



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



Case Study No. 9 – ‘Talk2Croydon’ and ‘A Voice for My Community’

INTRODUCTION

Talk2Croydon.co.uk is a new innovation in e-democracy. The website aims to both improve practice and co-ordination of community involvement across the borough, as well as provide an additional tool for grass roots public engagement in local decision making.

The site was launched in September 2007 and within the first month had 169 registered members. Talk2Croydon is the focal point of electronic public engagement for all the public agencies in Croydon. The site has been developed by Croydon Voluntary Action and is supported by Croydon Community Network, Croydon Council, Croydon Primary Care Trust and Mayday Healthcare NHS Trust.

A Voice for My Community is a project to develop strong and capable representation across the Local Strategic Partnership and its family of partnerships. The project provides a support and development programme that is led by representatives, for representatives.

The programme aims to develop the capacity of elected or appointed representatives on local partnerships. The support includes training, financial support, personal development opportunities, networking and sharing good practice. This will enable individuals to better understand and represent the views of those they are speaking on behalf of.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Both projects are aimed at increasing and improving community involvement in decision making across the borough.

Talk2Croydon

The Community Involvement Strategy Group (CISG), a multi-agency partnership of community involvement leads that is part of the LSP ‘family’, identified a need for a single ‘hub’ for engagement activities. A web-based solution would enable all the partners to participate and have the advantage of attracting audiences from groups often excluded by mainstream engagement techniques.

Whilst there are a number of e-democracy products available to purchase, the CISG felt none matched the requirements set out by partners. Therefore the group decided to commission a bespoke web product using open source code.

Using open source coding, in this case Dupral, has the advantage of both reduced development costs and no on-going license fees. It would also mean the site would be able to develop and improve as the code is developed by the Dupral community.

In order to ensure that the site met the needs of the very communities we wanted to reach, 6 local community groups were commissioned to hold focus sessions with target groups. These included children and young people, BME and refugee groups, disabled people and people with learning disabilities. Research shows that these groups are amongst those who are most likely to benefit from web access, over traditional engagement methods like surveys and public meetings.

The six community groups were involved in the procurement specification, the development and the testing of the site. They are now involved in marketing and promoting the final site.

The Talk2Croydon website has been designed to maximise functionality, both for those organising engagement activities and those wanting to participate.

Activities are divided into 'Buzz's' and 'Structures'. A Buzz is a one-off, time-limited activity focused on a particular issue. For example, consultations on a change to a service or a campaign to save an area of interest would be a Buzz. A Structure is an on-going activity that might cover a range of issues over time. Local networks, forums and partnerships would be Structures.

Each Buzz or Structure offers a range of mechanisms to involve people. These can include simple polls, more detailed surveys, and discussion forums, events entered on a central calendar, documents, videos and links to other sites.

Behind the scenes organisers are able to take part in a closed group. This enables practitioners to exchange ideas, share resources and discuss issues with each other. This extends the work of the CISG to a much wider group in a virtual way and will be central in promoting best practice in community engagement.

A Voice for My Community

*“Effective representation and involvement in LSPs from the voluntary and community sector is becoming increasingly important as LSPs have become more established”**

Community Representatives are vital to the development of community life in Croydon. 'A Voice for My Community' aims to support selected / elected representatives of networks, partnerships and forums, associated with the Community Network, to be equipped with the skills and knowledge to be effective in their role.

*“There is a low baseline of development of occupational standards catering for strategic representation and VCS leadership.”**

All representatives attached to the Community Network are asked to reflect on their development and support needs and this information is used to deliver the requested training and support. The training that has been requested and delivered, so far, includes; 'An introduction to Influencing', 'The Community Voice and the Planning Process' and 'Presenting Your Passion!' The next training days requested and scheduled are 'An Introduction to Being a Representative - How it all Works', 'Using IT for Representation' and 'Effective Partnership Working'. Interactive training is facilitated by Croydon Voluntary Action working in partnership with other organisations such as Croydon Council, the London Civic Forum and NAVCA, in the delivery of the programme. Expert speakers are also invited to inform, inspire and give context to the learning.

Along with the regular training days there is a small amount of financial support, should a representative identify other relevant training or an event that would enable them in their role. Croydon Community Network representatives are also contributing to an informative guidance pack, which will be available to each representative. A further part of the project, which is in the initial stages, is co-ordinating community and voluntary representatives who would like to benefit from mentoring with local key decision makers.

GOOD PRACTICE POINTS

Talk2Croydon

Partnership approach

Talk2Croydon is a good example of Croydon's approach to working in partnership. Funded by the council and the health sector, but managed by the voluntary sector, the site is a solution to the needs of the borough and not any individual organisation.

Involving target audience

From the earliest stage, those communities which the project most wanted to reach were invited to participate in developing the project. This was the most effective way of ensuring the final product would meet the needs of those for whom the site would be most relevant.

Comparing available products with bespoke option

At the beginning of the process very few web developers had put community involvement products on the market but there are now a wide variety of different products to support engagement. As a result, very few developers with an expertise in consultation are interested in building something bespoke as they have already invested in their own products.

From our experience, developing a bespoke system was not simple and required a great deal of time and resources to manage the development. There is also a great deal of reliance on the web developer and their knowledge of open source code.

In the long term the cost of maintaining the bespoke site can be a lot less than a license for a product owned by someone else. Again, much will depend on the relationship you have with the developer of the site.

A Voice for My Community

Responsive and inclusive

'A Voice for My Community' programme delivers a range of development and support opportunities on a rolling basis. The programme is responsive to the diversity of Croydon communities and respectful to individual support needs.

Training provision includes skills development and workshops on local issues. The training is both universal and targeted. Some groups of representatives are targeted to identify their own specific development needs, such as the Strategic Partnership representatives who are at the highest level of representation in the borough.

Practical support and a creative approach

Alongside the rolling programme of training there are also small bursaries available to representatives to financially support their development. The bursaries are primarily used for attending events that are relevant to their representation. 'A Voice for My Community' is also developing a guidance folder for representatives and a mentoring programme which will support representatives to shadow key local decision makers. 'A Voice for My Community' project is run by representatives for representatives and aims to add to the experience by encouraging networking and promoting good practice.

FURTHER INFORMATION AND REFERENCES

Sarah Taylor, Croydon Voluntary Action,
97 High Street, Thornton Heath, Croydon, CR7 8RY

Tel: 020 8683 5917

Email: Sarah.Taylor@cvalive.org.uk

Website: www.talk2croydon.co.uk

*NAVCA 'Skilling up for LSPs':

<http://www.navca.org.uk/NR/rdonlyres/27C3CCCB-307F-4FFA-9A29-F37948EE6618/0/SkillingupforLSPsFORWEBSITE.pdf>