



**I'm a
Councillor
Get me out of here**

Event Evaluation Report

I'm a Councillor, Get me out of here 2008

Prepared by Gallomanor Communications

Learning from the experiences of the 6th year of the event
Feedback from Councillors, Teachers and Students

Local
E
Democracy
Campaign
take part
take power



Contents

This report is an update to existing evaluation reports, which are available from www.bigvote.org.uk/moreinfo.

This report contains a summary of activity in 2008, feedback and recommendations for next year.

Event Overview.....	3
<i>What exactly does it consist of?.....</i>	3
<i>About Gallomanor.....</i>	3
2008 event.....	4
<i>Overall statistics.....</i>	4
<i>Statistics per council.....</i>	5
Summary of findings.....	7
<i>Key lessons from this year for councils.....</i>	7
<i>Key changes for IAC next year.....</i>	7
<i>Young people's feedback.....</i>	7
<i>Councillor feedback.....</i>	7
<i>Teacher's feedback.....</i>	7
<i>Council staff feedback.....</i>	7
Key lessons for councils.....	8
Feedback from Young People.....	9
Feedback from Councillors.....	13
Feedback from Teachers.....	17
Feedback from Council Officers.....	19
Case Study: Wigan Council.....	22

Event Overview

I'm a Councillor, Get me out of Here! is an online event to get young people engaged with local democracy.

Councils sign up to the event and put forward five or so councillors to compete to be 'Youth Champion' for that area. Those five councillors put up a manifesto on the 'I'm a Councillor' website, and, for two weeks, young people in their area ask them questions, chat to them online, and vote for the councillor they want to be 'Youth Champion'. In the second week a councillor is evicted each day, until the last councillor is declared the winner.

- **Young People** - get engaged with local democracy
- **Councillors** - find out about how young people feel, their concerns and enthusiasms
- **Teachers** - get a ready-made, memorable way to teach citizenship, where the work is all done for them

It's important that the engagement is a two-way process. Young people and councillors both learn from the event. And young people benefit from the experience of actually having a voice and being listened to.

I'm a Councillor takes place at the same time as Local Democracy Week, organised by the LGA. In 2008 the dates of the event were 6th – 17th October.

What exactly does it consist of?

The website	Manifestos Q+A section Live chat room Library (further info on local government topics) Quizzes Teacherzone (chat booking, teaching materials)
Supporting materials	Teacher notes, lesson plans, information sheets, etc Councillor briefing notes Marketing materials to help councils recruit schools

About Gallomanor

Gallomanor is driven by a desire to increase citizen's involvement in civil society with effective, innovative, and fun projects. We produce projects like: I'm a Councillor, Get me out of Here! which connects young people with their elected representatives; CivicSurf and CivicSurf:Coaching which inspire and inform civic leaders to become effective online communicators; and LifeSwap which shines a light on the lives of disadvantaged young people. We've also built on the successful I'm a Councillor format to create I'm a Scientist, Get me out of Here!, funded by the Wellcome Trust.

With seven years experience of working in digital engagement we are able to provide advice and strategic planning for organisations wanting to create community conversations in the 21st century.

2008 event

This was another successful year for I'm a Councillor. Councils were busier than ever before, and individuals spent longer on the site, visited more often and performed more actions while there (e.g. asking questions and voting). Further analysis below.

