



South Tyneside Council

To: MJ Awards 2011

From: Ann Best, South Tyneside Council

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MJ Awards 2011 Nomination For Excellence in Democratic Services Category

South Tyneside Council has a Democratic Services team that includes Democratic Support, Members Support, Elections & Registration and Civic Support.

Our Service vision is :

“To provide a modern service that promotes community leadership, citizenship and engagement of the community in the democratic process”

We have been working hard to make this vision a reality and have asked our elected Members and partners to help us in delivery. The engagement activities are, it must be said, in addition to the more traditional range of professional support services we still provide to Members, Committees and the public. **What makes us different is** that we have embedded new skills in the team which allow us to share our knowledge and experience of local democracy. **What makes us special** is the excellent relationship we have with our elected Members and the support they give us in taking forward the Democratic Renewal agenda together. Examples of activities we have undertaken in 2010/11, are:

We design and deliver **interactive and bespoke local democracy** sessions in schools and community settings. The sessions include information on what the Council does and how people can influence decisions being made. We invite our partners to come along, such as NHS and Primary Care Trust, the Police and our

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Youth Service colleagues, who can bring along the Council's mobile youth facilities or Youth Buses. We have used the Youth Buses out in the community to hold meetings and workshops about democracy.



An example of specific feedback from a school is :

“It was a fantastic afternoon and I must thank you all for all of your hard work and organisational skills! It was great to have so many representatives. The students all engaged really well and I think they'll be bragging to their friends for the next few days! “ (R.S., Teacher at local Technology College)

We create informal opportunities for our elected Members to explain their role to young people, with a view to encouraging younger people to contact their Councillor or consider becoming a Councillor when they are older.



We invited members of our Deaf community to explain to us what the barriers are to engaging in democracy. As a direct result of this we have also undertaken **team training in British Sign Language.**

We conduct historical **tours of our Civic buildings** to encourage people to visit the Town Hall more often.



We hold an **annual Intergenerational Debate** on a 'hot topic', chaired by the Mayor, assisted by our Young Peoples Parliament Chair and Forum 50 Chair (Our Older Peoples Parliament). Key officers and partners as well as elected Members take part in the debate, which is open to public participation. Recommendations arising from the debate are taken forward by the relevant officers and Members.



We have designed and delivered **training sessions on “Working in a Political Environment”** as part of the Council’s Capable Managers programme and have also delivered it to Future Jobs Fund employees and Community Entrepreneurs. The training aims to explain the Member/Officer relationship as well as the decision- making process so that officers can better understand their own role in that relationship.

Some feedback from the training is :

“I found this session very useful – I wondered whether it was covered in induction courses now? If not, it would be useful. I’ve worked here 6 years and learnt a lot today.” (YS – Council Officer)

We take our '**democracy road show**' to community events throughout the year. We have a stall at family fun days and consultation events etc. so that we can talk face to face with members of the community. We have a small range of promotional items to attract local people and we take voter registrations, take the contact details of people who would like to attend our Community Area Forums (Our area Committees), receive feedback about local issues which we then refer to relevant Members or officers for action.



We are currently developing a **resource pack for other Councils or partners to use** in their own democratic engagement efforts. It will include tools and suggestions for sessions and activities as well as some promotional items for visual appeal. We are happy to offer guidance and advice, based on what we have learned so far.

We hosted a '**Dynamic Democracy**' event, funded by Take Part, which allowed us to share our practices with those who attended the one day event. Nine other Councils attended, as well as partner organisations and we received excellent

feedback about how helpful the day had been. One example of feedback from the participants is :

“Great to see elected Members taking such an active role in engagement. Inspired by the fantastic achievements of South Tyneside Democracy and the team work ethic” (S.L., an officer from another Council)



We regularly receive **requests from other Councils nationally** who want to visit us to find out how we operate our Community Area Forums, Scrutiny or our democratic engagement activities. Councils who have visited include: Cambridge, Sunderland, Newport, Ealing, Hull, and Nottingham. We operate our Community Area Forum meetings in schools, community centres, church halls, sheltered housing facilities etc. This means that our Democratic Support Officers have developed additional skills around accessibility issues, using mobile equipment and adapting according to the meeting venues available. The approach has resulted in

more people attending the meetings and has also helped us to develop good relationships between the hosts and the Council.

