

Q: How did we get involved?

The Cabinet Office 'Leaders In Partnership' programme aims to develop a greater understanding of leadership and change management issues between different parts of the public sector. It brought together 12 participants from a range of public sector organisations with eight 6th form students from Slough Grammar School. It asked Questions of Difference to design and facilitate a process that would enable the two groups to come together and work to intervene and make a big difference by talking to people from a white housing estate where a few right wing-minded individuals were trying to influence local politics, exploiting local tensions in the wider Slough area.

Q: How did we tackle the challenge together?

The first task was to work towards establishing an affirmative atmosphere in which both groups could meet over several days, get to know each other and work together. In order to dispel natural anxieties about generational differences, Questions of Difference used techniques to encourage the newly integrated group to pay attention to how they noticed things and how their conversations revealed how they viewed the world. Out of that came sessions on understanding leadership as the means to make change happen and creating conversational environments in which people felt at sufficient ease to give good feedback. People began to understand how to ask difficult questions directly and affirmatively – how to re-frame their assumptions and the way they may be seeing things through language that gives people the opportunity to respond well.

Q: Did the outcome meet expectations?

Expectations involved the ability of leaders from different public sector organisations who had never met to work with their differences and another group of very different young people, before together attempting an even bigger challenge of difference.

- The most important outcome was 'creating the encounter' – an atmosphere in which people with diverse views could come together without being defensive or offensive.
- It was another example of being able to open up potentially dangerous issues and be able to get through the difficulties in ways that improved the situation rather than made it worse.
- As a result of the two groups meeting with local residents, there was much closer liaison between police and local authority – a police officer was proposed for the estate.
- Slough Grammar School has invited the Cabinet Office back on several further occasions to further the dialogue about urban regeneration – traditionally a closed subject to young people.

Q: What did the Cabinet Office 'Leaders in Partnership' programme learn from the relationship with Questions of Difference?

The working relationship showed the enormous benefit in leaders and young people working together on public issues. When you bring people together there's much more common ground than you think. There's an awareness of how ready people are to co-operate and you don't have to work that hard to draw out that co-operation. People from different generations can work together to have an impact on their societies.