

Voluntary Action Leicester – VALUES Active Citizen

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 Voluntary Action Leicester's VALUES Active Citizen project funded by the New Initiatives Fund. In the report we highlight the aims, objectives and achievements of the project, and lessons learnt by Voluntary Action Leicester.

Introduction

The VALUES Active Citizen project was run by Voluntary Action Leicester targeting people with learning disabilities. The project ran for 14 months over the European Parliamentary elections in June 2004.

The project established three VALUES Citizenship groups of four–six who met at regular intervals. Scrapbook and video evidence were used to record the work of the groups during each meeting. A Citizenship conference was also held for 22 participants on 6 April 2005.

The VALUES Active Citizen project is part of the wider VALUES project which aims to help people with learning disabilities get involved in voluntary work and feel more involved in society.

Aims and objectives

The objectives of VALUES Active Citizen were to:

- encourage people to get involved in consultation processes (looking at what is involved and how to make a contribution), actively helping people with a learning

disability to participate as citizens in public consultations; and

- helping people with learning disabilities to understand what is involved in voting in different tier elections, deciding whether they know enough to vote, making up their mind who to vote for, understanding the rights and duties of citizens - and how disability impacts on those rights.

Funding

A grant of £15,860 was awarded in December 2003 of which **£15,537** was paid out.

Target outcomes

The target outcomes of the project were to:

- assess the level of knowledge from 18 individuals at the outset of the project, at the end of the project and one year later;
- a questionnaire to assess attitudes and views of carers, parents and staff;
- a half day conference on being an active citizen, with attendance and evaluations from 50 people with a learning disability; and

- visits made to the groups or by the groups to gain further information and inspire discussion.

How successful was the project?

Overall the project appears to have achieved all of its objectives and some of its targets.

The group project activities followed four main themes:

- raising awareness of public facilities and spaces;
- understanding of current affairs;
- awareness of the processes and procedures of formal elections; and
- citizenship: rights and responsibilities, feeling part of society, confidence, access, involvement in what is going on in the city.

An independent evaluator was hired to assess the project's outcomes. The methods used included a questionnaire at the beginning and the end of the project, a feedback day and a questionnaire sent to the wider VALUES project volunteers.

The results of the evaluation indicate that volunteers now know more about the public facilities available and participate more in consultations than they did when they started the project. About one third of the volunteers now use the lending

library regularly, and some volunteers voted at the European election. They have also widened their horizons in terms of what is necessary for the community and good for the citizen, and feel more appreciated by seeing their role and place in an active community.

Good practice

- The Citizenship group was part of a wider project encouraging people with learning disabilities to value their input into society. This helped to put the work they were doing in a wider context and so helped them make better sense of the knowledge they had gained.
- Alternating the programme of activities between talks, visits and practical work helped volunteers to both listen and experience the relevance of the information they received.
- The creation of an ethos focusing on abilities rather than disabilities provided a comfortable, supportive and respectful environment to facilitate volunteer learning.

Lessons learnt

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

- Clearer and more robust evaluation methods should be developed in order to assess the impact of a project of this nature. Information collected for this project was not

sufficient to demonstrate the impact on participants.

- The timing of groups should take into account the participants' other commitments, such as other voluntary work, to encourage greater participation in the groups.
- The length of the project should be realistic to deliver all its activities. Twelve months was perhaps insufficient to achieve the desired results for this project.
- The need to work with participants individually to take into consideration their specific needs took more time than originally anticipated.

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

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