



2007-2008
*Increasing Voluntary
and Community Sector
Service Delivery*



Case Study No. 11 – Croydon’s Community Network

INTRODUCTION

The Community Network was set up in January 2002 to co-ordinate the participation of communities and the voluntary sector in the borough’s top level decision making board; the Croydon Strategic Partnership (CSP). The Network has around 350 members along with 15 linked networks that enable the interests of many of Croydon’s under-represented communities to influence local action.

Linked networks include: Children and Young People’s Network; Health & Care Forum; Older People’s Network (OPeN); BME Forum; Disability Forum; Refugee Forum and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Network.

The Network is the collective voice for communities in Croydon. It serves as a network of networks representing diverse communities’ interests. Its members work collaboratively and strategically to improve Croydon for its residents.

The Network and its linked networks select representatives to CSP board and its themed partnerships, and support them to participate in the work of the Partnership.

The Network meets quarterly. Its linked networks, which cover faith, black and minority ethnic (BME) communities and disability issues, focus on specific topics and provide feedback to the Community Network. This process enables harder to reach community groups to use their limited (and often unpaid) time effectively by participating in a group discussing their specific issues, rather than the more general Community Network meetings. Some linked group activity is funded through the Community Network.

Talk2Croydon, an innovative community involvement website that works to engage local people in discussion and debate, is an extension of the Community Network. It takes community involvement into an online medium, providing an opportunity for communities to air their concerns about various issues and say what they want from the CSP.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Funding

The Network receives £61k in annual funding from Croydon Council to employ a part time officer and administrative support on a part-time basis. The funding also provides targeted support to under-resourced linked networks. The Network is hosted by Croydon Voluntary Action (CVA).

Jo Gough, Head of Community Involvement at CVA says: “We support members by sharing information, providing leadership and the coordination of various activities, and by encouraging participation and involvement in local decision making.”

The Network is overseen by a steering group, made up of representatives from the 15 linked groups and elected representatives from the Network. The steering group meets six times a year to agree the focus for the Network.

The Network uses a portion of its limited resources to provide development funding for linked networks such as the Disability Forum and Refugee Forum. Where possible it identifies and develops under-resourced networks and gives them funding to help develop their capacity to be more influential. For example, the Refugee Forum was unfunded for a year and without the assistance of the Network, it would have had difficulty in continuing to be operational.

Representation and power sharing through the CSP

CSP comprises of a board, Chief Executives' Group, theme partnerships and sub-groups. In addition, the Community Network, neighbourhood partnerships and other groups are also seen as part of the CSP family.

The Community Network nominates a third (five) of the CSP board members from the voluntary and community sector (VCS). The CSP also has equal board representation from the public and business sectors. The CSP board elects its chair and three vice chairs from each of the sectors.

Specific designations are made so each of the five VCS places ensure a wide spread of members. For example, representatives will be nominated from Croydon Voluntary Action, Black and Minority Ethnic Forum (BMEF), Faith's Together, and various community groups. VCS board members represent the views of the Community Network as a whole and report regularly to the Network.

The Community Network also has representatives on the CSP's Chief Executives' Group, theme partnerships and sub-groups.

For the theme partnerships, there may also be particular designations for VCS members. For example, the Healthy Croydon Partnership has seats for voluntary groups and a patients' representative. Sub-groups of the Healthy Croydon Partnership have places for representatives of users / patients, carers, and voluntary organisations.

Example of how the Network represents the interests of under-represented groups through the CSP

Ms Gough explains: "In March 2007, we focused on creating a more equal and inclusive Croydon and invited some of the linked groups to present their views on gender, sexuality, disability, age and race. This stimulated discussion which led to priority action on the five key areas. These fed directly through to the CSP which have now been fed into Croydon's Community Strategy. One of the key things that came out of this was that the Community Network agreed that it wanted a new themed partnership which would focus on equalities issues to tackle inequality in the borough. The Chief Executives' Group of the CSP has taken this forward as an option for the future of equalities for the borough."

Additional contribution to the CSP and local decision making

Community Network representatives offer numerous benefits to the CSP. They are a source of advice and provide a range of views for consultation purposes. People within the VCS are a target audience to implement proposals within the Community Strategy. They play both a community advocacy role and a voice for service delivery through voluntary sector provision.

The Community Network has influenced various activities of the CSP board ranging from: the establishment of a Corporate Social Responsibility programme for Croydon; the development of a Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy and the development of Neighbourhood Partnerships. The Network has actively contributed to board discussions, such as: the role of the local press in improving Croydon's image; the content of the Community Strategy; agreeing the distribution of the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund; changing the structure of the CSP and agreeing the composition of the board.

GOOD PRACTICE POINTS

The Community Network is effective because of the power sharing and democratic arrangements in various partnerships that flow from the CSP.

Ms Gough explains: "Power sharing in the Healthy Croydon Partnership (HCP) is a good illustration of this. This is the second year that the HCP has agreed for the VCS to lead on a key item, which will be decided and designed by the VCS. The VCS has chosen to focus on refugees and health for its current item. This will be led by the Health and Care Forum and the Refugee Forum, and provides a good example of power sharing around decision making in the borough."

This work will involve highlighting health related items that have been raised through the Refugee Forum, and some of the problems that refugees have identified in the borough, as well as looking at how to utilise current good practice in Croydon. This work will also contribute to the national overview on refugee health and stimulate discussion around how Croydon can improve

health for these communities in the borough. Representations from the Refugee Forum to decision makers (politicians and senior officers) formed part of this.

Ms Gough adds: “This example demonstrates respect for the expertise in communities in the voluntary sector. This kind of willingness to take the risk to share power is a positive thing.”

She concludes: “There is good political and senior officer level input to the Network with good will around attending meetings and being available to sit on panels and attend or take part in various activities. CSP recognise that the Network is a forum to be approached for expertise and getting the community viewpoint.”

FURTHER INFORMATION AND REFERENCES

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