

## ABERDEEN CITY COUNCIL

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<b>COMMITTEE</b>	Anti-Poverty and Inequality
<b>DATE</b>	11 March 2026
<b>EXEMPT</b>	No
<b>CONFIDENTIAL</b>	No
<b>REPORT TITLE</b>	Evaluation of the Citizens' Assembly Approach to Poverty and Gender Inequality and Poverty delivered by the Scottish Women's Budget Group during 2024-2025
<b>REPORT NUMBER</b>	CORS/26/040
<b>EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR</b>	Andy MacDonald
<b>CHIEF OFFICER</b>	Michelle Crombie on behalf of Isla Newcombe
<b>REPORT AUTHOR</b>	Michelle Crombie, Strategic Lead, Prevention and Community Empowerment Deirdre Nicolson, Solicitor
<b>TERMS OF REFERENCE</b>	1.1, 3.1

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### 1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 This report presents an evaluation of the citizens' assembly approach to poverty and gender inequality delivered by the Scottish Women's Budget Group (SWBG) on behalf of Aberdeen City Council. The evaluation assesses whether the approach was implemented as originally intended, summarises key activities and engagement outcomes, and identifies lessons to inform the Committee's future citizen engagement exercises.

### 2. RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Committee:-

- 2.1 Notes the findings of the process evaluation, including engagement levels, outputs generated and lessons learned;
- 2.2 Thanks members of the Scottish Women's Budget Group Steering Group and wider community members for sharing their insights on the process; and
- 2.3 Instructs the Strategic Lead, Prevention and Community Empowerment to incorporate lessons learned into the design of future citizen engagement exercises.

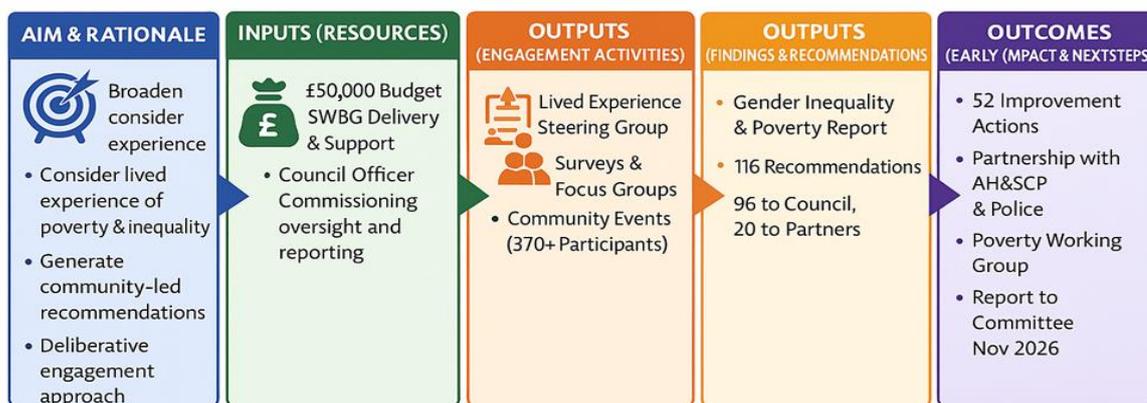
### 3. CURRENT SITUATION

- 3.1 On 12 June 2024, the Anti-Poverty and Inequality Committee approved a proposal for delivering a citizen's assembly approach on poverty and gender inequality. Due to its expertise in gender analysis and participatory engagement, the Scottish Women's Budget Group was commissioned to deliver the approach between June 2024 and June 2025. Using the principles of citizens' assemblies – particularly deliberation, inclusion, lived experience and independent facilitation – an approach was agreed which was suitable given available resources, time and policy context. This report provides an evaluation of the process and lessons learned.

## 4. PROCESS EVALUATION

4.1 This process evaluation considers:

- The original aim and rationale of the citizens' assembly approach
- Inputs, including financial and officer resources
- Outputs, including activities and methods used to deliver the engagement and the findings and recommendations of the study
- Outcomes, including actions planned by the Council as a result of the study and recommendations



### 4.2 Aim and Rationale

4.2.1 The aim of the citizens assembly approach was to broaden engagement on poverty and gender inequality beyond traditional consultation, centring lived experience to inform policy. The ambition was to generate credible, community-lead evidence and recommendations with potential to influence Council practice. Evidence from deliberative democracy practice suggests that approaches where participants engage with information, share experiences and collectively identify priorities produce richer insight than one-off surveys or conventional consultations.

