**Utopia isn’t the end... it’s the beginning**

**Sue Vasey, Chain Lane Community Hub and Mike Hickman, Community First Yorkshire**

**Mike Hickman (MH)**: Welcome to the Ordinary Extraordinary Leaders podcast, and our guest this time is Sue Vasey of Chain Lane, who I will allow to introduce herself, seems only fair. My name's Mike Hickman and I'm Leadership Development and Training Manager. You knew all of that. This is the more interesting stuff. Sue, tell us a bit about yourself and what we're going to be talking about today. Right.

**Sue Vasey (SV)**: Hi, my name's Sue Vasey. I'm the CEO at Chain Lane Community Hub in Knaresborough. We're a Community Anchor Organisation based there. I had a long career in the voluntary sector, so a lot of people will know me. I've been around for decades in various roles. And today I'm going to talk about a bit around strategic visioning and where to start and where to end and how it helps us to move charities forward at this time.

**MH**:And the word utopia crops up here as well, doesn't it? Can you tell us in what sense utopia?

**SV**: Yeah, so from my own experience, but also experience working as a consultant with many organisations, I found that when we start with strategic visioning, we often start at the wrong place. So, we start with what will stop us achieving our goal rather than trying to decide what it is exactly that we're trying to achieve and then find a way forward from it. So, one of the tools I use to try and get people to think differently about that is I say, let's start in utopia. So there's no funding issues, there's no staffing issues, there's no barriers in our way. What exactly is it that the charity wants to achieve to achieve all its goals? And let's start with that. And then we'll look at the more pragmatic eutopia with an E, which is what's actually achievable.

But if we don't start with what we really want to do, then often we can restrict ourselves in our thinking.

**MH**: Okay, so let's go for an example. Is there one from your own practice or something you would say is a very good example of this?

**SV**: Yeah. So Chain Lane Community Centre was a really great example of this. So in 2008, Chain Lane Community Centre was owned by a university and through an anomaly of ownership, the university didn't have any business interests in Knaresborough and they were going to sell it. At that time, there was a very active universal youth service and various community services going on and the town very much didn't want to lose this facility.

So our utopia vision for Chain Lane, and bear in mind, it was 2008 – so I'll just say credit crunch, recession, change of government coming up in the next couple of years – but the dream for Knaresborough was that we would save Chain Lane, we would turn it into a functioning community building and it would be a vehicle to improve community development activities in Knaresborough, somewhere where we could base things.

So that was our utopia vision. Alongside that, what would have been great was they gave us the building, we could get funders falling over themselves to fund the refurbishment and that, you know, the town would welcome the community development with open arms and we would be able to do all the things that we aspired to do. So that's utopia and we'd do it all in a couple of years.

That's what we were hoping. So we go back to 2008 and we were putting in, there was a funding stream through the Regional Development Agency, then Yorkshire Forward, which some people may remember, called Renaissance Knaresborough. And we had a bid, we had partners, we were working the bid up, it was all very positive.

And we were just about to sign the bid when there was a change of government in 2010. And people may remember that Yorkshire Forward was then abolished very, very quickly. And that funding stream disappeared.

So two years on, we were literally back to square one, although we'd done a lot of work. So keeping the utopia vision to save the centre, we had to start from scratch with that and say, OK, the journey is going to be different, but we still want to do what we set out to do. So we had to build different friendships and relationships with people.

We had to find different funders. We're in a recession. It was really difficult.

But we just kept that utopia vision in mind. And eventually we did bring the building into community ownership with an enormous loan. We did the refurbishment with a grant loan mix.

We then had to concentrate for four or five years on just building services up to service the loans. And it wasn't really until 2021 that we were able to start our community development activities. And then we got another change of government after the pandemic.

So eutopia with an E is that we've done the best we could and we went down the journey we needed to to achieve our original utopia vision. But it was a lot harder and a lot different to how we envisaged it.

**MH**: Thank you. There's an awful lot there. Enough for a book, I think I said the first time we talked about all of this. Connecting it to the theme of the podcast series on leadership. A question that you can riff around a little. How does self-leadership play a role in this?

**SV**: Yeah. So, you have to - if you're running a charity or you're involved in a project where you've got challenges - you have to believe in yourself and you have to be able to move forward and change with the moving landscapes.

