

West DEN

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 West DEN's Involve project, funded by the New Initiatives Fund. The report highlights the aims and objectives of Involve, the achievements of the project and lessons learnt by West DEN.

The grant

West DEN is an independent charity based in West Devon working to improve the long-term quality of life for residents. Their work focuses on pioneering new methods of sustainable development and regeneration both locally and internationally.

The Electoral Commission agreed to grant a sum of £23,649 to West DEN for the Involve project and an amount of **£22,422** was paid out. Involve's primary aims were to reverse the trend of low turnout at local and national elections and increase young people's participation in democratic processes. The project planned to undertake a number of innovative initiatives to engage local youth aged 18–24 with relevant political issues and encourage more young people to take part in the electoral process.

The Commission's grant covered the cost of employing one project co-ordinator for a 12-month period July 2003 to June 2004, and the production of posters, brochures and a launch event to advertise the project throughout the area.

Aims and objectives

The primary objectives of Involve were to:

- raise awareness about current local, national and EU electoral and governmental systems;
- research reasons why young people, especially first-time voters, are not involved in democratic processes;
- liaise closely with a range of youth or related organisations;
- increase the number of first-time voters;
- increase the number of young people taking part in local government processes;
- increase the number of young people involved in representative forums;
- promote IT as a means of involving young people in government;
- set up a youth forum in the borough council;
- disseminate the results of Involve to inform others; and
- ensure systems are set up to continue the project.

Target outcomes

The primary target outcomes of the project were to:

- receive at least 50 hits per week on an interactive website developed to provide information on local, national and EU electoral systems;
- establish a forum for engagement between public and government agencies on the interactive website;
- establish an active 10-member youth forum for the borough with an approved constitution;
- distribute a report to borough council members, recommending ways to increase interaction between young voters and government;
- disseminate the results of a survey completed by at least 150 first-time eligible voters designed to examine the reasons young people are disengaged from democratic processes;
- increase young people's involvement with local elections through the development of innovative media, particularly among those who are most isolated; and
- disseminate a final report of Involve's findings and results to interested stakeholders.

Evaluation

Involve's project manager Mo Morel evaluated the project with data collected from West Devon youth through written and electronic questionnaires, brainstorming sessions at each of the public seminars and

workshops, and feedback from youth forum members during the 12-month project. Involve's monitoring and advisory group approved the final report.

Deliverables

Over the 12-month project Involve delivered the following:

- two web pages on West DEN's website providing links to borough councils and youth organisations across West Devon;
- two local youth forums: Okehampton (five members) and Tavistock (seven members). Each forum met six times independently and twice together as an entire group;
- 141 students attended three workshops for year 11 and 12 students held at local colleges during Local Democracy Week: Tavistock College, Okehampton College and Kelly College;
- 153 first-time voter surveys completed and analysed to identify reasons why young people are less likely to vote;
- ongoing partnerships established with the West Devon Borough Council, Teens to Twenties Youth Group in Okehampton, Devon Youth Network, Tavistock and District Youth Council, and Devon Federation of Young Farmers' Clubs;
- 36 young people and four local politicians attended The Big Debate event held at Tavistock College on 1 March 2004.

Resources and project management

Mo Morel, Involve's project manager carried out the activities of the project. Records of budgeted and actual income and expenditures were maintained and monitored by West DEN which also provided senior management support.

The project delivered the above activities within the budget allocated as documented below:

- project staff: **£16,379**;
- management: **£3,063**;
- office costs: **£1,069**;
- sundries/launch: **£823**;
- travel: **£391**;
- printing: **£309**;
- training/conferences: **£223**;
- meetings: **£72**;
- website: **£60**; and
- postage: **£33**.

Total: **£22,422**.

How successful was the project?

Short-term outcomes

Involve's activities resulted in three key short-term outcomes.

The first outcome was the establishment of two youth forums for West Devon youth to gather and discuss issues that were important to their lives and how they could present those issues to local politicians. Originally Involve planned to establish just one youth forum. However, challenges with rural transport and low awareness of, or

interest in getting involved with the project, resulted in a change of direction and both Okehampton and Tavistock became the primary sites for regular forum meetings. With this change a total of 12 local young people became members of the forums.

