

The Fawcett Society

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 the Fawcett Society's Value Your Vote project, funded by the New Initiatives Fund. The report highlights the aims and objectives of Value Your Vote, the achievements of the project and lessons learnt by the Fawcett Society.

The grant

Value Your Vote was developed from an alliance between the Fawcett Society and the Women's Library at London Metropolitan University. The Fawcett Society is the UK's leading organisation campaigning for equality between women and men, and is unique in taking up a wide range of issues important to women across the UK. The Women's Library is a cultural centre, housing the most extensive collection of women's history in the UK, with over 60,000 printed materials, 400 organisational and personal archives and 5,000 material objects.

The Electoral Commission agreed to grant a sum of £18,600 to the Fawcett Society for Value Your Vote and an amount of **£18,590** was paid out. The primary aim of the project was to inspire women and girls to engage with political life by publishing a website and conducting a number of related events to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Equal Franchise Act of 1928.¹

The Commission's grant covered the costs for designing, developing and publishing a joint website between the Fawcett Society and the Women's Library, as well as costs to run a number of related events. Value Your Vote ran from November 2003 to May 2004.

Aims and objectives

The primary objectives of Value Your Vote were to:

- mark the 75th anniversary of the Equal Franchise Act;
- create an accessible, visual and written record of the Women's Library's Art for Votes Sake exhibition by developing a website linked to the home websites of both the Fawcett Society and the Women's Library;
- address some of the complex factors that give rise to the lack of participation, among women in particular, in political life and voting;

¹ The Equal Franchise Act gave women the right to vote on an equal basis to men for the first time in the UK.

- engage directly with girls and women to raise awareness about the importance of political participation today; and
- familiarise women and girls with political institutions, creating a feeling of political empowerment as well as ownership of the political process.

Target outcomes

The target outcomes of the project were for participants to:

- improve their engagement with and understanding of politics and public life;
- increase their likelihood of voting;
- enhance their knowledge of the story of how women won the vote and how women continue to contribute to public life today; and
- increase their knowledge of how to become involved with politics and public life.

Evaluation

The Fawcett Society and the Women's Library contracted independent evaluators to assess the website and the event held with female student union members. The Fawcett Society evaluated the visit to Parliament.

The following research methods were used:

- a focus group with eight young women aged 14–18 to test and evaluate the content and navigation of the website;
- monitoring visits to the website;

- feedback from attendees of the visit to Parliament;
- a survey questionnaire completed by 22 attendees of the student union event; and
- telephone interviews with a random selection of six participants from the student union event.

Deliverables

Over the seven-month project Value Your Vote delivered the following:

- a joint website developed and launched November 2003: www.votesforwomen.org.uk
- a visit to the Houses of Parliament organised for staff and users of four Tower Hamlets' organisations: Mosaada Women's Centre, St. Hilda's Community Centre, Bethnal Green Pensioners' Action Group, and Women's Health and Family Services; and
- a half-day seminar with three workshop streams held at the Women's Library for 28 female student union members and university students across the UK.

Resources and project management

Laura Turquet, Policy Officer for the Fawcett Society oversaw all aspects of the project. Records of budgeted and actual income and expenditures were maintained at the Fawcett Society.

The project delivered the above activities as documented below:

- website research, content and coordination: **£10,998**;
- administration and overheads: **£2,500**;
- marketing of website: **£1,200**;
- evaluation coordination and content: **£1,170**;
- marketing of events: **£1,028**;
- phone, stationery, postage: **£1,000**;
- catering and room hire: **£614**; and
- evaluation fees for student evaluators: **£80**.

Total: **£18,590**.

How successful was the project?

Short-term outcomes

Value Your Vote achieved a number of short-term outcomes over the course of the seven-month project.

The first of these was the development and launch of the joint website between the Fawcett Society and the Women's Library: www.votesforwomen.org.uk. A total of 5,688 unique visits² were made to the site from the launch in November until the end of the pilot project in May 2004. November to January were the most active months, during which time the website's promotion was linked to celebrations of the 75th anniversary of the Equal Franchise Act, and the Women's Library's Art for Votes Sake exhibition. Although the number of visitors was below original targets, the Fawcett Society realised their original targets (based on visits to the

Women's Library established website) were too high for such a new site, and a more comprehensive marketing plan at an earlier stage would have helped increase traffic to the site.

The focus group session with young women aged 14–18 living in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets resulted in positive feedback about the website and a number of suggestions for improvement. The young women responded well to the content and visual appearance of the website and easily picked up the key messages of encouraging girls and women to think about politics and women's issues, and to use their vote. In-kind technical support from BT plc to design and develop the site's structure enabled project staff to devote more time to developing content for the site.

