



BRIEFING PAPER

ENGAGING WITH THE BUDGET PROCESS

This briefing outlines view from women participating in the Scottish Women's Budget Group 2026 Women's Survey and from women engaged in our 2025-26 Women's Economic Empowerment project. The purpose of this briefing is to highlight key issues identified by women that impact their engagement in and understanding of the budget process. With the aim to support development of participation and communication activities as part of budget setting processes.

INTRODUCTION

Participation and transparency are key principles of gender budgeting. Involving citizens, civil society organisations and other stakeholders is crucial for monitoring how public budgets work towards meeting a country's goals and in identifying what these goals are.

True participation in the budget process goes beyond asking people for their ideas about balancing the budget, suggesting high-level allocations in a budget consultation exercise or proposing spending ideas.

Instead, citizen engagement should create a shared understanding of the challenges faced and the possible solutions to these, participation takes time and should be included in budget planning. This can be done in a way that builds ongoing and regular moments for consultation and more deliberative participation into budget cycles. Participation builds trust and

helps citizens understand the government's role and decisions. It also gives decisions more legitimacy.

Additionally, how budget decisions are communicated are important for increasing the transparency of budget processes and supporting wider participation. The budget process should be an opportunity for governments and local authorities to be clear about their priorities, what they are trying to achieve with their spending decisions, and why. This can include setting out the challenges and constraints, and the principles or values underpinning decision-making.

Through SWBG's 2026 Women's Survey and our **Women's Economic Empowerment project** we aimed to understand what women knew about opportunities to participate in the budget, what they thought of these opportunities and how they would like to be involved in future budget engagement and consultation processes. More details on these two activities can be found at the end of this briefing.

WHAT WOMEN KNEW ABOUT OPPORTUNITIES TO PARTICIPATE

The Women's Economic Empowerment group followed the budget process from the 2025 Autumn Statement, through the pre-budget scrutiny carried out by the Scottish Parliament and passing the Scottish Budget, to the passing of local authority budgets across Scotland in 2026. As part of this we aimed to help increase the group's knowledge of the budget process in Scotland and consider how budgets at national and local level reflect the needs of women.

The women who took part in this group were not aware of opportunities to feed into the UK or Scottish Government budget processes; a few had contributed to local government consultation processes previously. This lack of awareness about opportunities to participate was reflected by the women who completed the SWBG 2026 Women's Survey.

Of the just over 830 respondents who completed questions relating to the Scottish Budget process, only 30% were aware of opportunities to engage with the budget at a national level. This will include some people being aware due to engagement via work. When asked if they had ever engaged with the Scottish budget process, 12% of respondents said they had. This figure fell to 9% for disabled women, single parents and women under 35, and to just 6% for retired women who responded to the survey. While 58% of respondents said they would like the opportunity to engage with the budget process, a further 33% were unsure.

Disabled women, retired respondents and respondents with a household income of less than £20,000 were less likely to be aware of opportunities to engage, with awareness levels of 26%, 22%, 25% respectively.

This demonstrates a significant gap between those who have engaged with the budget process and those who would like to do so, highlighting a clear opportunity to improve participation.

WHAT WOMEN THOUGHT ABOUT OPPORTUNITIES TO PARTICIPATE

Scotland's Open Budget Survey 2023¹ found that while there had been an increase in accessible information shared about decisions made 'this has not translated to an increase in the ability to engage with the budget. Documents are shared which tell people of decisions after the fact, rather than providing them with the tools that they need to meaningfully engage.'

The Women's Economic Empowerment Group echoed these concerns about participation opportunities at both the Scottish Parliament and local authority level. They reviewed the pre-budget scrutiny carried out by two committees and the online consultations run by three councils and one health and social care partnership. A key question they raised was who decided on the scope of consultations and what impact this had on whose voices were heard.

Each committee took a slightly different approach to their pre-budget scrutiny. Members of the Women's Economic Empowerment project were unclear how these approaches helped meet the aim of improving transparency and raising public understanding of the budget. For example, of the committees reviewed, one committee undertook a closed call for evidence while the other was open to public respondents, however, neither made specific effort to involve anyone with lived experience of the area being scrutinised. The lack of public or lived-experience involvement was clear. This highlights the need for more inclusive engagement to ensure that policy decisions reflect the realities of the communities' parliamentarians aim to serve.

