

Public Achievement

Where Is My Public Servant (WIMPS)

The Electoral Commission established the New Initiatives Fund to support and promote new ways of raising awareness about voting and democracy. We have awarded grants to local, community and national organisations working with different target audiences across the whole of the UK.

This evaluation report provides information about Public Achievement's Where Is My Public Servant (WIMPS) project funded by the New Initiatives Fund. In the report we highlight the aims, objectives and achievements of the project, and lessons learnt by Public Achievement.

Public Achievement is a civic education organisation, empowering young people to take action on issues in their communities and, in the process, to learn core concepts of citizenship and democracy. The WIMPS project brought together a team of young people, web designers and lobbyists to build upon their website that enables young people to contact their public representative. Interactive training sessions, participation in conferences and political speed dating events were also undertaken.

Aims and objectives

The aim of the project was to promote participation of young people in the democratic system by enabling them to contact their elected public representative.

The project's objectives were to:

- increase awareness and understanding of UK elections and government
- promote, increase and support constructive engagement between young people, politicians and other public servants

- create an inclusive, accessible space for young people to voice their views on important issues in their lives
- test the benefits and limitations of web based approaches to youth political engagement

Funding

The project received a grant of £48,796 from October 2005 to June 2007.

How successful was the project?

The project delivered 27 events which were attended by 657 young people and 35 public representatives. Events were delivered in partnership with a number of organisations including the North Eastern Education and Library Board, Colin Youth Forum, the Northern Ireland Youth Forum, St Josephs College, Trócarie, Amnesty International, Children in Crossfire and the Northern Ireland Local Government Association.

The primary purpose of the website was to generate constructive engagement between young people and

public representatives. The website was re-launched in November 2006 and included articles and information about youth and decision making, videos, downloadable resources, audio/visual hot-seat interviews and a database of action projects.

Public Achievement took responsibility for the monitoring and evaluation of the project internally and engaged an external evaluator to produce an interim and final report. The evaluation data included interviews with the WIMPS staff, group discussion with the WIMPS volunteers, reviewing the statistics for the website, completion of questionnaires and telephone interviews with a sample of site users.

There were 326 registered website users in the first year and 428 in the second. Approximately 1,300 online messages were sent by young people to political representatives with a response rate of 20%. Eighty-six per cent of young people who attended events reported they understood more about people who represented them locally and 75% said they understood more about how politics affected their life. Sixty-one per cent of people that attended the political speed dating event said that they would like to get more involved with their local council, and had more issues to discuss with decision makers.

The project created an inclusive and accessible space for young people. Concerns that were raised included bullying, punishment beatings, teenage pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, lack of youth facilities and anti-social behaviour. The benefits of the website included speed, user-friendliness and accessibility, particularly for people with disabilities. The limitations included access to computers, user-friendliness for those with severe learning disabilities, and engagement of public representatives.

Good practice

- Child protection was a key issue for the project. All staff were police checked and undertook child protection training. There was compulsory registration for site users, secure email systems were monitored by WIMPS staff and online language filtering used, discussion forums were monitored, and consent forms were required from young people/their parents or guardians to transmit video footage.
- WIMPS staff recorded 13 hot seat interviews with politicians from six political parties including DUP, Sinn Fein, UUP, SDLP, Alliance and Green parties. The interviewees commented on the value of the face to face engagement and being able to speak about their lives, backgrounds and experiences as well as opinions on key issues.

Lessons learnt

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

- The WIMPS team promoted the project through various media. Despite this, the evaluation process highlighted the need for more promotional activity to enable young people to learn more about WIMPS and to recruit more young people to become involved in the project.
- The collation of monitoring and evaluation data should always be collected when delivering events. This will enable the group to identify how successful each element of provision has been, and to improve provision.

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

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