Overall statistics

	2008	2007
Total questions asked	6,961	6,689
Total logins	9,836	10,350
No. participating councils	22	32
Total users	4,266	4,958
Total no page views	181,771	135,301
Average time on site	14 mins 12 secs	10 mins 08 secs
Av pages viewed per visit	13.84	9.78

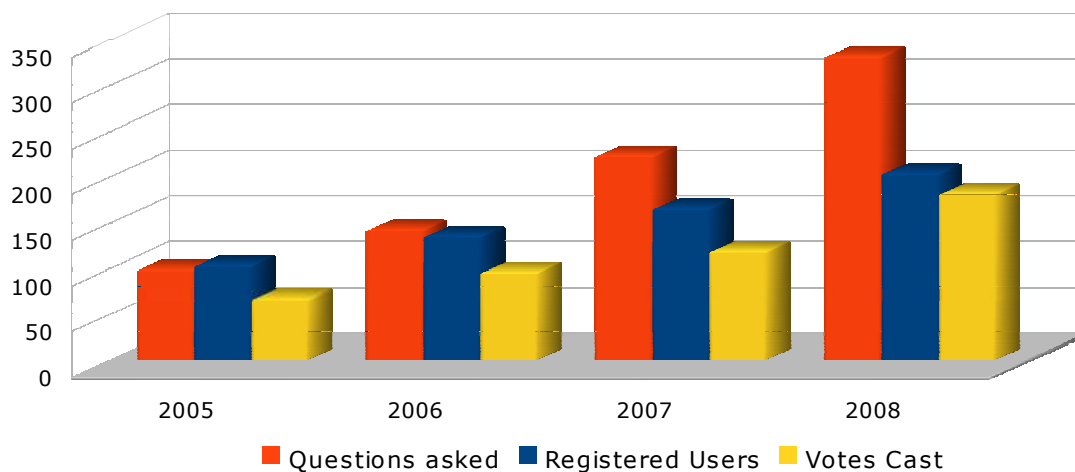
What is very noticeable is that users are spending far more time on the site, and viewing more pages while they are there. Both metrics are up by 40% - a dramatic rise. When we surveyed young people, 68% said that they visited the site in their own time, after having been introduced to it at school. That's up from 50% last year.

We have re-designed the site since last year, making it easier to navigate, and more visual and up-to-date. New elements include adding the gallery along the top, tabbed browsing on councillor pages, easier to use FAQs and a 'Latest Questions' teaser. We feel this improved design is the most likely reason for the longer visits and greater use of the site.

Statistics per council

	2008 Average	Average of previous years
Registered users	203	128
Votes cast	181	92
Questions asked	331	168
Votes per user	0.9	0.7
Questions per user	1.7	1.4
Log ins per user	2.33	2.26
Page views	6,219	n/a
Live chat, lines by students	2,279	1,194
Av pages viewed per visit	13.84	9.78

Key statistics
2005 - 2008



As you can see, the activity per council is very high this year. Councils have been getting busier and busier, with the average number of users, questions asked, etc rising every year. This is partly down to the hard work of council officers, councillors and teachers.

Familiarity and word of mouth are also clearly a factor, councils tend to be busier when running the event a second year. This is partly because planning is easier and more effective when everyone knows what to expect. And teachers and students, having taken part once, don't need persuading the second time.

But we should also acknowledge that over the years we have been running the event, there has been considerable investment in schools IT infrastructure. There's also been

a natural growth of IT-literacy among teachers and young people. These factors mean that it is every year it gets easier for teachers and classes to take part in an event like this – it's now less difficult to book time on school computers and less training or explanation is needed of how to use the site.

Particularly noticeable is that the numbers of questions asked, votes cast and lines of live chat have all approximately doubled. Time spent on the site has also increased significantly. This is great because it shows that young people are really getting a lot out of the site. 68% of students who completed our survey went on the site in their own time, having been introduced to it at school. As one teacher put it, 'They don't usually do that with their school work!'

We suspect that one reason fewer councils took part this year is that Gallomanor have been launching a number of new projects this year, including CivicSurf (<http://civicsurf.org.uk/>) and CivicSurf:Coaching which inspire and inform civic leaders to become effective online communicators, and I'm a Scientist, Get me out of Here! (www.imascientist.org.uk) which aims to do for science what I'm a Councillor does for local democracy. These projects have taken a lot of our energy and meant that we haven't focused on selling I'm a Councillor as much as usual.

