

East Midlands Improvement and Efficiency Partnership



Notts Bothered – Increasing Voter Turnout ▾

East Midlands Improvement and Efficiency Partnership Case Studies

The East Midlands Improvement & Efficiency Partnership is committed to celebrating the successful, innovative and imaginative project work that exists in the East Midlands region.

The EM IEP Support Team publish case studies showing how East Midlands councils are improving services, and delivering significant improvements and efficiencies.

The case studies are intended to inspire councils in the region, and indeed nationally, to transform services and benefit from the processes developed by those councils that have pioneered the way forward.

Summary ▾

‘Notts Bothered’ is a partnership between the Nottinghamshire County Council, Nottingham City Council and the seven District Councils in Nottinghamshire. The aim of the project was to develop a three year strategy to improve voter turnout throughout Nottinghamshire, targeting young people in particular.

The project involved an innovative high profile marketing campaign to increase voter turnout by raising awareness of elections and identifying and removing barriers to voting.

The project illustrates how local authorities can work effectively, with the private sector, to fulfil its statutory duties to promote and encourage participation in elections, and in so doing, improve efficiency and deliver value for money.



The Issue ▾

There is widespread concern in the falling turnout rates at elections. For local elections a low turnout can be seen as a challenge to the council's democratic mandate. This fall in turnout seems particularly marked in younger people. The differential turnout rates by age seem to suggest that voting is a habit which if not acquired at an early age is in danger of being lost.

Over recent county council elections the turnout has been boosted by the election being held on the same day as general elections. In 2009 this was not the case.

The uncertainty about whether it is appropriate for councils to encourage electoral turnout has been eliminated by a specific duty on returning officers introduced by the Electoral Administration Act 2006.

The East Midlands Improvement and Efficiency Partnership (EMIEP) previously had a target to increase voter turnout by 20% by 2011. The 2009 county council elections were seen as a first step towards this, the local authorities wanting to see what worked.

What You Did ▾

At the request of the County Chief Executives in the county, the Nottinghamshire Election Officers Group successfully submitted a bid to EMIEP to grant funding for the 'Voter Turnout Project'.

The Nottinghamshire Electoral Officers Group meets regularly to co-ordinate electoral issues across the county and was the natural mechanism to drive the project, with Ashfield District Council acting as the accountable body. The Group has a good track record of sharing best practice and exploring opportunities for working together and with partners, in the delivery of elections and electoral registration services. The Group had representation from all of the

Nottinghamshire Councils and the Midlands Office of the Electoral Commission.

The Group created a brief to increase voter turnout in the county and invited communications agencies to bid for the project. The brief was to:

- Design and execute a high profile and innovative campaign in the run up to the local elections in June 2009 to increase voter turnout, especially among young people.
- To carry out a thorough evaluation of the success of the campaign and attitudes to local elections and present this back.

Not bothered about county council elections?

Must do today:

- take books + DVDs back to library
- find help for dad to get around
- get bus timetable into town for the boys
- do recycling
- go to parents' evening

**Your county council. It does more than you think.
Vote on June 4th**



Notts bothered
www.nottsbothered.com

- To make specific recommendations for future turnout the vote campaigns in the districts, City and County and in respect of the development of a three year strategy.

A local PR agency was the successful bidder. A local Youth Mayor and two students from a local school were invited to join in the selection process. The specific phases of the campaign were to:

- Increase the level of voter registration. The key message being: **“make sure you are on the electoral register and able to vote”**.
- Increase awareness of local services and the importance of voting. Coverage of local government issues locally tends to be limited. This is reflected in attitude surveys which indicate that people have a more positive attitude to services provided by local councils than they do to the councils themselves. The key message here being: **“your local services are important, have your say”**.
- Encourage voters to vote. The final element was for electors to be reminded of the importance of voting with the key message of: **“vote on 4th June and choose your local councillor”**.

Research ▾

The campaign was shaped by research which included an academic review of published research and interpretation of a small number of focus groups.

Underpinning this was a focus on two main areas or target groups on which the campaign needed to have impact.

- Short-term impact would be seen by targeting those who know that they ought to vote but might not unless they were reminded. The campaign needed to strengthen their intention to vote.
- For longer-term impact the campaign needed to reach those who should vote but didn't see value in it and probably “couldn't be bothered”. An additional change needed to be encouraged to try to establish a life-long voting habit. The evidence suggested that these were primarily younger people.
To reflect these targets the campaign was branded **‘Notts bothered’**.

