
ACTIVE CITIZENS IN SCHOOL: EVALUATION OF THE DFES PILOT PROGRAMME

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Introduction

In 2001 the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) launched a three-year pilot programme: Active Citizens in Schools (ACiS). ACiS built on the Millennium Volunteers (MV) model, extending it to a younger age group by engaging 11-15 year olds in volunteering activities through their schools. The programme was based on the nine MV principles: Personal commitment; Community benefit; Voluntary commitment; Inclusiveness; Ownership by young people; Variety of opportunities; Partnership; Quality of opportunities; Recognition: with the addition of a tenth - Progression (continued activity, engagement and recognition).

The pilot was delivered by two charities. Changemakers worked in 18 schools in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, concentrating on Key Stage 3 and 4. ContinYou worked in ten schools in Brent, Bradford, Medway, Staffordshire and York, concentrating on Key Stage 3. Both developed subtly different models of delivery.

The Institute for Volunteering Research was commissioned by the DfES to evaluate ACiS. The evaluation involved seven phases: interviews with coordinators; participant questionnaires; school questionnaires; case studies; support worker focus group; comparative schools questionnaire; and stakeholder interviews.

Summary of key findings

Success in providing opportunities and securing take up

In total, 5,398 young people took part in ACiS, well above the initial target. 1,746 young people were involved through the ContinYou schools (against a target of 1,130) and 3,652 in the Changemakers schools (compared to a target of 1,800). They had been recruited through various methods, from presentations in assemblies, through to notices in registers.

Most coordinators felt that the pupils involved in ACiS were quite representative of the wider school population. A number commented specifically on involving pupils with a wide range of educational abilities. As one coordinator said: 'We have tapped into students who are less able - it is part of the inclusion agenda, working with students who have difficulties in school'.

However, some challenges were noted. Some schools found it harder to recruit boys, and some tended to recruit the educationally more able students. The barriers to involvement included: the apparent stigma attached to volunteering; a lack of appreciation of benefits of volunteering; a perceived lack of variety of opportunities; and, conflicting demands on young people's time.

A wide range of opportunities was developed through ACiS, from peer mentoring through to environmental enhancement. Broadly speaking there were three models of activities: themes and campaigns; discrete school-based projects; community-based projects. The opportunities offered were generally of high quality, with effective systems of support developed within most schools. The extent to which ACiS was linked into citizenship curriculum varied considerably between schools. In many cases the link had been quite informal, but in a number of schools it had been far more explicit.

There was a clear commitment towards developing a young person-led approach and most schools had made progress towards it. Indeed, the progression from adult-led activities towards young person-led was seen as one of the defining features of ACiS. There were, however, different understandings as to what a young person-led approach meant and different methods adopted to deliver it.

Recognition and accreditation

The national recognition associated with ACiS was an important motivating factor for schools and young people. 2,863 25-hour Certificates and 1,058 50-hour Awards were presented, representing thousands of hours of voluntary work.

A majority of respondents valued the Award and Certificates. However, the design quality of the certificates was criticised, and it was felt that there was a need for certificates to recognise contributions of less than 25 hours, and of more than 50 hours. More fundamentally, there was a call by some respondents for alternative forms of recognition that weren't hours based.

In addition to the ACiS certificates, the pilot agencies and schools had developed other forms of recognition. These ranged from 'special achievement' certificates produced by both pilots, through to celebration events, nominations to the Princess Diana Memorial Awards, and articles in school newsletters and in national media. Few schools had linked ACiS into formal systems of accreditation. The potential to make these links in the future was, however, recognised.

Building long term commitment

Among the ACiS participants responding to the baseline survey, less than half (47%) said that they had volunteered before. This highlights the success of ACiS in mobilising a new generation of active citizens.

Among the ACiS participants who responded to the impact questionnaire, 76% felt more involved in their communities. Sixty-nine percent said they were likely to continue to be involved in voluntary activities after ACiS. The coordinators confirmed the growing commitment to volunteering among young people through involvement in the pilot.

Despite the high-level commitment to future volunteering, there had been less movement directly into MV, or other programmes. The

potential for progression to MV was limited within the pilot due to the low age range of ACiS participants, particularly within the ContinYou schools who focused on Key Stage 3. The opportunity to enhance the progression to MV and other programmes was, however, recognised.

The benefits of ACiS

Participation in ACiS had a significant impact on the young people involved, with all stakeholders speaking enthusiastically about the contribution ACiS had made to their lives. For example, it had led to:

- Increased personal development - 79% of the ACiS participants responding to the impact questionnaire felt that they had gained in confidence and 84% felt they were more aware of the needs of others;
- Enhanced skills development - 89% ACiS participants responding to the impact questionnaire felt their team working skills had improved; 73% felt they were better at getting their point across;
- A sense of pride in their achievements, making new friends and having fun.

