Peter Beresford interview transcript

Angela Sweeney: Peter Beresford welcome. I'm very pleased that you've been able to come along to talk to us about user led organisations. It would be great if you could start off by telling us a little bit about who you are and what you do.

Peter Beresford: Well, I work in a university, Brunel University, as a professor of social policy and I direct a centre for citizen participation where our focus is on making it more possible for people to have a more active say and role in their lives and over the support and services that they access. But I've also got my own long term experience of using mental health services and because of that I've been involved for some time in what people call now user led organisations and I'm chair of one such organisation – Shaping Our Lives, which is an independent, national, service user controlled organisation and network.

Angela Sweeney: Why would a commissioner want to develop and strengthen ULOs in their area?

Peter Beresford: Well there's lots of very positive discussion going on now about co-production. The need for services, service providers, commissioners to do things jointly with service users and our organisations and I think that's a really great idea and it reminds me, which is a message I really want to send to commissioners, who of course are in quite a difficult position because they've got to deliver the best, as economically as possible, in difficult times. And I think the message I'd like to deliver to commissioners would be that there's no group better able to point you effectively and quickly towards what people really want, what'll be the most sensitive and appropriate thing to do, without wastage, than user led organisations. Any business knows that if it wants to find out what it's going to make a living out of, in terms of selling goods or services to customers, then it doesn't ask other people what they think those customers might want, it doesn't go to another place and see what they are doing there and what the local needs there are. It goes straight to the horse's mouth and the ULO is the horses mouth here for commissioners.

Angela Sweeney: From your experience and your knowledge of the area, what difficulties do ULOs have in becoming strong and sustainable organisations?

Peter Beresford: User led organisations tend to be competing with very big traditional charitable and voluntary organisations and that is not a level playing field and it's a shame, I think, that there can't be a recognition on the part of the bigger organisations that part of their role could be to sustain the user led ones and that they have different skills and contributions to make and for that to be worked out better.

Angela Sweeney: So Peter, if this works and recommendation 4.3 is realised and we have ULOs in every area where would you hope that this takes us in five years time?

Peter Beresford: I think I can answer that question best by thinking back to my own experience. When things went wrong for me which ended up with me using mental health services and eventually going into hospital. Looking back on it I realise that there wasn't really anywhere to turn to. It's difficult to turn to people close to you and why will they know? What happened was that as I began to sort some things out, I then found out about service users own organisations and then they were fantastically valuable to me and I think they have been a shaper for my subsequent life and a source of support and self understanding. But, think how fantastic it would have been if right at the start when things began to go wrong, I had known, I could find out without even having to try. That just like there's a Samaritans phone line, everyone knows there is and just like there's this and there's that, that there was a user led organisation locally where there'd be people who knew about these things from direct experience. That probably without too much embarrassment or fear I could have a confidential conversation with to check out how I might make better sense of what was going on. That would have been wonderful. And I think that's what we could hope for as the promise of the future of user led organisations. That organisations which are made up of people with similar experience that people then will know well if they can do it, so can I. It's happened to them, they'll understand. They won't think I'm stupid, they won't be demeaning about me. If you could just turn to that as a matter of routine that would be marvellous. So that would be my goal and hope for the future. I know it's a long way to go but it's a fantastic prospect.