Publicity Campaign ▾

The direct campaign activity included the following strands.

Media Strategy: The traditional media clearly had a role to play in reaching the public. The campaign team made early contact with the media, including engaging with editors and journalists, and produced content for the media (press releases, comment pieces, feature articles) encouraging readers to use their vote and containing information about council services.

Outreach Strategy: Conscious that voters may discount messages from councils the campaign team also engaged with a wide range of

partner organisations to use them as “ambassadors” for voting. These organisations included community partnerships, third sector organisations, and major employers. They were briefed, provided with election materials and a “toolkit” of resources and encouraged to use their channels to promote the objectives of the campaign.

Online: The campaign used a dedicated website with resources for outreach partners as well as information for individual voters. Adverts were placed on Facebook and a Facebook Group set up to encourage discussion.

Evaluation ▾

The reach of the campaign was monitored and the views of outreach partners surveyed. In addition, exit polling across the County gave feedback from voters.

The Impact ▾

Turnout in the 2007 district elections across Nottinghamshire was 40%, the turnout in the 2009 county council elections at 39.43% was broadly stable. The exit polling indicates that 80% of those who vote are serial voters (having voted in the last County Council election).

Some 20% of the sample of those who voted were specifically aware of the “**Notts bothered**” campaign and a number reported that they

had not intended to vote but the campaign had changed their minds.

Over a quarter of the 18-24’s who voted were non voters last time around. Over half of the 18-24s who voted were voting for the first time in a local election (based on samples from exit polls).

This campaign was across Nottinghamshire and covered all the districts. The media that serve the south of the County are

Good Practice Case Study

mostly based in Nottingham so the City was involved in the campaign (which required some messages that although City residents will be voting in the European Parliamentary elections they will not be voting for the local council).

Electoral officers are comfortable

with promoting electoral registration but are less used to promoting voting. Although officers were happy to deal with the mechanics (registration, polling day etc) they were less sure about promoting why someone should vote and wary about seeming to take a partisan line.

Lessons and Risks ▾

The most obvious risk is that encouraging voters could be perceived as party political. Ensuring that the campaign was even-handed and couldn't be accused of favouring one party was a constant concern. The campaign team felt that the nature of the campaign tied their hands to some extent – it is easier to campaign for a specific candidate or party than to encourage people just to vote. At times during the campaign the media would have liked a spokesperson but it was difficult to find one who could not be dragged into making a partisan statement. A high profile figurehead was thought to be essential.

The research made it clear that the changing approach of the political parties, and their declining resources, means that they are

less likely to mobilise the turnout. Overall, few voters reported having been canvassed.

At the beginning of the campaign there was concern about how the media would respond, given the tendency to be critical of local councils. In the main, however, by engaging with the media early the coverage of the principle of voting was more positive.

Engaging with students during the spring/summer term was difficult because election periods generally coincided with exams and revision periods. The positive feedback on the quality of election materials and toolkits was encouraging but would have been more effective earlier in the academic year.

Future Strategy ▾

The outreach strategy resulted in a network of partners (almost 300 in the final analysis) who they felt they had a role to play in encouraging greater participation in local elections; a powerful resource. They achieved impressive levels of campaign awareness in the community.

There is encouraging evidence that a partnership outreach approach can deliver high levels of exposure for key messages relating to participation in elections and were more effective conduits for such messages than more traditional advertising.

The “**Notts Bothered**” campaign name, visual identity and creative execution received widespread positive feedback from partners and resonated with a wide range of audiences.

Longer lead in times would help partners, businesses and schools

to raise awareness and challenge negative attitudes. It was also recognised that during busy election periods those closely involved in organising elections were less able to contribute time and resources to the campaigns. However, it was important that local authorities supported the campaign at the highest level.

Finally, in respect of education and young people, research showed that awareness of elections and the process of voting was actually reasonably high, and that if the motivation was there - voting was easy enough. It seemed that whilst the wider population was also reasonably well informed on the services provided by the local council, there was still a lack of understanding or belief that voting affects REAL CHANGE on the issues that mattered most to us.

Data/Evidence ▾

As part of the project the communications agency produced a detailed evaluation and lessons learned report.

Contacts and Further information ▾

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