We did find that most of last year's councils signed up again, with those who didn't commonly citing budget constraints, council re-organisations and, in two cases, maternity leave, as the reasons for not running the event this year. (We'd like to note that organizing I'm a Councillor will not usually get you pregnant.) This has led to many teachers who took part last year contacting us asking when they will get their packs, etc, whom we have had to disappoint.

Summary of findings

Key lessons from this year for councils

- Participation grows in second year
- Contact teachers early and in person
- Involve staff from different departments

Key changes for IAC next year

- Restructure Q&A section to make it easier to use
- Improve communication with teachers through a video introduction

Young people's feedback

- Young people really enjoyed feeling included
- Young people valued authenticity from councillors
- Young people said they wanted more contact with councillors

68% went on the site in their own time

"it made you feel important"

Councillor feedback

- Councillors saw the importance of youth engagement
- Councillors learnt more about young people
- It was fun!

96% would recommend the event to a colleague

85% thought IAC was good or very good for understanding the issues of ordinary young people

"The live chat was one of the most challenging things I have ever done as a Councillor and really worthwhile. I want to do it again!"

Teacher's feedback

- IAC helps to bring citizenship to life
- IAC involves students who would not normally be interested

100% want to take part again next year

"the pupils i eventually got loved it so much I think some of them logged on at home in their own time"

Council staff feedback

- Promotes engagement between councillors and young people
 - Start earlier recruiting schools and be persistent
- "It's so easy to use and young people love the fact that they get to ask questions and councillors answer them - it really helps to build a positive relationship between the YP and the Local council."*

Key lessons for councils

Contact teachers early and in person

And also get a named contact. "Letters to schools go straight in the bin, if they don't have a name on." We were told this over and over again by teachers. And most council officers told us how hard it had been initially to get hold of the right person and get buy-in. But many also told us what great contacts they had made with teachers who really get into the event. Be persistent, and also, try to get someone who already has relevant contacts to help. Councils have had great success by involving the area Citizenship co-ordinator, or a colleague from Education.

School timetables are fixed and IT suites booked early, usually before the summer holidays. The more notice you give to teachers, the more chance they have to fit the event in and arrange other activities around it. And actually speaking to teachers, or giving them a presentation (e.g. at a headteacher's meeting) can really help to get across the excitement of the event and how much of the work is done for them. It also gives them a chance to ask any questions.

If you are finding it difficult to recruit schools, it may be easier to concentrate on a few schools. Dumfries and Galloway got a lot out of the event by targeting four schools in the area and working closely with them. In the past some councils have had a very active and successful year, with involvement from just one school where a committed teacher really made the most of the event.

Be proactive about organising school visits

These are usually a great success, young people, councillors and teachers all really get a lot out of them. However, often councillors don't realise they can offer, and teachers don't realise they can ask. They frequently end up being arranged on an ad hoc basis by enthusiastic young people talking to councillors in live chat. More can be made of these visits if they are planned in advance, and of course, it's easier then to fit them into councillors' diaries.

It's worth making it clear to schools that they can request them, far in advance. Or even suggest times to them. One low stress/high impact idea is to arrange for councillors to do school assemblies. They can give a five/ten minute talk on their work and the event and explain that they want to hear from young people. This doesn't take up much of the councillor's time, but reaches a lot of young people.

Get to know the event yourself

Make sure you understand what's involved, how things work and all the things the site can do. We are ALWAYS happy to answer questions, explain things, give examples or demonstrate the event. IAC can be one of those things which seems really obvious when you've seen it in action, but can be difficult to explain. You'll find it easier to organise, to convince others to take part and to answer questions once you've got your head round it.

