

Awaz Utaoh

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 Awaz Utaoh's Asian Women and Voting Awareness project, funded by the New Initiatives Fund. The report highlights the aims and objectives of the project, the achievements and outcomes, as well as lessons learnt and good practice identified by Awaz Utaoh.

The grant

Awaz Utaoh is a small voluntary community organisation serving South Asian people in the city of Bristol and the surrounding areas. Their principal objective is to reduce crime and the fear of crime.

The Electoral Commission agreed to grant a sum of £6,641 to Awaz Utaoh for the Asian Women and Voting Awareness project and an amount of **£6,641** was paid out. This grant funded a project designed to raise awareness in the female black and minority ethnic sector in Bristol about how South Asian women can become more involved in the decision-making process of their communities. The project's primary activity was a weekly workshop that ran for five months during the 12-month project (April 2003 to March 2004).

The Commission's grant contributed towards the costs of employing a part-time project co-ordinator, management costs, language support, accommodation, stationery and communication, refreshments and a perception survey and accompanying report.

Aims and objectives

The objectives of the project, as set down at application were:

- to raise awareness about voting among South Asian women in the Bristol area;
- to initiate and facilitate discussion on voting issues for South Asian women; and
- to increase the number of South Asian women voting by approximately 5–10%.

These were to be measured by:

- conducting an initial perception survey and gathering data on existing South Asian female voters;
- performing an evaluation at the end of the project on the findings of the project;
- conducting a final survey on programme participants to measure the outcome of any increases in awareness among Asian female voters; and
- maintaining a register of attendees and continuing to monitor their attitudes and behaviours toward voting after the project's completion.

Target outcomes

At application, Awaz Utaoh's primary outcome measurement was to increase the number of Asian women who vote in elections by approximately 5% to 10%. Implicit in this target was the assumption that the Asian Women and Voting Awareness project would raise awareness and interest about the democratic process, resulting in more Asian women casting a vote in future elections.

Evaluation

The project was evaluated via two perception surveys, one, which was administered at the beginning of the project, and the other, which was circulated at completion to determine whether the weekly workshops had altered behaviours and attitudes toward voting. A further questionnaire will be carried out after the next local elections to determine whether the project has had an impact on voter turnout amongst the project participants.

Awaz Utaoh commissioned Tariq Yousuf to perform an independent evaluation of the project and make recommendations. Trends on voting behaviour amongst Asian women were gathered from the internet and local government data to contribute to a baseline measurement for the evaluation.

Deliverables

The key deliverable was a series of two-hour workshops, with language support, held every week for a five-month period:

- 1,632 women attended the workshops;
- topics covered at the workshops were 'What is voting – an introduction', 'The electoral system', 'How the electoral system differs from the South Asian model', and 'The benefits of the voting system';
- a workshop trip to Birmingham and a series of refresher workshops were held; and
- there was preparation for a local election at the Awaz Utaoh annual general meeting.

The project delivery plan was broken down as follows:

- April 2003 – recruitment of a worker to deliver the project and publicise the event;
- May 2003 – introduction of the project and completion of 100 perception questionnaires by participants;
- June 2003 – developed and initiated delivery of weekly workshops on the electoral system;
- July-August 2003 – continued delivery of workshops;
- September 2003 – participants travelled to Birmingham to meet with Asian councillors;
- October 2003 – continued delivery of workshops, focusing on the benefits of the voting system;
- November 2003 – delivered refresher workshops and conducted 100 evaluation questionnaires;

- December 2003 – preparation for a local election at the Awaz Utaoh annual general meeting;
- January 2004 – completion of the project and exit strategy;
- February 2004 – final evaluation report prepared; and
- March 2004 – fundraising to help the project continue.

Project and resource management

The activities of the project were supervised by the project manager, Simi Choudhry. The project manager was assisted by a part-time project co-ordinator, Deepa Bakrania, on a day-to-day basis.

The majority of the Commission's grant monies were allocated to the production of an evaluation survey and the salary of the part-time project co-ordinator from April 2003 to March 2004.

The grant monies were allocated as follows:

- salary of project co-ordinator: **£1,728**;
- room hire: **£1,440**;
- perception survey: **£1,000**;
- production of evaluation report: **£873**;
- sundries: **£600**;
- language support from April 2003 to March 2004: **£500**; and
- management costs from April to September 2003: **£500**.

Total: **£6,641**.

The project delivered its activities within the budget allocated.

How successful was the project?

