



Local Democracy Week 2011

A Guide to Getting Your Council Involved

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Local Democracy Week 2011 — *A Guide to Getting Your Council Involved*

WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

This is the 8th year of 'Local Democracy Week', which runs from the 10th to 16th October 2011. The campaign aims to encourage people, particularly young people to get more involved with local government.

The 'Local Democracy Campaign' is about getting young people more involved while creating an awareness of their local council. Most young people do not view local politics as a dominant force in their daily lives. Only a quarter of 11-16 year-olds believe that their local councillor is the best person to approach in order to change something in their community and when asked who they respect most outside their family, only 1% chose politicians.

So how can we change this? A good starting point is to bring politicians and young people closer together. Research shows that just one in three 11-16 year-olds have ever met a councillor or MP, and states that those who have '**are more likely to express feelings of political engagement and interest.**'

There is a lot of good work going on across Northern Ireland to connect young people with their local councils – and this work is proven to deliver results. Is your council doing all it can to bring local young people into the local authority environment?

This guide is designed to bring ideas together and encourage you to run events in your council area. These ideas may help you to formulate new ideas and schemes of your own.

NILGA recently supported the development of a mentoring programme to encourage more women into politics, we would like to encourage councils to consider how their Local Democracy Week initiatives can engage with this audience.

For any further information on this project, please contact the NILGA office on 028 90798972, or email m.maher@nilga.org

We are also on the lookout for any new and innovative ideas, especially ways of bringing young people into the council chamber, so please contact us if you have something new planned.

PREPARING FOR YOUR EVENT

- Be clear on what you want the young people to get out of the event – identify your objective
- Identify the ideas you want to host – or do you want to merge more than one idea into one event?
- Consider what is the age range of the young people you want to work with?
- Identify the young people: from local schools, youth clubs, voluntary sector organisations, cubs/ brownies – are they keen and when could they participate?
- You may want to think about linking the event to a specific decision or consultation currently being undertaken by the council. Young people want their voice to be heard and so this can be an excellent opportunity to gather views and opinions
- Think about the language you use – avoid acronyms and 'council' speak. This will help ensure that everyone fully engages with the process
- Consider how young people will travel to the event, the time of the event and location accessibility
- Make sure the date doesn't coincide with any other events (inside and outside of council)
- Book the room and the relevant councillors/officers
- Do you need to book any additional rooms for refreshments, breakout sessions/workshops?

AFTER THE EVENT

- Ensure that you thank the young people and their representatives formally after the event – preferably in writing
- Certificates of attendance can be a good reminder of an event and celebrate involvement
- If young people have been involved in a decision or consultation, make sure that they receive feedback on the resulting progress and outcomes
- A follow up visit to the group by councillors and officers promotes the message to young people that their views are being taken seriously and hopefully, that it isn't just a one-off, or only an annual event.

PR

- Why not consider taking the council itself to the young people, in their own environment, next time?
- Use the facilities within the NILGA communication office to ensure maximum coverage and ensure your local communities see your results
- Encourage the young participants to write about their experiences in their school or club newsletter
- Ensure your media contacts are aware of your events
- Possibly arrange a photograph for your website.

THE BIG EVENT

- A number of ideas are included in this guide. Seek support from other authorities who have already undertaken good practice so you may work in partnership
- Be open and transparent with the young people to ensure that events are engaging and productive
- Issue press releases and take photographs (ensure the members of your group have photo consent if these are to be published, most schools have this covered already and will advise you).
- Contact NILGA communications office for support in promoting or publicising your event and to share what you have achieved.

SOME EVENT THEMES

Here are a few ideas to help get your Council involved in Local Democracy Week. Further information on a number of these activities are provided in the document:

1. **Political Speed Dating;**
2. **Mayor for a Day;**
3. **Youth Question Time;**
4. **Meet the Mayor/Your Council;**
5. **Mock Elections,**
6. **It's Your Home;**
7. **Take Your Councillor to School;**
8. **LifeSwap;**
9. **Recognition of Achievement Event.**
10. **Learning about the European Union**

1. POLITICAL SPEED DATING

Political Speed Dating is a fun and light hearted way for people to interact with their representatives and has proved extremely popular since its launch in 2004. Speed dating rules apply: there is a limited amount of time for the councillors and young people to get to know each other. It's a fun way for them to meet and find out more about the role they both play in the community and how councillors can represent young people's rights and views at a local level. Councils will need to recruit equal numbers of young people and councillors.