¹ Scottish Human Rights Commission (2024) [Scotland's Open Budget Survey 2023](#)

At the local government level, the quality of the online consultations varied considerably. Participants raised concerns about whether some of these consultations were designed in a way to encourage particular responses. Issues identified included:

- ▶ **Opaque budgetary information – Participants felt that financial information in the consultations often served as justifications for cuts rather than providing transparent and accessible information on potential budget gaps and why they had arisen;**
- ▶ **Insufficient detail on the proposal's impact – Budget-saving options often lacked the granularity required for participants to understand what the potential impact could be. For example, one local authority proposed cuts to the events and performances budget without specifying which services would be lost. The group felt that this lack of detail meant that often they did not have the knowledge to decide if a proposal was acceptable or what the impact on them or their communities would be;**
- ▶ **The consultation process not feeling meaningful – One local authority provided a range of options in disparate areas and asked respondents to share if they felt the areas were essential, high priority, medium priority, low priority or non-essential. It was unclear how the grouping of areas was decided with one option being finance, digital and IT, council tax, school clothing grants, blue badge scheme. No explanation was given of what the areas were, and no option was given to provide any additional information to this consultation;**
- ▶ **Inaccessible language – The group did not feel the wording was always accessible. For example, one authority used a confusing response scale, such as asking if proposals were acceptable, indifferent, unacceptable, or undecided;**
- ▶ **Unconsidered culminative impact – Because local authorities and health and social care partnerships conducted separate consultations, the combined impact of their decisions on women and other minoritised groups could be overlooked;**
- ▶ **Siloed policy considerations – Consultations failed to address how decisions in one area might impact other priorities, such as how reducing school hours would impact on tackling child poverty or create barriers to employment for families and how this could lead to additional costs;**
- ▶ **Lack of transparency on consultation influence – It was unclear how consultation feedback would inform final decisions. This concern was amplified when two councils failed to publish reports on their consultation findings during the budget-setting process.**

The decisions taken by those who designed consultation processes impacted on women's awareness of opportunities to participate, as well as their desire to participate. The perception that decisions had already been made and that consultation processes were pre-determined was identified as a key barrier to participation.

WHAT WOMEN NEED TO GET INVOLVED

The graph below shares key areas that women responding to the 2026 Women's Survey identified as necessary to get involved in budget processes.

These responses provide a clear picture of the need for clear information about how to participate and share views as well as clear information on what is being asked. They also highlight the need for details on how people's views will be considered and the difference responding to a consultation can make.

'Trust that government isn't just ticking boxes and will actually act on any information gathered.'

'That it would make any difference and that I would actually be listened to.'

