

Women into Politics Election specials

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 Women into Politics (WiP) New Initiatives Fund grant to host four 'Election specials'. It highlights the aims and objectives of the grant, the achievements of the project and lessons learnt.

The grant

Women into Politics (WiP) was set up in 1994 to provide political education training to women in Greater Belfast. The women and women's groups that WiP works with are located in areas that have suffered disproportionately as a result of the conflict in Northern Ireland. These groups have often been directly affected by the conflict and have therefore not had the same educational opportunities as other groups in society. The areas in which the groups are located rate highly on the scales of unemployment, poor housing and deprivation. Furthermore, they suffer from a poorly developed social infrastructure.

The political training provided by WiP has been supplemented by a cross community dialogue and discussion series – Dialogue Across the City – of which 'Election specials' are a part. WiP was awarded a grant of **£7,174** to run four 'Election specials' in the Belfast area in March and April 2003.

Aims and objectives

The main aim of 'Election specials' was to provide a

forum through which groups of women were provided with information about voting procedures and the process of the count and given an opportunity to discuss the concepts of democracy and why people do or don't vote.

The specific objectives of the project were to:

- increase women's confidence in discussing difficult or controversial topics and in a bigger group;
- bring policy makers and women together for mutual benefit;
- give women an opportunity to question candidates on local issues;
- encourage women to participate in elections and use their vote.

Target outcomes

The main target outcome agreed between WiP and The Electoral Commission was to increase participants' interest in the political process, the concept of democracy and the democratic process. WiP aimed to ensure that women attending would make the connection between their own

interests and the work of elected representatives, and would see that using your vote can and does make a difference.

The goal was to involve a total of 225 women in the project. In addition, it was agreed between WiP and the Commission that WiP would aim to attract groups of women to attend the ‘Election specials’ from constituencies across the Belfast area.

Evaluation

The project had clear targets for attendance providing the baseline for quantitative evaluation. The project was further evaluated through:

- **Monitoring forms** – to collect data on social, economic, ethnic, religious and educational background of participants.
- **Evaluation forms** – to provide a basic view of what attendees thought of the event, whether they had enjoyed attending and what suggestions they would have to improve future events. This evaluation probed into whether attending the event had changed their opinion or influenced either the way they would vote or if they would vote at all. The evaluation also asked if attending the event had changed their awareness of the electoral process and the role of government.
- **Evaluation interviews** – a random sample of attendees were approached to expand on the above issues, gauge likely future voter intentions

and assessed the secondary effects.

- **Evaluation interviews** – a random sample of those that did not attend the ‘Election specials’ were approached to gauge likely future voter intentions (to establish a baseline for comparison).

Deliverables

‘Election specials’

WiP hosted ‘Election specials’ in a number of constituencies in and around Belfast throughout April and May 2003.

Overall, 166 women attended the events and engaged in dialogue with 25 prospective political candidates. The attendees represented women from very diverse groups.

The ‘Election specials’ were chaired by women with a wide range of expertise and knowledge, from female

community activists to a senior Law Professor at Magee University College, a BBC political correspondent and a consultant for Women in Enterprise.

Each attendee was given an information pack containing information on the candidates, the political parties and information on voting and counting procedures. The attendees were then encouraged to discuss topics for which they felt strongly. Cross-party representatives were present to discuss the issues. Topics included:

- **Equality** – including gender, race, disability, sexual orientation and age. Of particular interest was the discussion about the under-representation of women at decision-making level within political parties. Representatives of the political parties were asked

Table 1: breakdown of attendees

Group	Percentage of attendees
Registered disabled	12
Doing unpaid work	72
Between the ages of 18–24	7
Between the ages of 25–34	21
Between the ages of 35–44	36
Between the ages of 45–54	22
Older than 55 years	11
Carers	85
Ethnic minority background	38
Protestant	31
Catholic	62
Other religious backgrounds	7
No educational qualification	39
Educated to secondary level	15
Occupational qualifications	20
Educated to tertiary level	24

about their strategies, policies and actions to achieve equality within their party.

- **Governmental support for women's groups** – at nearly all the events the funding difficulties reported by the community and voluntary sector and its impact on service delivery and meeting the needs of communities was raised. It was suggested that public sector and community and voluntary groups work in partnership to ensure that the needs of the communities they are serving are both identified and met.

