

Breakout session: Deaf and Disabled People's Organisations

Speakers: **Tracey Lazard**, CEO of Inclusion London, **Samson Dawodu**, Solicitor at Disability Law Service, **Asma Bennani**, Head of Legal Aid Practice/Senior Solicitor, **Keely Parnaby**, Director of Peer Services at Inclusion Barnet, **Zhara Kendall-Morris**, Caseworker Supervisor at Inclusion Barnet

The session began with Asma outlining the overall learning aims of the conference to understand the problems and issues in the sector in simple terms so we can have discussions about how to address these issues and implement changes in our organisations. She highlighted concerns around the future of the advice workforce, especially in relation to recruitment and retention, and framed the sessions as an opportunity to explore how DDPOs have tackled these issues, both the difficulties and successes in attracting deaf and disabled people to the sector.

Defining DDPOs

Tracey explains what DDPOs are: organisations that are run by and for deaf and disabled people, with a mission grounded in the disability rights movement and the social model of disability. DDPOs identify and work to remove barriers in society and centre the voice of deaf and disabled people in both service and advocacy. Tracey highlighted that in the disability space there is an ongoing issue with lots of their funding and organisations still being governed by individuals who are not disabled, so deaf and disabled people are fighting to be self-organised.

She emphasised:

- The importance of peer support. Disabled people disproportionately use the advice sector so having advice from another disabled person is transformative. Peer delivery is important for flipping the dynamic.
- The shared experience of ableism that unites deaf and disabled people.
- Many DDPOs offer holistic support that is quite accessible. There are at least 60 DDPOs in London offering holistic support in housing, welfare benefits etc.
- DDPOs are small but critical part in the advice sector ecosystem

Collaboration through the Propel Project

Samson introduces Disability Law Service (DLS) as a legal charity that provides free legal advice across England and Wales. As part of the Propel Project, DLS are exploring how they can deliver advice services to deaf and disabled people at a local level in Partnership with two DDPOs, Real and Choice. The project's initial focus is on launching a new advice model by embedding two trainee solicitors within these organisations to provide specialist's legal support. In addition, two trainee advisers are completing NVQ qualifications in advice at Levels 2 and 3. DLS has conducted preference feedback groups and client's surveys, which revealed that clients not only want advice but support in learning how to advocate for

themselves. This insight has shaped the project's approach, with an emphasis on tailoring services to specific needs of the community through close collaboration with DDPOs. Ultimately, the goal is to develop a replicable advice model that can be shared with DDPOs and other advice providers.

Collaborative Working and Recruitment Challenges

Asma reflected on the challenges of working collaboratively with organisations that have different structures and expectations, particularly the difference between organised and non-organised organisations. She noted that open and honest communication from the outset is essential to overcoming misunderstandings and build effective partnerships. Asma highlights a mobilisation meeting that enabled meeting partners to candidly discuss their collaboration and helped to foster genuine partnership.

She also highlighted the importance of regularly planned meetings in nurturing strong working relationships. Constructive criticism was identified as a vital skill in collaborative environments. While some people express feedback directly and others more subtly, the ability to offer feedback respectfully and productively is essential to maintaining trust and shared progress. Asma also spoke to the reality of limited funding, stressing that financial constraints are a universal issue across the sector. Considering this, it's important for organisations to remain focused on core objectives and to collaborate on delivering the most impactful outcomes with the resources available.

Regarding recruiting staff, Asma discussed how her team made adjustments for applicants, such as allowing more time for interviews and assessing candidates' needs through the DWP, to ensure accessibility for disabled trainees. To support staff retention, she highlighted practices such as flexible working, competitive pay, career development, and wellbeing initiatives like regular debriefs and monthly staff lunches. Asma highlighted the importance of having a strong and supportive sickness policy, especially in DDPOs where staff may have higher levels of absence due to disabilities or long-term health conditions. She explained that a good sickness policy should be flexible and understanding, helping staff feel safe and supported when they need time off.

Importance of Peer Advice

Keely spoke about a collective partnership with six organisations, and she highlighted peer advisers being an important part of the project. Most of the peer advisers in the project were promoted internally, which supported staff retention. Keely noted that trainees stated that they may not have completed the training without the support of other peer advisers, showing the value of the shared experience.

Keely also emphasised the policy impact the project has had. The collaboration has allowed the group to campaign against disability and PIP cuts and respond to government consultations, with client stories driving their advocacy. Their work has significantly contributed to the pay and conditions reports.

She noted being open about one's own health conditions when comfortable, helps build stronger relationships. Accessibility practices, like sharing interview questions in advance, are also important. Finally, Keely stressed the need for more sustainable funding. Without the Propel programme, many DDPOs would not be able to run advice services.

Tailored Supervision and Workplace Flexibility

Zhara, from Inclusion Barnet, shared her personal experience as working in the advice sector as a disabled peer advisor. She highlighted that she was funded through the Propel Project, and that it gave her proper one to one support around setting boundaries, delivering advice, and exploring flexible supervision tailored to the needs of disabled staff. As a supervisor, Zhara was able to identify barriers not just locally but nationwide in forms and processes not being accessible. These issues could have gone unnoticed without a peer- support perspective. Her work led to changes that now benefit people across the country, including the ability to save and complete forms more easily.

Zhara also reflected on past experiences in the sector, where key decisions were made without taking her and her disabilities into account. In contrast, working at DDPOs has empowered her to advocate for her own needs, access flexible working arrangements, and sustain her full-time role.

Inclusive Recruitment and Organisational Culture

Tracey Lazard closed the session by discussing how DDPOs actively encourage disabled applicants and make inclusivity a visible priority in recruitment materials. However, she emphasised that stating inclusion as a value is not enough, organisations must back it up with practice. Tracey stated that true inclusivity must be embedded at every level of an organisation, from leadership to day-to-day policies.