The second key outcome of Involve was the dialogue opened up between West Devon youth and local councillors and politicians through the college workshops and The Big Debate. Each of these forums provided both politicians and young people the opportunity to hear each other's views firsthand and to engage in debate over controversial issues such as the minimum age for voting and holding office. Some of the other issues discussed at these events included transport, affordable housing and amenities for young people.

The third key outcome was the report produced and distributed to local borough councillors, politicians and youth organisations about the views that West Devon youth participating in the project held about politics and democratic processes. Compiled by Involve's project manager, the report describes the issues these young people would like politicians to act on and the reasons they feel disengaged from the political process.

Results from the first-time voter survey, which was administered at youth forum meetings, public events and through social networks of

youth forum members, proposed five key reasons why many young people felt disenchanted with politics:

- they lack knowledge about democratic processes;
- they believe politicians do not take their views seriously;
- they have an attitude that one more vote would not make any difference to the result;
- they believe politicians do not understand or address their needs; and
- they feel the current voting system is out of date.

Results from the brainstorming sessions held at youth forum meetings, college workshops and The Big Debate revealed several issues that Involve project participants would like politicians to act on including:

- improved local public transport at a reduced cost; and
- reductions in university fees and re-introduction of student grants.

Longer-term evaluation

At this time West DEN has no available resources to roll out the pilot project beyond its original timelines or further monitor its long-term impact. Responsibility for the youth forums has been passed over to the West Devon Borough Council (WDBC) and although WDBC has expressed an interest in developing a youth parliament as a result of Involve, it is unknown whether

or not WDBC will take either of these initiatives forward.

Additionally, West DEN has provided West Devon borough councillors and local youth organisations with copies of Involve's final report, detailing young people's attitudes toward democracy and key learnings from the project. Many of the lessons that emerged from the project deal with how to reach rural and isolated youth and this information would be valuable for others attempting to conduct similar projects with this target group. Involve's final report will also be useful for others trying to understand the current climate of West Devon youth's attitudes and behaviours toward politics and democracy.

At this point the longer-term impacts of Involve's activities are dependent on other West Devon organisations and government bodies either carrying on the work of Involve or using the results and conclusions from the final report. As a result, it will be worth maintaining contact with both West DEN and West Devon Borough Council to determine what initiatives, if any, are implemented over the long term.

Conclusions

The activities that West DEN piloted through Involve achieved varying degrees of success. The college workshops achieved the greatest attendance with 148 young people attending

three events, and the youth forum was most successful as two separate groups based in Okehampton and Tavistock, rather than one across the whole borough.

The extensive local media coverage that Involve received over the 12-month period suggests a strong community interest in bringing youth and politicians together. Local borough councillors were positive about their involvement with the public forums and provided encouraging feedback about their perceptions of the impact of the project and their desire to see its work continue.

While there is a recognised need to engage West Devon youth with local politics and democratic processes, the results from this pilot demonstrate there were significant barriers to engaging youth with this type of project. Many of the techniques tested by Involve to achieve the project's original objectives and engage local youth did not produce the results anticipated. Awareness of Involve among those who completed the first-time voter survey was low at only 11%, and a number of tools, such as the interactive website, email and texting did not achieve the take-up rate that was hoped for.

However, Involve has established a format for

opening dialogue between West Devon youth and local councillors and politicians, and created a structured forum for youth to discuss issues of importance to their lives. If West Devon Borough Council continues the efforts of Involve and West DEN, youth engagement with democracy and political processes in West Devon will likely increase in the future.

Through the evaluation of this project it has been possible to identify a number of elements of good practice and 'lessons learnt' that could be of interest to other organisations or bodies considering replicating this concept.

Good practice

- Setting targets before a project starts provides an opportunity to react to lower than anticipated participation levels and problem solve alternative methods of reaching the target audience.
- Developing partnerships with like-minded organisations assists in engaging with 'hard to reach' groups, such as young people in rural areas.
- Involving local borough councillors and politicians in youth seminars creates opportunities for debate and discussion on topical issues,

and helps young people feel decision-makers are listening to their views.

Lessons learnt

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

- Multiple methods of transport need to be considered when trying to organise young people in rural areas.
- Youth meetings should be held where young people typically gather and feel comfortable, rather than inviting them to attend meetings at a venue not of their choice.
- Youth field workers should be used to take a project into smaller communities and engage young people in more isolated areas.

New Initiatives Fund

For further information about this project please contact Nick Biggs from West DEN at: nick@westden.co.uk or visit their website at: www.westden.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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