

Spiral Skills – Right to Vote

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

This evaluation report provides information about Spiral Skills' Right to Vote project funded by the New Initiatives Fund. In the report we highlight the aims and objectives and achievements of the Right to Vote project, and lessons learned by Spiral Skills.

The grant

Spiral Skills is a division of Learning First, a Northumberland education and training provider that seeks to widen participation in education and to promote the social inclusion of various groups. Spiral Skills is the advocacy arm within Learning First that works with people with learning disabilities to help them speak up for themselves and assert their human rights. Spiral Skills worked with Adult Training Centres across Northumberland to deliver the Right to Vote project.

The Electoral Commission agreed to grant a sum of £9,899 to Spiral Skills for the Right to Vote project. An amount of **£8,364** was paid out. The primary aim of the project was to work with people with learning disabilities at day centres, self advocacy groups and colleges in Northumberland to produce a series of accessible leaflets about democratic processes and institutions.

The Commission's grant covered the costs of coordinating and delivering the project,

holding a one-day conference and designing and printing five leaflets for distribution. Right to Vote ran from May to November 2004.

Aims and objectives

The primary objectives of Right to Vote were to:

- increase awareness among people with learning disabilities in Northumberland of their right to vote;
- explain to them how to vote, and help them identify what support they might need;
- explain the right to vote of people with learning disabilities to their carers and the responsibilities of carers in facilitating, but not influencing, people when they choose to exercise this right; and
- introduce people with learning disabilities to the role of local and central government.

Target outcomes

The target outcomes of the project were for people with learning disabilities to:

- understand how to vote and

their right to vote;

- understand what a local council does; and
- understand who their MP is and what government does.

Evaluation

Pam Walker, Advocacy Project Manager for Spiral Skills, led the evaluation of this project. The following methods were used to assess the extent to which the original objectives were met:

- ongoing observation and monitoring of participant involvement at training sessions;
- questionnaires completed by participants at a November 2004 conference; and
- results from a democracy quiz completed by carers at training sessions.

Deliverables

Over the seven-month project, Right to Vote delivered the following:

- sixty people with learning disabilities participated in workshop sessions at adult training centres run by Northumberland City Council;
- fifteen carers of people with learning disabilities attended two training sessions specific to their needs;
- five leaflets were produced in three formats – large print, colour, and black and white – for further photocopying; and
- a one-day conference was held to launch the five

leaflets. Fifty people with learning disabilities attended from across Northumberland.

Resources and project management

Pam Walker, Advocacy Project Manager for Learning First-Spiral Skills was responsible for coordinating and overseeing the Right to Vote project. Records of budgeted and actual income and expenditures were maintained and monitored at the Learning First-Spiral Skills offices.

The project delivered the above activities as documented below:

- Preliminary work with self-advocacy groups: **£2,585**
- Training sessions and materials: **£2,314**
- Conference: **£845**
- Travel: **£760**
- Design and print of leaflets: **£916**
- Office costs: **£944**

Total: **£8,364**

How successful was the project?

Short-term outcomes

The Learning First-Spiral Skills' Right to Vote project achieved its key objectives and outcomes of increasing awareness amongst people with learning disabilities of their right to vote in the Northumberland region.

The Right to Vote project began with an initial assessment of the level of

knowledge people with learning disabilities in Northumberland had about their right to vote. Spiral Skills staff attended adult day centres across the region, facilitating short workshops to understand the current level of knowledge about the right to vote. Seventy-five per cent of those attending the workshops had not voted before and 60% said they were not registered. Most participants did not know what the electoral register was and none of the participants either recognised or had been involved in filling out a voter registration form. Furthermore, one group of adults did not know that at 18 years of age they became adults and therefore gained the right to vote.

This initial assessment confirmed the need for further education for people with learning disabilities about their right to vote. The next phase of the project was for Spiral Skills staff to work closely with people with learning disabilities to identify the most appropriate content, and accessible format, for a series of leaflets. These leaflets were to be launched at the 5 November 2004 conference.

A series of day-long information dissemination and training workshops were planned to develop the content of the leaflets. A number of challenges were faced at the first session, however, such as maintaining people's interest for extended periods. It became clear that half-day, monthly sessions would be more effective at maintaining

participants' attention and utilising Spiral Skills' staff time. This provided an additional opportunity to reinforce and build on learning from previous sessions with the same group of people.

