

Blackburn with Darwen – Can Vote! Will 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 Blackburn with Darwen's Can Vote! Will Vote! project. In the report we highlight the aims, objectives and achievements of the Can Vote! Will Vote! project and the lessons learned.

The grant

Blackburn with Darwen Local Education Authority (LEA) partnered Talia Theatre to deliver the Can Vote! Will Vote! project. The mission of Blackburn with Darwen's LEA is 'Aiming High Including All.' Talia Theatre is based in Manchester and was founded in 1997 with the aim of developing high quality, dynamic theatre. Talia works with community institutions, schools and theatres to produce art that can communicate across language and cultural barriers.

The Electoral Commission agreed to grant a sum of £53,077 to Blackburn with Darwen LEA for the Can Vote! Will Vote! project. An amount of **£53,077** was paid out. The primary aim of the project was to use the medium of theatre to build on work from Local Democracy Week 2003 and to raise awareness among local young people about the importance of democratic participation.

The Commission's grant covered the costs for project management, creative

development, and rehearsal and production for three theatre pieces. Costs of video production, and print and distribution of learning resource materials were also included. The Can Vote! Will Vote! project ran from April 2004 to March 2005.

Aims and objectives

The primary objectives of Can Vote! Will Vote! were to:

- raise awareness among young people of the importance of democratic participation and the benefits they can derive from it;
- make the democratic process appear more relevant to the needs and interests of young people;
- enable young people to disseminate their experiences to their peers and the wider community (including their parents and others of voting age); and
- build closer partnerships between young people, the wider community and elected representatives.

Target outcomes

The target outcomes of the

project were to:

- develop a greater sense of civic responsibility and commitment to participation in the democratic process among 1,800 young people aged 14–16;
- lead to greater interest in democratic involvement among adults (parents of young people and spectators at street theatre performances); and
- raise awareness about the role of young people as active citizens among the wider community through enhanced press and media coverage.

Evaluation

Mary Carley, Corporate Development Manager for Blackburn with Darwen's LEA oversaw the evaluation of this project with the Project Steering Group. The Project Steering Group was responsible for regular monitoring, with staff representatives from Talia Theatre, Blackburn with Darwen Council and Excellence in Cities.

Informal feedback from schools, teachers and adults watching public performances, and media coverage monitoring were the primary methods used to assess the project's success.

Deliverables

Over the 12-month project Can Vote! Will Vote! delivered the following:

- 1,600 Year 10 pupils in eight Blackburn with Darwen area high schools attended a

performance of Brave New World and attended a follow-up workshop at their school;

- 30 students took part in four public performances in Blackburn with Darwen that were viewed by 600 passers-by;
- 750 students took part in a Question Time event with a panel of three local councillors, two Youth Council representatives and two high profile local residents; and
- learning resources and a DVD of the theatre performances and Question Time event were developed and distributed to every secondary school in Blackburn with Darwen and all LEAs and Excellence in Cities Boroughs across the UK.

Resources and project management

Mary Carley, Corporate Development Manager at Blackburn with Darwen LEA was responsible for coordinating and overseeing the Can Vote! Will Vote! project.

Records of budgeted and actual income and expenditures were maintained and monitored at Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council's offices.

The project delivered the above activities as documented below:

- Project management: **£4,825**
- Phase 1 – rehearsal/development: **£11,660**

- Phase 2 – development of resource pack: **£3,680**
- Phase 3 – school tour of performance and workshop: **£14,145**
- Phase 4 – recruitment of young people: **£540**
- Phase 5 – performance rehearsal: **£6,670**
- Phase 6 – performance: **£5,117**
- Phase 7 – production of video: **£6,440**

Total: **£53,077**

How successful was the project?

Short-term outcomes

Blackburn with Darwen's Can Vote! Will Vote! project achieved its primary target of reaching more than 1,800 secondary students during the course of the project. All activities were completed as originally proposed and a number of additional public performances were undertaken as a result of increased demand among students to further explore their interest in democratic involvement.

