

## YWCA 'It's a Girl Thing'

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 UK.

This evaluation report provides information about the YWCA's Young Women's Participation Conference – 'It's a Girl Thing', funded by the New Initiatives Fund. It highlights the aims and objectives of the grant, the achievements of the project and lessons learnt.

### The grant

As a part of the YWCA's long-term commitment to young women's participation in civil society and public life, the YWCA, in conjunction with the UK Youth Parliament, hosted a conference, 'It's a Girl Thing'. The conference aimed to reach and engage young women from across England and Wales, and give them the opportunity to learn about participation, democracy and the electoral process. It was the first time that such a national forum was created specifically for young women.

The YWCA was awarded a New Initiatives Fund grant of **£15,000** in March 2003 to part-fund the hosting of this conference. The YWCA funded the costs not covered by the New Initiatives Fund and the UK Youth Parliament helped to source and arrange a venue for the conference for free.

### Aims and objectives

The main aim of the conference was to encourage and enable young women aged between 11 and 19 to become more active in public life, politics and their

communities. It was also hoped to bring engagement with political processes alive for young women, build their skills, confidence and knowledge of participation and encourage them to get involved locally and nationally.

The objectives of the conference, as agreed between the YWCA and the Commission, were to:

- introduce participation in democratic processes, communities and public life;
- build young women's confidence, skills and knowledge of electoral processes;
- demonstrate the key role young women can play in shaping their communities;
- give young women the tools, skills and confidence to enable them to participate in and engage with public life;
- demonstrate to young women the variety of opportunities available to them in public life.

### Target outcomes

The targets, agreed between YWCA and the Commission, were that 150 women would:

- have an increased understanding and be more equipped to enable them to actively participate in public life and decision-making at community and national level;
- be more aware of the needs and issues of young women across the country;
- have a greater awareness of the key role that young women can play in shaping their communities and opportunities available to them in public life;
- have greater confidence, skills and knowledge of democratic and electoral processes;
- have a deeper understanding of issues of concern for them;
- have gained more confidence in raising their issues and working together to look at solutions.

### Evaluation

An independent evaluator (a freelance social researcher specialising in research into young people's election participation) was commissioned by the YWCA to attend the conference and establish whether the conference:

- met its aims and objectives and if these aims were shared widely among participants;
- resulted in the anticipated immediate target outcomes.

The methods of evaluation were:

- surveying the attending young women, youth workers and workshop leaders;

- holding participatory evaluation sessions at the end of conference;
- observing at conference.

Evaluation questionnaires were distributed to attendees, evaluation sessions were held at the end of the conference day and observations were recorded by those hosting the conference.

### Deliverables

The 'It's a Girl Thing' Young Women's Participation Conference was held at Leeds Civic Hall on International Women's Day, 8 March 2003. 126 young women between the ages of 12 and 17 from diverse backgrounds attended the conference.

YWCA undertook an extensive consultation exercise with members of their youth groups to build a varied programme that met the needs of the young women. Face-to-face interviews were conducted, an internet chat forum developed and questionnaires distributed to identify thoughts on the conference title, potential invitees, location and programme. The final programme included:

- keynote speeches from:
  - Sandra Gidley MP, Liberal Democrat Spokesperson for Women;
  - Labour councillors from Leeds and Camden;
  - the Chair of the Young Greens;

- workshop sessions – including 'Having our say', 'Turning opinion into action', 'Learning 4U', 'Inspirational women', 'Asian women' and sessions that addressed the issues of body image and sexual self-respect. Sessions also introduced the attendees to the internet, 'Things that matter' and the UK Youth Parliament;
- a dance performance on the theme of domestic violence by young women from Cwmafan YWCA;
- icebreaker activities;
- a girl-band playing music at lunch-time;
- evaluation sessions.

### Resources and project management

The £15,000 New Initiatives Fund grant was used to fund:

- accommodation – for YWCA staff and youth workers and young women delegates;
- travel – for 51 young women, 16 youth workers and two crèche workers, YWCA general support staff and workshop leaders;
- catering – Friday dinner, Saturday lunch and refreshments and Saturday dinner;
- salaries – of two crèche workers and 16 youth workers;
- workshop leaders costs – salaries and equipment;
- evaluation – a contribution towards the cost of evaluating the success of the conference.

A dedicated project manager who worked in consultation with the Senior Manager, Senior Management Team, Communications Team and Fundraising Manager, managed the organisation of the conference. They made sure that the team’s approach helped to ensure that young women from socially excluded and/or disadvantaged backgrounds would be able to attend.