### 4.3 Inputs: Resources

4.3.1 The project was delivered within the approved budget of £50,000. Scottish Women's Budget Group (SWBG) direct delivery costs were £27,400, with the balance allocated to participation support measures, including vouchers, childcare, travel and venue hire.

SWBG Staff Time	£24,400
Design & publishing costs	£3,000
Local Organisation Costs	£2,400
Participation Vouchers	£1,280
Steering Group Participation Costs	£3,600
Travel/ Device Costs	£1,920
Childcare Costs	£2,500
Food Costs	£960
Room Hire	£2,400
Event Costs	£5,840
Resources	£500
<b>Total</b>	<b>£48,800</b>

Best practice indicates that the success of deliberative processes depends on time and resources, political mandate and problem suitability. While sufficient for a substantial engagement exercise, resources did not allow for a full assembly model. Council officer involvement focused on commissioning, governance oversight and committee reporting.

#### 4.4 **Outputs: Engagement Activities and Participation**

In total, approximately 370-390 people were engaged. Recruitment prioritised women with lived experience rather than demographic representativeness through random selection. Engagement included:

- Steering Group - A lived experience steering group of nine women from diverse backgrounds (including carers, disabled people, migrants and low-income households) met approximately nine times throughout the process. They were remunerated and played a substantive co-design and interpretive role throughout.
- Community Survey - A city-wide online survey was co-designed and delivered, receiving 262 responses. Respondents were predominantly women (approximately 82%), with around 22% reporting incomes under £20,000 per year.
- Targeted Focus Groups - engaging approximately 40–50 participants from groups often excluded from formal processes, including survivors of domestic abuse, disabled women, young women, Gypsy/Traveller women, migrant women, and frontline practitioners.
- Community Events and Outreach - Two World Café-style community events engaged approximately 40 participants, and informal outreach conversations engaged an estimated 20–30 additional individuals in community settings.

#### 4.5 **Outputs: Findings and Recommendations**

- 4.5.1 The [Aberdeen Gender Inequality and Poverty Report](#), produced by the Scottish Women's Budget Group, met the original aim of taking the citizens assembly approach by improving understanding of the lived experiences of poverty and gender inequality in Aberdeen. The detailed findings report, considered by the Anti-Poverty and Inequality Committee on 11 June 2025, documented those experiences and presented 116 practical, community informed recommendations. Of these, 96 were directed to Aberdeen City Council, with the remaining 20 made to the Aberdeen Health and Social Care Partnership, Scottish and UK Government, Police Scotland and Financial Services Ombudsman. The recommendations covered key areas including childcare, kinship and unpaid care, violence against women, community safety, in-work poverty, benefits and income maximisation, council tax reduction and debt, accessing services and support, housing, and transport.

## 4.6 Outcomes: Improvement Actions and Ongoing Collaboration

As a result of the Scottish Women's Budget Group report, the Council has identified [52 key improvement actions](#) to be taken forward by the Council in partnership with the Aberdeen Health and Social Care Partnership and Police Scotland to address the issues raised. The Council has established a Gender Inequality and Poverty Working Group to implement the actions and progress will be reported to the Anti-Poverty and Inequality Committee on 25 November 2026. Council officers will continue to work with the Scottish Women's Budget Group during the implementation stage. Longer-term impacts on policy and service outcomes will be realised over time as these actions are implemented.