What you need...

- Audience: young people, aged 11+
- Duration: 45-90 mins
- Political speed dating pack (downloads available – see below)
- A similar number of young people and councillors taking part (up to 15 of each)
- The venue (the council chamber) set out with chairs facing each other around the room
- A compare who introduces the game, provides score cards and leads everyone through each stage
- Prize for the winning councillor?

How you do it...

- Everyone sits opposite each other, councillors on one side, young people on the other
- The young person can ask three questions in three minutes before the gong sounds
- Young people stay where they are; the councillors move on to the next young person
- Each councillor is graded and a winner evaluated.

What you get out of it...

- Young people love it. You get engagement while enabling them to discuss their most important issues and they get a sense of the difficult and important decisions councillors make
- Councillors love it... it's a fun, quick and convenient way for them to meet young people on a one-to-one basis, and get a sense of their most important issues.

2. MAYOR FOR A DAY

Young people often dream of how their council would run if they were in charge for the day, often unaware of the pressures of making difficult decisions, and balancing tight budgets. By providing

an opportunity to be 'Mayor for the day', councils can dispel the myths and rumours surrounding being a Mayor and demonstrate democracy in action to young people from schools, colleges and youth groups.

There are several ways you can choose your Mayor/or Mayors for the day. You could organise an election to identify the most popular candidate or invite the school or group to the council offices and lay on a programme of activities or initiatives (for example, the allocation of fantasy budgets) that culminate in the identification of the new Mayor. It is essential to try to make the experience real for the winning candidate. Make them a Mayor for the day, not just a guest of the council.

What you need...

- Audience: young people, aged 8+
- Duration: half to full day (in conjunction with other activities)
- An obliging and agreeable council
- A process to appoint the 'Mayor for the Day' (MftD) (perhaps a competition or classroom election)
- Manifesto or plan of action for the MftD when in office (this could be the basis of the above competition – 'three things you would change if you were mayor for the day')
- The local media interest.

How you do it...

- Combine MftD with other activities from this guide to provide a full (or half day) of democracy flavoured initiatives
- Chamber can be used to hold the election for MftD, hold a mock council meeting with MftD leading
- Work on and with your council colleagues – what they are prepared to do for the MftD is important
- Get a date and commitment from officers and organisations
- Are you inviting just the MftD – or their class/school/group as well?
- Work with local schools/youth groups in advance and decide on the process to select MftD
- Things to think about providing for the MftD: a slot at a full council meeting; a hypothetical budget to allocate/spend; junior robes or badge of office; time with the real mayor; writing a manifesto and a visit on behalf of/accompanying the real mayor;
- If the MftD is coming with a group, prepare some questions to start a discussion amongst the young people, i.e. what would you do as mayor, what changes would they make to their community, what speeches would they give, where else would you like to be mayor
- Arrange transport and refreshments for the young people if not done via school.

What you get out of it...

- Young people get to see how the council works
- Young people get to find out more about what their council does for them and their families; and how they can get involved
- Can provide specific experiences such as, election process, budget management, decision-making, partnership working, leading an organisation.

3. YOUTH QUESTION TIME

Young people from schools and youth groups across a council area are given the opportunity to quiz their councillors, which can be supported with an audience.

What you need...

- Audience: young people, aged 12+, and at least three speakers
- Duration: 60-120 mins
- A theme for the discussion - relevant to the young people
- A venue, the council chamber!
- Some questions (encourage young people to choose beforehand)
- The local media interest.

How you do it...

- Target the adult panel participants (or those to be questioned) appropriate to the theme (i.e. crime = police officer, negative perceptions = local newspaper editor)
- Have a reserve list of panel members
- Record the event by taking notes and photos
- State an objective for the session and look for specific action points or commitments from the organisations represented
- Challenge participants to follow up any promises made

- Arrange for a feedback session or process.

What you get out of it...

- Participation in a popular and familiar TV-style debate
- Helps break down communication barriers between young people and their councillors, politicians or representatives
- Panel members can get their messages across to young people
- Young people increase their appreciation of the democratic process
- They can also get answers to issues that matter to them.

4. MEET THE MAYOR/YOUR COUNCIL

Young people are invited to a meeting to see how decision-making works in the Council and/or to meet the Mayor. To make this more interactive young people could be given an opportunity to play a money game. For example they could be given £x million to allocate to various services and budgets and be asked to give reasons for the various allocations.

What you need...