The project team considered that the conference had been successfully managed. However, they also acknowledged that the financial management of the project could have been streamlined – to ensure that the lead organisation, all partner organisations and funders were kept up-to-date about the progress of the project.

## How successful was the project?

### Short-term outcomes

As outlined above, the conference facilitated the attendance of 126 young women. The number of attendees was not as high as originally anticipated, due to a number of last minute cancellations – illness, disorganisation in youth projects and social or practical barriers to participation experienced by some young women were all reported as being contributing factors.

However, the impact of the drop in the number of young women attending was small.

Forty per cent of the women that attended came from

YWCA projects, the remainder represented a number of external youth organisations including Connexions Partnerships, regional youth parliaments and local schools.

The responses received to equal opportunities forms distributed at the conference would suggest that over 50% of participants were from socially excluded and/or disadvantaged backgrounds and 23% of attendees were from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Eight of the 23 key women involved in hosting or delivering elements of the conference were from ethnic minority backgrounds (35%), and one was a disabled person. It was hoped they would be seen as positive role models to the delegates.

**Ninety-one per cent** of the young women said that they had enjoyed the conference and would attend another similar YWCA event in future. Attendees particularly enjoyed the:

- political speakers;
- ice breakers;
- keynote speech from Sandra Gidley;
- issue-based and practical workshops;
- moving dance performance.

In response to the question ‘What did you learn during the conference?’

- 36% of respondents felt that they had gained more confidence in raising their issues and working together to look at solutions;

- 26% of respondents felt more equipped to actively participate in public life and decision-making at community and national level;
- 21% of respondents showed a greater awareness of the key role that young women can play in shaping their communities;
- 17% of respondents felt that they had developed greater confidence, skills and knowledge of democratic and electoral processes.

Participants’ responses to the question ‘After the conference, will you use what you learnt?’ reveal that 66% said they would use what they had learnt in their daily lives, within their communities and public life. 47% said that they intended to use what they had learnt by raising awareness, educating their peers and campaigning on specific issues, or setting up particular projects within their communities.

Workshop leaders commented positively about the energy and enthusiasm of the participants and the conference organisers. One workshop leader commented that ‘the young women in my workshop were brilliant, really switched on and enthusiastic and thoughtful. They challenged and inspired me!’

Organising a conference can be a difficult task, exacerbated in this instance by the complexities of catering for such young delegates. Taking this into account, the evaluation suggests that the management

of the project was effective, inclusive and resulted in a successful event.

### Longer-term evaluation

In evaluating the success of the conference in the manner adopted, the YWCA was able to identify that the young women themselves were able to determine what they had learned from the conference and how they intended to use their increased understanding, awareness and skills in future. Their responses can be measured against the immediate outcomes and short-term impacts.

The results however, are only perception-based, rather than behaviour-based. The longer-term impact of the conference, and the extent to which the conference influenced young women's behaviour in taking action within their communities, will be assessed between March and September 2004.

### Conclusions

Initial evaluation would suggest that the 'It's a Girl Thing' Young Women's Participation Conference can be considered a success. Although the numbers attending were slightly lower than originally projected, it did meet its aims and objectives by encouraging and enabling young women to take a more active interest in public life, politics and their communities, through its innovative and varied

programme. Following the pilot project, the YWCA intends to use the model in different regions across the country in 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

- A consultative approach to developing a conference programme.
- Encouraging a diverse group of delegates to attend and engage with different aspects of the conference.
- Engender a safe, supportive and enabling environment to ensure that the event is inclusive and positive.
- A participatory approach to the delivery of workshops.
- Facilitated open discussion amongst small groups of attendees.
- Breadth of political views represented.

### Lessons learnt

- More emphasis on 'how' to influence policy and decision-makers, including practical skills and ideas for taking action locally would have been welcomed by delegates.

- Introductory speeches, breaks and lunch breaks should be kept to a minimum to facilitate a greater amount of time for smaller discussion based workshops.
- Opportunities to network and socialise with other attendees should be built in to provide delegates with the opportunity to share learning and experiences with one another and maximise their experiences.

### New Initiatives Fund

For further information about this project please contact Louise Cooper, National Grants Manager, YWCA at: [Louise.Cooper@ywca-gb.org.uk](mailto:Louise.Cooper@ywca-gb.org.uk).

Further information about the New Initiatives Fund and the wider work of The Electoral Commission can be found at: [www.electoralcommission.org.uk](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk)

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