Feedback from Young People

Based on 84 feedback surveys completed online

Quantitative results

68% visited the I'm a Councillor site at home, having been introduced to it at school (this compares to 50% of students in last year's survey)

96% of young people found the event Very or Quite interesting

87% learnt something about their council which they did not know before

82% say that their understanding of what *their council* does is better, or much better than before

84% say that their understanding of what *their councillor* does is better, or much better than before

86% of students who asked a question (or questions) were satisfied with the councillor's response

93% of young people found the website easy to use

94% liked the format of the project

Qualitative results

What did young people like about the event?

What young people valued most was the contact with councillors. When asked, 'From which activity did you learn the most?', the most common answers were 'Asking questions', 'Chatting to councillors' and 'Meeting councillors'. Adults often assume that young people are not interested in politics, but they really valued interacting with the councillors, and the way that the event, especially the online aspect, broke down barriers.

They valued hearing from the councillors, and the chance to be heard themselves.

The chat room, where students were able to talk to the councillors and ask them questions

the messaging service was good because you could ask the councillors questions. I thought from this young people could express what they would like in the town

Online chat with the Councillors. I got to ask what I wanted and they replied in a language I understood.

I Learnt a lot from the councillor's replies

It was a big deal for students that they asked the councillors questions and they replied. It made them feel valued and important.

The Q+A page. I was so excited to see a reply

Young people also valued meeting the councillors face to face. We absolutely recommend building on the event by organising councillor visits to schools.

When Keith came and spoke to us at school, he made me understand some things about what his role is.

It's also obvious how all parts of the event work together. The factsheets and quizzes deepen students understanding and help them get more out of the interaction with the councillors.

The quizzes gave a good background and meant the questions to the councillors could be a bit more relevant.

i learnt the most from the social housing sheet that we read in class i now understand where social housing originated and why it is used.

Young people also really valued that they had a say

i loved this site and wish to thank you for this time to tell my views

Gave us a chance to speak up

They listened to us.

that you could choose which councillor could help you and it made you feel important

The fact that the councillors kindly used up their time to talk to us.

it was fun being in charge

i liked how the councillors and the students had a say on what they thought and how herefordshire could be improved

The familiarity of the medium made it much easier for them

that the councillors took note of what we said and just that I got a chance to put my views across in a way that was easy for me and in a way that I am used to by email and chats on the internet

And they valued getting to talk to adults other than their parents and teachers

That you got to ask real councillors that have experience what it was like and other stuff Cos its good just asking your dad but it is even better asking councillors who specialize in politics

Being able to talk to and learn about some one we don't know but will listen to our ideas and maybe even use some.

What made young people connect with certain councillors?

The things young people were looking for from councillors were authenticity:-

whether they seemed to have our interests at heart and if they answered our questions with straight answers even if it was not always an answer we liked because at least I then knew where I stood.

Whether they answered my questions or not. Also whether they had actually done anything. I became fed up of them saying what they were planning to do i want to know what they have done!

the fact they seemed like they cared and did want to take part. It didn't seem like a publicity stunt for them.

And an understanding of young people's issues:-

Because they sounded as they would help us in the future and make changes for things we wanted to be done.

the views they had on issues that would come up in young peoples life

Their answers to my questions and how they talked to children.

Whether or not they had an understanding of young peoples issues.

What they would do to ensure young people had a voice in the Vale.

i really liked learning about the councillors and them showing interest in the youth for once instead of the grown ups .

They also really valued councillors making an effort

Because of the answers she gave to us from the questions we asked her and she talked to us as much as she could.

And they clearly cared about what happens in their area, and thought seriously about what the councillors would do.

looking at their profile and had a look to see which councillor would be most helpful towards the school.

What surprised young people?

We asked young people what surprised them.

Some were surprised that councillors were nice!

that not all councillors are boring

That the councillors understood so much about the youth culture.

It surprised me how quickly the councillors replied and how easy it seemed to talk to them

They learnt a lot about councils and what being a councillor was like

yes ... about how much things the council do for us what we dont know about

Yes,when i found out how boring it must be to be a councilr.

