

ULO Case Study: Disability Alliance Sunderland

Origins and evolution

The Physical Disabilities Alliance (PDA) was founded in 1998 as a registered charity. During 2008-09 the PDA set about transforming itself into a user-led organisation, and from 1st April 2009 it became known as Disability Alliance Sunderland (DAS). The new name reflected the inclusive nature of the organisation, embracing all disabled people in the area.

DAS is an umbrella organisation working in the interests of disabled people, organisations and others (including carers).

Under Wave 1 of the Department of Health's *Action and Learning* initiative, Vision Sense, an organisation based in South Tyneside, was chosen to act as a mentor and to support DAS to work towards becoming a ULO. This experience was captured in a booklet titled *A Journey Towards Improvement*.

Vision

DAS aims to provide a voice for disabled people living in the City of Sunderland. It promotes equality of access to society, opportunities and the environment. It helps disabled people to obtain the services that they need, and signposts them to the relevant sources of support.

DAS firmly supports the principles of equal opportunities and non-discrimination, and is committed to the promotion of independent living, equality, choice and control.

Current legal status

DAS is a company limited by guarantee and a registered charity.

Governance arrangements

The new constitution and legal status embody the principles of a ULO (e.g. promoting independent living from a social model of disability perspective and a minimum of 75% of board members being disabled people).

The Board of Directors currently comprises eight people, six of whom are disabled.

DAS is a membership organisation giving all its individual and organisational members the right to vote, based on the principle of 'one member, one vote'. Membership is open to anyone who has a genuine interest in, or concern for, DAS, the ideals and objects for which it exists.

Disabled people are consulted on issues that affect them, and they are fully involved in the organisation's decision-making processes.

Scale and scope of services provided

Services provided by DAS include:

- Advocacy
- Peer support
- Support in using direct payments
- Personal budgeting
- Assistance with self-assessment
- Provision of disability equality training
- Provision of learning and training activities
- Help in accessing employment opportunities

DAS, with partner organisations, has founded a local peer advocacy project.

An experienced advice and information worker is employed and information is available in a range of formats and languages. A website has also been developed. The advice project has built links with the BME community and with those with mental health and learning disabilities. An advice outreach service is planned, that will operate from the Headlight project – a service user-led mental health resource centre.

DAS is a partner in the local direct payments and support service which is known as *Go Direct*.

Resources and support

DAS currently has two full-time paid staff – an advice and information worker and a development worker. The advice and information worker has been paid for through the ULO Wave 1 budget, and their contract ends on 31st March 2010. The need for this post was identified in the course of the ULO Wave 1 project. The development worker, who has been with DAS throughout its evolution over the last six years, will cease to have a contract on 31st July 2010, unless other sources of funding can be identified. This role was also examined during the ULO Wave 1 development process, and it was decided that it should focus on the management of the organisation. DAS also has a part-time administrator. All the remaining tasks are carried out by volunteer members.

DAS is housed free of charge in the Independent Living Centre, which is part of Sunderland City Council's Health, Housing and Adult Services Directorate.

Funding for DAS currently comes from Sunderland Council and the Department of Health, together with a small amount from the Big Lottery Fund. 90% of the budget is spent on staffing and related costs.

The overall lack of resources and uncertainties over funding limit what can be achieved. The need to access limited funding and to respond to tenders inevitably means that organisations are entering a competitive environment.

Partnerships and networks

DAS is an umbrella organisation bringing together providers of support services to disabled people in Sunderland. It works with the Council for Voluntary Service, the Council for the Disabled, the Sunderland Volunteer Centre and the Disability Independent Advisory Group (which feeds in to the Sunderland Partnership). It has a good working relationship with City of Sunderland Council.

Lessons learned

The precursor to the DAS Board of Directors was very keen that the organisation should embrace ULO principles, and were very pleased when their involvement in ULO Wave 1 was confirmed. However, some hard lessons have been learned that DAS feels may be of interest to other organisations which are considering going down this route.

Be very, very careful! Think long and hard about what you want your organisation to do. If this aligns with ULO principles, then fine. If not, do not try to bend your vision and objectives to fit.

The management committee of the organisation has to be quite clear about the nature of the challenge that they are taking on. It will involve additional work and new areas of risk. It is vital to make sure that the management committee or board members are all totally committed to the journey. They will be expected to acquire new and improved knowledge and skills, they will have to learn think outside the immediate environment of their own organisation or area of interest, and they will have to take a business-like approach.

The move to company status will enable an organisation to contract with statutory bodies to deliver services, while reducing the exposure of board members to risk. The DAS Board members undertook a skills audit and governance training, and they are now more aware of their responsibilities. A new finance system was put in place and policies were reviewed. This involved a great deal of additional work, at a time when the organisation was already under pressure.

Organisations run by and for disabled people do face a particular capacity problem when key staff are absent while undergoing treatment for their medical conditions. In this case, during the ULO Wave 1 project, both the mentoring organisation and DAS experienced such problems.

Some important lessons were learned about the mentoring role itself. It is vital that the mentor and mentee both have adequate capacity to take on the additional work involved in moving towards ULO status. An effective mentor really needs to be a larger organisation, capable of deploying the required staff time and skills. Mentoring cannot be short-term – bringing an organisation to ULO status may take lots of time and effort. Here, both organisations underestimated the effort required,

the timescale was too short and the funding did not flow smoothly – leading to delays, uncertainty and frustration.

Moving to ULO status may involve a real culture shock for some organisations; some are much more business-driven than others. It will involve more work for staff, who may well be hard-pressed dealing with day-to-day matters. Work cannot simply stop while the changes are made. Business skills are vital, and should not be overlooked. DAS recognises that it still has some way to go in this regard, and would benefit from longer-term mentoring and other support. At present, it feels that it has neither the capacity nor the experience to take on contracted service delivery, but it aspires to be able to do so.

None of this can happen without adequate core resources, including paid staff. It is dangerous to see ULO status as a means of attracting core funding to the organisation.

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