

## ULO Case Study: Vision Sense

### Origins and evolution

Vision Sense was established in 2003 by four disabled people, two of whom became Executive Directors when the organisation was formed. Previously employed by charities in the Region, they were committed to the social model and were aware of the many ways in which disabled people were being discriminated against at work and in volunteering, and determined to do something about it.

The organisation's business plan was predicated on earning income from training activities, and reinvesting any profits in running an advocacy service and work placement opportunities.

Vision Sense was founded on an ethos and values that predated, but meets the ULO design criteria. A successful bid for funding under Wave 1 of the Department of Health's *Action and Learning* initiative, enabled Vision Sense to mentor the development of Disability Alliance Sunderland.

The company is currently involved in a number of policy and research projects, including looking at the needs of local authority and health commissioners in the context of ULO development.

### Vision

Vision Sense provides an advocacy service for disabled people. It tries to ensure that disabled people have a strong voice at all levels, from influencing strategy and policy on the one hand, through to improving the service received by the disabled individual at the other. It seeks to promote best practice on disability equality, diversity and access.

### Current legal status

Vision Sense is a social enterprise – a company limited by guarantee, but run on a not-for-profit basis. It is deliberately chosen not to register as a charity, to help counter the historic nature of oppression in charities run for disabled people and change the view of disabled people as recipients of charity – and this sets it apart from many other organisations.

### Governance arrangements

There is a Board of Directors. The two founders are the Executive Directors. There are seven non-executives, including business, research, finance, HR and policy experts and, from time to time, other people can be co-opted onto the Board to meet a specific, short-term need. Vision Sense ensures that, at any point in time, over 90% of

Board members are disabled people, people with substantial, long term health conditions or Survivors. It is currently 100% representation.

This structure enables the company to respond flexibly to opportunities and changing need, to focus on specific areas of interest, reduce costs and to operate with a high degree of freedom.

Vision Sense also signposts information for the families and carers of disabled people to ensure their own needs are met, alongside that of the disabled person. However, it strongly believes that disabled people must be enabled to voice their own needs, rather than having this done for them, particularly in transition to adulthood.

### **Scale and scope of services provided**

Advocacy and training for disabled people are the main focus of the company.

Advocacy covers every aspect of the life of disabled people – ensuring peer support for choice, voice and control, so that independent living is achieved and life chances are not lower than those of non-disabled people.

Vision Sense has a strong role in influencing strategy and policy formulation, and believes that disabled people should play an active role in evaluating service provision. Over the years, it has completed several key pieces of user-led research and evaluation on issues affecting disabled people. Most of this work has been in the North East, but Vision Sense also works in the North West, Scotland and Yorkshire, with training and policy delivery as far as Kent, Cornwall and Northern Ireland!

The following list gives a flavour of the wide variety of activities which provide sustainable revenue streams for Vision Sense:

- Accredited training as an Open College Network Centre
- Organising accessible consultations, reference groups and involvement
- Organising inclusive conferences and events
- User-led research, evaluation, service design, monitoring and policy reports, as well as independent mapping and Case Reviews for social care and health
- Advice and audits on the accessibility of public buildings and developments – by a qualified, registered, insured, experienced, disabled Access Officer, who is a member of the National Register of Access Consultants and a RICS IEC.
- Co-producing equality policies, impact assessments and Schemes
- Disability equality training

### **Resources and support**

There are four paid staff, three full-time and one part-time, plus two more on fixed contracts. All the delivery staff are disabled people, with PAs. The two executive directors play a key role in identifying and exploiting business and policy opportunities.

Vision Sense also operates with a small pool of associates, who can offer technical or specialist input – for example on areas of IMCA.

It took around four years from initial start-up to place Vision Sense on a sustainable basis financially. A number of significant training contracts were won, and the company started to develop a reputation. Further commissions were obtained from local authority and health organisations, and the company widened its area of operations to include auditing, individual coaching and accredited equality training.

In the last full year of trading, rather more than half of the company's income was generated by research and policy commissions in fields such as human rights, employer's duties and user-led research. 10-15% was generated by training programmes, perhaps 5% on access auditing (lowered, due to the recession), and the balance on other specific training and mentoring activities.

### **Partnerships and networks**

Vision Sense works in a variety of local, regional and national partnerships and networks. It recognises that its expertise lies in specific areas such as advocacy, consultation and access, and that other organisations have complementary skills. Only in this way is it possible to meet the wide-ranging needs of disabled and Deaf people, for example from BME communities, who experience many cultural and access barriers in negotiating complex systems.

### **Lessons learned**

The experience of Vision Sense suggests that intending ULOs might like to consider the following:

Organisations should carefully consider what services and activities are needed in their local area. Are there any obvious gaps that need to be addressed, and how could this be done?

Is the organisation representative? Are the views that are being put forward really representative of the wider local population of disabled people, or are they just the views of a small group of people? Particularly, many established groups ignore the needs of younger disabled people. Robust evidence of local need will steer the organisation in the right direction.

Do you have a first-rate finance director? This is a vital factor in ensuring that the required systems and procedures are in place, that forecasts are soundly based on a good understanding of the market, and that costs can be controlled. Good financial planning, projection and analytical skills are the basis on which growth can be planned and the business driven forward.

It is very important to consider the possible risks to sustainability – to think about ‘What would happen if...’ – and to make contingency plans for dealing with them. For example, what would be the impact on the business if a key member of staff was suddenly not able to work for a protracted time? This happened to Vision Sense, and required a re-structuring and new planning.

It is also important to review the legal status of the organisation and ensure the Trustees / Directors understand their liability. This can affect the type of business that can be sought, the level of risk that is permissible and the liability/exposure of the directors. Without Limited status, some Service Level Agreements, loans or contracts can mean personal liability for the Directors.

Organisations that are seeking to become ULOs and to deliver contracts, should not underestimate the significance of the culture change that they may have to go through. Some organisations set up for disabled people have a culture which seems to emphasise the charity, rather than business models.

Probably the single most important success factor is vision and collective drive. There must be a strategic view of policy, where the organisation should go, identify and follow-up business opportunities and ensure that the money flows in. The skills and experience needed for these roles should not be limited to one person – there needs to be a clear management development and succession strategy.

#### **Further information contact**

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