How many plans the councillors have

And some were surprised at how well the event engaged their peers

The way everyone got so involved

And what would they change if they could?

The most common comment was that young people wanted more of it!

I think that we should do something like this more often so pupils know how important the council are and to get their points across.

I had lots of fun but maybe it could last a bit longer next time!!

It Could be more widely advertised so more people could take part, more questions could be asked and more people could try to take an interest in their town

In particular, many students wanted to have some way of interacting with councillors the rest of the time.

make it on all the time so that young people can always use it to pass their views and ideas on

The chat lines could be kept open all through the year, even though the Winning Councillor has been decided.

Councillors also often mentioned they would like to carry on having lines of communication open the rest of the year too. There are fairly simple things that councillors can do to make themselves more accessible to young people. These include having Facebook and Bebo profiles, and keeping a blog. Young people seem to be unlikely to contact their councillor spontaneously (or even realise that they could), unless given some encouragement.

As part of the CivicSurf project we've put together information about using social media, particularly blogs, at <http://civicsurf.org.uk/category/resources/>, if this might be helpful.

Feedback from Councillors

Based on 55 feedback surveys completed online

Quantitative results

Taking part in I'm a Councillor

93% said yes, they enjoyed taking part in the event.

96% would recommend the event to a colleague.

51% of councillors spent under one hour a day on the site, **33%** spent 1-2 hours.

60% of councillors found the site 'very easy' or 'quite simple and straightforward' to use. A further **30%** found it 'Quite difficult to start but easy once I was used to it'.

Most councillors (**80%**) thought that the Q+A section was best for communicating with students. **16%** thought the live chat. However, **33%** enjoyed live chat the most (while **53%** enjoyed the Q+A the most).

Comparing it to other youth engagement events

We asked councillors their views on IAC compared to other methods of youth engagement, for a range of factors. IAC came out top for every measure:-

59% thought that IAC was 'very good' for meeting lots of young people (next highest was councillor visits to schools, with **48%**). In total, **90%** thought IAC was very or quite good for meeting lots of young people.

57% thought that IAC was 'very good' for getting your views across (next highest was councillor visits to schools, with **43%**). In total, **91%** thought IAC was very or quite good for getting your views across.

54% thought that IAC was 'very good' for understanding the issues of ordinary young people (next highest was councillor visits to schools, with **47%**). In total, **85%** thought IAC was very or quite good for understanding the issues of ordinary young people.

Councillor visits to schools came second in every category, followed by councillor visits to youth groups, student visits to council offices and, lastly, councillor surgeries.

Qualitative results

Councillors were energised by talking to young people

Students raised grass roots issues which concerned them; it was a fresh change from the technical and financial issues which usually fill council meetings and it allowed students to have direct access to councillors.

I've always loved interacting with younger people and felt it was very good to be able to participate. I also think that some of the students become quite involved in the process opening up the idea that they have a voice and can be involved locally in politics.

Getting the ideas from young people to take forward. Young people see the solution to a problem without seeing the complications.

By the end of the first day all of my office were interested and all felt involved!

The live chat was one of the most challenging things I have ever done as a Councillor and really worthwhile. I want to do it again!

They felt it was a great way of hearing from young people

Gave young people the freedom to ask anything they felt important.

Getting out there and listening to the views of young people.

The youth of today are the citizens of tomorrow, it gave us a direct view of how they feel. I thought it was a very worthwhile and interesting event.

Meeting young people from all over the Borough

They learnt a lot more about what young people care about

That issues 'on the street' are the key.

How much the young people cared about the environment

That young people of today are worried about things that are happening around them, they are very concerned about crime and other anti social behaviour, they want something positive done to make our world a better place to live in.

Including specific issues that they wouldn't have known about otherwise

Problems with transport and costs associated with education are a major problem.

Surprised to learn that all was not well with some of the school bus services

Councillors found out how interested young people were in politics

Young people are very interested in politics

Young people are interested in the effect of the democratic process on their lives.

