

Binoh of Manchester – 'My vote and me'

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 Binoh of Manchester's 'My vote and me' project funded by the New Initiatives Fund. In the report we highlight the aims, objectives and achievements of the project, and lessons learnt by Binoh.

Background

Binoh of Manchester (also known as the Centre for Specialist Educational Assistance) is a registered charity based in Greater Manchester and Lancashire that supports young people with a range of behavioural, social, and learning disabilities from the area's Orthodox Jewish community.

Binoh creates relevant social awareness programmes for special cultural and ethnic needs. It has previously been awarded grants by the New Opportunities Fund and the Royal Society for Nature Conservation, and is currently undertaking a project with the National Foundation of Youth Music.

Aim and objectives

The aim of the project was to provide information on social participation, voting and electoral systems via community workshops for young people. Culturally, the project's objective was to show that the principles of participation in the democratic political process are vital elements of Jewish and community life.

As a secondary objective the project also planned to demonstrate to the wider community the importance and relevance of such a programme.

Funding

A grant of £12,000 was awarded in 2003, and the project ran for a year until spring 2004. In addition, the Binoh Executive Committee provided £3,000 funding of their own.

Target outcomes

The target outcomes of the project were:

- to produce ethnically-sensitive workbooks and worksheets showing how civic duty relates to religious obligations
- to instigate an essay and poster competition to promote local community participation
- to invite local councillors to explain their roles and responsibilities
- to invite two local Members of Parliament (MPs) to explain their roles as both elected representatives and government ministers.

- to visit local democratic institutions to see councils and committees at work
- to organise a day visit to the Houses of Parliament to meet local MPs and to observe the workings of national democracy
- to engage in a postal voting campaign for local elections scheduled for spring 2004

How successful was the project?

The project achieved its key objectives. Several events and activities were undertaken, including a tour of the Houses of Parliament.

Discussion sessions were held with participants to plan the future direction of the project at the outset, and feedback forms were completed at the midway point and at the conclusion of the project. Participants also completed essays after the project was completed to record what they had gained from the year. The feedback was positive and participants showed significantly improved enthusiasm for, and understanding of the democratic and electoral process.

The project registered with the YVote 2005 mock election campaign and received assistance in the form of support materials and information. The YVote campaign also assisted in the preparation of mock election manifestos that were produced

from workshop sessions towards the end of the project.

Evaluation

The project was evaluated by staff from Binoh of Manchester who were not involved with the project. It was concluded that the project may have benefited from a more rigid structure, as over the year the interest of the young people flagged briefly before picking up for the spring elections. Also, the project's plans were disrupted by increased political activity over the general election period, but sufficiently flexible planning allowed certain key activities – such as the visit to Westminster – to be rescheduled.

Good practice

- Young people can find politics and concepts of social responsibility interesting if presented in ways they find relevant and practical.
- Minority and religious groups can be successfully engaged if activities and material are presented in the context of their cultural history and value system.
- The trip to Parliament scheduled towards the end of the project encouraged participation, and was seen by those involved as a reward and reinforcement of the learning undertaken, as well as providing an opportunity to view the workings of Parliament at close range and meet local MPs whose decisions as government

ministers impact directly on their constituents.

Lessons learnt

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

- Projects of a year or more may wish to hold special activities at the midway point of the project schedule to maintain interest.
- It is vital for a project schedule to be flexible enough to accommodate unexpected events. A key project activity (the visit to Parliament) would have had to have been cancelled if contingency plans had not been in place.
- Projects involving groups of young people must be planned meticulously to minimise long periods of waiting, which create feelings of disappointment and a loss of momentum.

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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