In October 2010 South Shields Town Hall celebrated its **Centenary**. We used this opportunity to showcase how the Civic building is a focal point for local democracy and a source of Civic pride. The team were involved in the **compilation and publication of a book** charting the history of the building. We also worked with colleagues on a **special exhibition**, displaying civic artefacts and an original Mayoral robe, as well as on planning a major **celebration event** and putting together a '**Virtual Town Hall Tour**' with a local TV personality and historian which was made available on 'YouTube' as well as on the Internet. We arranged the production of some special **Town Hall colouring books** so that young children could take a close look at the architectural features when they come to visit. Through all of these activities, we highlighted the role of the Council and Elected Members and the importance of getting involved in Civic life.



Some of the team have undertaken '**Train the Trainer**' training, with support from the Workers Educational Association. This gives us additional capacity and scope to deliver democratic engagement sessions without having to buy in expensive facilitation.

We have previously designed and trialled specific public sessions such as '**A Peoples Guide to Planning**' and '**A Peoples Guide to Licensing**'. These events

were designed to allow the participants to take on the role of a member of the Planning Committee or Licensing Committee, using real local case studies and also to consider the role of a member of the public and the Council Officer as well as partner roles. We engaged planning and licensing officers in these events to make them accurate and realistic. The feedback was excellent.



We have been asked to host **interactive workshops at conferences**, including a 'Big Society' Conference in Newcastle, Duty to Promote Democracy workshop at a regional Association of Democratic Service Officers (ADSO) event in Newcastle and a NEEP/Take Part event in Middlesbrough.

We proactively promote sessions held in the community by the Parliamentary Outreach Team and Take Part North East /Skillshare North East. We have excellent working relationships with these partners and freely exchange information and ideas as well as working together on projects.

We continually promote **the importance of voting** and as well as canvassing activities for registration, we hold special prize draws for early registrants, send birthday cards to attainers (Those who become 18 years old), have used SMS texting to alert young people to elections and also have used advertising in cinemas and on buses to ensure voter participation. Our current level of young people registered to vote is over 85%.

We are regularly asked by local schools and community groups to organise **Political Speed Dating** sessions. We use the model originally designed by the Solent Peoples Theatre, but have modified our approach over the years to meet the needs of different audiences. This activity is always very popular with our elected Members and we always get great feedback from participants. We add to the panel of speed daters by mixing in partners from the Police, Fire and Rescue Service, Health Partners and members of our youth and older peoples Parliaments.



We have held a **Town Hall Quiz** as an ice breaker to other activities. We encourage and support **work placements**, so that young people can experience what it is like to work in Democratic Services, possibly as a future career choice. We also host young people to be **'Mayor for a Day'** or **'Cabinet Member for a Day'**, which includes a Members induction and undertaking the duties of the Member.



We use **interactive voting equipment** to add another dimension to our community sessions and have found this to be a very useful tool, as it introduces the concept of voting but in a friendly way, with immediate results. It was a great help when we worked with our Deaf community participants.

We work with our Mayor in hosting **school visits**, usually a number of schools every month. The Mayor invites the young people to consider what life is like as Mayor and the young people can try out the Mayoral chair, chains and visit the parlour. The Mayor encourages the visitors to ask probing questions about how the Council works.



We hope that this summary gives you an insight into what we feel makes us a worthy entrant for the Municipal Journal Award and we would very much welcome the opportunity to share further details, should we be successful in being shortlisted

For further details on any of the items mentioned above, please contact Ann Best on 0191 424 7257 or email ann.best@southtyneside.gov.uk