Other topics discussed included: education, employment, anti-social behaviour, childcare, community relations, reproductive rights, domestic violence and environmental management. The organisers were careful to ensure at all times that all points of view could be expressed, and there was no political agenda evident in the organisation of the events.

The workshop 'Ethnic Minority Women in Northern Irish Politics' (co-hosted with Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities (NICEM)) specifically targeted women from ethnic minority communities across Northern Ireland, providing them with an exclusive forum to express their opinions of politics in Northern Ireland in terms of representation and participation.

Resources and project management

The resource allocation for the project included:

- postage: **£665**
- photocopying: **£168**
- hospitality: **£700**
- room hire: **£700**
- telephone: **£245**
- childcare: **£700**
- materials/information packs: **£1,610**
- staff costs: **£700**
- advertising: **£560**
- travel and other: **£626**

Total: **£6,674**

Four of WiP's staff were directly involved in carrying out this work and a local link person was appointed in each geographical area to assist in the organisation of the events. This facilitated a co-ordinated and community focused approach to the organisation of the events. The total cost was less than the grant originally awarded; funds not used were not claimed from the Commission.

How successful was the project?

Short-term outcomes

The evaluation exercise undertaken by WiP would suggest that the 'Election specials' gave women the opportunity to engage with political decision-makers. Furthermore, for many women it was the first time that they had attended a political event and had met their political candidates.

Women expressed the view that they particularly enjoyed a

number of elements of the 'Election specials', including:

- meeting other women and hearing their concerns;
- meeting women from communities they have not interacted with before;
- the opportunity to meet representatives from all parties and to hear the different parties' stance on the issues raised;
- talking on a one-to-one basis with the politicians, during and after the event;
- a non-sectarian panel;
- discovering it was easy to talk to politicians;
- that the events changed their own perception of politics;
- experiencing politicians with a 'human touch' who were willing to listen and did not interrupt or get caught up in sectarian language.

The participants felt that they were better informed about political and electoral processes and more motivated to engage in the politics. The evidence also suggests that the women that did attend the events would be more inspired to vote at future elections than those that didn't attend the 'Election specials'.

As a result of attending the 'Election specials' the participants expressed a desire to get involved in community politics, a minority expressed a desire to involve themselves in party politics. They also stated a wish to pass on the knowledge they had gained to

family, friends and in particular, their children.

Most importantly, the participants expressed a desire to see more positive events of this kind.

The overall participation was lower than anticipated. Women into Politics outlined a number of contributing factors:

- Elections originally scheduled for 1 May were postponed to 29 May and called off for a second time at the end of May, with no further date set – Women into Politics were of the view that people felt disenfranchised and that the low-attendance was indicative of their lack of trust in the political process.
- WiP felt that the funding difficulties reported by the community and voluntary sector, specifically within the women's community sector at the time of the 'Election specials', had an adverse impact on the organisation of the events. The women's networks and women's organisations that worked with WiP in reaching out to its target group felt that they were under-resourced in terms of personnel and finances.

WiP also suggested that longer timescales in the planning phase would improve the attendance figures of the events

by facilitating greater opportunities to network with women's community groups in the area.

Longer-term evaluation

The evaluation exercises undertaken in the short-term were comprehensive and enabled WiP to establish the immediate outcomes and successes of 'Election specials'. A further evaluation exercise is planned, to be undertaken independently by the University of Ulster to help assess the longer-term impact. However, the timing of the evaluation is subject to securing funding.

Conclusions

Despite failing to meet the numerical target for the number of attendees, the women who attended the 'Election specials' were inspired and motivated to greater involvement in local and national politics. Furthermore, the discussions enabled the women to broaden their perspectives of community issues and facilitated mutually beneficial interaction between political representatives and the general public.

Due to their success WiP have plans to run similar 'Election specials' in the future, pending funding applications made, these would be before the next local council elections.

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 the event programmes.
- A very diverse group of attendees, with differing needs and experiences, were encouraged and targeted to attend.
- The provision of a crèche and the funding of attendees travel expenses.
- Non-sectarian, cross-party political representation.

Lessons learnt

- Adequate time must be given to arrange events.
- Outreach work must be undertaken to make contact with 'hard to reach' groups.
- An impact assessment would enable an organisation to form a more comprehensive view of the success of events.

New Initiatives Fund

For further information please see: www.womenintopolitics.org or contact Carola Speth at WiP: policy@womenintopolitics.org
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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