The one thing that we've always said is that the one thing that's certain is that nothing is certain and change has always been happening. And sometimes it's great change, sometimes not. So just having that belief in yourself that you can be flexible and move with the times and move with the landscape and change, but keeping that goal in mind, remembering what it is you're trying to achieve, that's the key aim. And you may have a very different journey towards that achievement than you thought you would. But by keeping your kind of belief in what you're trying to do and keeping yourself on task with it and being a bit stubborn, I guess, as well, and determined is, you know, as strong as any skill set, really.

**MH**: I mean, I was about to get into personal values and stubbornness or the degree of self-belief. You can see why that might be necessary here. So, what personal values do you believe are essential?

**SV**: I think integrity is the key one for me. You can only bring people on your journey and inspire them to your aspirations if they believe in you and can trust you. It's got to be ethical. It should go without saying in our sector, but sometimes we're kind of pushed to make unethical decisions. And I think we've just got to stay true to those key values.

**MH**: And you say unethical is again, you know, in that very general sense, would there be an example of the kind of thing that could happen?

**SV**: Yes. So going back to my days when I was CEO at Your Consortium, which is now Better Connect, we achieved a million-pound apprenticeship contract, which was an amazing achievement for our sector to get a mainstream contract such as that. And at the time, it seemed like it was great for us and for partners and it was stable funding and it was everything, you know, utopia told us we wanted. But actually, it wasn't really the type of work our partners excelled at, and it was forcing them into a kind of work method and client group that really wasn't their core business. And the paperwork and the bureaucracy around it just was ripping the heart out of them and us.

So, I took the really, really tough decision that actually we'd taken that money, but it was really a bit unethical for us to be forcing partners down a route that they, you know, with all the best interests, wasn't right for them. And so we gave it up and it was one of the hardest decisions I've ever made to give up core funding of a million pounds that was benefiting the sector because it wasn't ethically benefiting them anymore. It was pulling them away from their core work.

And yeah, it was a tough one. And then I had to find money to replace it, which was even tougher. But yeah, sometimes you've just got to step back and say, why are we doing this? Why are we doing this? Are we just chasing the money here? And I think on that one, we probably were.

And so, yeah.

**MH:** So it's not just so much just self-belief, it's also knowing what you're about and revisiting what your mission is and revisiting, you know, what did we say we were going to do? We're not just chasing anything.

**SV:** Yeah. And the way that funding works and the way that it's so hard at the moment, you know, it's so easy to get pulled offline, chasing the money. And, you know, I feel very disciplined about that. You know, everything we do is tied into our business plan and into the community development activities within the town and what we've been told is needed.

But it's so tempting sometimes just to go, oh, we can get money for that. Let's go for it. So, yeah.

And I think generous leadership as well. I've learned a lot in my several decades in the voluntary sector and I'm more than willing to share that with anyone because don't make the same mistakes. Believe me, we've made a lot. You know, so I think generous leadership is one of the key things within our sector. And there's a lot of generous leaders in our sector. We're very lucky.

**MH**: As we approach the last couple of minutes of the podcast, I know that another thing we talked about ahead of time with wisdom and the connection between all of these things and wisdom and what is wisdom in the first place?

**SV**: Well, yeah, people like to think it's experience and knowledge, but it's not really is it? It's about how you apply those and how you use them. And it's not...it's not about age either. I've met some very wise young people and then some not so wise who are a bit older.

So, it's really about applying the things that we learn, see, do and all that knowledge that life brings us. How do we make that match what we're trying to achieve? And you can tell wise people, you know, they stand out. And I think it's something everyone should aspire to be wise.

**MH**: That's one of our aspirations, all of us here, including those responsible for doing the Ordinary Extraordinary Leaders podcasts. So thank you ever so much. So before we sign off, is there anything that you'd like people to be aware of coming up, a message you'd like to include in the podcast or something you'd just like people to go away and think about?

**SV**: I think really it's tough out there at the moment. Look after yourselves. And I think particularly working in charities, reach out for peer support, you know, get the support you need and never stop believing in yourself because you're probably awesome.

**MH**: Well, we have a vision of utopia, but an awful lot of wisdom with it. Thank you very much, Sue. And thank you, everyone, for listening. There'll be more podcasts very soon.