

ULO Case Study: Durham Disability Voice (DDV)

Origins and evolution

DDV is still in the early stages of its evolution, but it has great ambitions. It is a small organisation with very limited resources. Until 2006, the views of disabled people in County Durham were represented through a Service User and Carer Forum. This ceased operation when public funding was withdrawn.

DDV was launched in 2008 to fill the gap. On the one hand, disabled people wanted a channel through which their concerns could be heard; on the other hand, the statutory bodies wanted a County-wide representative body for the disabled that they could consult.

DDV was established as a group of individuals and representatives of disability organisations, who would work together to provide a unified voice for disabled people in County Durham. It would fight to ensure that disabled people were treated as equals, that barriers to access were removed, and that their rights were recognised and observed. It would campaign for business, statutory bodies and other organisations to fully meet the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act.

The new organisation received help from Durham County Council to set up, register, and to put vital systems and policies in place; it also provided administrative support. Advice and support was made available through the County Durham LINK initiative. All this support has now been withdrawn.

The DDV Management Committee decided to explore the benefits of ULO status.

Vision

DDV aims to provide a unified voice for all disabled people across County Durham, and to address their needs wherever possible using charitable means.

The organisation works on behalf of the disabled, their families and carers. Carers are seen as being a vital part of the organisation's constituency. The wider aim is to help build a more inclusive society.

DDV sees itself having four main areas of focus:

- Provision of information and advice
- Representing the views of disabled people, their families and carers in local and regional forums
- Influencing policy and service provision
- Encouraging participation by disabled individuals

The overarching principle of DDV is that it is run 'by and for disabled people'.

Current legal status and governance arrangements

DDV is a membership-based voluntary organisation, registered as a charity.

There is a Management Committee of volunteers, who are elected by the membership at an AGM. There are currently nine members of the Management Committee, though it could increase to ten. Seven of the members are disabled, and the other two are carers.

DDV welcomes both individual members and interested organisations; the latter are known as Affiliated Groups. Membership is renewable annually. Statutory organisations do not have voting rights.

There is a Finance Sub Group which acts as a general purposes committee, and looks after the day-to-day operations.

Scale and scope of services provided

In its constitution, adopted in November 2007, DDV's aims are to provide advocacy, advice and information to disabled people in County Durham, and to act as an umbrella and resource body. Its charitable objectives are broad, and involve meeting the needs of disabled people, their families and carers.

DDV provides a forum where disabled people and their carers can discuss concerns and issues, and can develop appropriate responses.

It liaises with other organisations and agencies, both within the County and across the wider Region, to enable disabled people to have a voice. It seeks to raise public awareness of the needs and concerns of disabled people, and to maintain a dialogue with policy-makers and service providers. Through these links it aims to influence policy and improve the quality of service provision.

It provides advice and support to disabled people and their carers.

Resources and support

As with so many other voluntary organisations, DDV is finding it a hard struggle to resource its activities at the present time.

The organisation is run from member's homes; there is no office base.

Small amounts of funding have been raised and deployed on specific consultations.

There is no membership fee at present, though one could be introduced in the future as a contribution towards operating costs.

DDV is currently seeking finance in order to place its activities on a more robust footing. In particular, it needs funding to employ a part-time development worker who can drive things forward and help the organisation to grow. County Durham is a large and complex area to service, and it is felt that a dedicated development worker is the only means of fostering County-wide contacts and networks, and also ensuring a County Durham voice at all the appropriate regional meetings.

DDV is considering how it might establish a permanent base, but this would also require funding.

Partnerships and networks

DDV has developed useful working links with Gateshead Access Panel and Darlington Association on Disability. It is closely involved in the activities of the County Durham Disability Partnership.

DDV recognises that it needs to extend its network of contacts and its membership into the west of the County, and further east into Easington and Seaham. It also recognises that it needs to engage more with younger disabled people – probably through specific, targeted activities that would appeal to them.

Lessons learned

It would be premature to point to areas of good practice, but DDV is very proud to have set itself up and to have survived tough times.

One critical lesson has been how important it is to have an organisation that is prepared to listen and to share ideas with others. DDV is happy to talk to other organisations that are seeking to support the disabled, and it is heartened that individuals and organisations are increasingly seeking its advice and support.

DDV is interested in the ULO agenda as a means to:

- Develop regional contacts and networks
- Raise awareness about the role of DDV
- Identify the barriers to the organisation's growth and ways of overcoming them
- Identify possible sources of funding and gain expertise in this area
- Learn from others

As a first step DDV needs a fundraiser and a paid member of staff who can travel around the County meeting organisations and individuals and explaining the organisation's purpose.

DDV recognises the need to diversify its membership, but this is expected to come in time.

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