

Camden Community Empowerment Network Marketplace Website

BACKGROUND

The CCEN Marketplace website was set up in July 2007. After a number of years of allocating Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (NRF) money through grants, Camden Council were developing a commissioning and procurement process for allocating NRF and there was some concern that small groups would not be able to access this process as their services were not recognised by the local authority. The aim of the website was to provide:

- Procurement officers and other funders with a single access point to information about what services local groups were providing and for whom.
- A space for posting tenders and funding opportunities and a facility to send out email alerts to groups fitting the criteria for these.
- An opportunity for groups to advertise for potential partners to form consortia in order to bid for larger contracts
- Information for groups looking for other groups providing similar services.

The website was set up to enable groups to load and update their own information through a unique username and password. CCEN has admin control and groups contact CCEN to be issued with a username and a password – the password takes them directly to their page on the website. Groups can change the password once they access the site.

The Website

During the first 3 months over 50 groups requested a username and password with approximately 80 groups having requested a username and password over the 2 years since the site has been in existence. However many of those who requested a username and password in the first 3 months did not upload any information about their organisation, and even after numerous reminders had still not uploaded any information by the time the website closed. Any information on the website for a number of groups had been uploaded from Cindex by the CCEN Coordinator who emailed the groups to inform them of this and requesting they look at the website to see if the information was correct and to add to / amend it.

Support offered to groups

The CCEN Coordinator recognised that some groups would be unfamiliar with uploading information and developed a Marketplace Website Form so that groups could collate all the information they needed for the website before attempting to input it. Along with this form two factsheets were developed that went through the process of uploading information step by step and showed how the website would work.

A range of support mechanisms were offered to groups who needed help uploading their information in the form of workshops, one to one advice, sessions in community centres and visiting groups to provide 'hands on' support on how to upload their information, and actually uploading their information from a completed form.

Opportunities for tenders

This part of the website was not a successful as first thought and very few tenders were every posted on the website. This was due to the size of the tender documents and to technical problems but also the lack of commissioning opportunities being presented.

Looking for Partners?

This part of the website was used only once although groups may have contacted other groups they found through the website directly rather than advertising on the website.

Issues of Concern

Poor awareness of need to input details onto website

Whilst initially many groups were eager to get a username and password few of them actually used these to input their details. This meant that anyone accessing the site to look for organisations that met their needs – for example groups working with young people offering education and training and operating in Kentish Town would get possibly one or two responses whereas the number of groups issued with username and password working to these parameters was more like 15 or more groups. (This is not just a problem for the Marketplace website but also for the Premises website which is not used as much as it could be.)

Lack of response to reminder emails

The CCEN Coordinator regularly emailed groups to remind them to input their details – offering new username and password if the initial ones had been lost – as well as offering to show them how to input the information and offering to input the information on their behalf.

To ensure that some information was available on the website the CCEN Coordinator spent some time inputting organisation's details from either VAC's own database or the councils database Cindex. To ensure that this was correct the groups involved were emailed and asked to check the information on the Marketplace website to ensure it was correct. If not they were encouraged to either amend the listing themselves or contact the CCEN Coordinator who would do the amendments for them. However no group ever responded to these emails either way so we did not know if the information was correct or if the groups ever actually checked it.

Changes of personnel

Over the life of the website many groups have had staff changes or even lost staff due to funding cuts and knowledge of the website and how it could be used decreased.

Teething troubles with the website

- There were a number of technical problems with the website initially. Some groups did not receive their username and password directly so the Coordinator had to email them separately.
- Because the Marketplace website was linked to the VAC Premises website the website address was not easy to access from web browsers www.camdencommunityspace.org.uk/CCEN.
- Initially groups had to edit their details and change their password from the Premises page rather than the Marketplace page but this was soon dealt with.
- It was difficult to upload commissioning tenders and up until the site closed this facility was not working correctly with the CCEN Coordinator having to contact the website developer each time a new tender came in.
- The email alert to those groups who met the criteria for the commissioning tenders never worked and we were unaware that this facility was not actually activated – although we requested it a number of times.
- CCEN had no way of knowing how often the website was accessed by either other voluntary and community sector groups or by council and other statutory body commissioning officers and no facility for groups to feed back if having their groups information on the website had been useful.

- The 'Looking For Partners' facility was included in the website to encourage groups who might consider tendering for a contract to think about joining together with other similar groups so as to be able to apply for larger contracts but it never seemed to get off the ground as we had hoped.

Change in funding process

NRF was abolished in 2008/9 meaning that there was no 'extra funding' available for groups to access and the demand for information about groups decreased dramatically. Tendering opportunities are now almost non-existent on any regular basis. All funding is now processed through the Local Area Agreement and is solely for meeting the targets set out in LAA and the Community Strategy.

Impact of closure of the site

The failure of the Marketplace Website is clearly evident in that since the groups have been informed that the site has closed only one group has contacted the CCEN regarding this. This group informed CCEN that although the information about their group had been uploaded onto the site they had never actually accessed the site or had anyone contact them through seeing their information on the site.

Lessons learned

If we were to start afresh then any website needs to be a stand alone – it needs its own web space and to be easily accessible through web browsers.

It is not enough to expect groups who have few or no paid staff to input and update their own webpage – CCEN would need to allocate staff time to do this and to send out to groups on regular basis (every 6 months?) to ensure information is current,

The website needs to be advertised widely to stakeholders and potential users and we need to ensure that all facilities are working correctly