- Audience: young people, aged 8 to 14
- Duration: depends on whether combined with other initiatives, two hours/half or full day?
- Use of the council buildings, especially the chamber
- Plan for the visit incorporating...
- The activities and resources in this guide
- An available councillor(s).
- **How you do it...**
- Make sure there is a range of accompanying activities from this guide
- Interesting tour of buildings, culminating in the chamber
- Have a macebearer to lead the children around and ensure he can keep them engaged and amused along the way
- Adequate refreshments
- Opportunity to meet a councillor or the mayor!
- Have something for the young people to take home.

What you get out of it...

- A convenient way to combine several activities in this guide
- Can help dispel myths and suspicions about the council
- A chance to open the doors to the council
- Creating an opportunity for future councillors or those who will work to support local government.

5. MOCK ELECTIONS

Councils can support schools wishing to host mock elections. You might like to contact schools in your local area to see if they would like to get involved. Practical help can include providing information on how elections are run or even just lending ballot boxes to authenticate the event.

What you need...

- Audience: young people (all ages)
- Duration: minimum 60 mins (for just the election process)
- A partnership with a school or youth group who have been running a mock election
- The mock elections toolkit from the Hansard Society (see below)
- Time in the council chamber to stage election and/or results announcement
- A range of accompanying activities to fill a day (or half day).

How you do it...

- Work with the young people over a period of time, helping facilitate the election
- Invite them to the council buildings and arrange a day of democratic activities from this guide (with a significant activity held in the chamber)
- Arrange for voting slips, ballot boxes and appropriate voting conditions
- Have a counting system prepared
- Announce and reward winning candidate.

What you get out of it...

- A mock election in the chamber adds authenticity to the democratic experience of the participants
- All the high drama, intense decision-making and mass participation of a real election
- Provides the opportunity to stand as party candidates, speech-writers and canvassers

- Young people recognise and follow a democratic process relevant to them
- It is an interactive and interesting active citizenship resource and actively engages pupils with political, social and moral issues.

Download: <http://www.mockelections.co.uk/sections/nireland/teachers/homepage.asp>

6. IT'S YOUR HOME

This activity is aimed at younger children (6-12 year olds). The mayor wears his robes and introduces the children to the role of the council and why it is important, possibly telling a story to the children.

What you need...

- Audience: young people, aged 6-12 years (primary schools, cubs, brownies, etc)
- Duration: 60-90 mins
- A venue – the council chamber!
- A host – how about the mayor?
- Refreshments and maybe additional activities.

How you do it...

- This event is for the younger audiences –
- The host (e.g. the Mayor) dresses up in the robes and tells the young audience about the history of their area
- This then sets the scene for a brief overview of what the council does – maybe with a questions and answers session
- The young audience then has refreshments provided (in a separate room if there's no food allowed in the chamber).

What you get out of it...

- It gives the young audience an early introduction to their council
- Also provides a basic understanding of what it does and why it's important.

7. TAKE YOUR COUNCILLOR TO SCHOOL

The aim of this event is to allow Councillors to get to know young people by meeting them in their own classroom. Your council may wish to formally approach schools to assess interest in this initiative or Councillors may visit the school of their children or relatives. Either way, make sure you have the permission of the head teacher. You might decide to stay for an hour or two or even for a half day – if you are brave enough.

8. LIFE SWAP

The aim of LifeSwap is to give councillors, councils and young people an unedited view of the day-to-day lives of young people. It helps councillors see young people as individuals rather than statistics and enables young people to express their feelings about society. It dispels stereotypes and builds understanding on both sides, in a simple but effective way. Young people are asked to capture their experiences, focusing on the theme 'my life: my community' using mobile camera phones. They take pictures of things that are important to them in their lives and communities over a specified period. The images are uploaded to a dedicated page on the council website. All images have a caption, giving an insight into the photographers feelings that day.

9. RECOGNITION OF ACHIEVEMENT EVENT

The council could hold a 'Recognition of Achievement' event where young people's achievements and contributions to the community are recognised and celebrated.

10. LEARNING ABOUT THE EUROPEAN UNION

Local Democracy Week is now held in cities and towns right across the European member states. As part of your council activities for Local Democracy Week, you could communicate with younger people the links your council has with other European member states. The following website provides information and lessons on the work of the European Union, What it's for and How it works. This could be incorporated as part of the Youth Question Time or Take Your Councillor to School. <http://europa.eu/abc/12lessons/>

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