

Hansard Society MPs in Schools

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 Hansard Society's 'MPs in Schools' project which was supported by a grant from the New Initiatives Fund. We highlight the aims and objectives of the project, the key achievements and the lessons learnt.

The Grant

The Hansard Society is an independent educational charity that aims to promote effective parliamentary democracy.

The 'MPs in Schools' project was launched initially in July 2001 with funding from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). To continue the project, further funding was sought from The Electoral Commission. With the help of Commission funding, the project was re-launched in June 2002.

The Electoral Commission granted a sum of **£5,000** to the Hansard Society to contribute towards the costs of the development, publicity and delivery of an information pack for schools.

The pack was targeted mainly at Key Stage 3 pupils and was distributed nationally. The project was run in partnership with the Citizenship Foundation, Children's Express and the Parliamentary Education Unit.

Aims and objectives

The main objectives of the MPs in Schools project, as documented in the application to the Commission were to:

- provide MPs and schools with a model to ensure a structured and focused visit by MPs to schools in their constituencies;
- encourage a partnership between the elected representative and the pupils themselves;
- provide a resource that was lively and pupil centred;
- give young people the opportunity to explore issues around democracy and voting.

It was also important to both the Commission and the Hansard Society that MPs were clearly informed that their visits to schools should remain focused on the democratic and parliamentary processes and not on party politics.

Target outcomes

The grant from the New Initiatives Fund was designed

to allow the extension of a previous pilot in 2001–02, during which the Hansard Society had received registrations from over 450 MPs and 1,000 schools.

The application to the Commission by the Hansard Society was not specific about the quantitative targets they were aiming for while progressing the project. However, following the commencement of the project, the following targets were agreed:

- 1,000 extra registrations of schools by the end of 2003;
- contacting all registered schools and informing them about the resource;
- increasing the number of MPs who have ordered the pack.

Evaluation

The Hansard Society undertook its own evaluation on the project, drawing heavily on a survey of a sample of schools. Three different techniques were used to gather feedback – phone interviews, written questionnaires and face-to-face interviews. The sample covered 30 out of the 1,500 schools reached across the UK from both the private and public sector – representing 2% of those involved.

Deliverables

The pack included the following:

- The MPs' section that helped to prepare MPs for their school visit, particularly:

- noting the age group the information pack was aimed at;
 - guiding them on how much young people were likely to know;
 - providing hints on how to prepare for the school visit;
 - noting why the citizenship agenda is relevant for young people;
 - encouraging them to use local knowledge and issues to engage young people.
- A teachers' section providing:
 - guidance on how to contact their local MP;
 - guidance on how to plan for a visit from an MP;
 - information on other resources that schools can use to support the learning process;
 - a background to political literacy.
 - A pupils' section, providing worksheets that:
 - guided and helped them prepare questions for their MP;
 - outlined the role of Parliament, MPs, and local councillors;
 - outlined who can vote and how to vote – supported by a mock elections project.

Project and resource management

During the development and early part of the delivery stage of the project, there was a personnel change in the project manager role. The latter part of the delivery stage was managed by Fiona Booth, the Programme Director for Citizenship Education.

The financial management of the project was monitored by the Director of the Citizenship Education Programme. The total grant of £5,000 was used to fund:

- design and print of flyers;
- mailing to all schools;
- staff costs to oversee work and process requests for packs;

Production costs were to be kept to a minimum by using in-house resources and expertise.

How successful was the project?

Short-term outcomes

The Commission funding provided the Hansard Society with an opportunity to:

- distribute over 1,500 packs to schools;
- distribute approximately 200 packs to MPs;
- register interest from a further 1,000 schools.

Approximately half of the schools in the initial distribution used the pack to arrange a visit from their MP. The broader qualitative objectives of the project were assessed through

the evaluation survey, which took the form of either a phone interview, written questionnaire or face-to-face interview. The survey addressed questions around the use and impact of the pack and provided an opportunity for teachers to suggest improvements.