Spiral Skills used the half-day sessions to test the content and format of five leaflets, selecting those that the participants felt were most appropriate. This process helped identify the vocabulary and images that would clarify concepts rather than confuse. Spiral Skills used information leaflets from the 10 June 2004 European Parliamentary elections to understand what format and style would make one leaflet more easy to understand than another. This process also illustrated how important clear photographs and illustrations would be, particularly for individuals with lower literacy levels.

This developmental process appears to have been effective at educating those involved with the project and developing a series of accessible leaflets. An unanticipated outcome was the creation of a 'Dictionary of political terms' that became a companion to the leaflets. Many of the words used to describe electoral and democratic systems were new to participants, and Spiral Skills discovered that carers also found the dictionary helpful.

At the same time as the leaflets for people with disabilities were being developed, the Right to Vote project also held workshops with carers to help

them understand the rights of people with learning disabilities and their own responsibilities in providing support while not influencing decisions about who to vote for.

Unfortunately, only 15 carers attended the two workshops, which was below the level Spiral Skills had hoped for. Even so, the workshops were helpful in understanding the level of knowledge among those carers who did attend. A 'democracy quiz' was used at the start of each workshop to gauge levels of understanding, which revealed that many of the carers had less knowledge than some of the people with learning disabilities. Less than 25% were able to describe the job of an MP, and the same number stated they were voters. More importantly, less than 25% knew that it is an offence not to put an eligible adult's name on the electoral register. A leaflet for carers was developed from these workshops.

The final component of the project was to launch the newly developed leaflets at the 5 November 2004 conference. More than 50 people with learning disabilities attended the event. A number of local politicians also attended, including Councillor Jim Wright, Joint Chair of the Northumberland Learning Disability Board.

All attendees were asked to complete a questionnaire at the end of the conference, which revealed that 90% now had their names on the electoral

register. About half of these were as a result of attending the workshops. Furthermore, all delegates stated they knew how to contact their local councillor or MP and also said they felt confident enough to mark a real ballot paper in an election.

Longer-term evaluation

The longer-term impact of this project will be realised through the distribution of the leaflets throughout Northumberland and the UK. Ten requests for copies of the leaflets have already been received from similar organisations in Wales, Cornwall, Yorkshire, the Midlands and County Durham, as well as from the Electoral Reform Society. These requests suggest there is positive support and demand for the leaflets.

It will be beneficial for Spiral Skills to remain in touch with the organisations that request copies of the leaflets in order to find out what response organisations observe and if they have any recommendations for improvement. It will also be beneficial to monitor the level of knowledge and awareness among people with learning disabilities in Northumberland to gauge their retention of knowledge and confidence over the long term.

Conclusions

Spiral Skills' Right to Vote project has been successful at increasing awareness among people with learning disabilities in Northumberland of their right to vote. The workshop format

used by Learning First-Spiral Skills appears to have worked well to identify the needs of the target audience and develop leaflets that responded appropriately. The workshops also helped identify the need for a 'Dictionary of political terms' that can be used as a stand-alone resource or as a companion to the leaflets.

The level of knowledge among both people with learning disabilities and carers who attended the workshops was low at the start of this project. By the end, however, participants knew they were eligible to vote, had practised registering to vote and ticking boxes on a ballot form, knew their ballot was secret and felt confident about marking a real ballot in an election.

This workshop method appears to have worked well at providing accessible information to 60 Northumberland people with learning disabilities about exercising their right to vote and to 15 carers about their responsibilities. There is now a further opportunity to extend the impact of this project by distributing the five leaflets across the UK and sharing best practice with similar organisations that want to achieve the same aims.

Through the evaluation of this project it has been possible to identify a number of elements of good practice and 'lessons

learned' that could be of interest to other organisations or bodies considering replicating this concept.

Good practice

- establishing a baseline about the level of knowledge among people with learning disabilities and their carers was essential to understanding what level of information was required;
- developing the leaflets directly with people with learning disabilities was effective at ensuring the content and format were accessible and clear; and
- sharing the leaflets with other organisations and boroughs will assist those who do not have the resources to conduct a similar project, and will extend the impact of this project.

Lessons learned

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

- conducting shorter ongoing workshops to increase awareness and develop the leaflets was more effective than the originally planned full-day sessions;
- testing assumptions about participants' knowledge was crucial to understanding and addressing their needs most

effectively; and

- a new approach to attracting carers' interest in the project is required to ensure people with learning disabilities get the information they need to exercise their right to vote.

New Initiatives Fund

For further information about this project, please contact Pam Walker from Learning First-Spiral Skills at info@learningfirst.org.uk or visit their website at: www.learningfirst.org.uk

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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