

Alpha os Omega Limited – BME Involved

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 Alpha os Omega Limited's BME (Black and minority ethnic) Involved project. In the report we highlight the aims and objectives, the achievements and the lessons learned by Alpha os Omega Limited.

The grant

Alpha os Omega Limited is a social enterprise based in Bradford. It was set up in October 2002 with the support of the Millennium Commission and the School for Social Entrepreneurs. Their key aims are capacity building, and training and diversity awareness with organisations and individuals in the Bradford area.

The Electoral Commission agreed to grant a sum of £16,040 to Alpha os Omega Limited for the BME Involved project, and an amount of **£16,040** was paid out. The primary aim of this project was to run discussion groups with black and minority ethnic residents of Bradford, and through those group sessions to identify barriers and potential solutions to political engagement.

The Commission's grant covered salary costs for a project manager, as well as costs to recruit participants, analyse the data collected during the information sessions and write a final report. The BME Involved project ran for

12 months, from February 2004, to February 2005.

Aims and objectives

The primary objectives of the BME Involved project were to:

- facilitate information dissemination seminars to encourage greater involvement of certain excluded groups of people in the political process;
- liaise with community centres that are local to excluded groups in order to identify those individuals most in need of seminars;
- provide seminars in participants' preferred language choice, such as Bangla, Pushto and Punjabi, to overcome any language barriers;
- encourage healthy debate and discussion within the identified participant groups to help them to make informed decisions on the topics of voting, democratic process, roles and responsibilities for local and central government, the differences between different types of elections and when and how to approach their

local MP;

- identify barriers to engagement with the political process and potential solutions; and
- prepare a good practice report on how the project's lessons can be transferred to other hard-to-engage groups who may be excluded from the consultation process.

Target outcomes

The target outcomes of the project were to:

- increase awareness of the democratic process;
- increase understanding of how the democratic process works and why it is important;
- increase confidence to participate in the democratic process;
- increase understanding of the best methods of engaging with some of the hardest-to-reach groups and communities; and
- provide individuals from hard-to-reach groups with an understanding of issues they would like to know about.

Evaluation

Alpha os Omega's Director, Saeeda Ahmed, was responsible for producing the final evaluation report for BME Involved. A post-seminar questionnaire completed by all participants was the primary method used to assess the success of the project and the extent to which it achieved its objectives.

Deliverables

Over the 12-month project BME Involved delivered the following:

- 12 discussion groups with 15–20 participants attending each event;
- 166 individuals participated, representing four main ethnic communities in Bradford: 40 Bangladeshi, 82 Pathan and Pakistani, 35 Indian, and 7 from British Asian, mixed Asian or other Asian backgrounds;
- an information booklet about UK democratic processes and institutions was developed and distributed to all seminar participants; and
- a final report was produced, which outlined findings from participants' discussions during the group sessions.

Resources and project management

Saeeda Ahmed, Director of Alpha os Omega Limited, was responsible for overseeing the project. Records of budgeted and actual income, and expenditures were maintained and monitored at Alpha os Omega Limited's offices.

The project delivered the above activities as documented below:

- Salaries: **£13,151**
- Travel: **£115**
- Overheads: **£755**
- Venue hire and refreshments: **£663**
- Interpreters: **£417**

- Printing: **£609**
- Facilitators: **£330**

Total: **£16,040**

How successful was the project?

Short-term outcomes

Alpha os Omega's BME Involved project achieved its key aim to run discussion groups with black and minority ethnic residents in the Bradford area. Over the course of the year-long project, twelve sessions were held and 166 local residents participated from the Bangladeshi, Pathan, Pakistani and Indian communities.

A local councillor attended each discussion group and gave a short presentation about the role of elected members and the methods available to the public to contact them. Language provision was central to the project with a bilingual moderator and observer attending every event. A question-and-answer period with the local councillor concluded each session and participants were given an English language information booklet with facts about local government, local elections, the UK Parliament, UK-wide elections, the EU, and a list of local MPs and MEPs.

