



Commissioning Sustainable Care & Support Services: A call for action

In October last year I wrote an opinion piece that called for reform of the way care and support services are commissioned (Inside Housing, 11/10/2013). In it I highlighted that the 'Wacky Races' approach to winning new contracts drives down wages, destabilises services, crushes innovation and draws limited resources away from the real work with service users.

I went on to explain that in the rush to race to the bottom, the wheels of care and support are in danger of coming off and crashing the system. This could drive out capital investment, reduce investment in attracting and/or retaining good staff, while potentially increasing the costs of health and social care to hospitals and statutory services plus increasing the benefit bill.

In this viewpoint, I expand on last year's opinion piece and set out why we need a call for action to address how the sector can best deliver sustainable care and support services for older and vulnerable adults.

Written for the Housing Learning and Improvement Network by
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Introduction

For those of us working in care and supported housing services, we are constantly fighting to deliver excellent services, keep our contracts and, if we are lucky, grow a bit too.

But with a new Care Act on the horizon, let's stand back, look at where we are today and consider some ways in which we can make a better future. We don't want to go back to the mistakes of the past.¹ So, let's start with 'What is the state of care and support in the 3rd sector?'. In particular:

- We are proud of the services we provide to vulnerable people, often under difficult and risky circumstances.
- We recognise there is a growing risk of a gap between the services we aspire to provide and those we can actually deliver with the resources available.
- We feel we have been squeezed on costs as much as we can. Some, especially in domiciliary care, as recently reported by the United Kingdom Home Care Association², pay below the minimum wage with the silent or ignorant compliance of commissioners.
- We are worried about when our staff are going to get a pay rise, especially with the increases in the cost of living. Some of our staff need welfare support themselves to cope financially.
- We can see that demographically the need for our services are growing, and that local authority services, which once complemented our roles, have been withdrawn/stretched.
- As public resources get stretched, the professional tolerance level on abuse will rise uncomfortably.
- The general public and Commissioners have not yet made the link between cost, quality and their future. No one knows about the cuts we have faced and the environment we work in, not even people within housing. We are not getting our point across.

And that's just the status quo. There is also the cycle of retendering:

- Documentation requirements keep growing. One recent tender we submitted was 20,000 words long. Method statements are weighed by commissioners rather than monitored.
- TUPE'ing staff in and out of our organisations is a dehumanising process. The process makes it difficult to establish your own culture and standards before the contract is retendered again. This frustrates management who have invested in staff and then see a competitor benefit. The obvious conclusion for an employer is to match short term contracting with a short-term plan for staff training & development.
- Historically, many of us have tried to meet the demand for specialist housing. A new development now makes a big loss which needs cross-subsidy from surpluses or sales of other homes. It is, therefore, galling to be told by Commissioners that we will have to tender for the support/care contract for the new home. How does this encourage providers to invest, especially in high support schemes where the design of the homes do not lend themselves to alternative users?

¹ Family Mosaic (2012). *No going back: Is institutionalisation being recreated in modern care and support settings?*

² UKHCA (2014). Briefing: *A minimum price for home care*

If you reflect on this, then the future does not look rosy:

- How can we attract, train and keep quality staff?
- How can we respond to growing demand?
- How can we respond to growing legal responsibilities for things like safeguarding?
- How do we deliver services that we remain proud of?

More money is not likely if we are quiet about the challenges we face. So what should we be doing to ensure that care and support services are sustainable?

Some of the ways forward are captured in a recent video case study made by Skills for Care and the Housing LIN. This takes a detailed look at a Family Mosaic supported housing scheme, Hana Mews, in East London.³ However, we need a coordinated call for action to ensure that we can continue to provide affordable housing, care and support for the most vulnerable people in society.

A call for action

On behalf of our service users, what is the way out of this hole? Here are some suggestions.

1. Increasing demand without growth in services suggests prices should rise. We need to become strong and fight for a fair deal for us, our staff and our customers. The product is under priced.
2. Collectively we need to set minimum requirements for tendering. For example, minimum contract periods and standard documentation, and if we don't get this then at the very least withdrawal of homes from services if our historical investments in the homes and services are ignored.
3. Rationalisation. There are too many of us and that doesn't help quality or price. If you are small and specialist you may have a niche product. If you are large you are more likely to be able to compete on cost and quality, but if you are a mid-range organisation then you should ask what unique role do you play? Family Mosaic has contracts of over £40m and its overhead spread across a £200m business, but we don't think we are yet big enough to offer competitive value. We collectively have to reduce back office costs. The sector needs to rationalise.
4. We may think things are difficult but Private Companies can deliver services cheaper than us. At the top end they can also provide a quality service but at the poorer end of the market they often treat it as a process. We need to compete to protect quality as well as our own futures.
5. Some Local Authorities still give a preferred status to their in-house services which can't compete on a level playing field, wasting valuable resources on self-protectionism. This has to change.
6. We should think about redefining our services so that they are seen as valuable to others. I have argued this publicly for Social Housing (where investment has been dropping since the late 1970's) but the same applies to Supported Housing. One reason we are underfunded is because we have not convinced government, press and other influencers we are worth investing in.

³ www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/type/resource/?cid=9134&msg=0

7. We will be stronger if we campaign together. This needs trade and professional bodies such as the CIH, NHF, the Housing LIN and others to use their strength and resources to get us united behind a campaign. Four Housing Associations are pushing them to do this (Family Mosaic, Home, Midland Heart and Riverside). This covers a communications campaign, research, plus an ask for a review of commissioning so that we can change the negative processes we use at the moment.
8. We still have to campaign alone at a local level and get your stories in local press: Make this an election issue.
9. I would also target health as a source of funding rather than DCLG/local government. We can prove to local health commissioners we will save them money.⁴ We can't do this to DCLG. Supporting People funding is dying because it isn't linked into other social policy strands. Start a new relationship with Health. Invite your local Clinical Commissioning Group members, Mental Health Trust or Director of Public Health out to visit your schemes. Despite calls for greater integration and partnership working, at a local level, the NHS doesn't have a clue about what we do.
10. To deliver the above needs leadership. An offer to government of rationalisation, competitiveness, but the need for a fair deal is easy to write but hard to deliver. But if we really care about our service users we have to stand up and deal with these difficult issues. Leadership isn't just about CEO's. It is a responsibility we all have.

Conclusion

To conclude, the future could look bleak for our services but they look worse for the client groups we try to serve. So there is a compelling case to fight for your clients and fight for yourselves. Make something happen!!

Note

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author, and not necessarily those of the Housing Learning and Improvement Network.

About Family Mosaic

Family Mosaic is one of the largest housing providers in London and the South East. We provide affordable homes to rent and buy as well as care and support services to thousands of people who need extra support.

We provide our customers with a range of opportunities such as training, employment and access to learning. We also partner with local communities to make our neighbourhoods better places to live.

More at: www.familymosaic.co.uk

⁴ Family Mosaic (2013). *Health begins at home. Interim Research Report*

About the Housing LIN

Previously responsible for managing the Department of Health's Extra Care Housing Fund, the Housing Learning and Improvement Network (LIN) is the leading 'learning lab' for a growing network of housing, health and social care professionals in England involved in planning, commissioning, designing, funding, building and managing housing, care and support services for older people and vulnerable adults with long term conditions.

The Housing LIN welcomes contributions on a range of issues pertinent to housing with care for older and vulnerable adults. If there is a subject that you feel should be addressed, please contact us.

For further information about the Housing LIN's comprehensive list of online resources and shared learning and service improvement networking opportunities, including site visits and network meetings in your region, visit: www.housinglin.org.uk

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