

Ossie Stewart interview transcript

Angela Sweeney: Hi Ossie, welcome. I'm very pleased to have you here today to talk to us a little bit about the relationship between diversity and user led organisations. What advice would you give to user led organisations going into the future, in terms of how they can ensure that they are fully representative of different groups?

Ossie Stewart: Well, that's a very complex question in the sense that, there are two pressures on user led organisations. There's a pressure to gain resources because in the world today a lot of user led organisations will be social enterprises, therefore they'll be mini businesses or social businesses in lots of ways and thinking about how to make sure that next years budget is met and all that. So the pressure's on them to focus on easy wins, easy access to budgets, but my advice to them would be to make sure that if they want to be credible, to win those contracts, they need to think very carefully about who they're representing and how they can evidence that they involve people appropriately or that their constituency is a diverse constituency which includes all different communities, because I know that the commissioners will be looking for that. So my advice to any user led organisation is that you're strength will be in your diversity.

Angela Sweeney: Can I ask you there, what common interests do you think there are across all diverse user groups?

Ossie Stewart: The common interest is adequate funding, good communications, good information about services, proper support for growing communities in terms of what local authorities should be doing. It should be campaigning, every organisation has its issues, campaigns, concerns, it should be a voice for those campaigns and concerns. I think people do share common interest, there's nothing intrinsically different between a Somali women's group and their concerns and interests than there would be for a wheelchair users group. There will be things they share about decent services, good, high quality services, proper funding, good information streams, good access to the information. It maybe different information but it's information nonetheless, accessible information, there's no difference. Those are things that people share and also an ability to lobby through an organisation. Lobbying on your own, a Somali women's organisation will be less effective lobbying on its own than they would if they had common goals, whether there be four, five, six, seven or fifteen organisations lobbying on the same thing. So that's why I see a ULO having that role, to play that role of bringing together those common shared ideas. If it can't do that or won't do that then it's failed as a ULO.

Angela Sweeney: So Ossie, do you think that ULOs have changed in the way that they represent different groups or the way that they embrace diversity?

Ossie Stewart: I think tremendously, they've changed dramatically over the years, partly driven by the law. There's been a change in the race relations act, the amendment to that which makes it a public duty obligation on public service providers to prove that they meet the needs of all their service users. Disability discrimination act the same, a public duty element to that, which demands the same evidence to prove that all service users are receiving the services they deserve or getting fair treatment, fair access to that. Now users of services are a vast array of people. The disability movement is only one small group within that great array of people. So, there's a tension between the user led movement and user led organisations in that the user led movement is talking about a small group of people, whereas user led organisations implicitly, or explicitly, have to represent everybody. So, there are two different tensions there. If you talk to some of the old user led organisations which started in the eighties and nineties say in Hampshire or Essex, they've had to learn to embrace a wider community. Evolve from their own friends and mates to actually be representative of the wider communities, because local authorities have demanded it and those who have failed to do so have gone by the wayside.