Sitting in the Mud | Post 1 transcript

James Watson-O’Neill: Hello, how are you? Welcome to my first blog post. This will be a series of updates on my journey as CEO at SignHealth in working with my colleagues and our trustees on our work on equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI). I'm being supported today by Catherine, our BSL interpreter, so you can choose to watch me, my spoken voice and SSE or Catherine who's using BSL. We have spent years thinking, talking, doing around EDI, but it feels increasingly urgent to me that we share some of the struggles and the successes that we are having as we make progress and move this work forward. SignHealth is an amazing organisation. I am very, very proud to be the CEO. We are a health charity and we are working towards health equity for deaf people. We know that we experience poorer health than hearing people and that there's no good reason for that, so we are determined to change it. We were set up in 1986 and we have grown a lot since then. We now have almost 200 staff and a turnover of about £9 million a year. We provide a range of services, including social care, psychological therapy and domestic abuse support and that's delivered by deaf people, to deaf people directly in British Sign language. We work across England and we have sites in Leeds, Manchester, Birmingham and London. And about half of us work from home, like me today. More than 75% of our staff are deaf people and we think that we are one of the largest disabled people's organisations in the UK, in England. But we don't know, and we're possibly the only DPO in the world that is focused specifically on health. One of the things that I'm learning as we think and talk more and more about the importance of EDI in our work is just how difficult this work can be. In the past few years, I have had literally hundreds and hundreds of meetings about EDI. My husband, who overhears some of my meetings as I'm working at home, he can't believe how much of my working week is made up of conversations that centre around anti-racism. But we still struggle to make progress. There's lots of reasons for that. We've had a pandemic, of course. We've had our fair share of staff turnover as well. Half of SignHealth's board is new and joined us just recently this year, including our new chair, Sabina Iqbal. So there's always work to do to catch people up on their journey, on our journey, and also to see the work from their perspective at the same time. But it's important for me to remember also that everyone is on their own journey and going at a speed that is slower or faster than mine. So creating spaces where people can build trust and feel brave, safe, is really important. But there's something more than that. This work is often described as uncomfortable, particularly by white people like me. I also find it really, really frustrating. I was taught mostly by watching other people that leadership is about action, about changing things, about making decisions, about delivering results. But I am learning that a lot of this work needs to be just about sitting in the mud of it all. Just sitting, feeling the messiness of it, trying to connect to the pain of it and listening to the stories that people share. I'm trying to learn not to leap into action, but instead just to sit in it. So this blog is invitation to sit in the mud with me, or perhaps slowly to wade through the mud, because I do want to make progress, but I also want to be a better leader and to really, really learn. I don't want to dismiss the feeling of what we are working on by focusing too much or too quickly on action. So, finally, I am really keen to try to champion the work of other people in this space, as I have so many people to thank for the learning that I've been doing on EDI. One example, we have worked really closely with Letesia Gibson. She is the founder and the programme leader of a company called New Ways. She has helped us in so many ways. It's really impossible for me to describe them here or to do them justice. But one thing that she has really taught me is, and that I'd really like to share, is that it is possible to be two things at the same time or to hold two truths at the same time. I am really keen to make progress on our EDI journey and sometimes frustrated by our slow progress. But at the same time, I am really, really proud of what we're doing and how we are changing. So thank you. Thank you, Letesia, for helping me learn. I am looking forward to sharing more about our journey in the next update of my blog. I'll be posting more about our journey and in the meantime, please, please get in touch if you want to. I really, really welcome your feedback. You might want to connect more on what we're doing, or you might want to point out things that you think we're doing wrong or could do better. Please feel free to get in touch. We know that we are not the perfect organisation, but we are determined to continue our journey. Thank you.