

Electoral Education Ltd Active Citizenship

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 Active Citizenship project run by Electoral Education Ltd, a community-based educational business commonly known as ELECT. The report highlights the aims and objectives of the project and outlines the achievements of the project and the lessons learnt.

The Grant

The Electoral Commission granted a total of **£56,475** to ELECT to support its 'Active Citizenship' project. The pilot ran over a period of nine months – from November 2002 to July 2003.

Aims and objectives

The grant assisted ELECT in its ambition to pilot a service to the local community in the North East Lincolnshire area. The general aim was to provide an interactive service to a local community that offered impartial advice on the:

- electoral process;
- 2003 local elections;
- continued interactive access to elected members.

ELECT's specific objectives were to:

- provide local information on elections to assist in reconnecting the elected with their electorate;
- raise awareness of the electoral process;
- connect electors to candidates;

- engage a young population into politics;
- provide a forum for debate and discussion;
- provide a resource for those teaching and promoting active partnership;
- increase turn-out at local elections;
- reach adults who have never voted before;
- deliver objectives in the e-learning, e-democracy and e-government agenda.

ELECT also had aspirations to set the scene and a baseline for an electoral project that could be rolled out regionally and nationally.

Target outcomes

During the application process, ELECT and The Electoral Commission agreed that ELECT would measure success based on the following output and outcome measures:

- the proportion of electorate voting in the next local election;
- the number of 'hits' on the ELECT website;

- the number of questions asked by electors on the website;
 - under 18 years old;
 - over 18 years old;
- the number of schools and colleges that have used the ELECT website as part of citizenship courses;
- the composition of attendees at ELECT conferences and workshops;
- the number of candidates for election who:
 - attend ELECT briefings;
 - engage with debate on the website.

Evaluation

It was agreed that an independent evaluation of the project would be undertaken by the Department of Politics and International Studies, Hull University. The University was to measure the extent to which ELECT met the measurable outcomes as outlined above.

ELECT representatives also provided a perspective on the progress and impact of the project. This perspective was integrated into the evaluation report forwarded to the Commission.

Deliverables

A key deliverable for this pilot was to engage local politicians and local electors through the medium of the website. Through the council's Electoral Registration Officer, every candidate standing in the 2003 elections in North East Lincolnshire received an invitation to be included on the

website. Candidates were given individual presentations outlining the role of ELECT and were provided with technical support in the recording of their individual details and views on ward issues in both text and audio formats.

All candidates were provided with a facility to issue press releases from any online computer and were given their own email addresses to facilitate interaction with electors. Party leaders were also afforded an opportunity to state key council-wide issues they were using to promote their party. Independent candidates were given equal space to those standing for political parties.

The website provided access to candidates directly, by party or by ward. By entering their postcode electors could view a sample ballot paper, find their polling station and access the audio, photographic and textual information supplied by their candidates.

Throughout the pilot, ELECT also undertook to promote the website through leaflets, banners, local newspaper articles, and local radio interviews. A key deliverable was the televised debate that was transmitted by the local Channel 7 (NTL Cable). The debate included representatives from all parties standing, an independent candidate and a representative of the local youth parliament and provided a forum for an interactive session between candidates and the invited audience.

On the electoral educational front, ELECT:

- held awareness raising workshops at local conferences on citizenship;
- provided adult education workshops through 11 online libraries;
- made connections with schools and youth parliament representatives;
- developed citizen lesson plans for teaching purposes.

A key deliverable for the pilot was the 'Active Citizenship – A Vote of Confidence' seminar, which was run in association with the University of Hull and the North East Lincolnshire Council. The aim of this seminar was to report back on the pilot programme, provide an initial evaluation of its success, and to receive comment from a variety of professionals offering an external perspective.

Finally, ELECT has adapted the website to provide ongoing information about elected members throughout the year.

Project and resource management

The pilot was project managed by Richard Bellamy, Executive Secretary of ELECT. In its initial application, ELECT provided a project timeline that detailed specific developmental and evaluation tasks expected through the course of the project. This detail assisted it in providing the deliverables as agreed with The Electoral Commission.

Mr Bellamy started with some background information and a 'skeletal' website on which to build on throughout the pilot. During the course of the pilot, ELECT was in constant contact with a Commission case officer, to ensure that the project was progressing to the timescales agreed. A good relationship was developed, which meant that alongside the financial support, case officers also were able to provide assistance and advice when required. The project was delivered within the budget allocated.

How successful was the project?

Short-term outcomes

The independent evaluators concluded that the Active Citizenship pilot project was successful in fulfilling its core aims, for the following reasons:

- at all times ELECT offered and provided an impartial, fair and consistent service to all candidates;
- the pilot provided a neutral arena for discussing local election issues;
- the pilot provided an interactive and user-friendly service to local candidates and the community within North East Lincolnshire.

With regard to the specific objectives and target outcomes, these were judged by Hull University as partially successful. This partial success was due to the setting of wide reaching and ambitious objectives and the lack of a relevant baseline to quantify the pilot's actual impact.

Nevertheless, the pilot was gauged as being successful for a number of reasons:

- it provided a new tool for the Electoral Officers to 'market' their elections;
- 64 out of 91 existing members and potential candidates contributed;
- it pioneered the use of audio information, which allowed ELECT to gather over 200 audio clips from candidates on issues relating to their ward;
- there was a demonstrable increase in candidates' knowledge and confidence in using the internet as a means of communicating with voters;
- it encouraged candidates to think more rigorously about their own stances on policy and engage more effectively with electronic communication.
- there were 32,218 page hits on the website in April and May 2003, indicating a connection with the general public;
- it provided an impartial resource for information provision and learning on election and citizenship issues;
- a locally relevant resource for teachers was produced to present electoral issues in an impartial manner;
- it provided a forum for discussion and interaction through the Channel 7 debate and the Active Citizenship seminar;

- it gathered and maintained support from the local authority's Democratic and Education Services and **all** political parties.

These successes were significant given the short timeframe the pilot operated within. However, further success of the pilot was inhibited by the fact that:

- the website was not advertised as being available online early enough;
- the online message board system to allow online discussion on a number of issues was not up and running in time to gain maximum effect.

Longer-term evaluation

ELECT are keen to see the continued promotion of the impartial website address. They hope to add the website address to all official election material, particularly in those areas where postal voting is being piloted or rolled out. To achieve this, ELECT will be seeking funding from other sources.

Conclusions

The pilot was a unique, multi-media project that offers considerable promise for the future. It provides an e-friendly model that others could adopt at a local, regional or national level to assist them in their attempts to raise the profile of election processes and issues. The product that ELECT has created is innovative and interactive, and the model could be replicated by others

with an interest and expertise in this area.

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

- Implementation of audio information technology to present messages to users of the website;
- the level of accessibility provided to users of the website through being able to access information that was either clearly articulated in the written material or was delivered through an audio medium; and
- the level of impartiality maintained throughout the project.

Lessons learnt

- Timing is critical – detailed planning at the early stages is necessary if a project is going to reach its full potential;
- it is essential to establish SMART objectives and targets for a project of this nature. ELECT started the project by citing some objectives and outcomes that proved to be:

- particularly broad, e.g. 'deliver objectives in the e-learning, e-democracy and e-government agenda'; or
 - remarkably ambitious, e.g. the reference to 'increase turnout at local elections';
 - difficult to measure, e.g. reach 'adults who have never voted before';
- give careful consideration of how to quantify the impact of the project.

New Initiatives Fund

For further information please contact Richard Bellamy at: rbellamy@ElectionsUK.org or visit their website: www.ElectionsUK.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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