How interested young people are in politics.

However, we found that a minority of councillors had a less positive view.

"[I found out] that Students really don't care about politics or they would have got more involved and asked more sensible questions."

The quotes above (which are far more representative) show that you can't draw conclusions about young people's attitudes, or the scope for engagement, just because, for whatever reason, the event in your area is quiet.

Most councillors learnt a new respect for young people

These students have lively minds and views which need to be taken on board.

That the concerns of young people are similar to mine

I have greater appreciation of the students' level of knowledge and awareness.

That young people have some very serious opinions and are better at asking questions than adults

Children and youth ARE informed

That in the main, young people do care about what is happening in their own communities.

They realised the importance of engaging with young people

The views of young people are not always what older people like myself expect

To really listen and understand what the young people were trying to get across.

The need to engage with students more

It was really good to get out there to meet, listen and speak to young people. Young people have some really good and strong views on almost everything... Just because they cannot vote they still need to be heard and have a voice. I would recommend getting involved in I'm a Councillor to everyone. Thank you

And how important two-way communication can be

That meeting or chatting to the students is far better than simply answering questions online. There's no to and fro in the Q&A section that can be far more stimulating for both students and the councillors when the event is taking part in real time.

That communication is key to everything.

Most councillors really enjoyed it

Taking part was both great fun and informative. I've made some friends and I'm still in contact with some of the students via Facebook and Bebo. All in all a very worthwhile time which hopefully put a more human face on local politics and let the students know that people do listen to them.

Can't wait for next year!

I thought it was absolutely brilliant fun!

This has been an excellent opportunity to highlight the needs and aspirations of our young people

I would say that the taking part was a great experience, it didn't matter who won. Carry on the good work.

It was a privilege to take part and the concept was innovative and created positive interaction between me - as a councillor - to the schools that took part.

Year-round engagement

Some councillors talked about finding ways to carry on communicating with young people year-round.

I think it was a brilliant way to engage and we are looking at finding some ways to have this type of communication embedded into the council's consultation process outside of this particular initiative.

As mentioned in the young people's feedback section, they were asking for the same thing. The enthusiasm is there on both sides. Happily there are many simple things councillors and councils can do, to use technology to keep the conversations going. As part of the CivicSurf project we've put together information about using social media, particularly blogs, at <http://civicsurf.org.uk/category/resources/>, if this might be helpful.

Feedback from Teachers

Based on 10 feedback surveys completed online

Quantitative results

Number of teachers agreeing with a range of statements about the event:-

Interaction with Councillors helped the students learn more	10/10
It brings local democracy to life for students	9/10
It involved students who wouldn't normally be interested in politics	9/10
It covered a lot of ground, without needing much preparation from me	8/10
Using ICTs helps to involve students	8/10

Every teacher surveyed would participate again next year.

Most teachers felt the Q+A section was very useful, while about half felt the live chat section was.

Most used the info sheets supplied to support the event, and found them useful. The Local Government information sheet was the most popular, followed by the recycling and leisure info sheets.

The most popular lesson plan was the 'Introduction to I'm a Councillor' lesson, the least popular with teachers was the balloon debate.

Most teachers would like to first hear about the event, and receive teacher packs in **May/June**, and get the access code cards and have the site available in **September**.

Qualitative results

Teachers repeatedly mentioned how valuable it was that their students felt included and listened to.

the learners really felt that their voices were being heard. They had very good ideas how issues could be resolved

The understanding that they were individually part of a democratic process and their voices and opinions matter.

they had a chance to have their voices heard

The human contact, and the use of technology to break down barriers, made the event real and memorable

Students really enjoyed the activity and it helped them to learn about Local democracy in an interesting way. They enjoy computers and feel very comfortable about the format

Students know that councillors are human and that they do work for the good of the local community. Politics become relevant.

