

Staffordshire Learning Hub

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 Staffordshire Learning Hub's E-democracy for Staffordshire Surfers project, funded by the New Initiatives Fund. The report highlights the aims and objectives of E-democracy for Staffordshire Surfers, the achievements of the project and lessons learnt by Staffordshire Learning Hub.

The grant

Staffordshire Learning Hub is a limited company originally established in 1999 by a partnership of Staffordshire further education colleges and the University of Staffordshire. The Hub provides supported internet access, first steps learning and the full range of learndirect courses in 33 learning venues. Staffordshire Learning Hub also coordinates 117 UK online centres throughout the county.

The Electoral Commission agreed to grant a sum of £21,730 to the Staffordshire Learning Hub for the E-democracy for Staffordshire Surfers project and an amount of **£18,117** was paid out. The primary aim of the project was to pilot a series of interactive online sessions with Staffordshire Learning Hub users and support their learning about democratic processes and issues.

The Commission's grant covered the cost of employing one project leader part-time for eight months and associated costs with promoting, delivering and independently evaluating

the project. The project ran from November 2003 to June 2004.

Aims and objectives

The primary objectives of the E-democracy for Staffordshire Surfers project were to:

- run a series of interactive sessions for all individuals to access suitable websites to learn about the democratic process with trained staff on hand to support access to relevant information; and
- invite local councillors and MPs to attend sessions to raise awareness of opportunities presented by UK online centres as a means of involving the community in democratic issues.

Target outcomes

The target outcomes of the project were to achieve:

- 350 users attending the sessions;
- 10 councillors and MPs getting involved; and
- 92% satisfaction rate among users of the sessions.

Evaluation

Staffordshire Learning Hub contracted Glendevon Associates Ltd. to conduct an independent evaluation of the project upon completion. An internal evaluation working group was also established to monitor progress and record data to be used in the final evaluation.

The following research methods were used to monitor and assess the project:

- Product review and testing of the online quiz by external stakeholders, such as selected local councillors, learndirect staff, lecturers in further and adult education, school teachers and representatives from trade union education.
- A participant questionnaire to determine immediate impact and user satisfaction of the sessions (185 questionnaires completed of 303 users).
- Programme review meetings of the internal evaluation working group to monitor ongoing progress and identify opportunities for improvement.
- Follow-up telephone interviews with project delivery staff at 13 delivery centres.
- Follow-up interviews with 10 session participants.

Deliverables

Over the eight-month project E-democracy for Staffordshire Surfers delivered the following:

- an online quiz about UK and EU electoral systems with links to related websites;
- 303 users completed the quiz over the course of the project;
- 26 blended learning events were held at 17 UK online centres;
- 26 politicians attended events and facilitated debate and discussion (three MPs, one MEP, 22 local councillors); and
- a poster and leaflet pack was developed to advertise and market the programme to over 200 local community associations and at local UK online centres.

Resources and project management

Sandie Gay, Network Co-ordinator for Staffordshire UK online centres oversaw all aspects of the project. Records of budgeted and actual income and expenditures were maintained at Staffordshire Learning Hub.

The project delivered the above activities as documented below:

- project manager: **£4,100**;
- promotional materials: **£3,796**;
- quiz development: **£3,231**;
- independent evaluation: **£2,000**;
- accommodation: **£1,450**;
- centre facilities rentals: **£1,114**;
- postage: **£750**;
- training: **£600**;

- marketing: **£500**;
- meetings: **£476**; and
- online quiz prize: **£100**.

Total: **£18,117**.

How successful was the project?

Short-term outcomes

The activities of E-democracy for Staffordshire Surfers resulted in a number of short-term outcomes.

The first of these was the development of an online quiz about UK and EU democratic systems that can be used as both a stand-alone product and in a blended learning experience.¹ The session plan that was developed to create a blended learning environment utilised a combination of Staffordshire Learning Hub staff and discussions with local politicians in conjunction with the quiz. Feedback from participants suggests that events were well structured with a good mix of face-to-face and individual work stimulating lively debate among politicians and attendees.

Results from participant questionnaires and interviews conducted after the project suggest the quiz was fun and easy to use and was also able to raise awareness about the electoral system. Those individuals who participated in the events appeared to engage well with the programme and 90% of those who completed questionnaires felt they had

¹ Blended learning is a teaching method that incorporates face-to-face meetings and e-learning.

learned more about the electoral system because of attending the sessions.

Unfortunately there was no data collected about participants' awareness and understanding of UK democratic systems before they engaged with the quiz. This would have added further evidence about the degree of learning that occurred during the session. Even so, the large number of participants who felt their knowledge and awareness had increased demonstrates the project did achieve its primary aim of assisting users to learn about democratic processes.

