CLOSING LOOPS CASE STUDY

'YOUR POTS, YOUR SAY'
Empowering communities to allocate grant funding

In November 2023, Closing Loops hosted the first of four annual 'Your Pots, Your Say' community voting events. Your Pots grants are awarded through a participatory budgeting (PB) approach, where members of the public help make decisions on how grants are distributed locally.

SUMMARY

The first round of grants to use this PB selection process took place in autumn 2023. At a public community voting day, applicants presented their project ideas and the audience voted on who should get funding.

The added value was the active public engagement and project networking/collaboration that directly resulted from using PB. Feedback gathered at the event and through follow-up focus groups was taken forward to shape the design of the following year's event.

This case study shares how the first voting event worked and people's experiences from the day. It also shares how we adapted and improved the PB process and voting event over the subsequent two years using community feedback and co-design.

Find out more about Pots of Possibility at foodfutures.org.uk/pots-of-possibility

WHAT IS PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING?

Through Participatory Budgeting(PB), citizens make decisions over how grant funds and public budgets are spent. PB has been rapidly growing worldwide and operates at many different scales, from very small budgets within towns or neighbourhoods, to multi-million pound citywide processes. PB enables local people to deliberate, propose projects and make decisions that affect their lives in a democratic way.

PB is recognised as an effective way to:

- address inequalities in service provision and resource allocation
- engage and empower citizens through deliberation on public investment
- stimulate co-production, trust and responsibility between citizens and government.

It is a flexible, values-led method for elevating community engagement. There is no one-size-fits-all approach.

Over the five years of the Closing Loops project, we will hold four rounds of Your Pots. This is a unique opportunity to use the multiple rounds to co-design, evaluate and adapt the PB process with our local community.

> *If it feels like we've decided, it's PB. If it feels like someone else has decided, it's not.*

Through this we aim to build a legacy of participatory deliberation, decision making and budgeting processes locally.

This legacy includes both the frameworks for such processes, as well as the skills and experiential learning developed through active community involvement in the design, development and implementation of PB.

We hope that this work will encourage and support other local funding bodies (such as councils and public health) to consider incorporating PB approaches into how they allocate funds.

CO-DESIGN OF YOUR POTS (ROUND 1)

The PB process was shaped by a series of public consultation events:

- Information workshop: 'What is Participatory Budgeting & why is it coming to North Lancashire?' Delivered by Shared Future CIC, this brought existing knowledge/experience of how to make PB work well into North Lancashire.
- Interactive PB design workshop: People from a range of backgrounds and organisations came to shape the PB process, including how we could engage widely with diverse groups and support them to apply, and designing fairness into the voting rules.

- In response, we created a list of groups to target to widen the fund's reach across geographical locations, demographics, project themes, etc, and held drop-in sessions to support potential new applicants. 11 applications proceeded to the voting day, including organisations that hadn't engaged with us before.

- Based on discussions at the design workshop, we agreed that:
  - Each project would give a 3-minute presentation followed by a marketplace style networking session, after which voting would take place.
  - Only people joining the voting event in person could cast votes.
  - Each attendee would have four votes and could only vote for a project once.
  - Project presenters had four votes but could not vote for their own project.
  - We consulted with local school links who advised that anyone over the age of eight should be invited to vote. This was an age that pupils are invited to join student panels and school parliaments.

Each project presented in their own style. Some brought props including pieces of furniture for a furniture restoration project and surplus food ready meal tasters for people to try at the event.

There was a real buzz of excitement and connection in the networking session. Presenters took the opportunity to talk to people in more detail about their project idea, and connections were built between the projects as well.

WHAT DID THE COMMUNITY VOTING DAY LOOK AND SOUND LIKE?

The project representatives arrived first. The space was set up with a small stage at the front for presentations, and a display/networking area at the back with posters about the different projects. There was a buzz of nervous energy and excitement among the presenters, with people chatting about each other's projects, discovering things in common and forming new connections with organisations they'd never met before.

