

## Women into Politics

### Elections, Politics and Governance: A Special Dialogue for Young Women

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 Elections, Politics and Governance project funded by the New Initiatives Fund. In the report we highlight the aims, objectives and achievements of the project, and lessons learnt by Women into Politics.

#### Introduction

The project consisted of a series of single day events for women from 17 to 25 years of age to discuss issues with candidates and representatives, and among themselves. The events consisted of a panel discussion and questions and answers, a workshop on democratic institutions and process run by the Electoral Commission, lunch, followed by a debate in the style of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Each of the five main political parties was offered a place on the panel for each event.

In addition each young woman was given a pack outlining who the panellists were, background information on the debate, information on how to get more involved in democracy and a registration form.

The project was supported by the Community Relations Council and other community partners including University of Ulster, Queens University Belfast, Omagh District Council, the Department for Employment and Learning, Omagh Women's Area Network and secondary schools.

#### Objectives

The objectives of the Elections, Politics and Governance project were to:

- increase interest in and awareness of government structures, voting systems and democratic governance
- increase knowledge regarding voter registration and to encourage young women to become registered voters
- signpost young women to guidance for the pursuit of a career in politics and governance.

#### Target outcomes

The target outcomes of the project were:

- a total of 150 young women engaged in political discussion among themselves and with candidates and elected representatives
- young women registered as voters
- young women having an increased understanding of the government structures of the UK and NI
- young women more aware of the requirements and rewards of a career in politics and

governance and/or will be aware of the guidance available regarding such careers

- young women more secure/self-assured in expressing their own views on politics

## Funding

A grant of **£5,682** was awarded in April 2005. The project ran from April to December 2005.

## How successful was the project?

An independent evaluator assessed the project's outcomes. Clear targets for attendance were used as the baseline for evaluation, coupled with the use of a post-discussion questionnaire and a reflections on learning worksheet.

The evaluation measured increases in understanding and awareness, as well as feelings regarding voting and self-assurance. The worksheets were returned to participants so that they would have a continuing reminder of the event.

The women were also asked what issues were most important to them, and what they would change about their community. Responses included smoking in public places, racism, sectarianism, student loans and more activities for young people. These responses gave an interesting insight into the minds of the participants.

A random sample of women not attending the events, but in similar academic circumstances were asked to complete the evaluation questionnaire to provide a control group. This proved a very effective tool in measuring the impact of the project on those who attended the events.

The project experienced some difficulties in recruiting attendees due to rural locations and late notice date changes, however, around 180 young women attended discussions, exceeding the original target of 150. Fewer than expected actually registered as voters due in part to difficulties recruiting young women from the appropriate age group.

## Good practice

A number of areas of good practice can be identified from this project:

- Sound and thorough evaluation methodology, including participant questionnaires and one-to-one interviews provided the organisation with high quality feedback.
- The use of a control group allowed the organisation to monitor the impact of its workshops on participants, compared to non-participants.
- Holding the workshops in different locations, both urban and rural, allowed the organisation to reach and involve women from as many areas as possible.

- The choice of event format where participants were able to meet their political representatives in person appears to have had an extremely positive impact on participants, leading them to change their perceptions of politics.

## Lessons learnt

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

- The project would have benefited from a longer planning period, to allow greater attention to be paid to recruiting participants for the discussions and for the control group.
- Greater experience of working with young people would have made the organisation more sensitive to the timetable commitments of young women being recruited from educational establishments.

## Further information

For further information about this project please contact:

Susan M Kelly  
Women into Politics  
109-113 Royal Avenue  
Belfast BT1 1FF

Tel: 028 9024 3363

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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