## 5. LESSONS LEARNED FOR FUTURE PRACTICE

### 5.1 Strengths to be Retained

- 5.1.1 Mixed Engagement Methods - The approach used by the Scottish Women's Budget Group combined breadth and depth of engagement using mixed-methods and strong partnership with local organisations. Co-design with lived-experience participants, supported by remuneration, enabled meaningful involvement and strengthened both the credibility and depth of insight.
- 5.1.2 Engagement Approach, Safe Space and Flexibility – Members of the Scottish Women's Budget Group Steering Group emphasised that the project's relational, community-centred engagement approach was central to their positive experience. Creative, non-intrusive activities allowed participants to explore complex issues without needing to disclose painful personal details. This helped create a 'safe enough' space where women felt valued, listened to and able to contribute authentically. The women-only environment and the emphasis on trust, transparency and continuous feedback strengthened psychological safety and encouraged sustained participation. Flexibility was also a major factor. Participants were supported to engage as much as their lives allowed, with advance notice of meetings and updates when they could not attend. A WhatsApp group helped maintain connection and continuity.
- 5.1.3 Participant Support – Participation vouchers, reimbursement of travel, and provision of refreshments reinforced that the women's lived experience was recognised as a form of expertise requiring emotional labour. This material acknowledgment contributed significantly to sustained involvement. Participants also highlighted the vital role of the project leader and facilitator, in particular their relational skill set, community development experience, respectful coordination, and transparent approach were repeatedly named as reasons the group felt confident, organised and motivated. Collaboration with trusted community organisations further strengthened engagement by supporting recruitment of diverse women and creating an environment shaped by relationships rather than formality.
- 5.1.4 Practical, Community Informed Recommendations - The project captured rich, detailed data on lived experiences of poverty and gender inequality, and the outputs – including a detailed findings report, executive summary, thematic analysis, and 116 practical, community informed recommendations – directly addressed the original aim of improving understanding and informing Council action.

## 5.2 Areas for Further Development

- 5.2.1 Scope and Focus - The broad thematic scope of the study enabled the project to generate a rich and comprehensive evidence base on lived experience across multiple aspects of poverty and gender inequality. A learning for future exercises is that, where the Council wishes to support deeper deliberation on specific policy choices, a more tightly defined remit may be beneficial. In particular, future exercises could include an early scoping phase to identify one or two priority policy questions, alongside clearer opportunities for participants to explore relevant Council policies, service models and constraints. This would support more focused deliberation and help generate recommendations that are more closely aligned with Council levers for action.
- 5.2.2 Understanding and Visibility of Current Council Practice – The citizen assembly approach appropriately prioritised independent engagement and the capture of lived experience. As noted by the Scottish Women’s Budget Group, limited awareness of existing services or policies among participants is itself a valuable finding, highlighting issues of accessibility and communication. A learning for future exercises is the potential benefit of complementing this insight with opportunities for participants to develop a clearer understanding of current Council practice. Where appropriate, this could include accessible explanations of how services operate to support informed discussion and enable more targeted recommendations to improve both awareness and service design. Such an approach may help participants to explore specific service areas, identifying barriers, gaps or unintended consequences, and strengthen the link between engagement and service improvement.
- 5.2.3 Strengthening Engagement Reach and Project Timeframes – While the project successfully created a supportive and inclusive process, the Scottish Women’s Budget Group felt that the tight timescales restricted the ability to reach a wider cross-section of seldom-heard groups, including care-experienced women, women with addictions, and those involved in selling or exchanging sex. Extending the engagement period and building in more lead-in time with partner organisations would help widen participation and deepen the evidence base. Longer timescales would also support earlier and more sustained collaboration with council officers, providing better access to data needed to inform and refine recommendations.
- 5.2.4 Enhancing Participant Support and Emotional Safety – The steering group’s experience also suggests opportunities to strengthen emotional safety and readiness for public-facing elements of the process. Although presenting to the Anti-Poverty and Inequality Committee was largely positive, some participants found the political nature of questioning upsetting. More structured preparation and debriefing, along with additional trauma-informed safeguards, would help protect wellbeing at these stages. Finally, while communication methods such as WhatsApp proved effective, future projects could benefit from a more formal communication framework and clearer feedback loops to ensure all participants—regardless of availability or digital access—remain informed, included, and confident in how their contributions shape the work.
- 5.3 See Appendix 1 for more detailed reflections and learning from the Scottish Women’s Budget Group (SWBG) Steering Group.

## 6. NEXT STEPS

6.1 This evaluation will be shared with partners of Community Planning Aberdeen, including the Anti-Poverty and Community Empowerment Group, that are currently developing proposals for people panels to be taken forward as part of the Local Outcome Improvement Plan 2026–36. These panels will involve individuals with a range of lived experiences to help influence multi-agency decisions about services and policies. By taking on board the findings of this evaluation in involving people with direct experience of poverty and inequality, people panels can support more joined up decision making, strengthen the relevance and effectiveness of solutions, and ensure partner policies reflect how people experience multiple services.

## 7. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

7.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from the recommendations in this report. Future citizen engagement exercises are subject to the Council's annual budget setting process.