I liked the fact that Councillors were made to seem very approachable

And it was fun!

It makes politics fun for the students

A valiant attempt to engage young people.

the pupils i eventually got loved it so much I think some of them logged on at home in their own time

Teachers also really valued the contact with the council.

The authority contact was really helpful.

This event has helped us to raise our profile with the local council and for them to realise that our young people do have a voice and that they needed to listen to them as they are the voters of the future.

And they are keen for it to continue

Keep doing this. It was a shame that Canterbury had only 4 councillors, 6- 8 would have been better.

Feedback from Council Officers

Based on 15 feedback surveys completed online

Quantitative results

Most felt the council's relationship with schools and youth groups had improved as a result of taking part in the event (9/14)

Most council officers would like to sign up to the event between March and June.

Most would like to receive teacher packs, and recruit schools in May/June

They found the 2007 evaluation report to be the most useful document in gaining support within the council.

Contacting schools

Most wrote letters to schools (13/15)

Most went to visit schools (9/15)

Many phoned the schools (8/15)

Other methods used included, group presentations to headteachers, presentations to youth workers, using colleagues with existing contacts to involve schools (e.g. schools partnership officers, inspectors, youth services team) and getting councillors who are school governors to involve their schools.

Officers found the teacher information leaflets to be the most effective material we provided for getting schools on board.

All found fewer schools participated than had said they would.

Coverage

Most got coverage for the event in local newspapers (13/14)

Some got coverage on local radio (5/14)

Qualitative results

Council officers mainly enjoyed the event

Everyone thoroughly enjoyed it.

This is a fantastic event and I really enjoy it each year

I was really impressed with the organisation of the event. It was great to see the young people react in such a positive way.

They liked the way it created links, gave young people a voice, and helped councillors to understand the issues of ordinary young people. And it was fun!

The enthusiasms of both our Councillors and the young people and the types of questions asked - some surprised our Councillors.

Building relationships with the schools and councillors

Its just great to hear young peoples views through the questions asked. It opens the councillors eyes to young people and what they think.

The Live Chats and the Questions and Answers. It was great to see the young people really interested in interacting with the Councillors, and asking some very interesting questions.

It's so easy to use and young people love the fact that they get to ask questions and councillors answer them - it really helps to build a positive relationship between the YP and the Local council

Some had issues with the timing of the event

Unfortunately, we cannot change the time of Local Democracy Week, which for many councils is the spur to get them involved.

It is unfortunate that local democracy week is when it is! It's difficult to maintain momentum with this dues to the summer holidays.

A few schools that declined to participate said that the Autumn term is very busy and that it would be better during the Winter.

They have some advice for other councils running the event for the first time.

Most importantly,

Enjoy it!

Most other responses can be summed up with 'start early recruiting schools!'

From an organisers view - plan early and get the schools on board early too.

Contact schools earlier and arrange to see them face to face. Citizenship teachers are a good start.

Start with just a few participating schools

Try and recruit more schools. Now the understanding is there of when teachers need information, planning can be more precise.

But they also stressed you need to put some **effort** into recruiting schools

allow time to go to all the schools/ youth clubs etc as it can be quite time consuming

Make sure there is dedicated admin support for the event throughout the 2 weeks and also that you need to nag schools after the initial letter of invite is sent out, preferably by phone.

focus on building an individual relationship with a key person in each school so that they engage - and keep pestering schools and youth centres to participate

And made some points about recruiting and supporting councillors

Make sure your councillors are fully competent on the computer otherwise you have to do a lot of handholding (or mouseholding!!)

ensure the councillors who take part are up for some fun and answer the questions as quickly as possibly.

briefing for Councillors beforehand and know who to contact for support

One wanted the teacher resources to be available electronically

Could we have electronic teacher packs?

