

The Hansard Society – MPs in schools Scotland pilot 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 MPs in schools Scotland pilot project funded by the New Initiatives Fund. In the report we highlight the aims, objectives and achievements of the project, and lessons learnt by the Hansard Society.

Introduction

The Hansard Society is an independent, non-partisan educational charity which exists to promote effective Parliamentary democracy. The Members of Parliament in schools Scotland project built upon the Hansard Society's existing series of elected representatives in schools publications. These handbooks, designed for teachers, students and politicians, offer information, resources and guidance on how to get the most out of a school visit from a politician.

Aims

The MPs in schools Scotland project aimed to connect young people in Scotland to the UK Parliament by allowing them to engage with MPs in an interactive way leading to meaningful outcomes.

Funding

The project was awarded a grant of £5,583 to cover the costs of salaries, overheads and translation of materials into Gaelic, and it ran from September 2005 to May 2006.

Target outcomes

The target outcomes of the project were to:

- increase awareness and understanding of UK political institutions, particularly the difference between the powers of the UK and Scottish Parliaments, among school students and their teachers
- develop a resource pack in English and Gaelic which supports the visits of Scottish MPs to schools
- provide a structure which makes it easy for schools to arrange visits from MPs to support the Scottish curriculum
- provide opportunities for teachers and pupils to discuss political events and issues
- enhance the relationship between young people and their MPs

How successful was the project?

Four pilot sessions took place in four schools across Scotland involving four MPs; one from each political party in Scotland represented in the UK Parliament. One of the sessions was in a Gaelic-speaking school with a Gaelic-speaking MP. Eighty-four students took part, of whom 55 were at primary school level and 29 at secondary school level. The project was assessed by means of pre and post-evaluation

questionnaires sent to participating students, teachers and MPs. They assessed the following criteria:

- the idea behind the MPs in schools session (whether it increased students' knowledge and engaged their interest)
- suitability of the material sent to schools
- organisation of the sessions
- after the event, if the students felt their knowledge had improved and whether they felt they could approach their MP in future

The evaluation data showed that the project allowed young people to raise their level of knowledge and awareness of the UK Parliament through an honest and informal interaction with their MP. It allowed them to become more interested in politics, increased their chances of voting, and informed them how to contact their MP.

The students were able to learn the basics of what Parliament does, and what the job of an MP entails. The project required them to build upon this knowledge, and focus on an issue which they would research and work on with their MP. The project was very much student-led, with the teacher providing guidance and helping with resources.

The young people were forced to ask themselves what they felt was important to them, and how this related to the work of Parliament. For the primary school students,

there was an increase in their awareness of politics, and the work of the MP who visited. Both MPs were struck by how prepared, enthusiastic and knowledgeable the primary school students were, and this is reflected in the evaluation.

For those with a good existing knowledge of political institutions, like the Higher Modern Studies class at one of the secondary schools, the project provided an opportunity to discuss an area of their studies where they would like to increase their knowledge, by discussing it with an MP. For the students at the Gaelic-speaking secondary school, it was an excellent opportunity to learn more about Parliament and discuss an important issue in the Outer Hebrides – wind farms – with their MP, in Gaelic.

Feedback from teachers indicated that the resource pack was useful in helping them to prepare for the MP's visit. Comments from students were overwhelmingly positive about their interaction with their MP, and the MPs themselves felt the visit had been a great success.

Good practice

- Student-led sessions. The students identified issues and topics they wanted to discuss with their MP and prepared presentations and questions which were used during the MP's visit.
- Over the course of the pilot, informal feedback from the teachers helped to determine

which sections of the pack were working well, and which could be improved. Ideas for presentation and format were obtained from the teachers.

- The project works best if teachers are allowed to adapt the materials for their students, since they know their students best. Hansard used feedback they had received from the pack to come up with a structure suggesting how to run a visit, rather than a set of instructions to teachers.

Lessons learnt

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

- Teachers suggested that primary and secondary age materials should be kept separate and that primary school sessions should be evaluated differently (the questionnaire was felt to be too heavy for the students).
- Most of the MPs did not find time to read the entire pack.

Further information

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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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