

Cumbria Association of Local Councils – D2D Campaign

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 a project run by the Cumbria Association of Local Councils (CALC). CALC is funded by membership subscription from parish and town councils, and its staff operate out of Voluntary Action Cumbria offices.

We highlight the aims and objectives of the project, along with its achievements and the lessons learnt.

The Grant

The Electoral Commission provided a total grant of **£31,000** to CALC to support an awareness-raising project aimed primarily at encouraging local people to stand for election as parish councillors. The project formed part of the CALC 'Parish Democracy Campaign'. This campaign had two specific aims of:

- increasing public awareness of the work and role of parish and town councillors;
- developing better councils, including the improvement of the training of local council clerks and councillors.

The project also attracted contributions from Cumbria County Council, five district councils, the Countryside Agency, the Rural Development Programme and two charities.

The campaign began in January 2003 and ran until the local elections in May 2003. It covered all parish and town council areas in Cumbria.

Aims and objectives

The campaign was delivered against a backdrop of decreasing interest and involvement in local issues as evidenced by the number of people interested in standing for parish and town councils and the number of vacant seats after elections in 1999.

In Cumbria there were also concerns about increasing demands on town and parish councillors and the introduction of a new Councillor Code of Conduct that prompted some opposition both locally and nationally.

The CALC 'door-to-door' project or 'D2D campaign' was aimed at encouraging individuals to get involved and put themselves forward for local elections. Further themes of the project were based around education, information and community development.

The specific objectives of the campaign were to:

- inform all electors of the role of parish and town councils, the role of councillors and the nomination and election process;

- encourage more people to stand for election to parish and town councils;
- encourage more contested elections.

The primary tool used to achieve the objective was the production of a leaflet entitled *Go on. Get Involved*. The New Initiatives Fund grant was designed to support production and delivery of this leaflet to all households in parish and town council areas in Cumbria. A poster and local media campaign ran concurrently and supported the leaflet drop.

Target outcomes

The measurable outcomes agreed with The Electoral Commission during the grant application process were as follows:

- leaflet drop completed by Royal Mail by 24 March 2003;
- more people seek nomination for election than the 1999 elections;
- more contested elections than in the 1999 elections;
- fewer vacancies on councils after the 2003 elections than in 1999.

These agreed outcomes were designed to align with the project's overall objective.

Evaluation

At the outset of the project, it was agreed that CALC would provide The Electoral Commission with an independent evaluation report of the project's progress, outcomes and impact.

Deliverables

Campaign activities

As indicated in the grant application, the primary tool for the campaign was a leaflet entitled *Go on. Get Involved*. The leaflet provided information under the following headings:

- what is a parish and town council;
- who is the council, and who are the councillors;
- what do councillors do and how much time will it take;
- getting elected to a parish and town council – including subheadings on:
 - qualifications to be a councillor;
 - the nomination procedure;
 - the polling process;
 - the contested election;
 - election expenses;
 - acceptance of the position of councillor.

The leaflet was designed to provide enough information to stimulate an interest in the issue, and also provided contact details on who to contact to find out more information. The leaflet also published a date where public open sessions were held should potential candidates wish to pursue the issue in more detail.

Representatives at CALC developed and agreed, with The Electoral Commission, a plan for delivery of the campaign that included requirements and specifications for the:

- design and content of the leaflets;
- timetable for the direct mail of the leaflets;
- concurrent poster campaign via local councils, libraries and community centres;
- concurrent radio and press activity and public seminars;
- updates on the CALC website;
- independent evaluation of the overall project.

Project and resource management

Given that the campaign had to work with a short timeframe to achieve its targets, keeping to a strict timetable in delivering these outputs was seen as necessary and desirable. Clive Moth of CALC project managed the campaign with support from partner organisations. In their application form, CALC provided a project timeline that detailed specific tasks expected through the course of the campaign. This project plan assisted CALC in providing the agreed deliverables on time.

This type of project had not previously been undertaken on such a scale within the area, so CALC worked with The Electoral Commission to ensure that the leaflets met both quality and legislative standards. In particular, the design of the leaflet was discussed with the Commission's Communications Directorate, and overall design of the leaflet adhered to RNIB guidelines.

