

REDISCOVERING THE CIVIC AND ACHIEVING BETTER OUTCOMES IN PUBLIC POLICY

Policy Briefing Number 9

Title: How to Encourage Civic Behaviour Through a Local Authority Contact Centre

Brief Description of the Project:

- The aim of the project is to identify how callers to a local authority contact centre can be encouraged to get involved in civic activity. It is based on the idea that people who call are not just customers, but concerned citizens. If citizens are contacting the council because they are concerned about the local area, might they be interested in doing something to improve it?
- The research was undertaken in 2008-9 in partnership with a local authority in north-west England, in two neighbourhoods. One is relatively affluent, mostly home owners, ethnically diverse. The other is more deprived, mostly social housing, predominantly white.
- There were two stages to the experiment:
Stage 1. Citizens who phoned the council's contact centre (about benefits or environmental issues) were asked:
"We are currently promoting civic awareness and are looking for people to get involved in improving the area. We want to encourage people to take action on community issues in the area. Would you be interested in finding out more?"
Stage 2. Citizens who said "Yes" were contacted by the local neighbourhood team, either by a personal visit or an information pack. The intention was to tailor the opportunities for participation to meet the skills and interests of citizens.
- A researcher did telephone interviews with citizens soon after their first phone call to the contact centre and again two months later. Questions included civic behaviour, attitudes, efficacy and motives for.
- This was a design experiment: researchers worked with practitioners over a period of time to design, implement, evaluate and re-design the intervention.

Key Findings:

- **Stage 1. Contact Centre**

Citizens were very enthusiastic about the project and were happy to be asked. Lots of new faces came forward - 63 people signed up to find out more

- Broad range of age, gender and ethnicity.
- Variety – e.g. included isolated carers, parents of young children and people in full time work.
- A third had not previously been involved in civic activity.

Contact centre staff found it easy to ask people and said they would be willing to play a bigger role in future, e.g. passing on information about the opportunities in the neighbourhood.

- **Stage 2. Tailored Opportunities from neighbourhood team**

The local authority found it difficult to tailor the opportunities to people's needs because that is not the way they usually work. At the start the neighbourhood team offered people a limited repertoire of the usual community initiatives that were going on at the time: people did not want to join community organisations. Researchers organised a workshop with practitioners to feed back from the research interviews what residents were interested in, and we designed some new activities around those themes, three of which were developed, but there was then some delay in getting them off the ground:

- Good morning phone calls from residents to isolated or housebound people;
- Mystery shopping, where people pose as customers and then provide feedback on their experience of using public services;
- Thank you cards.

- Overall, the initial enthusiasm did not translate into action: only a few people undertook any new activity:

- 4 people who had little or no previous experience of civic activity were interested in getting involved (in a gardening project, the good morning scheme or mystery shopping) but the activities did not get off the ground quickly enough, or did not fit quite what they wanted to do. By the time the good morning scheme was launched, more than 6 months later, one was still involved in it.
- 2 people, who were already active civic volunteers, received valuable support (help with training, free CRB checks, funding, setting up bank account, meeting space) which improved their effectiveness. One ran a support group for grandparents and another ran a local community association.

Policy Relevance and Implications:

- Citizens who phone a contact centre about local services are happy to be asked about getting involved in improving their local neighbourhood.
- The contact centre is an effective way of recruiting a wide range of people, reflective of the local population in terms of age, sex, ethnicity and employment. It reaches people who have no history of civic activity.
- Contact centre staff found this easy to do and it did not interfere with their work: they would be willing to go further.
- If people's interest is to be sustained, there need to be opportunities in place that are relevant to the local area and that appeal to a variety of skills, interests and time commitment.
- A potential idea to test out in the future:
Step 1. Identify the problems/issues in the area and produce a menu of specific tasks that residents can do to improve them (this should be negotiated as part of a neighbourhood agreement or area board, so the tasks are relevant and interesting to residents).
Step 2. Contact centre asks citizens who phone up "Do you want to get involved in improving your area?" If "yes" citizen is advised of the menu of specific options and how to follow up on them. If all the options are unsuitable, a referral is made to the neighbourhood team.

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