Each discussion group followed a structured format with a pre-determined guide to ensure key subject areas were covered and conversations remained non-partisan. Four topics were covered:

- awareness and understanding of the democratic process;
- participation in the democratic process;
- barriers to engaging in the democratic process; and
- solutions for engaging in the democratic process.

All sessions were recorded so discussions could be analysed at a later date.

Alpha os Omega's final report explores in detail the conversations and debates that took place. Participants appear to have engaged with the structured topics in the discussion guide. Their general knowledge and attitudes towards electoral and democratic systems, however, were not measured at either the start or the end of each session, as was originally planned.

The only information collected to gauge the impact of the sessions was participants' past voting habits compared to their intention to vote in the future. These findings suggest that no significant change occurred as a result of attending the group discussions. Of those who responded to the questionnaires, 78% had voted in local elections in the past and the same number intended to vote in the future. For general elections, 73% had voted in the past, and 76% stated that they intended to vote in the future. The only area of improvement related to European elections, which saw a rise from 34% voting in the past to 42% intending to vote in the future.

These figures suggest those attending the seminars were already engaged with the UK democratic process and only a marginal change occurred related to European elections.

Because no other data is available about the level of education that participants needed, or the appropriateness of the discussion groups for their needs, it is impossible to judge the extent to which the project achieved its intended outcomes of increasing awareness, understanding and confidence in the democratic process among the target group.

Through analysing the discussions that occurred during the 12 sessions, Alpha os Omega has suggested a number of solutions for improving engagement among black and minority ethnic communities. Some of the recommendations that emerged were:

- increasing direct contact with elected representatives;
- increasing access to language support
- increasing the number of women involved in politics; and
- providing more widely-available information about democracy and elections through seminars and workshops.

A number of other barriers and solutions were also identified, including childcare provision and transportation facilities. All of these, however, should primarily be considered in the

specific context of these 12 sessions, since the method used to recruit participants was not designed to create a representative sample.

Longer-term evaluation

Alpha os Omega would like to expand the BME Involved project in the Bradford area, but funding has yet to be secured. As such, there is little long-term monitoring or evaluation that would, at this point, contribute to the project's current findings. It would be useful, however, to stay informed of findings from any continuation of the project.

Conclusions

Alpha os Omega Limited delivered the planned activities of BME Involved as outlined in their original application. Twelve discussion groups provided 166 participants with non-partisan information about UK democratic processes, in their preferred language, and gave black and minority ethnic members of the Bradford community an opportunity to interact with local councillors. The sessions created a forum for debate about UK democratic processes, and participants discussed the barriers and solutions to engaging with the democratic process they face in their own lives.

The qualitative approach used by Alpha os Omega has provided a series of suggestions about the barriers to participating in the democratic process among BME communities, and suggested solutions. These

findings could be a useful starting point to further explore how to encourage greater engagement in these communities in the future.

The project, however, did not measure the participants' attitudes or knowledge at the outset of the sessions. Also, feedback was not collected from participants about the extent to which they felt their understanding, awareness or confidence in participating in the democratic process had improved. As a result, it is difficult to judge how successful this method has been in achieving all of the project's target outcomes.

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

- arranging for bilingual moderators and observers at seminars for black and minority ethnic communities ensured participants could understand and participate in discussions;
- developing and imposing a discussion guide ensured key points were covered during the sessions and councillors fully understood

their role in participating; and

- inviting councillors to participate in a seminar about democratic institutions and processes was a good way to personalise discussions and debates.

Lessons learned

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

- alternative language provision should extend to all aspects of a project, including written materials. In this case, the leaflets distributed at the end of the seminars should have been available in participants' first languages, in addition to English;
- it is important not to assume participants' prior knowledge of electoral and democratic processes at the start of a project. In future, the information booklet for this project should be simplified so that all participants can easily understand it; and
- participants' knowledge and attitudes at the start and end of a project should be measured in order to collect valuable information about the extent to which objectives and outcomes are achieved with the target group.

New Initiatives Fund

For further information about this project please contact Saeeda Ahmed at Alpha os Omega via email: alphaosomega@yahoo.co.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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