In their own evaluation report, drawing on the results of the sample survey, the Hansard Society highlighted a number of areas of success:

- they reported a high level of usage from the schools that accessed the information pack, culminating in successful visits from MPs. Success in this sense was measured by the feedback on the surveys returned by the teachers and MPs;
- the pack was regarded as accessible to teachers who did not have a background in politics and therefore created a level of confidence in the use and distribution of information to pupils;
- the pack was reported as providing uncluttered guidance for teachers, which was able to be followed with little outside assistance;
- the pack was seen as filling an information vacuum regarding political literacy and the citizenship agenda.

In addition, the feedback survey suggested a number of other positive impacts in some or all of the schools that took part, with the following outcomes highlighted:

- pupils benefited from the visits from their local MPs,

arising from the significant level of preparation involved and participation during the Q&A sessions on the day of the visit;

- the mock elections feature of the pack was reported as being a useful way of encouraging activity among pupils, providing them with a 'hands on' view of political processes;
- in some schools, the visits prompted an interest in local news stories among pupils, especially articles involving the local MP;
- the visits provided an opportunity for students to learn about the role of councils and local councillors;
- the school visits gave pupils the confidence or an impetus to write to their MP about issues in their local area;
- the pack appeared to have given teachers the confidence to contact their local MP, to prepare for and follow through with the visit;
- many teachers reported that they, too, have been through a learning process in the area of political literacy;
- the pack was seen as providing an opportunity for teachers to take on a different approach to teaching the citizenship curriculum.

A project visit by the Commission to the Hansard Society also provided a generally positive account of the way the project was

managed and implemented within the resources available.

However, as with all initiatives such as this, it is difficult to set a baseline and to measure the true extent of the impact. The use of three different survey techniques also created inconsistencies in the quality and nature of feedback obtained through the evaluation process.

Longer-term evaluation

The Hansard Society intends to continue this work and are actively seeking additional funding to not only further distribute the resource but also to take into account and build on the recommendations provided in their evaluation report.

Conclusions

From the information available, the project appears to have secured considerable success in relation to the key qualitative outcomes sought. The Hansard Society was able to meet the targets set for delivering packs to schools, and increasing MP involvement in the project.

It has provided a useful learning tool for developing partnerships and promoting active participation among the parties it intended to reach. The project has also proven itself to be a useful resource, one that has reached more than one audience and can be easily duplicated, thus ensuring the longevity of the information produced. Some schools have now written this resource into their school plans and calendar, which is a good measure of the value of the material.

The pack appears to have been well-received by the schools, students and MPs who have had access to it. However, the Hansard Society itself has identified that the project's impact was impeded by the method of dissemination and the limited capacity of the Hansard Society to promote the availability of the resource.

Further, the Hansard Society noted that in hindsight it would have been beneficial to allocate time and resources at the early stages of the project to the development of a marketing and publicity plan.

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

- Production of a high quality, clear and comprehensive resource – a good balance of diagrams and textual information to assist learning;
- providing a resource that promotes active rather than passive learning around the citizenship agenda.

Lessons learnt

Any similar scheme in the future should:

- consider more than one method of advertising the pack. Given that direct mailouts only reach one contact in each school, there needs to be consideration of the use of other methods to promote awareness and distribution levels past the information 'gatekeepers';
- consider placing the pack online to allow for greater access and distribution between teachers (providing one pack per school inhibited the number of pupils and teachers coming into contact with it);
- look into providing additional visual and interactive supporting material with the pack, such as a CD-Rom or video;
- develop the detail within the pack to reflect the different academic needs between the pupils at different key stages;
- provide guidance to teachers on prioritising activities if they have limited time to dedicate to the issues;
- consider including a separate section dedicated to young people outside of mainstream education;
- ensure that MPs are sufficiently prepared for the school visits – perhaps by developing more detailed guidance notes or running half-day sessions with MPs about how to talk to young people about politics and democracy;
- provide ideas and guidance for varied types of visits from MPs;
- use a consistent evaluation technique to ensure that information is collected consistently;
- identify ways to establish a baseline and a tool to help objectively measure the impact of the pack in schools over time.

New Initiatives Fund

For further information about the project please contact Fiona Booth, Programme Director, Citizenship Education at the Hansard Society, London.
Tel: 0207 739 4000 or visit: www.hansard-society.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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