

## Operation Black Vote

### MP shadowing scheme

Operation Black Vote (OBV) is a not-for-profit organisation that works to address what they describe as the 'Black democratic deficit' in the UK. They do this through running educational programmes for young people, motivational events and information provision and through a number of shadowing schemes.

The MP shadowing scheme gave 21 individuals from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities the opportunity to shadow an MP from one of the three main parties over a period of six months. The shadows were also trained on national and local democratic institutions, party candidate selection processes and dealing with the media. In addition they were expected to act as 'ambassadors' sharing their learning and experiences with their own communities; training was provided to help them fulfil the role.

### Project objectives

The project's objectives were to:

- increase knowledge amongst BME communities about the role and importance of the UK Parliament
- inspire BME communities to positively engage in politics and wider civic society
- engender a belief that BME

communities can bring about positive change by engaging with politicians and the democratic process

- increase electoral registration levels in the ambassadors' home communities

### Funding

The MP shadowing scheme was awarded a grant of £49,200 and ran from September 2005 until March 2007.

### How successful was the project?

The MP shadowing scheme was open to BME individuals aged 18 or over who could demonstrate strong commitment to the aims of the schemes and an understanding of the main social and political issues experienced by BME communities. The scheme was widely advertised and participants chosen via an application form and interview process.

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The shadowing took place over a period of six months in both Parliament and the MPs' constituencies. A minimum of eight days were undertaken by each shadow. In addition OBV ran training days to help the shadows to get the most out of their experience, and held a national media launch. A graduation ceremony at the end of the project enabled MPs and shadows to talk about their experiences and share what they had learned.

Each shadow also committed to taking part in activities to raise awareness in their communities, examples of which included bringing local young people to Parliament to meet an MP and having MPs talk at local events many involving young people.

The project was externally evaluated by the Young Foundation, who used questionnaires, feedback forms and interviews to assess the experiences of both the shadows and the MPs who took part.

Much of the feedback generated by the evaluation focuses on qualitative issues. The shadows appreciated the variety of things they were able to take part in, such as accompanying MPs to meetings and events, meeting other MPs and Peers and seeing MPs deal with

constituents. Participants welcomed the access it gave them and in-depth knowledge of how Parliament works.

The experiences of the shadows were very much dependant on the relationship they were able to build with their MP (and their office). In some cases shadows had to be very proactive to ensure that they were given adequate time with their MPs and all shadows had to deal with the possibility of their shadowing days being cancelled or rearranged at short notice. All 21 participants completed the shadowing, and overall the project met its objectives.

### **Good practice**

- Shadows welcomed the support they got from one another, regardless of party affiliation and consider themselves a useful network for the future.
- Recruiting high profile MPs (including party leaders and cabinet members) to the scheme ensured media interest and meant that shadows got a full picture of Parliamentary responsibilities.

### **Lessons learnt**

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

- It was hard to schedule

shadowing days for some participants early on. Quicker identification of those that were struggling and more support may have improved some shadows' experiences.

- Some MPs would have liked to have interviewed their shadows in advance to discuss expectations and set objectives.

### **Further information**

For further information about this project please contact:

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Further information about the New Initiatives Fund and the wider work of The Electoral Commission can be found at:

[www.electoralcommission.org.uk](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk)

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