Then the audience arrived including friends and family of the projects, interested members of the public and even some curious passers-by. The audience took their seats and the compere started, asking everyone to 'Be kind, be wise, be fair' when it came to casting their votes.

One by one, the projects came on stage to pitch their ideas. Some presented alone, while others presented in a group. Some had props, while others spoke about personal experiences. Some like Eggcup, represented well-established organisations, while others like Four Seasons Allotments were setting up new projects.

Then it was time to relax. There was delicious food prepared by a community chef, time to chat to the presenters, browse the displays, ask questions and think about voting choices. When the voting opened, it became noticeably quieter – people were clearly giving careful consideration to how to cast their 4 votes. In total, over 250 votes were cast, spread over the 11 projects.

Finally, after a tense vote count, the results were announced. Six out of the 11 projects were recommended for funding.

WHAT PARTICIPANTS SAID ABOUT THE VOTING DAY

£50,000 available in the first round.
11 applications totalling £88,369.
77 people joined the voting event.
6 projects totalling £48,362 were recommended for funding.
3 citizen journalists covered the day.
1 community chef provided food.

This has been a fantastic opportunity to engage with local people and others running similar projects. Great to be able to start collaborations.

Presenters gave an average satisfaction score of 4.45/5.0, highlighting opportunities for networking and collaboration as a major benefit.

'It made me consider how groups need to talk to each other more, as some already had the solutions to others' problems.'

'Very fair. Creative. Nice feel. Much better than a cold judgement by an anonymous board.'

The audience gave an average satisfaction response score of 4.5/5.0, highlighting how they felt inspired, empowered and more hopeful.

'It was great to see the variety of projects and ideas. It has energised me to continue my own sustainability journey.'

'Feeling inspired by so many great creative local people and projects. Feel more hopeful.'

'Because it's fun to vote!'

In terms of what could be improved, feedback suggested that requiring people to attend the voting day in person meant that many who wanted to vote were not able to take part. This highlighted the potential for reaching many more people in future rounds by incorporating an online or hybrid participation element.

A follow-up online survey and focus group gave us many ideas for improving the reach and impact of Your Pots, which were discussed at our summer co-design workshop to shape the following round of grants in autumn 2024.

CO-DESIGNING YOUR POTS ROUND 2 (2024)

In June 2024, we hosted a co-design workshop to consult on the feedback from the first Your Pots round and discuss improvements for Round 2. People from a range of community organisations took part in discussions around clarifying the fund's communications and messaging, identifying target groups to reach, support and mentoring for applicants and the format of the voting day.

Following the co-design workshop, we made several improvements to the Round 2 voting event that took place in November 2024:

- We focussed Round 2 communications and messaging on themes that hadn't yet been funded (waste, repair, non-food ideas).
- We hosted an 'All About Repair' workshop to support organisations to develop project ideas around the specific theme of repair and reuse.
- We offered 1:1 online mentoring sessions in addition to the open drop-in sessions to support organisations with their application.
- We supported applicants to produce a 3-minute video to show at the voting day instead of giving a presentation, as some people had found this stressful.
- We expanded the marketplace stall area to improve networking opportunities and create a more vibrant atmosphere at the voting day.
- We commissioned Lancaster Film Initiative to produce a video of the voting day to promote the Your Pots fund and the benefits of participatory budgeting.

WHAT PARTICIPANTS SAID ABOUT THE SECOND VOTING DAY

It was great to be part of the conversations ... with members of the community thinking creatively and positively about how we can work together to achieve greater impact for people and sustainability.

The video format levelled the playing field more between presenters.

'It has strengthened my attention for reusing and repairing as a way to enhance wellbeing..., to increase self-expression & creativity. All markers of a more sustainable lifestyle.'

'I think the flexibility of the application and the support given throughout made it accessible to a wide range of projects.'

'There are some wonderful connections being forged through the project, and I am very conscious of the impact it has had for me and my business.'

Feedback about the second Your Pots voting day was collected using a short evaluation form during the voting day, as well as an in-depth online survey after the event. Overall satisfaction levels showed a clear increase from Round 1, particularly among project applicants. 94% of respondents felt the voting day worked well and should either keep its current format or just make minor changes.

