

## Kent County Council

### County Councillors in Schools

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 Kent County Council's County Councillors in Schools project funded by the New Initiatives Fund. In the report we highlight the aims, objectives and achievements of the project, and lessons learnt by Kent County Council.

#### Introduction

Kent County Council developed the County Councillors in Schools project as a pilot exercise with the intention of eventually expanding it across Kent. The project facilitated the visits of county councillors to local schools to discuss the roles of both the council and councillors. A resource pack was also developed so that young people could prepare for the visits.

#### Aims and objectives

The aim of the project was to increase the understanding and interest of young people in Kent in local democracy.

The project's objectives were to:

- increase the level of understanding that young people have about local government
- increase the level of understanding that young people have about the role of county councillors
- increase the level of interest in local politics and local government demonstrated by young people

- increase the county councillors' level of understanding of young people's concerns about their local community

#### Funding

The organisation was awarded a grant of £9,338, for a project that ran from October 2006 to March 2007.

#### How successful was the project?

The project built on Kent County Council's existing democracy work, including their participation in Local Democracy Week. Due to delays and difficulties in organising school visits, only five of the six planned visits took place. The visits were undertaken by four councillors, representing three political parties. Approximately 130 students aged 13–16 took part in the visits. The talks were conducted during citizenship classes and consisted of explanations of what councillors and the council do, and discussion on key topics that the young people had identified in advance. There were also question and answer sessions where time allowed.

The project evaluation was undertaken by the council's Youth Participation Coordinator. The evaluation included questionnaires for students and feedback forms that were completed by students, teachers and county councillors. The initial plan allowed for the levels of student interest and understanding of democracy to be measured through the use of two student questionnaires (one completed before, and one after the visits). However, due to limited time in the classroom, there was some inconsistency in the completion of the questionnaires. In total 47 students correctly completed questionnaires, and 68 students completed feedback forms. This has resulted in less robust evaluation data to draw upon when forming judgments on the project's success.

The findings show that 95% of students had improved or greatly improved knowledge and understanding of local democracy. Eighty per cent said they now understood the duties of the county councillors, 79% had learned the frequency of the county elections and 68% stated that, when eligible, they would vote in either the local or general elections. Student feedback was positive, indicating that they enjoyed the interactive nature of the sessions. Teachers found the visits useful, and that the sessions engaged the young people. They also stated that they would recommend the activity to their colleagues.

County councillors felt that it was a worthwhile activity and that they would be happy to continue the relationship with the schools.

The project met its overall objectives and increased young people's levels of interest, understanding and knowledge about the role of county councillors and local government. County councillors learnt of the issues and concerns of young people through delivering their talks in an interactive manner, allowing young people to express their views.

### Good practice

- The interactive nature of the sessions assisted young people's engagement.
- Councillors were flexible about what was covered in each session, gauging the knowledge and interest levels of the class and responding accordingly.
- By visiting schools and talking with the students, county councillors had the opportunity to provide a human face to politics. One of the most common themes of the student feedback was that they enjoyed having their views listened to and taken seriously.

### Lessons learnt

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

- Greater initial preparation would have facilitated a better learning experience for the young people. This could

have been delivered through an initial lesson to the young people conducted by the Project Coordinator, to enable the young people to consider issues that were important to them.

- A debriefing session following the county councillors' visit, allowing the young people to discuss what they had learned, would have helped to embed learning.
- Teachers felt that the duration of the visit should be extended, allowing young people to familiarise themselves with the county councillor, and be more confident in asking questions.
- Undertaking questionnaires both before and after the visits can be a good way to assess the impact of the visits and improve any future visits.

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