

# REFLECTING THE COMMUNITIES WE SERVE



## By Nasim Qureshi

We need to ensure staff, volunteers, trustees and advisers reflect the communities they serve, we've heard in our Listening to Each Other cell. And as Nasim Qureshi explains, organisations that operate in this way can achieve a great deal more.

From our beginnings a decade ago, Inspired Neighbourhoods has taken particular care to operate in a way that is fully a part of, not separate from, the Bradford communities in which we operate.

For example, we drew a set of circles with a two-mile radius from each of our centres, and then spent time identifying and learning about all the networks, local organisations and community associations within each circle.

A while ago, we alongside partners decided to establish a summer school service, in part to gain greater insights into how lives of children and young people have been changing in recent years. In the area selected for this service, we partnered with a large number of local community organisations, building on their strengths, and reaching people we were not otherwise in contact with. We also involved the police, schools and statutory bodies, and were able to influence the City-wide strategy, inviting

the Council Chief Executive and others into discussions with the young people, letting them speak for themselves.

Each of our centres has a community advisory board or committee, and these feed in to our main Board. So community voice travels continually up and down, and this produces a level of intelligence that could not be obtained from any number of surveys. There is no need to spend money on marketing and promotion to the community, because the connections are already in place.

Before any project is started, there is a period of co-design with the local communities. This type of activity can rarely be covered by grant funding, because most funders expect to see a full plan set out in advance when we submit a grant application. Yet, if we want to do things *with* people, rather than *to* them, that initial co-design phase is so important. For this reason, we try to generate as much income

as possible through our own trading efforts, and this independent income allows us to operate in ways which are very flexible and responsive to the things that matter most to the people we work with.

The process is not just about co-design, it is also about co-delivery. A wide range of people from within the various communities become volunteers, and volunteering is a foundation for substantial areas of our work. For example, the library service is entirely run by community volunteers. We take this very seriously, and our volunteers have written roles and responsibilities, and training opportunities. Because of this, volunteering has high status in our organisation, and can often become a route into paid work. In fact, most of our paid employees started off that way.

I have a simple principle: 'If we are sitting in a room, we are not working with the communities.' So I make sure we all spend most of our time out and about – 95 per cent of our workforce is peripatetic.

I don't like time sheets and we don't use them. Instead, our employees work the flexible hours that are needed to deliver services, often outside standard hours, responding to emergencies, while balancing their own childcare or other family needs. Nearly everyone works more than their 37 contracted hours, and turnover is very low.

There are now 75 employees and 32 volunteers. Many have lived experience of

the difficulties the organisation is seeking to address. We are a disability-friendly organisation, and a lot of attention is paid to mental well-being within the team. The Board composition too is over 90 per cent local.

And so, at every level, our teams have emerged from the local communities and remain part of them. Our organisation is able to listen and respond because of the people in our teams, the ways they work, and the informal conversations that happen all the time.

Over the last decade, operating in this way, Inspired Neighbourhoods has gone from strength to strength. We now provide a broad mix of services across four different communities within or close to Bradford. This includes, for example, mental health and physical health support, domiciliary care, employment advice, enterprise advice, community housing, a country park, and the community library, improving the lives of over 10,000 local residents, and supporting over 800 businesses. We've learned that, if we keep our feet on the ground, and build a workforce that remains rooted in and reflective of our communities, we don't lose touch, and can achieve a great deal.

**Nasim Qureshi is CEO of the Inspired Neighbourhoods group, a social business and a community anchor across the Bradford district.**