## 8. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

8.1 There are no direct legal implications arising from this report.

## 9. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

9.1 There are no direct environmental implications arising from this report.

## 10. RISK

Category	Risks	Primary Controls/Control Actions to achieve Target Risk Level	*Target Risk Level (L, M or H) <small>*taking into account controls/control actions</small>	*Does Target Risk Level Match Appetite Set?
Strategic Risk			L	Yes
Compliance			L	Yes
Operational			L	Yes
Financial			L	Yes
			L	Yes
Reputational			L	Yes
Environment / Climate			n/a	n/a

## 11. OUTCOMES

Council Delivery Plan 2024	
	Impact of Report
<b>Aberdeen City Council Policy Statement</b>  <a href="#">Working in Partnership for Aberdeen</a>	The proposals within this report support the delivery of the following aspects of the policy statement within the context of tackling poverty:-  A Transparent, Accessible and Accountable Council

	Aberdeen City Council works for the people of Aberdeen, and it is important that people can access, understand, and take part in the Council's democratic processes. To make Aberdeen City Council more transparent, accessible, and accountable we will  'Explore options to establish local Citizens' Assemblies – with the first remit of a Citizens' Assembly being to advise the council on what's needed to tackle gender inequality in Aberdeen'
<a href="#"><u>Local Outcome Improvement Plan</u></a>	
Prosperous Economy Stretch Outcomes	Stretch outcome 1: 20% reduction in the percentage of people who report they have been worried they would not have enough food to eat and/ or not be able to heat their home by 2026.
Prosperous People Stretch Outcomes	Stretch outcome 12: Reduce homelessness by 10% and youth homelessness by 6% by 2026, ensuring it is rare, brief and non-recurring with a longer term ambition to end homelessness in Aberdeen City.

## 12. IMPACT ASSESSMENTS

Assessment	Outcome
<b>Integrated Impact Assessment</b>	No assessment required.
<b>Data Protection Impact Assessment</b>	Not required.
<b>Other</b>	N/A

## 13. BACKGROUND PAPERS

### 13.1 [Aberdeen City Council Response to the Scottish Women's Budget Group Study on Gender Inequality and Poverty 26 November 2025](#)

[Citizens' Assemblies Approach - Final Report on the Scottish Women's Budget Group Study on Gender Inequality and Poverty 11 June 2025](#)

[Citizen Assemblies 12 June 2024.pdf](#)

[Citizen Assemblies 11 January 2023.pdf](#)

## 11. APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Reflections and Learning

## 12. REPORT AUTHOR CONTACT DETAILS

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## **Appendix 1 Aberdeen Gender Equality and Poverty Project Reflections and Learning**

### **Background**

The Scottish Women's Budget Group (SWBG) were commissioned by Aberdeen City Council's Anti-Poverty and Inequality Committee to explore the impact of poverty and gender inequality on women and their families in the city. The project also aimed to identify with participants solutions that could address these issues for individuals, families and the wider community.

The project began in September 2024 with the recruitment of a steering group to oversee the project. The final report was provided to Aberdeen City Council in April 2025. A presentation was made to the Anti-Poverty and Inequality Committee in June 2025, and the response was discussed by the committee in November.

The project took a mixed-methods approach, using the principles of a citizens assembly combined with a gender budgeting approach to guide the research. Key principles included:

- Participative: the challenges and the solutions were identified by the community;
- Intersectional: ensuring we involved and heard from a diverse range of people;
- Informed: the steering group were supported to build on their experiences and understanding of poverty and inequality.

The mixed-methods approach enabled us to hear from those who have experience of living on a low income, those who work in organisations that provide support, as well as those who have experience of both.

Underpinning this approach was a commitment to ethical, non-extractive knowledge gathering, which tried to ensure that participation was proportionate and meaningful. We aimed to co-create a safe enough space that allowed participants to bring their authentic selves in a way that was supported, celebrated and encouraged.

The intention was to create a robust and fuller understanding of how gender inequality impacts on women and their families by engaging with a representative sample from across Aberdeen.

### **What the steering group told us about their involvement**

As part of this project, we recruited a group of 9 women to act as a steering group to help oversee the project<sup>1</sup>. The steering group were involved in:

- Designing the research questions and data collection methods;
- Analysing the data collected and identifying areas for improvements;
- Developing recommendations;
- Presenting the findings to the anti-poverty and inequality committee;
- Engaging with council officers to help them develop their response to the report.

Through engaging with community organisations in Aberdeen, we were able to recruit a diverse range of women to the steering group. Steering group members told us that receiving information from a trusted person/organisation encouraged them to get involved in the project.