The most significant aspect of the project was Talia Theatre's production of 'Brave New World', which was performed in eight schools across the Borough and followed by small group workshops. Students were broken into groups of 30 and encouraged to compare the UK's political system with the utopia represented in the play.

Informal feedback from schools indicated the performance was

both stimulating and challenging for students. Overall, pupils appeared to engage with the subject matter and those students who wanted to explore issues of democracy further were recruited to develop their own theatre piece about democracy. Two different pieces were developed and performed at a variety of public sites in Blackburn with Darwen. One piece dealt with the theme of suffragettes and the other addressed students' views about being a member of the Borough of Blackburn with Darwen.

These two theatre pieces were performed at the Darwen Market, the Blackburn Library and the Blackburn Shopping Mall. The performance at Blackburn Shopping Mall was felt to be the most effective, drawing a crowd of over 550 adults and children and keeping the audience interested and attentive throughout the performance.

The second significant aspect of the project was a Question Time event held on 6 October 2004, attended by 730 Blackburn with Darwen secondary school students. This event was held just two weeks before the annual Local Democracy Week and was designed to bring secondary students together with local politicians to discuss eight pre-selected questions submitted by secondary students earlier in the year. Two students from the local Youth Council joined three local councillors and two high-profile local residents on the panel. Although conflict with

exam schedules resulted in a lower attendance than originally hoped for, those students who did attend appear to have engaged actively with the discussion and debate.

The final component of the project was the production of a learning resource and DVD, including video footage from the public performances, the Question Time event and the Brave New World production. This package was sent to all LEAs and Excellence in Cities Boroughs across the UK, as well as the Department for Education and Skills, and the Improvement and Development Agency. This aspect of the project could have a broader impact beyond the local activities of Can Vote! Will Vote! if the activities of this pilot are duplicated in other boroughs across the country.

Longer-term evaluation

The full impact of Can Vote! Will Vote! will not be known until longer-term data can be collected by Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council about increases in the number of young people who take part in voluntary and community-based activities related to local democracy. Blackburn with Darwen currently has an active community of young people who participate in youth forum and advisory groups and it is hoped that this project will increase involvement of young people in the coming years.

A review of the learning resources distributed across the UK would also be useful in order to understand the

broader application and replication of the pilot activities.

Conclusions

Blackburn with Darwen's Can Vote! Will Vote! project delivered all of the originally proposed activities, and reached the target number of students they hoped would become involved in the 12-month project. Some activities generated more interest and attendance than others, such as the public performances, which required students to devote considerable time to creating and performing original pieces of work, and the Brave New World performance, which reached students in their schools.

Informal feedback from pupils, schools and the general public who viewed the public performances suggest that each of the pilot project's activities engaged the young people who took part. Because no measurements were made of the students' attitudes toward civic responsibility and democratic processes either before or after the activities, however, the key outcomes have not been measured to date. This has meant that there is little indication of the level of impact the project will have on the future behaviour of those pupils involved and it is difficult to know which of these piloted activities will be most effective at encouraging civic participation and engagement with democracy.

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

- conducting small group workshops immediately after performances reinforced ideas and issues about democracy and provided an opportunity to deal with important issues that arose during the performances;
- pre-selecting questions for the Question Time event ensured debate remained focused on the issues of democratic process and institutions; and
- inviting a high profile local resident to chair the Question Time event raised the importance of the event for young people attending.

Lessons learned

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

- when partnering with schools, it is crucial to coordinate project activities with exam schedules to ensure adequate numbers of students are able to participate;
- preparatory sessions with pupils ahead of the 'Brave New World' performance would have helped introduce the subject matter and

issues that some schools found very demanding; and

- when reporting project results it is important to collect all relevant data to ensure short-term outcomes can be understood.

New Initiatives Fund

For further information about this project, please contact Mary Carley, Corporate Development Manager for Blackburn with Darwen LEA at:
mary.carley@blackburn.gov.uk or visit their website at:
www.blackburn.gov.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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