There were some areas for improvement identified including: making project applications link more clearly to principles of regenerative economy; getting applications from a wider range of geographical locations right across Lancaster District; and how to make voting accessible to people who can't attend an in-person event.

CO-DESIGNING YOUR POTS ROUND 3 (2025)

In April 2025, 15 people attended a co-design workshop to discuss feedback from the previous round and improvements for Round 3. These included representatives from community organisations, previous grant recipients and members of the public who'd attended the previous voting day. The main topics for discussion were how to reach/involve more people, how to increase the fund's impact, and how to improve people's understanding of regenerative economy.

In response, we made several improvements to the Round 3 voting event that took place in November 2025:

- We introduced an online voting option in addition to the in-person voting day to expand the fund's reach and increase impact. 1389 people took part in the online vote compared to 85 people at the in-person voting day.
- We targeted communications at the locations and themes that hadn't yet been funded (Carnforth, Heysham, Silverdale, rural communities; community renewable energy; sustainable community transport; community-led housing initiatives).
- We used THRIVE magazine articles and blogs to explain what a regenerative economy looks like in practice, by showing what the funded projects are doing for people and place. [Click here to read the THRIVE articles]
- We updated the Application Form to steer applicants to think more directly about the environmental and social impacts of their project ideas and design their projects according to regenerative principles.

WHAT PARTICIPANTS SAID ABOUT THE THIRD VOTING DAY

I think it's good to bring in the online vote to involve more people in the decision-making process.

It's wonderful to see so many organisations with sustainability and regeneration at the heart of their organisation.

The voting process with its full community engagement leads to deep thinking and awareness of what's going on in our community.

I think Your Pots has encouraged greater creativity and innovation within the topic areas of regenerative communities and sustainable production.

As in previous years, feedback was collected using a short evaluation form during the voting day and a follow-up in-depth online survey. Overall feedback was strongly positive, with participants again valuing the community engagement, networking opportunities and promotional benefits created by the process. There was almost universal support for the addition of the online voting option, and the number of people who took part far exceeded our own expectations. This had a huge impact in engaging with hundreds more people across the district that we'd never engaged with before.

The addition of online voting and the growing scale of participation did raise new questions that we will need to address in the final round of funding. In particular, we need to consider how to communicate the voting options and rules more clearly, how to increase ticket capacity at the in-person event, and how to support and create equity for smaller/newer organisations to take part.

YOUR POTS - YOUR SAY

COMMUNITY FUND | CLOSING loops Pots of Possibility | FOOD FUTURES

ABOUT CLOSING LOOPS

Closing Loops is a five-year £1.5 million project led by FoodFutures, North Lancashire's sustainable food partnership.

The project is delivered by six local organisations (LESS, Lancaster District CVS, Eggcup, Global Link, Shared Future CIC and Scientists For Global Responsibility), and is funded by The National Lottery Community Fund.

Thanks to National Lottery players, Closing Loops supports community-led action and local initiatives to transform waste into a valuable resource. It aims to stimulate a zero-waste, circular and regenerative local economy.

The project is cultivating a regenerative food economy by building a composting academy, gleaning network, citizen journalist movement and co-creating North Lancashire recipes.

SUPPORTED BY:

COMMUNITY FUND

PROJECT PARTNERS:

eggcup

Global Link Development Education Centre

ldcvs supporting you to support your communities CELEBRATING 50 YEARS

LESS Promoting Sustainable Living

SGR responsible science

Shared Future

STAY IN THE LOOP

Find out more about how you can get involved with the work of Closing Loops:

FoodFutures.org.uk/closing-loops

If you have any questions or feedback, please contact the Closing Loops Project Coordinator Rachel Marshall at rachel_cl@lessuk.org. To stay in the loop on upcoming events, visit our website and subscribe to the monthly FoodFutures newsletter.

COMMUNITY FUND | CLOSING loops Pots of Possibility | FOOD FUTURES