The final budget cost was £36,500. This included The Electoral Commission grant plus £1,000 from the Rural Development Programme in Cumbria and a further £4,500 from the Parish Democracy Programme. Allocation of the budget is outlined below.

A significant proportion of the grant – **£24,000** – was allocated to the direct mailing company who were engaged to deliver the leaflets to individual homes, businesses and authorities within the catchment area.

The remainder of the resource was allocated as follows:

- design, production and batching of leaflets: **£7,000**;
- internal distribution of leaflets to councils: **£250**;
- poster campaign: **£2,000**;
- awareness leaflets to accompany the D2D exercise: **£750**;
- evaluation exercise: **£2,500**.

The project was delivered within the budget allocated.

How successful was the project?

Short-term outcomes

CALC managed within a limited time period to successfully produce and deliver 126,000 leaflets:

- 122,000 of which were sent directly to residents in 264 electoral areas in towns, parishes and wards going to the polls;
- 4,000 of which were sent to principal authorities, public libraries and local councils to

become available to the public in general.

The campaign generated interest within the local media. BBC Radio Cumbria provided opportunities for explaining the project and discussing election process issues. The timing of the mailing exercise also coincided with a production of articles and letters in the local newspaper about the work of local councils.

However, the project did not provide an independent evaluation report as required by the Commission. CALC did approach the Research Department of the University of Northumbria to undertake the evaluation exercise, including a brief to undertake a full quantitative assessment of the project's impacts. However, it was advised by the University that such an exercise would cost more than the funds available.

Instead, it was agreed with the Commission that the grant recipient would write the project evaluation report which was then subject to review by specialist evaluation consultants. Although CALC provided a frank account of the success of the project, given the resources available, it was only possible for CALC to provide a limited statistical analysis of the project. This has meant that any conclusions made as a result of the analysis can only be indicative.

The analysis provided in the evaluation report highlighted that there was a 13.2%

increase in contested elections in the county when compared to contested elections in 1999.

Up until the May elections it was believed that many of the existing councillors would not stand again. In this context, the percentage increase in contested elections is clearly a successful outcome. CALC believes that the leaflet campaign and the associated media publicity had some impact in minimising the potential loss of existing councillors and in encouraging new candidates to stand for election. However, there is only anecdotal evidence to support this assumption and it is difficult to prove 'cause and effect'.

The picture in relation to the measure of 'a reduced number of vacancies after the elections' was less positive. The number of vacancies remaining immediately after the elections increased from 266 in 1999 to 329 in 2003 – representing a percentage increase of 21.8%. As the project was unable to provide any detailed research in relation to this issue, it is difficult to determine why this was the case, and whether or not the CALC project could have had a bigger influence in changing this result.

Longer-term evaluation

At the completion of the project CALC acknowledged that demonstrating the success of the project was difficult because the methods in place to measure its impact were limited. The project had specific short-term goals and no longer-term assessment of impact is planned.

Conclusions

The CALC project appears to have had some success in raising the awareness of the role of parish and town councils within Cumbria and stimulating interest in getting people involved in local issues. However, this success has been difficult to quantify and has largely been based on anecdotal evidence. Given the size of the grant provided to CALC, it is arguable that the results should have been more significant and more clearly demonstrated.

CALC intends to take steps to ensure that the momentum gathered during the campaign is not lost, and to continue to find approaches in partnership with others to promote participation in local democracy to the public.

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

- Targeting a wide catchment of people by direct mailing leaflets;
- running campaigns using different media simultaneously can help to reinforce key messages.

Lessons learnt

- Building in evaluation plans from the outset is essential;
- awareness raising campaigns that offer a multidimensional approach are likely to be more effective than those based on leaflets alone;
- to be effective, such projects need to be sophisticated and interactive in their attempts to attract their intended audience;
- some methods of awareness raising are more conducive to the measurement of impact and outcomes than others. Impact cannot be measured through numerical targets such as 'number of leaflets delivered';
- obtaining and using benchmarking information is critical when measuring and evaluating the success of a project.

New Initiatives Fund

For further information about this project please contact Clive Moth from the Cumbria Association of Parish Councils at:
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or visit their website:
www.calc.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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