

London Borough of Tower Hamlets – Build Your Own Politician

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 Build Your Own Politician project funded by the New Initiatives Fund. In the report we highlight the aims, objectives and achievements of the project, and lessons learnt by London Borough of Tower Hamlets.

Introduction

Build Your Own Politician was devised by the London Borough of Tower Hamlets Electoral Services Department as a pilot project to explore young people's perceptions of politicians and to openly consider the barriers that may prevent young people from becoming politically engaged.

Over a two week period, a core group of young people in Tower Hamlets worked with a local artist and Electoral Services staff to discuss the characteristics that make an ideal politician.

Participants did this through group debates, games, research projects, visits, interviews and a range of other creative sessions. Working with the artist, they used these ideas to produce a piece of visual work that was exhibited at a local community centre.

The exhibition ran for six weeks at the Ideas Store, Crisp Street, before touring the borough during local democracy week in October 2005 with additional drop-in workshops.

Objectives

Objectives of the project were to:

- raise awareness and stimulate debate among young people

about political engagement and the role of the politician in their everyday lives

- raise awareness among young people about the importance of voting
- increase confidence in politics among young people
- create a framework for young people to communicate effectively with local decision-makers
- raise political awareness among the wider community across the borough
- raise awareness of Electoral Services in Tower Hamlets

Funding

A grant of £16,600 was awarded in July 2005, and the project ran until October of the same year.

Target outcomes

The target outcomes were to:

- ensure that between 10 to 15 participants were able to name their political representative, be aware of what they do and explain what qualities make a good politician
- create a display of project work to be exhibited across Tower Hamlets

- allow a further 500 young people to have contact with the project during the exhibition stage and to increase their awareness of their political representatives
- generate borough wide awareness of the project through local press coverage

How successful was the project?

Overall the project achieved and in many cases exceeded its key objectives and target outcomes. The success was evaluated using questionnaires, focus groups and the use of 'secret ballot boxes' for anonymous feedback.

Thirty-six young people took part in the initial 10 days of outreach workshops. Following these, all participants demonstrated an understanding of different political structures, the value of democracy and the role of politicians.

From the local community, 484 people visited the exhibition either at the Ideas Store or other locations across the borough.

The exhibition created a forum for group members to meet and interview politicians including the Mayor of Tower Hamlets.

The project was also successful in raising the profile of Electoral Services thus paving the way for future work in Tower Hamlets.

Following the exhibition, the project co-ordinator received a large number of requests from community groups for future

partnership work. A local teacher took her class to a workshop as part of their citizenship programme. This shows that the project reached well beyond its original target group and really captured people's imagination.

The project also generated a lot of positive press coverage.

Good practice

A number of areas of good practice can be identified:

- A creative and flexible approach to encourage participation contributed to the success of the project. Workshops with the core group included a photography session, a workshop on identity, media and music run by Operation Black Vote and a visit to the Black Power exhibition at the Whitechapel Art Gallery.
- Employing a professional artist produced a very high-quality final product. This had a positive impact on both participants and wider audiences as they felt their ideas were important and being taken seriously.
- Working in partnership with local youth groups and a wide range of young people during broader outreach sessions made a positive contribution to the project.
- The project paved the way for future innovative interventions in the area such as 'Cotchin with the Councillors' a regular forum for young people to meet and discuss local issues with their representatives.

- The innovation of this project has meant that it can be used as a pilot project which can be replicated by others.

Lessons learnt

Projects of a similar nature can learn from the following:

- Recruitment was inhibited by young people's previous commitments to summer holiday activities, negative perceptions of Electoral Services, and constraints placed by Ramadan.
- The core group were not wholly representative of the local community. Three out of five members were in higher education with specific interests in politics or global affairs.
- Projects should also consider how to recruit young people from outside formal education if they are a target group for the project.

Further information

For further information about this project please contact:

Layla Bates
Tower Hamlets Borough Council
The Electoral Services Office
Town Hall, Mulberry Place
5 Clove Crescent
London E14 2BG
Tel: 020 7364 3753

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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