

CARES Sandwell

Postal Votes for Carers 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 CARES Sandwell's Postal Votes for Carers project funded by the New Initiatives Fund. In the report we highlight the aims, objectives and achievements of the project, and lessons learnt by CARES Sandwell.

Introduction

CARES is an organisation based in Sandwell, West Midlands, that provides support and respite services to unpaid family carers. They developed and implemented Postal Votes for Carers and the People They Look After as a pilot project to promote postal voting among the target group.

Aim

The main aim of the project was to pilot raising awareness of postal voting as a method of democratic participation for unpaid carers and the people they care for. They also sought to give additional information on the postal voting process by emphasising the practicality and accessibility of postal voting and helping people fill in postal vote applications if such assistance was necessary.

Funding

The project was awarded £16,500, initially for 2003–04; the project eventually took place from July to December 2005.

Target outcomes

The target outcomes of the project were to:

- distribute a minimum of 50 postal vote application forms in each of Sandwell's 24 electoral wards (1,200 forms in total)
- raise the profile of CARES and the work the charity undertakes
- promote greater awareness of the role of the Electoral Commission and the availability of postal voting

How successful was the project?

Targeting the 30,086 unpaid carers in Sandwell, CARES used existing research on issues such as time commitments, health problems and other factors affecting carers to demonstrate that they would be ideal candidates for postal voting. The project was delivered in various ways: though letters written directly to carers to raise awareness of postal voting; through distribution of an illustrated poster to carers and over 100 voluntary organisations; through presentations given in day centres and other similar establishments; and indirectly through voluntary and statutory

service providers, such as GPs' surgeries being asked to distribute postal voting forms.

Twenty-three presentations were given to carer support groups in the six towns in Sandwell from the end of September 2005.

Statistical data from the electoral registration office of Sandwell Council was used to find out how many individuals were registered for postal voting before the project began, compared with the number of unpaid carers.

Audiences at the presentations were informed about the availability of postal voting and offered assistance to complete an application form if they wished. The local electoral registration office was notified of the project and informed that the forms being used were different from standard, council-issued ones; it was hoped that it would be easier to measure the number of forms returned via the project as a proportion of overall postal vote applications during the period. In the end, this did not prove possible.

The results of this pilot project seem to show that many of the target audience were aware of postal votes, and were either already registered or felt that it was important to go to the polling station to vote if possible. For example, at one location in Smethwick, the project found that, 'Although the majority of the group were

elderly, they were nevertheless able to walk to the polling station to vote and any individual that required a postal vote had already registered for one.' However, audience members were also able to take forms away to distribute to people that they knew, and members of the project team were able to reassure and alleviate concerns that people may have had arising from recent negative publicity about postal voting.

Although 473 electors in Sandwell registered for a postal vote during the course of the project, this figure cannot be attributed solely to the project because the local authority was canvassing for postal votes at the same time. However, the project met its objective of raising awareness of the availability of postal voting to carers and the people they care for.

Good practice

- A variety of methods were used to publicise the project and disseminate the postal vote application forms.
- Time was taken to reassure audience members about the security of postal voting.
- People liked the flexibility that postal voting gave them to return their votes over a period of time.
- CARES worked with voluntary and statutory service providers (e.g. Aids and

Adaptations Service, Meals on Wheels) to raise awareness of the project.

Lessons learnt

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

- The project confirmed a high level of awareness amongst carers of the availability of postal voting, and that many people valued the importance of going in person to the polling station.
- An assessment of the general problems faced by carers which theoretically implied that postal voting would be useful to them was not borne out in practice.
- Word of mouth is often a more effective method of spreading a message than presentations and leaflets.

Further information

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Further information about the New Initiatives Fund and the wider work of the Electoral Commission can be found at www.electoralcommission.org.uk