

## New Economics Foundation

### Peoples Café Project

The Electoral Commission established the New Initiatives Fund to support and promote new ways of raising awareness about voting and democracy. We have awarded grants to local, community and national organisations working with different target audiences across the whole of the UK.

This evaluation report provides information about the New Economics Foundation's Peoples Café project funded by the New Initiatives Fund. In the report we highlight the aims, objectives and achievements of the project, and lessons learnt by the New Economics Foundation.

### Introduction

The New Economics Foundation works to construct a new economy centred on people and the environment. Much of its work is focused on research and education.

The Peoples Café Project was run in collaboration with the Camden Society, who run a number of cafes in London staffed by people with learning disabilities. The project provided six cafe discussion events at each of the nine venues across London, Birmingham, Plymouth and Hereford, where people debated the impact of political issues, government and elections. They planned for the average attendance at each event to be 15 people, totalling 800 participants across 53 events. Participants discussed issues that were specified in advance at their tables, before feeding back to the larger group.

### Aim

The project's aim was to engage people in civic life through discussion events, targeting their habits and interests, and focusing on people with low incomes.

### Funding

The project was awarded a grant of £29,602 and started in July 2005, lasting for 13 months.

### Target outcomes

The target outcomes of the project were to:

- increase awareness and/or understanding of elections and government in the UK
- give people who do not normally engage with the political system the chance to talk about issues that matter to them
- support participants to increase their understanding both of the way in which the political system works in relation to these issues and also of the difficulties that politicians have in decision-making
- measure the extent to which cafes are attractive, low-cost venues for such events

### How successful was the project?

594 people came to 53 cafe events in areas of social deprivation. The format of the session included two or three

rounds of table conversations, with plenary sessions after each. Usually people would move tables after each round and were provided with topics for discussion specified in advance. The project was continually assessed, enabling changes to be made if necessary. Feedback was sought in the form of questionnaires, group question and answer sessions, and individual interviews with participants. The evaluator also considered numbers attending each event, regional influences and the circumstances of participants.

Initially the group ran mixed events including the general public and people with learning disabilities. They found that some participants with severe learning disabilities presented challenges for those who had not come into contact with this group before. This was overcome by separating participants, enabling people with learning disabilities to attend their own event at some of the venues. This provided the opportunity for many people with learning disabilities, who had not previously engaged with the political system, to participate in discussions on citizenship and how government works.

The project met its overall objective and engaged people in civic life by targeting issues that interested or affected them. These included trade justice, climate change and local

planning issues. However, not all the targets were met.

Many of the participants interviewed felt that the concept of the project was innovative, and appreciated the opportunity to participate in discussion and hear other people's perspectives. However, participants generally felt that they had not increased their knowledge of the political systems and government in the UK. This is because discussions were broad and rarely focused on the details necessary to increase knowledge in these areas.

### Good practice

- Marketing the sessions to established networks of people who already knew each other ensured discussions were engaging. In addition, holding events on burning issues that people wanted to talk about increased attendance.
- Discussion events had two main characteristics which made them appealing: they were simple and cheap to organise, and people who attended generally found them constructive, deliberative and enjoyable.
- Spin-offs from the events included a CVS worker using the cafe format for a meeting on 'reaching the hard to reach audiences' aimed at statutory and voluntary sector providers of education and training. Another participant organised

a series of conversation events as part of the first Edinburgh Food Festival in August 2006.

### Lessons learnt

Projects of a similar nature can learn from the following lessons:

- Mixed groups including the general public and people with learning disabilities need to be carefully facilitated.
- Participants generally felt that they had not increased their knowledge of political systems and government in the UK.
- The group found that a more structured approach to monitoring would have enabled the evaluation data to be more easily collated and interpreted.

### Further information

For further information about this project please contact:

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