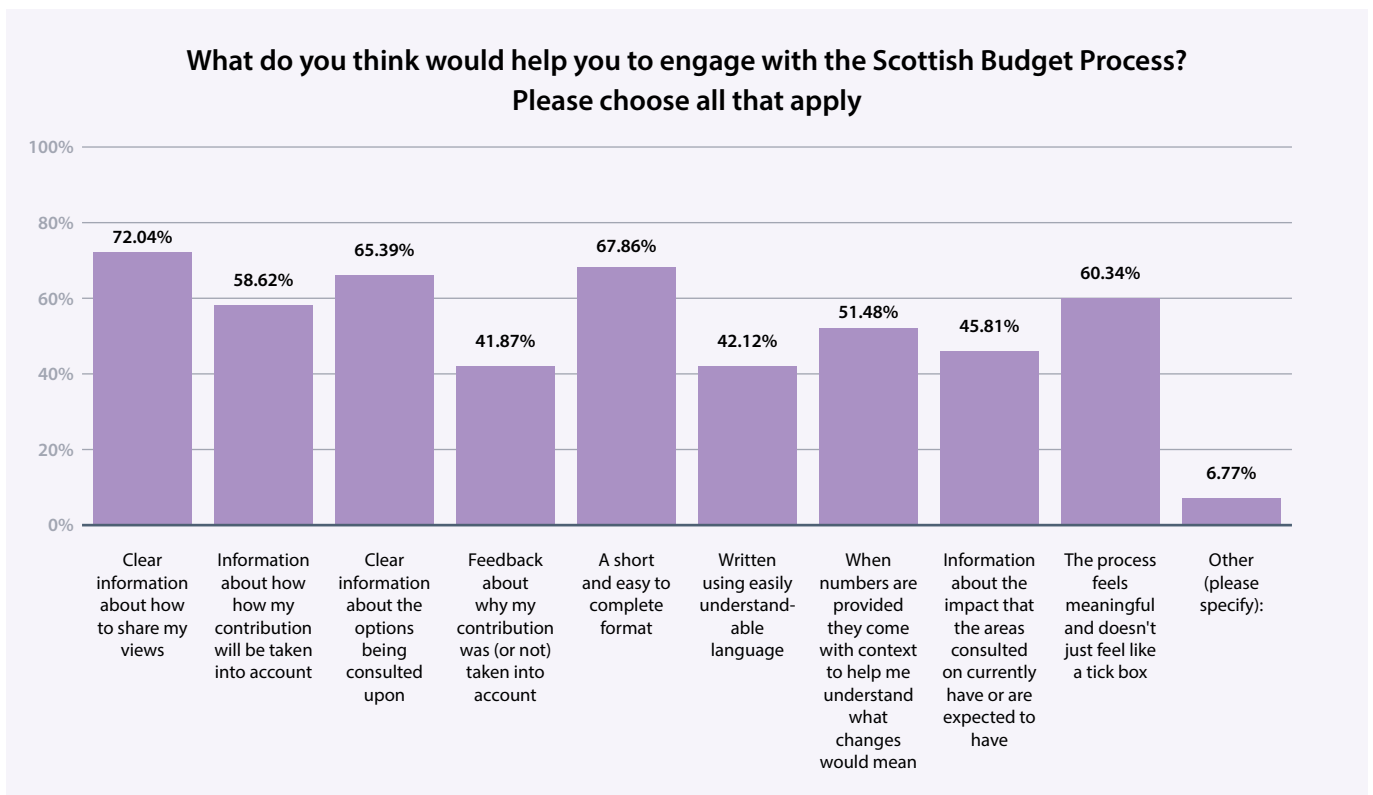
Responses across all groups of women were relatively stable but for some groups certain aspects were more important.

For example, disabled women particularly highlighted the need for a short and easy to complete format (72%) and that the process feels meaningful (66%), while Black and minority ethnic women gave greater importance to information about impact (52%) and single parents highlighted the need for a short and easy to complete forms (80%).

In line with the views shared by the Women's Economic Empowerment group, women who completed the survey told us that they would need clear information about proposals to be able to say how they felt something would impact on them and their community.

'The consequences of what my views would mean for the country as a whole should be clear. If I down vote something because I don't have a clear understanding of the consequences of doing that and it has a really negative future impact that would be awful.'

'That the process explains the expected impact on different groups of people. Eg. Employed people, women and men, carers or young people.'



Survey respondents also felt that providing feedback to those contributing to a consultation or participatory process on the difference that their engagement had made was important to encourage participation.

'I have offered my views through the government consultation website but the feedback, being so general, misses a lot of what I think are key points.'

Participants in the Women's Economic Empowerment group felt that sharing lived experience should be compensated to support people's participation.

Finally in relation to participation, we asked women when they thought government should consult on the budget. Most respondents (77%) felt it was important when making major changes to an area of funding so they could gather information on the potential impact and 74% felt annual consultation to understand priorities was important.