Short-term outcomes

At the early stages of the project, a perception survey was carried out with workshop participants, which demonstrated that the workshop attendees had some knowledge of elections and electoral issues, but felt they wanted more. Some of the key findings from that survey revealed the following:

- 95% understood what voting meant;
- 99% of participants had never voted;
- of those whose families had voted, it was the husband who cast the vote; and
- 74% wanted to learn more about voting; although 96% didn't want the government to teach them about voting.

Over the course of the project, 1,632 women attended the weekly workshops, surpassing the anticipated number of attendees (1,125 to 1,575).

Results from the survey conducted towards the end of the workshop series highlighted the needs of South Asian female voters within the Bristol area. Of those surveyed the following results were found:

- 95% said they had an understanding of the voting system;
- 100% said they needed more information on voting

and a majority of these said that workshops would be their preferred method;

- all respondents felt that Awaz Utaoh could support their cultural needs when voting;
- 60% commented that access to voting was the primary obstacle that had restricted them from voting in the past, and language was the second;
- 90% said they would consider a voting station at Awaz Utaoh, and just over 50% said they would consider taking a voting course under the supervision of Awaz Utaoh; and
- 90% commented that they would like to continue being involved with the voting awareness project.

Through the course of the workshops, Awaz Utaoh identified several key support mechanisms that would be important for encouraging South Asian women to consider voting or getting involved in local elections. These included bi-lingual literature, culturally appropriate voting houses and culturally sensitive transport in terms of gender mixing.

Unfortunately the final questionnaire did not ask participants about the extent to which their knowledge of electoral systems or their attitudes towards voting had changed as a result of the workshops. Nor did it ask whether they were more likely to vote in future. This data

would have provided valuable evidence of the success of the workshops toward achieving their primary objectives of raising awareness about voting and increasing South Asian women voters by 5–10%. Even so, the project does appear to have collected useful baseline information about culturally appropriate mechanisms that South Asian women feel would assist them in participating in future elections.

Longer-term evaluation

The results from this project are a crucial staging post in the process of encouraging women from ethnic minorities to vote. Awaz Utaoh has identified several key barriers that have contributed to poor turnout rates at elections of South Asian women in Bristol and some possible solutions to improving electoral participation.

The full impact of the workshops, however, is not entirely clear and therefore it is difficult to know whether this method of reaching Asian women in Bristol will be the most effective way of raising awareness about the democratic process over the long term. Although 90% of the workshop attendees commented that they would like to continue accessing this voter awareness project, it is not clear that their primary reason to do so would be to gain greater knowledge about voting.

To measure the long-term impact of this project it is essential that Awaz Utaoh

continue to survey the participants to determine if the workshops produce any change in their voting behaviours.

Conclusions

On balance, it appears that the voting awareness among South Asian women within the Bristol area project has met some, but perhaps not all of its primary objectives. The workshops served to initiate and facilitate discussion on voting issues and respondents who completed the initial and final survey appear to have a basic understanding of voting. However, it is not clear to what extent their level of knowledge or attitude changed over the course of the workshops.

The quantitative information has not captured enough detail to draw definite conclusions about the immediate impact of this pilot, and the final survey did not determine whether the attendees considered the workshops to be successful and whether they were more inclined to vote as a result.

At the same time, one of the valuable outcomes of the project, which was not outlined as an objective at the outset, is an assessment of the current level of understanding about elections and voting among South Asian women living in Bristol and the surrounding areas. Useful data has been

gathered about South Asian women's attitudes and behaviours toward voting and what they believe to be the greatest barriers to casting their votes on election day.

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

- Providing participants with all workshop information in their first language ensured the attendees could participate fully.
- Conducting the perception surveys during the two-hour workshop ensured 100% completion rates of the questionnaires, maximising the extent of the baseline data.
- Disseminating the survey results to local and national organisations, which share the same goals and target audience will ensure the data can be utilised for a variety of purposes.

Lessons learnt

If repeated in future, such schemes should:

- Ensure that the participant questionnaires conducted at both the start and finish of the project capture the

changes in attitude and behaviour that have resulted from the project.

- Capture qualitative data (such as reasons for not voting) during the course of the workshops to understand how this can be improved for the future.
- Ask participants what they think solutions to certain issues might be, in addition to asking why the issues exist.
- Involve those individuals who do vote in elections in the questionnaire and survey data to compare their experiences and perceptions with those of the women who have not voted.

New Initiatives Fund

For further information about this project please contact Simi Choudhry from Awaz Utaoh on 0117 935 4528 or visit their website at: www.awazutaoh.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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