

Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council – ‘Who runs this place?’ project

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 ‘Who runs this place?’ project funded by the New Initiatives Fund. In the report we highlight the aims, objectives and achievements of the project, and lessons learnt by Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council.

Democracy matters

Introduction

The project was run by Blackburn with Darwen Council, in collaboration with a production company and a community arts group, targeting young people at risk of temporary homelessness, who have been involved in drug or alcohol misuse, were single parents or were otherwise excluded. The project ran workshops and produced a theatrical production and DVD to encourage young people to get involved in the democratic process.

Aims

The project aimed to raise awareness of the democratic process and make it relevant for young people by building links between hard-to-reach young people, the wider community and elected representatives.

The objectives of the project were:

- to run taster workshops with 70–80 hard-to-reach young people
- for 25 participants from the taster workshops to produce a piece of theatre highlighting the issues raised in the workshops
- to perform their theatre production in Blackburn

- to produce a DVD of the final theatre production along with a toolkit to be disseminated to other local councils

Funding

The project was awarded a grant of £14,695 over a 3-month period commencing November 2005.

Target outcomes

The target outcomes of the project were to:

- raise awareness among hard-to-reach groups of the importance of democratic participation
- explore the risks associated with not taking part in the democratic process
- make the democratic process appear more relevant to the needs and interests of the hard-to-reach young people
- enable the young people to share their experiences with their peers
- build closer partnerships between hard-to-reach groups, the wider community and elected representatives

How successful was the project?

The council’s Public Relations and Communications Officer,

Angela Ingram, managed the project with Title Role Productions and the community-based arts group Action Factory. The hard-to-reach groups that took part were THOMAS (Those on the Margins of a Society), Nightsafe and Blackburn Foyer and target numbers of beneficiaries were met. Over a three-month period the project ran workshops and sessions inspiring the groups to write, act and create stage scenery, including a graffiti wall, culminating in a drama production called 'Who runs this place?'.

Initial scepticism for the project from the hard-to-reach groups (some had strong views that voting 'wasn't worth it') and a lack of commitment, were overcome by the dedication of the team and by trying different methods of engagement. Interest was also maintained through a celebrity (a member of the cast of *Coronation Street*) and the involvement of Jack Straw MP, as well as having participants attend a council meeting, where they were also invited to meet councillors on a one-to-one basis. From what they had learned during the project they felt empowered to ask questions to councillors about issues affecting them. The questions included asking about housing for young people with mental health problems and about plans for a new road.

Ensuring the young people were made comfortable with media interest (photographic consent forms were given out) resulted in them having a positive

experience. There was some evidence of changed behaviour, with a move towards realising democracy can be relevant.

The final production was a success, and Foyer residents who saw the play were inspired by seeing work produced by their peers.

Good practice

A number of areas of good practice can be identified from this project:

- Meeting people on their own terms and ensuring the drama reflected their concerns.
- Contractors needed to be able to take a flexible approach.
- The themes for the play – finding a wallet, losing a family member, hoping for the partner of our dreams and the personal issues raised on the graffiti backdrop related directly to the participants' lives and were things everyone could relate to.
- Katie Lambert, the drama worker from Action Factory, received a telephone call from Foreign Secretary and Blackburn MP Jack Straw, to talk about involving young people in the democratic process. She reported the call to the rest of the group. The group were surprised at the interest of such a high profile minister and started to believe it was possible that they could make a difference.

Lessons learnt

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

- Similar projects would need a longer lead-in time and more resources as project partners were not all sufficiently familiar with democratic processes and how to target hard-to-reach groups.
- A longer lead-in time was necessary to enable the group to focus on, formulate and vocalise their needs and interests.
- Some people found the press and publicity intimidating, but were made comfortable by signing consent forms.
- People taking part needed expert advice on local democracy, elections and voting in a non-patronising way, and this could be improved by choosing partners with more experience in this field.

Further information

For further information about this project please contact:

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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

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