The young women from Tower Hamlets also appreciated the use of pictures with text, and welcomed the comparison of lifestyle between Kate, the modern representation of young women in 2003, and Eliza, the historic representation of young women in 1913. While they all found the website content informative, they also identified navigation as a key area for improvement, and suggested the site would be more

engaging with the addition of games or quizzes. They felt these would make the site more fun, and would help them remember details about the history of women's voting.

Value Your Vote also planned three distinct pilot events targeted at different audiences of women and girls. These events were to pilot new ways of engaging young women with politics and democracy. However, in the end only two events were delivered. The event targeted at young women aged 14–18 proved too difficult to organise and was ultimately abandoned because of low attendance. However, through the planning process a number of contacts were made that the Fawcett Society feel will help in planning future events.

The other two planned events achieved greater success at engaging women with UK democratic institutions and teaching them about how to express their views to decision makers. The first of these was a visit to the Houses of Parliament organised through a partnership with the Hansard Society's Connecting Community Project. Eight women from four organisations in the Tower Hamlets area participated and had the opportunity to meet their MP Oona King, as well as observe a variety of activities taking place in Parliament.

Overall the participants felt their knowledge of Parliament and the role of MPs increased as a result of the visit and found the day both interesting

and informative. In particular, the meeting with Oona King MP was considered to be a particularly valuable experience.

The second event was a half-day session with 28 female student union members from across the UK. The session featured keynote speeches and three workshop streams to teach women how to use democratic institutions to get their messages across to decision-makers.

Of the 22 attendees who completed post-event questionnaires, all felt the event was good and their knowledge about the history of women's voting had increased. However, many participants were already committed voters before attending the event and as a result less than half felt the workshop had increased their knowledge of politics. Even so, a majority felt the contacts they made and knowledge they gained about public participation were valuable and the Fawcett Society anticipate this will have longer-term impacts when the women return to their universities and apply what they have learned.

Longer-term evaluation

There are currently no plans to further roll out any aspect of Value Your Vote. However, the Fawcett Society and the Women's Library have plans to discuss future applications of the website and the events.

It will be useful to remain in touch with the Fawcett Society and the Women's Library to see if an improved method of

² Unique visits represent one individual computer accessing the website, regardless of how many times they return to the site. Although this is a useful measurement, it is still imperfect because more than one individual who shares a computer at a public internet cafe, public library or at home will only count as one visitor.

marketing the website to its target audience can be identified and if either of the events are repeated in future.

Conclusions

Overall, Value Your Vote appears to have had some useful results that could be applied to future projects endeavouring to raise awareness about the history of women's political engagement, and how women can engage with current UK democratic institutions.

The website was comprehensive in its content and certain aspects appeared to be innovative and engaging for the target audience. The timing of its launch and promotion was well coordinated to coincide with the 75th anniversary of the Equal Franchise Act, and the Art for Votes Sake exhibition at the Women's Library. However, it does appear to require a more directed-learning setting to attract young women to visit the site, and as a result, alternative strategies will be important to generate more significant activity.

The visit to Parliament seemed successful in improving participants' understanding of politics and democratic institutions, and how they could share their views and expertise with decision-makers. The second event with the student union

members was viewed as a valuable experience by participants and has already created an opportunity for the Fawcett Society to work with the National Union of Students (NUS) at their annual conference.

It is unfortunate the event designed for 14–18 year olds did not go ahead in the end, especially since this was an important target audience for Value Your Vote. However, valuable contacts were made and lessons learnt for 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

- Working in partnership with like-minded organisations helped to provide additional opportunities to reach the target audiences.
- Developing the website and special events around the 75th anniversary and the Art for Votes Sake exhibition helped women become aware of the website.
- Involving Oona King MP in the visit to Parliament helped bring democracy and political engagement to life for the attendees.

Lessons learnt

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

- Special events should be held where 'hard-to-reach' audiences spend most of their time rather than inviting them to other venues.
- When organising events for 'hard-to-reach' groups, partnerships with like-minded organisations that have expertise working with the target group must be established very early on in the process.
- Development of the website should have incorporated a longer-term marketing plan that would attract more visitors and provide a reason to keep it active beyond the 75th anniversary.

New Initiatives Fund

For further information about this project please contact Katherine Rake from the Fawcett Society at: katherine@fawcettsociety.org.uk or visit their website at: www.fawcettsociety.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

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