Without wanting to say we told you so, we have provided all teacher materials electronically for some years! We obviously don't do enough to highlight this however. All teaching materials are available online at www.bigvote.org.uk/teachingmaterials. These can be accessed by any teacher, without logging in to the site. Answers to quizzes though are only available to logged in teachers, in TeacherZone. This is to prevent students cheating!

Case Study: Wigan Council



Unitary Authority, NW England (Greater Manchester), Labour controlled council, popn 305,600, mostly urban.

Wigan learnt from a quiet first year last year and the event really took off. They saw really keen engagement from their young people, with the highest votes per user and questions per user in the country.

Lead officer: Simon Dale, Community Engagement Manager

Illustration 1: (cc) http://flickr.com/photos/salford_ian/

Key things that worked

- Involve a multi-disciplinary team
- Start early with schools, and be persistent
- Councillors who were positive about engaging young people
- Give plenty of support and guidance for councillors

Wigan took part for the first time in 2007, but had a very quiet year. As you can see, this year, despite not having a dramatically high number of users, they were near the top of the table for everything else. Their activity per user is particularly staggering. Furthermore, the overall number of questions submitted - 634 - is the third highest ever in the 6 years of the event. To get that from a relatively moderate number of users is phenomenal.

	Wigan council	Ranking (out of 21)	UK Averages	
			2008	Previous years
Registered users	192	10th	203	128
Votes cast	263	4th	181	92
Questions asked	634	2nd	331	168
Votes per user	1.4	1st	0.9	0.7
Questions per user	3.3	1st	1.7	1.4
Log ins per user	3.2	3rd	2.33	2.26
Page views	9726	4th	6219	n/a
Live chat, lines by students	4235	3rd	2279	1194
Live chat, lines by cllrs	1154	3rd	375	205

This shows real engagement with the event. Wigan's young people were returning to the site several times and really getting into the opportunity to ask questions, exercise their right to vote and chat to councillors. This quality of involvement is what leads to long-lasting effects from the event and staff, teachers, councillors and of course young people are to be congratulated.

When they had a very quiet event the first year, Wigan decided not to be disheartened, but to treat it as a dry run and learn from it. One thing they learnt was the importance of really getting schools on board. "Last year I think some schools said yes when first approached, but then didn't do anything with it."

Teamwork

Key was having a team working on I'm a Councillor, with staff from different departments. The community engagement staff who were leading the project worked closely with two colleagues from the PSHE and Citizenship team from Children and Young People. They also involved other staff where needed. This meant that they could spread the work around, deal more easily with absences, holidays and work clashes and pool knowledge and expertise.

Recruiting schools

The PSHE & C team had named contacts in each school who were responsible for citizenship, and personal relationships with many of them. They also knew about what it's like in the classroom and what teachers need. "The teachers trusted their judgement when they said this was a good thing."

The team wrote letters to schools about I'm a Councillor, then emailed, then telephoned to follow up after teacher packs had been sent out. They started this early, "I think we'd sent notifications out to schools before we'd even officially signed up".

Supporting councillors

The other thing they'd learn from the previous year was about making sure councillors were fully briefed and felt supported. They prepared their own guidelines document for councillors to help them. This included:-

- Extracts from IAC 2008 evaluation report which showed what councillors could get out of it.
- What support will I receive?
- Tips on writing for young people (written by a colleague from the youth information team)
- What can I expect to be asked? (examples of questions from 2007)
- What schools are taking part?

Each councillor was also assigned a member of staff who was their support person, so they knew who to contact and that someone was there to help them. Councillors didn't need a great deal of support, beyond the odd technical question in the early days, but it was reassuring for them. Staff also offered to show councillors around the site and have a run through with them. Again, this wasn't needed, but the fact that it was there helped councillors to feel supported.

The moderation team were definitely struck by the friendly and co-operative attitude of Wigan councillors, and the way they communicated well with students. The council staff's constructive advice (like, 'it's about engaging with young people, not party politics') and making the councillors feel supported must have helped to promote this.