



## Tameside case study: 'Top Ten' comic

### **Executive summary**

Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council (MBC) has developed a comic book aimed at Year 6 pupils to show youngsters what a council like Tameside is all about. It is hoped that by engaging with young people at an early age, there will be an increase in public participation from these young people for life. The comic combines games, puzzles and a story strip outlining the many functions and roles of the council. The comic has been a huge success although the true success of the project will not be seen for another eight to 10 years when it will be measured by an increase in voter turnout.

### **Introduction**

Falling voter turnout is a major concern in many of the world's liberal democracies. Participation in the electoral process is vital if a government or local authority is to claim legitimacy but in the United Kingdom, as in many other states, fewer people are casting their votes and surveys show that those least likely to do so are the young. During the latter half of the 20th century the average turnout in general elections was around 70 per cent, although at the 1950 General Election - the first since the end of the Second World War - it was close to 84 per cent. However, in 2001 it fell to 59.4 per cent, and rose only marginally, to 61.5 per cent, in 2005.

In local polls the decline has been even more pronounced, with turnout struggling to reach even 40 per cent. Tameside MBC has employed a variety of strategies to encourage people to vote, but it has made a special effort to stimulate interest among the voters of tomorrow. Working on the 'get them while they are young' principle, it has produced a 24-page magazine, 'Top Ten', which is aimed at Year 6 children - those aged 10 and 11.

The colourful publication has been designed to be fun and informative without being condescending. It includes puzzles and a comic-strip story based around an alien youngster named Cee-Kerr who lands from outer space. He has to pass his final earth exam on local government, and receives help from a 'Top Ten' team of youngsters.

### **Objectives and achievements**

The key objective is to show youngsters what a council like Tameside does, how it differs from central government, what services it provides, how it prioritises, how it makes its decisions, and how councillors are chosen by ordinary people.

It aims to show that councils are dynamic bodies employing a lot of people who are trying to do a lot of good. In this way it sets out to dispel the negative view that so many people hold - such as the old man shown on the cover of the 'Top Ten' magazine saying: "I blame the council myself".

Hopefully, the children will understand that the council is there to work for them and that they can shape their communities for the better by participating in government at both the national and local level.

In terms of achievement, all that can be said so far is that 'Top Ten' has been well received by both teachers and pupils. But the crunch will come in eight or so years when today's Year 6 pupils reach 18 and qualify to vote. If at that point election turnout begins to improve in Tameside, it will be possible to judge 'Top Ten' a resounding success.

### **Critical success factors**

#### **1. Accurate targeting**

If a publication such as 'Top Ten' is to succeed it is essential that it is designed to appeal to the relevant age group, as any hint of condescension and the 10 and 11-year-olds would immediately see through the pomposity.

It is vital to avoid the so-called 'disco-vicar' syndrome in which older people make themselves look silly by trying to appear cool. To make sure that all this was taken into account, Tameside MBC's marketing and communications unit, which put together the magazine, consulted closely with the local education authority to ensure that everything was properly targeted and couched in terms which youngsters would readily understand.

The magazine was trialled in eight schools before going borough-wide and Tameside also engaged the services of Brian Clarke, a professional children's magazine editor. Feedback from the trial was positive.

#### **2. Versatility**

'Top Ten' has been produced so that teachers can use it as a classroom aid. However, it is also easy for 10 and 11-year-olds to read and use on their own, and so is suitable as a gift to classes from visiting speakers, such as councillors.

It has also been designed so that the colour work is generic to all single-tier councils and most of the black text may not need to be changed. Tameside Council owns the copyright of the publication but is happy to offer licences to other authorities for a one-off fee of £150. For that, they receive a CD-rom from which they can print off copies. If any changes are required to the mono text, these can be completed for £10 per page.

#### **3. Fun**

Although the aim of 'Top Ten' is to put across an important message, it would never succeed if it had been perceived as boring. Consequently, great emphasis has been placed on making it a fun publication. It is colourful, the graphics are

bright, and it has a selection of puzzles and quizzes. Page two has a Word Search for terms such as 'councillor', 'money' and 'roads'.

The centre spread is a town scene, in which youngsters are asked to find things, which the council is responsible for, such as a school-crossing patrol, traffic calming and even a gravedigger. And on pages 21 and 22 readers can find quizzes, puzzles, a word worm, mazes, a dotted drawing and much more.

#### 4. Point of contact

While most Year 6 youngsters will have heard of their local council, it is likely that they see it as some sort of anonymous body residing behind the walls of their local town hall or civic centre. Their only contact with the council may be the mayor's Christmas visit to their school.

'Top Ten' gives councillors the chance to go into schools and meet youngsters. They can take in copies of the magazine as a gift, and this allows them to talk to classes about the council and democracy, while at the same time allowing the pupils to see the human face behind the local government facade. In this way, closer contacts can be built, hopefully leading the pupils to use their vote and participate in council exercises when they reach the age of 18.

#### 5. Dissemination

The full launch of 'Top Ten' was linked with local democracy week. Schools were asked if they would like a visit from a council officer and a councillor to speak about their work, linking their roles to the comic. Pupils had gone through the comic beforehand with their teachers and prepared questions. All the schools visited were surveyed afterwards and all said they would like the visits repeated.

### **Financial costs**

Funding for the 'Top Ten' comic book came from the Lifelong Learning team. There are no ongoing costs as schools have been asked to photocopy the puzzles and to retain the originals for year-on-year use.

### **Contacts**

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