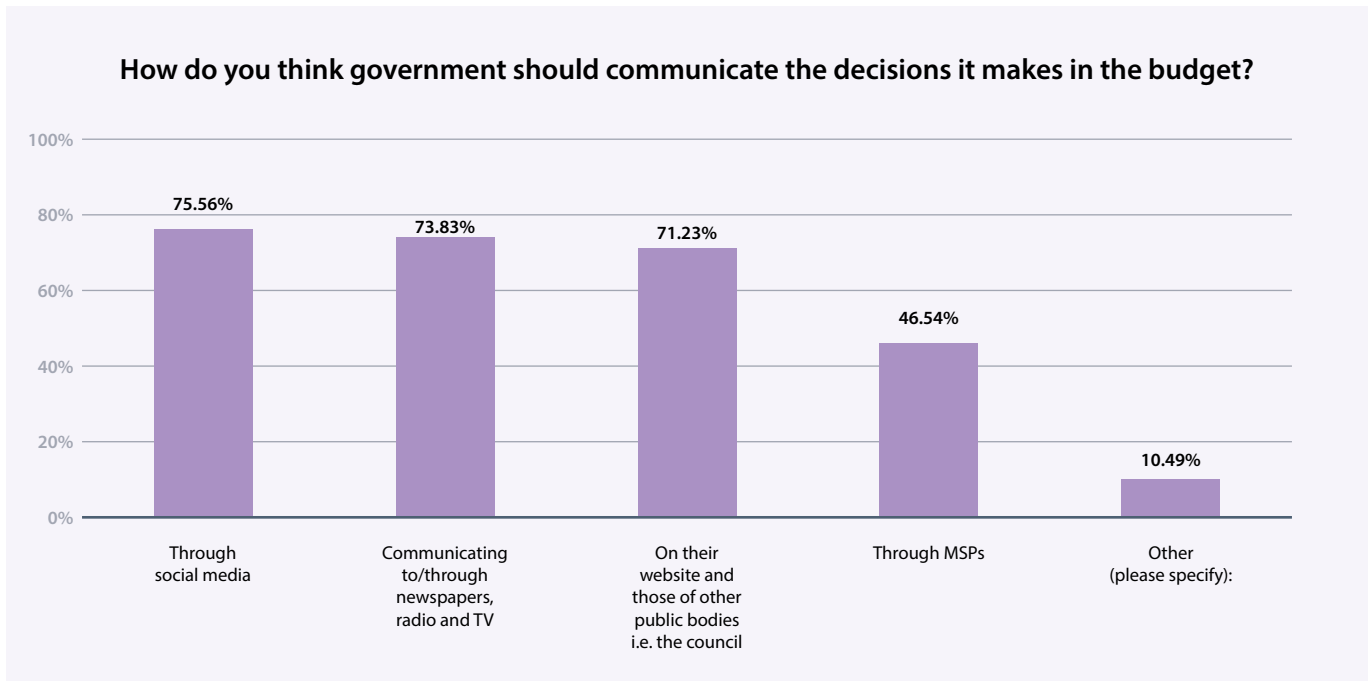


COMMUNICATING BUDGET DECISIONS

The Women's Economic Empowerment Group went on to look at how budget decisions were communicated. The group felt that all levels of government made limited attempts to clearly communicate the full breadth of the decisions they had made and their likely impact. At the local government level, one local authority the group reviewed had no information on its website, while the other had a news release that focused on the areas the local authority had chosen to invest in, without mentioning any savings/cuts made. The group also found that the media reports on budget decisions often concentrated on tax decisions with little information given about other decisions made. This made it difficult for the public to understand the full range of decisions taken or to assess whether these reflected their own priorities.

While the Scottish Government publishes the Your Scotland Your Finances document,² there is limited information included on the impact decisions are expected to have. It also focusses on areas of investment and says little about savings being made and the potential impact of these. The Women's Economic Empowerment group were clear that the information communicated should include the expected outcomes from the decisions taken, for example, what difference £7.6million additional investment in neurodiversity funding is likely to have.

For those who completed the women's survey, the graph below shows people's preferences on how best to communicate budget decisions. Within the other responses there was significant preference noted for communication by post or flyers sent directly to people. Other options considered were public meetings, through trusted partners in the public or third sector and the need to consider ethical use of social media platforms.



² Scottish Government (2026) [Scottish Budget 2026 to 2027: Your Scotland, Your Finances – a guide](#)

Retired women had significantly less preference for communication through social media and websites (down to 63% and 66%) while these forms of communication were more popular for women under 35 (88% and 78%). Disabled women also had a higher preference for communications via websites and through MSPs (78% and 53%).

Women on a household income of less than £20,000 had lower preference for preselected options and were more likely to suggest alternative methods such as letters, engagement through partner organisations or in-person

through locally elected representatives. Women from Black and minority ethnic communities had a lower preference for social media and a higher preference for websites (70% and 78%). Finally, women from the LGBT community responding to this survey had a higher preference for social media and through newspapers/radio (84% and 83%).

These results demonstrate the different needs of different groups of women and the varied approaches required to reach them.



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In asking women about the budget process in this year's SWBG 2026 Women's Survey and through those who took part in the Women's Economic Empowerment group, we have heard a clear message of women's desire to engage with the budget process and to receive

clear communications about budget outcomes, shared through a range of channels.

However, at present budget consultations at all levels of government are often piecemeal and carried out in a limited way. The Women's Economic Empowerment group identified some key barriers to genuine engagement through their more detailed consideration of recent consultations.

