

Equality and Diversity Case Studies

Directorate: Resources

Service: Legal and Democratic

Title: Engaging Young People in Local Democracy

Introduction:

One of the key aims of the Democratic Services function is to increase participation in local democracy. By ensuring practices and procedures are clear, well communicated and open to all.

Challenges:

Evidence gathered through equality monitoring forms, together with anecdotal evidence, shows that young people do not engage with local democracy at the same level as those in older age groups.

The majority of those who completed equality monitoring forms when attending public meetings (such as Council and Committees) identified themselves as being in the 65-84 years age group, the second most popular age group was 45-64 years.

Research carried out via attendance at 'Meet your Councillor Events' with young people at colleges and schools in the area demonstrated that young people did not have a clear understanding of the role of Councillors or democratic procedures such as formal council and committee meetings, not did they see that what happened in such meetings was relevant to them.

How the challenges were overcome:

A two point approach was used, the first was to educate young people about Councillors and meetings, and the second was to get some young people involved in local democracy via co-option to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

The first approach was to co-opt young people who were Cheshire West and Chester UK Youth Parliament representatives onto the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. This allowed young people to actively get involved in local democracy. The co-optees liaise with the youth senate, other students at their school and via Facebook to explain what they are doing on the committee and get input to feedback to the Committee. They are also undertaking a scrutiny review on the Image of Young People which will again demonstrate their involvement, and the relevance of local democracy to their peers.

The second approach was to produce a 'Mock Council project pack' with a difference. One that would act as a fun and educational day for students and young people - who often have very little idea of the decision making process – and remove some of the misconceptions about Council meetings and elected members.

The 'project pack' concept for a Mock Council debate ensured that the programme could be re-used over and over again and adapted for multiple uses. It contains enough information and detail to enable Democratic Services staff with (the help of a number of Councillor and officer volunteers to provide numerous twists and turns to make the event challenging and fun.

The project information pack contains:

- Timetable for the day, including briefings, group meetings and meetings
- Profile of the imaginary borough of 'Townville'
- General responsibilities of Elected Members
- Details of 50 individual roles – giving realistic backgrounds and scenarios for each participant to 'adopt' if they wished
- Rules of Procedure for debate (adapted for the purpose)
- An agenda for the Townsville Council meeting with bespoke reports relating to topical and real issues

The event debates were web cast live by the Communications Team and recordings continue to be accessible via the Council's website and are still attracting viewings.

The information pack was circulated to the students in advance of the day and College Tutors had the opportunity to discuss the event beforehand. A press release was issued after the event and photographs were also available on the Council's web site. Information has been circulated to all Cheshire West and Chester Secondary School Head Teachers, giving them an opportunity to consider taking part in the two planned re-runs scheduled for 2011.

In addition to taking on key roles of Chief Executive and Monitoring Officer Democratic Services staff gave the usual administrative support to the 'Townville Council', 'doubled up' as members of the public and, alongside Councillors, acted as 'political advisors' in group meetings. The current Chairman of the Council assisted the Townville Council Chair and Councillors from all parties took on roles as members of public and press as well as helping out in the Group meetings.

The Chair of Townville Council and all Townville Councillor roles were played by the students.

The students were in charge of their Council meeting from the election of party leaders (brown, grey and purple) and developing their own political viewpoints and strategy, right through to formally moving resolutions at the meeting. The Democratic Services Team, having compiled the reports and provided background information, were well placed to throw a number of spanners into the works at key stages during the course of the day.

A short 'tester' (debating the merits of tea versus coffee) was also included in the introduction to the day to help students become accustomed to the Council Chamber, sound equipment, etc.

The immediate response of the students attending the event was that they had had a surprisingly good time and thoroughly enjoyed themselves. One or two even expressed interest in becoming a Councillor.

Evidence of solicited and unsolicited feedback on the 'Townville Council Day' is available. There was a broad selection of favorable comments received from the students, Tutors, CWaC Councillors, Democratic Services staff and others involved on the day.

Outcomes:

Increased participation in local democracy by young people. Active participation by young people at overview and Scrutiny Committee is webcast. A group of young people are undertaking a scrutiny review. Recent monitoring forms do show some attendance by those in the Under 18 and 18 to 24 age groups.

By hosting similar student events next year, the Democratic Services Team plans to further enhance its engagement with the local community, particularly in terms of young people aged 15 to 17 years.

The project pack is also capable of being adapted and marketed as a useful learning tool for 6th Form Colleges and other higher education establishments to utilise.

What we could have done better:

More active promotion of the role of young people on Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

A debriefing and evaluation meeting took place after the mock Council event when the opportunity was taken to further improve the package. One of the suggestions being to programme in the opportunity for pre-Council mini briefings with 'real' Executive members. This has the full support of Executive members who are really keen to engage with the younger people of the Borough.