Impacts were also evident on the schools. These included:

- Improved behaviour - 11 of the 13 schools responding to the impact questionnaire felt that ACiS had a positive effect on students' behaviour;
- Enhanced relationships between pupils and staff;
- Increased profile and reputation - 9 of 13 schools responding to the impact questionnaire agreed that the reputation of the school had been enhanced;
- Changing ethos.

Positive impacts on local communities were also apparent, but were, however, less significant than on the schools and young people. Partly this was due to an emphasis on 'school community' rather than 'geographical community', but it was also due to difficulties with establishing community-based activities (e.g. health and safety issues, finding appropriate opportunities, sustaining relationships with community organisations). A number of positive benefits were, however, highlighted: providing new links to schools, activities delivered by young people, and changes in attitudes towards young people among members of the wider community.

Sustainability and transferability

All but one of the coordinators responding to the school impact questionnaire said that ACiS would continue in their schools at the end of the pilot. A number of significant steps had been taken at a national/regional level towards ensuring sustainability.

However, it was less apparent exactly how ACiS would be sustained in the long term.

The ACiS pilot had been delivered and managed through different mechanisms. Within the schools, individual members of staff were identified as ACiS coordinators. Within the ContinYou schools, coordinators generally received a management point and time off timetable to deliver ACiS. Within the Changemakers schools, coordinators (who generally did not have time off timetable) received 30 days of support-worker time over two years. While most schools had involved a few additional staff members in supporting specific ACiS activities, most would have liked more input. The two pilot agencies had provided a number of support functions, which were widely valued, from facilitating meetings and training between participating schools, through to visiting individual schools. Exactly how these various mechanisms would be maintained after the end of the pilot was felt to be fundamental to sustainability.

Staff time was the biggest challenge identified to running the pilot, and was felt to be the most pertinent issue in terms of sustainability. While a small number of schools had been able to find resources to dedicate some staff time to ACiS in the future, most had not and many felt this would need to come from outside individual schools. The ability to engender support among school staff was also felt to be crucial to sustainability, as was the role played by the two pilot agencies in facilitating networking opportunities and sharing ideas and experiences between schools.

In terms of transferability, the comparative study indicated that there was a demand to increase active citizenship opportunities (and help in working towards this), and more specifically for ACiS to be rolled-out nationally. The most significant barrier identified by comparative schools to extending active citizenship opportunities, however, was the availability of staff time to support them.

There was general agreement among the pilot schools and agencies that ACiS should be rolled-out nationally. Indeed, the two pilot agencies had been funded by the DfES to develop a framework document and two toolkits, and to deliver regional workshops on ACiS. However, a number of issues were identified, focusing around the resources needed to support it. The need for dedicated staff time was key; the need to facilitate networking

between schools and between schools and community groups was also identified.

ACiS chimes well with many current policy agendas and initiatives within the education and volunteering sectors (from Extended Schools, through to the Tomlinson Review, and the Russell Commission), which further reinforces the call for ACiS to be sustained and transferred.

Conclusions and recommendations

The success of the ACiS pilot at engaging young people in active citizenship and volunteering activities suggests that a national roll-out would be viable. A number of specific recommendations follow for the future direction of ACiS:

Strategic factors

- Nationally developed, locally delivered - Evidence suggests that the programme should be developed within a national strategic framework (to provide quality assurance and recognition), but delivered locally, with a regional infrastructure to facilitate networking and training among participating schools.
- Flexibility within clear guidelines - There is a need to ensure clarity in the programme's framework and the ACiS principles. However, there is also a need to maintain flexibility in delivery, allowing for different starting points of schools.
- Adequate resourcing - There is a need to look for ways of funding ACiS. In particular, resources are needed in terms of staff time and expertise, but also in terms of support for ACiS coordinators themselves.
- National recognition - National recognition should be maintained and enhanced. In addition, a 10-hour and 100-hour certificate could be developed; as could alternative, non-hours based forms of recognition. Providing guidance on how ACiS could link to accreditation could help to increase take-up.
- An ACiS coordinators network - Consideration should be given to facilitating networking among participating schools.
- Closer links to MV - A more strategic approach would help to make the links more explicit.

Operational (school-level) factors

- Dedicated staff time - Each school should identify a lead member of staff to take overall responsibility for ACiS. Ideally, they should be given dedicated time to do so.

- Senior management team support -There is a need for top-down support to complement bottom-up delivery.
- Staff support - In order to effectively deliver ACiS there is a need to engender support from a team of school staff.
- Build on what you're into - Establishing a baseline, and planning a progression pathway, could help deliver ACiS in most appropriate way for each school.
- Commitment to the ACiS principles - Each participating school should seek to embrace the ten ACiS principles.
- Links to the citizenship curriculum - If adopted as a principle, schools should look to develop appropriate models to link ACiS to the citizenship curriculum.

Additional Information

Copies of the full report (RR620) - priced £4.95 - are available by writing to DfES Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottingham NG15 0DJ.

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Copies of this Research Brief (RB620) are available free of charge from the above address (tel: 0845 60 222 60). Research Briefs and Research Reports can also be accessed at www.dfes.gov.uk/research/

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