Furthermore, 94% of those who participated in the project were satisfied with the session they attended, and 92% were satisfied with the quiz. These results are greater than the targets Staffordshire Learning Hub set for themselves and demonstrates the project's method of delivery was successful at engaging participants.

One disappointing outcome of E-democracy for Staffordshire Surfers was the lower than anticipated attendance at organised events and in particular among young people in Staffordshire county. Although some UK online centres had very high levels of attendance², other events had very few attendees and the project had hoped that young people would represent more than just 37% of total participants. Low attendance figures appear to be the result

of a combination of factors, such as difficulty coordinating schedules to organise events and poor timing with local school schedules and student exams.

However, once participants engaged with the quiz and the session, the project was proven to be an effective way of educating Staffordshire Learning Hub users about democracy in the UK. In particular, the involvement of local politicians appeared to add significant value to the project. In fact, the number of local politicians who volunteered to participate and then ultimately attended events was well beyond the original target. In the planning stages, Staffordshire Learning Hub hoped that 10 politicians would become actively involved. Over the course of the project 35 politicians volunteered to help and in the end 26 were able to attend events across the region.

Longer-term evaluation

The quiz has now been provided to all learndirect networks and UK online centres across the country, with accompanying guidance about how to organise and deliver a blended learning event. Northern College has also incorporated the use of the quiz in their virtual learning environment as part of their courses on politics. Additionally, the quiz is available online and has been accessed 53 times since the project ended: www.slh.ac.uk/quiz

Currently there are no plans to roll out the E-democracy for Staffordshire Surfers project any further. Given the results to date it appears the quiz is a valuable tool that could be used in a variety of learning environments. However, it is also clear there were difficulties in getting participants interested in volunteering to take part in the blended learning events. Ultimately, Staffordshire Learning Hub did not receive the response rate they had hoped for at events and at this time there do not appear to be any immediate strategies about how to improve that.

Through conducting interviews with staff after the project, Glendevon Associates Ltd. was able to determine that coordinating schedules with politicians was at least one of the key barriers to achieving attendance targets because it was a cumbersome process for centre coordinators. As a result it will be useful to continue monitoring this aspect of the project at UK online centres to see if these processes improve over time.

A number of recommendations have been made by Glendevon Associates Ltd. regarding the further roll out of E-democracy for Staffordshire Surfers. In particular, an extensive national project called the 'big quiz' has been suggested. However, at this time Staffordshire Learning Hub do not have partners nor funds in place to go ahead.

² Waterside online centre achieved 58 participants at each of five events in less than one month.

Whether the pilot will be a success in the longterm will depend on whether or not an improved method of encouraging attendance and participation can be identified, and whether a more efficient way of coordinating schedules among staff, politicians and users can be found.

Conclusions

E-democracy for Staffordshire Surfers was designed to develop and test a product that would encourage people to learn about democracy and electoral processes in an online environment. This goal was achieved.

Staffordshire Learning Hub has created a valuable online resource that appears to be successful at educating people about democracy and democratic institutions in the UK and EU. In addition, piloting and testing the quiz demonstrated that it can function as a stand-alone product or be used in a blended learning environment where users can ask questions and debate the content of the quiz with politicians and staff.

Although the target number of 350 participants attending events across Staffordshire county was not realised, the 262 individuals who did participate in the events, and the additional 41 individuals who completed the quiz on

their own appear to have both learned from the experience and enjoyed it.

If it is possible to identify alternative ways of marketing and organising events that would achieve higher attendance results, such as delivering the quiz in conjunction with another programme, the product could reach many more people and have a greater impact 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

- Testing and reviewing the quiz before it went live helped to ensure that the content and navigation were easy, educational and enjoyable for users.
- Using a blended learning model was successful as a method of delivering this product because those who participated enjoyed both the quiz and discussions with local politicians.
- Running events at UK online centres where staff were motivated to engage with the quiz, and where politicians were able to attend sessions resulted in higher turnout

and higher interest in the project.

Lessons learnt

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

- All technical issues should have been reviewed and resolved before the pilot went 'live' to ensure that all participants were able to engage with the product.
- When administering participant questionnaires an attempt should have been made to collect contact details to conduct follow-up interviews.
- Earlier coordination with school schedules and curriculum plans could have helped increase involvement of young people and avoid conflicts with exam periods.

New Initiatives Fund

For further information about this project please contact Sandie Gay from Staffordshire Learning Hub at: sandie@staffsnet.force9.co.uk or visit their website at: www.slh.ac.uk or the quiz at: www.slh.ac.uk/quiz

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

We are an independent body set up by the UK Parliament. We aim to gain public confidence and encourage people to take part in the democratic process within the UK by modernising the electoral process, promoting public awareness of electoral matters and regulating political parties. For more information see: www.electoralcommission.org.uk

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