the participatory budgeting pilot with Tanjong Pagar Town Council, MP Foo Ceexing and the Spottiswoode Residents' Network, funded by the Tote Board's Future-Ready Society Impact Fund.

The amenities are the least interesting part of this exercise. What made it different from most consultations was that residents had to first pitch their proposals, negotiate and persuade, and then accept a collective verdict. One father of two, who had lived in the estate for some 15 years, wanted a low rock-climbing wall for children. Some neighbours felt it would have served too few families. His proposal didn't get the go-ahead.

Before we announced the results publicly, we shared them with participants. Those whose proposals had fallen short were disappointed, and said so. But they accepted the outcome graciously.

We should be careful about what that shows. Construction has not begun, and we cannot claim the pilot has produced more capable citizens or that anything about it will last. What it did create was an occasion to practise a specific civic behaviour – living with a fair decision that went against you. That behaviour is difficult to learn in the abstract, and is something a consultation exercise rarely asks for.

There is one early signal, though we offer it cautiously. Foo has noted that 2026's durian party and selection exercise session drew roughly twice the turnout of 2025's. A single estate over a single year proves nothing on its own, and durian is a confounder we would not wish to dismiss. But this experience is at least consistent with the proposition that people who have decided something together turn up for one another afterwards.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THIS SCALES

A single pilot in one estate is thin evidence, and the more useful material comes from places where these processes have been running for years.

The broadest recent assessment is an international study by researchers Merrick Langdon, Harlow Pickens, Grace Nakato and Bhavana Nayak, examining participatory budgeting initiatives worldwide between 2020 and

2024. Over those five years, the number of such projects roughly doubled, and the sums allocated through them grew from around US\$500 million (\$64 million) to US\$900 million. The authors report a strong association between citizen participation and improvements in budget transparency, alongside rising public trust in the institutions running these processes. Their more useful finding is the caveat. Transparency improved in some places without corresponding gains on broader governance measures, which tells us visibility alone achieves little. What matters is whether citizens hold genuine decision-making

The Neighbourhood Renewal Programme is the natural place to begin, since it already funds the sort of improvements residents can sensibly choose between while continuing to renew ageing infrastructure and deliver the safety and accessibility works that need professional hands. What matters is that residents come in at the start, when problems are still being named and priorities ranked, rather than at the end, when drawings are circulated for comment. Schools are the next obvious setting. Students given a small allocation and asked to choose among their own proposals would learn something about citizenship that no syllabus conveys: What it feels like to lose a vote to your classmates and keep turning up.

power and can see the results delivered afterwards. Where participation is symbolic, an elaborate consultation dressed up as a choice, the trust benefits do not follow.

Scotland shows what it takes to turn a good idea into a standing practice. In October 2017, the Scottish government and the body representing Scottish local authorities agreed a framework under which at least 1% of local government budgets would be subject to participatory budgeting, with the explicit expectation that councils go beyond existing consultation.

Progress was slow, and the pandemic pushed the deadline back. But by 2023, they could report that more than 110,000 people had directly decided how £154 million (\$262 million) of council money was spent, exceeding the target at 14% of budgets. What carried it from ambition to routine was a shared target, a common framework and national support for councils running these exercises for the first time.

South Korea has taken the idea to national scale. Since 2008, its Finance Ministry has run a national participatory budget through which citizens propose projects for the government's budget. The guard rails are what make it instructive. Ministers first screen proposals for eligibility, citizens and experts then develop the surviving ideas, a citizens' panel votes on priorities, and the ministry decides what enters the budget proposal, which still requires Cabinet and National Assembly approval. Citizens shape the agenda without displacing anyone's authority.

Brazil offers the longest record of such citizen participation. Sonia Gonçalves, writing in *World Development*, examined Brazilian municipalities between 1990 and 2004, and found that those adopting participatory budgeting channelled a larger share of spending into health and sanitation, with a corresponding fall in infant mortality, and that richer budgets did not explain it. A separate nationwide study by Michael Touchton and Brian Wampler reached a similar conclusion.

Neither is a controlled experiment, since municipalities chose whether to adopt the practice, but the pattern is consistent. When citizens allocate, they favour the unglamorous things that professional planning under-weighs.

A DOOR HAS JUST BEEN OPENED

On Aug 4, the Ministry of National Development replied in writing to Foo, who had asked whether part of the Neighbourhood Renewal Programme (NRP) budget might be set aside for residents to propose, develop and vote on improvements to their own blocks. Town councils, the ministry confirmed, have that flexibility, subject to technical feasibility.

The NRP is the natural place to begin, since it already funds the sort of improvements residents can sensibly choose between while continuing to renew ageing infrastructure and deliver the safety and accessibility works that need professional hands. What matters is that residents come in at the start, when problems are still being named and priorities ranked, rather than at the end, when drawings are circulated for comment.

Schools are the next obvious setting. Students given a small allocation and asked to choose among their own proposals would learn something about citizenship that no syllabus conveys: What it feels like to lose a vote to your classmates and keep turning up. Singapore could adapt some elements, beginning with \$500,000 for citizen-proposed projects with wider public benefit. Against the \$154.7 billion 2026 Budget, this represents roughly 0.0003% – a deliberately small commitment to testing whether citizens can help allocate public money responsibly. None of this rests on citizens choosing better than professionals. Often, they will not. It rests on the observation that a person who has weighed one good idea against another understands their community's constraints in a way that no amount of explanation achieves, and is likelier to accept the next set of constraints they are handed.

A PATH TOWARD WALKING

Foo has argued in Parliament, drawing on S. Rajaratnam, for a democracy of deeds, in which citizens work with one another and with the Government to solve shared problems. Deeds require decisions, and decisions require something at stake.

A resident who has argued for a proposal, listened to the objection, and accepted the verdict, has been made a party to the place in a way no amount of programming achieves. That is the route to belonging that we tend to skip, because it is slower than an event and riskier than a survey.

A reflexology path is modest infrastructure, but it makes a serviceable figure for what we are describing. You feel it underfoot, and the discomfort is what does you good.

As for the climbing wall, its proposer did not walk away when it lost. He asked whether it might be folded into the estate's renewal plans instead. That question, from someone who had just been outvoted by his neighbours, is a better argument for involving residents early than anything we can offer.

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(From left) IPS senior research fellow Justin Lee, Spottiswoode Park resident Jagwinder Singh, IPS research fellow Nicholas Thomas and resident Roy Fung in the Spottiswoode Park estate – where a participatory budgeting pilot took place earlier in 2026 – on Sept 4. ST PHOTO: JASON GUHH