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<sup>1</sup> One woman stopped their involvement in the steering group after 2 sessions

Building a safe enough space which valued the contributions of all group members was key to sustaining the involvement of 8 out of 9 of the participants. This was despite several participants experiencing life events that could have led to their involvement ending). The fact that the group was for women only was identified as another factor which helped maintain involvement. This played a role in creating a safe enough space for participants.

*'The group recognised the importance of lived experience and created a safe, inclusive space where my voice was valued. This support gave me confidence to contribute openly, helped shape discussions, and ensured that real experiences were reflected in the group's work and recommendations.'*

Understanding that the women involved in the project were balancing their own lives and families and providing options that allowed people to participate as much or as little as they were able to was crucial, as well as helping the women involved balance competing demands on their time.

Steering group members highlighted that the flexible approach to their involvement helped them stay engaged. A WhatsApp group was set up at the start of the project, with everyone's consent, to allow the group to communicate with each other and to share updates. The majority of the group found this extremely helpful in maintaining their involvement.

*'Having a clear schedule of meetings, agreed upon as much as possible, and being notified of appointments with enough advance notice to add them to our calendars. Also, if you couldn't attend a meeting, the coordinator would send us a summary of what was discussed, what was agreed upon, and the next steps. I found the coordination to be excellent. Although this was not my first experience as a volunteer or collaborator, it was, in my opinion, the best-organized one.'*

Providing participation vouchers was an important way of recognising the value participants brought to the group and the wider participation activities. These vouchers acknowledged that participants' knowledge was a unique, valuable form of expertise and that sharing it required emotional labour. In addition, we reimbursed travel costs and provided refreshments, all of which aimed to demonstrate the value the participants brought to the project.

The design of the project recognised that sharing their experiences could be difficult for the women involved. We aimed to use activities which did not involve women having to share the detail of their experiences. Using creative methods allowed us to explore issues in a non-threatening, fun way. All steering group members highlighted this as a factor in maintaining their involvement. This approach also helped highlight the commonality of the group's experiences, despite the diversity within the group.

## **Benefits**

All steering group members told us that they felt like they had been listened to and that they had learnt new skills by being involved in the steering group. The majority also felt they had hope that things could change:

*'It was my first experience in a group of women, and I found it very enriching. It has changed my perspective, as I realized that many of the problems I believed were personal, or in some cases related to my condition as an immigrant, are in fact mostly challenges we face as women. Furthermore, I came to understand that many of these gender-related problems are systemic and caused by failures in the social system.'*

*'It has also helped me better understand how my city works, its social fabric, and the city council. It has provided me with information about resources that I can now share to help others. It has strengthened my conviction that being socially active is positive and has rekindled my desire to volunteer, to find a place from which I can help and give back what I have received.'*

*'My involvement had an impact both personally and collectively. Personally, it increased my confidence and strengthened my ability to speak up about issues affecting women. My lived experience helped shape discussions and influenced how issues affecting women in poverty were understood. My contributions supported the group's work by adding real-world insight, ensuring that policies and recommendations considered the realities faced by women.'*

## **SWBG reflections**

This project took a feminist approach to research, grounded in an ethic of care. We aimed to build relationships (on a human-to-human level) creating a space where people wanted to share their knowledge and insights knowing that they can trust those in the group to hold those insights with care.

The facilitative approach taken was a relational one, recognising that the steering group members were the experts in the room. The role of SWBG's facilitator was to support the group, helping them to participate and share their truths, while acknowledging both the commonalities and the differences in their experiences.

*'The continuous feedback we have received at every step of the project, always being taken into account and asked for our opinion. The wonderful way the group coordinator has led the project, always respectful, facilitating participation, and open to suggestions. In one word, the transparency.'*

The timescales of the data-gathering phase of the project were tight. With more time, it is possible we could have been engaged a greater number of people and reached other seldom-heard groups (i.e. care experienced people, women with addiction issues, women involved in selling or exchanging sex, etc).

Additional time would also have allowed for engagement with council officers to access data to help inform recommendations.

Attending and presenting their findings to the Anti-Poverty and Inequality Committee was, on the whole, a positive experience for the group, building on earlier work to help them feel heard. However, for two steering group members, the political nature of some of the questions and the way they were framed was upsetting.

Finally, tight timescales and the holiday period affected the group's ability to engage fully in helping inform the response from council officers. Despite this, the group were appreciative of the efforts made to engage with them.