

Innovative ideas: Active Citizenship

This briefing provides an overview of innovative approaches to active citizenship in the field of migrant¹ integration. It is one of four² which MigrationWork CIC has put together to inspire and inform readers about what has worked well and why in the run-up to our MiFriendly Cities social innovation³ workshops that we are hosting in the West Midlands. The approaches outlined below do not represent an exhaustive list.

Innovative approaches - Introduction

Here are some examples of projects from across Europe which we hope will inspire you. We looked at projects that:

- **Encourage political participation**
- **Encourage civic participation**
- **Build new social connections**

What is active citizenship?

Active Citizenship is about you getting involved in your community and democracy at all levels, from your neighbourhood to national level. This includes *civil participation* like volunteering, going on protests and being a good neighbour. It also includes *civic participation*, which is a more formal type of participation. Most people think of voting, but it could also involve becoming a member of a political party or volunteering to become a [school governor](#) or a [magistrate](#).

By volunteering you can take part in society and gain knowledge that can help you feel empowered and included, as well as improve your chances of getting paid work. Volunteering plays an important role for migrants and non-migrants alike to meet and take action on community issues that matter to them all.

Active Citizenship is ultimately about **taking an interest in your community and making things happen.** It is about having your say about things that matter to you and taking part in decisions that affect you. It is not about nationality - you do not need to be

¹ In this context we define this as a person who was born outside of the UK.

² On the topics of housing, employment, active citizenship and healthcare.

³ Innovation is broadly defined here as a new approach that the sector can learn from, or an approach which builds on previous insights to offer something new, to deliver effective results.

a British citizen to be active - all you need is a desire to want to improve the world around you.

Political participation

- **About Voting:** Did you know that you can vote even though you are not a British citizen⁴? An [estimated](#) 4 million migrants in England and Wales were eligible to vote in the 2015 General Election⁵, but [research](#) shows that people of black and ethnic minority groups are generally much less likely to be registered. Let's do something about that! In order to vote every person in a household over 18 needs to be registered. What could you do to encourage your community to [get registered](#)?
- **Voter registration:** In Bristol, community organiser and activist Mohamed Mohamoud from Somalia campaigns to get fellow [Somalis to register to vote in the UK](#). During the 2015 general election he helped over 1,000 people to register by taking forms to shops and cafes. To get even more people signed up, he organised a concert with a popular Somali artist which attracted over 400 people. The event was free, but to get in people had to fill in an electoral registration form.
- **Learn from a leader:** Operation Black Vote runs an innovative [MP Shadowing Scheme](#) for the next generation of political leaders from a black and ethnic minority background. The concept is simple, each mentee is paired with a high-profile politician and then supported to develop as a political leader. For example, the Mayor of Bristol, Marvin Rees, started his political career through this shadowing scheme. Together with local councils the organisation also runs Civic Leadership Programmes to improve the representation of BME communities in public life and to demystify the functions of key public institutions. Participants learn about different areas of public life such as the role and responsibilities of school governors, magistrates, trustees and councillors. Many participants have become councillors, magistrates and school governors themselves.

Civic participation

Governments at different levels play an important role in facilitating active citizenship as they can help create an enabling environment which makes society more accessible to newcomers. The best initiatives start bottom up, but in order for them to develop they often need a framework.

- **Refugees designing policies:** Through the [Neue Nachbarn](#) (New Neighbours) in Germany, refugees coproduce integration policies with their local municipality. The organisation is a refugee-led initiative which approached the Mayor of

⁴ Under Britain's electoral rules EU citizens and Commonwealth citizens can currently vote in local and regional elections

⁵ This includes people born outside of the UK who have since acquired British citizenship, and Commonwealth and Irish citizens.

Arnsberg asking him for help to self-organise. He gave the project a small office, a computer and a dedicated phone number firmly anchored within the City Hall. In doing so, the municipality of Arnsberg was, for the first time, talking with refugees and not about them, and was working with them, not for them, to co-produce policies around integration, civic engagement and urban development policies. The project provides language translations, links migrants up with volunteering opportunities, and educates people on how to understand and navigate the system and society. They even set up a football team with migrants and local Germans. The full case study can be [read here](#).

- **Decision making in education:** Are you a parent? Education is important to help migrants integrate and the role of parents is essential in making this happen. A Swedish school where most students are of a migrant background, established a [special Parental Board](#) which has formal responsibility for decisions concerning Swedish as a second language, mother tongue teaching, creating a good working environment for pupils, forms of cooperation between home and school, and other topics. Parents have been able to influence what is happening and it works well with the council of pupils, which is also active. Some parents feel that their participation has allowed them to gain more respect from their children, since they have better knowledge about the school and can have an impact on it.
- **Getting families involved:** In Ireland, *Pathways to Parental Leadership* supports schools in fostering migrant parents' involvement in their children's schools lives with [a toolkit](#). You could become a school governor, for example.

New social connections

- **Shared dinners:** [Next Door Family](#) in Czech Republic and [Sunday Lunch](#) in Hungary are initiatives that encourage the integration of migrants and promote intercultural dialogue. The idea is simple: hosts and guests are matched up to share a meal together in each other's homes. By promoting individual friendship ties, these initiatives aim to change the perception of migrants within society, as well as the attitudes of migrants themselves.
- **Meeting a local:** Many libraries in Sweden offer a service they call [Borrow a Swede](#) where newly arrived immigrants can go to a local library and choose from a list of Swedes who have agreed to take part in the scheme and are willing to pass on their knowledge and expertise. The idea is simple and addresses the barriers and expectations migrants often face and usually have to negotiate themselves without little help from the host community.

"Meeting others is an important step in settling down and becoming a part of the host society and that interaction between different cultures and religions will increase tolerance and respect" ([European Commission](#)).

- **Making music together:** [Olympias Music Foundation](#) increases access to high-quality music education in local schools and the wider community through the provision of instrumental lessons, community choirs and performance workshops. Based in Manchester, they use music as a catalyst for social cohesion and community integration with the help of their community choir which features female refugees, asylum seekers and victims of domestic violence. They also run a children's choir, which brings together children of different ethnicities, faiths and backgrounds to sing together weekly.

Brighton Table Tennis Club – the UK's first Club of Sanctuary

"On a Tuesday we have young Irish travellers being coached by Afghan unaccompanied minors, the world's first Table Tennis coach with Down's syndrome and local white British kids."

[BTTC](#) uses sports to bring the community together and create a support network for newcomers, particularly unaccompanied young people. Whilst playing table tennis, they practice their English, or *Pinglish* and also do *Ping Maths*. The club works with people from all walks of life to improve health, celebrate diversity and build a strong community. The project started with two worn-out tables in a youth centre – today it has its own centre with 10 tables and runs 100 tables across the city in parks, squares, schools, homeless shelters, sports centres and a psychiatric hospital. It works in two prisons outside the city and has more than 1,250 people play in the club's weekly sessions.

Summary

The examples cited in this paper all began as small, simple ideas and could easily be adapted and replicated elsewhere, hopefully in your community too. There are some elements of good practice which are good to keep in mind when planning to set up your community project.

Elements of good practice

- Apply a whole society approach when planning your project is important. To contribute to integration, you need to engage locals as well as migrants.
- Look for opportunities in other activities/ things people already do (see music/ eat food etc), and using these to 'add on' another element of civic action/ learning / relationship building.
- Make sure your project addresses a need in your community and do some research to find out if anyone is doing anything similar already.
- Recognise the role volunteering plays in setting up a community project, and the commitment it requires.
- Think about the sustainability of the project, who can you partner with to scale it up or keep it going.