We are calling on the Scottish Government to:

- ▶ Set a clear plan for wider public participation in the Scottish Budget, including from the 2027-28 Scottish Budget onwards, with funding to support public engagement;
- ▶ Publish a citizen's version of the pre-budget and draft budget information, clearly outlining what the large budget figures are expected to achieve in a way that is relatable and meaningful for the public. Accessible information should be published at an early stage to enable participation, rather than only after the budget has been approved;
- ▶ Provide, promote and support opportunities to be involved in consultation activities across the budget cycle;
- ▶ Develop communication strategies to demonstrate the impact of public engagement on the budget-setting process, clearly outlining how the evidence provided by the public has informed budget decisions.

We are calling on MSPs to:

- ▶ Promote opportunities for participation through the pre-budget and draft budget scrutiny phases;
- ▶ Ensure that they hear from a wide range of citizens, with particular focus on people with protected characteristics as defined by the Equality Act 2010, as well as different socio-economic backgrounds, including representation from low-income groups. Call on the Scottish Government to present a budget engagement plan to Parliament.

We are calling on Councillors to:

- ▶ Promote best practice in participation in local budget processes as outlined in our [Gender Budgeting Toolkit](#);
- ▶ Develop communication strategies to demonstrate the impact of public engagement on the local budget-setting process, clearly outlining how the evidence provided by the public has informed budget decisions

OUR WORK WITH WOMEN

Women's Economic Empowerment group

The Scottish Women's Budget Group has been running a Women's Economic Empowerment project for two years. The aim of this work is to empower women to engage with the budget processes at national and local level. Through the last budget cycle the group met between October 2025 – April 2026 and considered the UK Autumn Statement, Scottish Budget and local authority budgets in three areas the women were based.

The women participating in this project self-select to join following previous engagement or membership

of SWBG. The women in the group bring a variety of experiences and intersecting characteristics which often mean they have particular experience of structural inequalities faced by women.

Women's Survey 2026

On 25th February 2026, the Scottish Women's Budget Group (SWBG) launched its fifth annual Women's Survey. The survey plays a vital role in documenting the lived experiences of women in Scotland, particularly how public policy and budgets intersect with and potentially reinforce existing inequalities. The survey was open for just over a month and gathered 1,025 responses from women across Scotland's 32 local authorities. The survey included a set of questions on the Scottish Budget process which were answered by over 830 respondents.



DEMOGRAPHICS OF WOMEN'S SURVEY RESPONDENTS

Type of area

50%

lived in an urban area (built up area with a population of over 10,000)

29%

lived in a small town

21%

lived in a rural area



Age



2%
were 18-25



12%
were 26-35



17%
were 36-45



18%
were 46-55



26%
were 56-65



22%
were 66-75



3%
were 76 and older

Household type

37%

two adult household

19%

two adult household with children (under 18)



8%

three or more adult household (i.e. flat-share, living with non-dependent family members or with dependent children over 18)

5%

single adult household with children (under 18)

7%

other

24%

single adult household without children

19%

of respondents' household income is lower than £20,000 per year



Disability

28%

of respondents have a disability



Ethnicity

57%
White Scottish

26%
White British

2%
English

3%
Women from black and minority ethnic communities*

1%
Irish

1%
Eastern European

6%
Any other white background

2%
Mixed or multiple ethnic groups

1%
I do not wish to disclose my ethnic origin



Sexual Orientation

83%
heterosexual/straight

11%
LGBTQ+

6%
Prefer not to say



* This group is made up of respondents identifying with the following ethnicities: Indian, Indian Scottish or Indian British; Pakistani, Pakistani Scottish or Pakistani British; Bangladeshi, Bangladeshi Scottish or Bangladeshi British; Chinese, Chinese Scottish or British Chinese; other Asian background; Caribbean, Caribbean Scottish or Caribbean British; African, African Scottish or African British; Black, Black Scottish or Black British; other Black background; and Arab, Arab Scottish or Arab British.

ABOUT US

The Scottish Women's Budget Group (SWBG) is a charity that promotes women's equality. We do this by helping people understand how budgets and economic policy can tackle inequality. SWBG brings together a wide range of women from across Scotland who have an interest in women's equality and want to achieve better gender equality in our society. We have focused on encouraging active gender analysis in the Scottish Budget process since 2000.

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Our work to engage women has been supported by:

