

## Hansard Society

### Citizen Calling

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 Hansard Society's Citizen Calling 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 Hansard Society.

### Introduction

The Hansard Society works to promote effective Parliamentary democracy by carrying out a programme of work aimed at strengthening the political system and enhancing engagement in civic and political life. Current activities include citizenship training, Parliamentary and government education and e-democracy projects. They also conduct research into reforming political institutions and law-making processes.

They developed the Citizen Calling project to pilot the use of mobile phone technology in a Home Affairs Select Committee inquiry. Young people were recruited to the project and encouraged to make submissions via their phones to an inquiry about young people and the criminal justice system. A website was created to hold the young people's submissions, and enable interested parties to read them and add comments.

### Aims and objectives

The aim of the project was to test the use of mobile

communications technology in Parliamentary consultation.

The project's objectives were:

- to promote public awareness and understanding of elections, government, and Parliament and its role in law and policy making
- to promote awareness and understanding of the role of technology in supporting law and policy making
- to assess the capacity of mobile telecommunications technology to support Parliamentary awareness and participation
- to determine the form and quantity of inquiry submissions gathered using mobile telecommunications technology

### Funding

The organisation was awarded a grant of £21,360. The project started in January 2006 and ran for twelve months.

### How successful was the project?

The project recruited young participants through their teachers and youth workers.

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Invitations were sent to 200 community youth groups and 500 secondary schools. Staff were urged to discuss the issues raised by the inquiry with the young people they worked with and provide support as necessary to facilitate their engagement. In addition, information on the project was uploaded onto MySpace and Google Video, alongside a short video of the Committee Chair inviting participation. Press releases were distributed to broadcast, press and web media and on the launch day young people who had registered an interest received a text message informing them that the inquiry was open for submissions

Participants were encouraged to visit the project website and to register themselves, allowing the project to collect demographic, attitudinal and behavioural data about users' political and technical literacy. As well as hosting the contributions and allowing comments by visitors, the site also included FAQs on the pilot, and information about Parliament, select committees and how to get involved. The project aimed to structure the submissions by requesting that the young people answer five questions focusing on their experience of crime.

To evaluate the project the Hansard Society worked in conjunction with an independent evaluator. The data used for the evaluation included evidence submitted to the consultation, a pre-consultation survey, post-consultation feedback, website traffic statistics and feedback from the select

committee members. There were 887 visitors who made 1390 visits to the website. Of these, 101 people registered to take part in the project, however the level of submissions received was disappointingly low.

Twelve messages were submitted via mobiles by eight contributors; additionally, a further five comments were added to the website in response to submissions. The main points made by the young people were that collectively they are often made scapegoats for the misdemeanours of a few; that the media often exaggerates crime and that there is a sense of moral panic; and that meanwhile the real problems (social deprivation and boredom; lack of real community cohesion and grass-roots activity) are not addressed. Some contributors pointed out that effectively tackling such issues would increase young people's desire to participate in society, and lessen the temptation to commit crime.

Respondents of the pre-consultation questionnaire generally claimed to be experienced proactive users of the internet and mobile phone technologies, with 56% having some interest in politics and 60% considering themselves to be informed on political issues. Twelve people completed post-consultation questionnaires. Questionnaire responses highlighted that participants felt empowered by being able to get their views across to people who make decisions. They also said it was good to know that they were being listened to.

Having to complete the questionnaire caused some resentment as it slowed down their interaction with the site, and there were also suggestions that problems lay with texting as a communication tool.

There were a number of contributing factors that may have impacted on the level of responses. These included the difficulty in securing a shortcode number, which would have allowed contributors to send in submissions for free. Instead, a longcode number was used, which meant that young people had to pay the standard network rate to send in their submissions. In addition, the cost of leasing the longcode number determined that the submission period could only be four weeks; it may have been possible to have a longer submission period if a free to call number had been available.

Feedback from the select committee highlighted that while they felt that information technology played a role in select committee work, the current problems of using mobiles and messaging, as demonstrated by the pilot, meant that without technological advancement, this route was of limited use to committees.

### Good practice

- The numbers actively contributing to the Citizen Calling project were small. However, those who did register included young people who, while showing high levels of technical literacy and political interest, had not previously engaged in formal political processes.

- Participants understood that their submissions and comments had fed into the process of law and policy making in the UK.

## Lessons learnt

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

- A great deal of importance was placed on youth workers, teachers and MPs to help facilitate participation. The research team believe that more could have been done on the part of facilitators to help promote awareness and participation.
- Despite careful planning and liaising with all project contributors, a greater lead-in time and a more strategic promotional campaign would have helped raise awareness and participation.
- The cost of leasing a longcode number determined that the submission period could only be four weeks; it may have been possible to have a longer submission period if a free to call number had been available.

### Further information

For further information about this project please visit:

[www.hansardsociety.org.uk/  
programmes/e-democracy/  
citizencalling](http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/programmes/e-democracy/citizencalling)

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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](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk)

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