

Reversal of fortunes

Care homes may be on the bright side of a once dark situation, says **Les Bright**



Given that less than 5 per cent of the UK's older people actually live in them, care homes attract what sometimes seems like a disproportionate amount of attention. Sadly much of the comment is negative; some justified, but much of it ill-informed or based on prejudice. That's why Laing and Buisson's authoritative, annual market survey on the care of elderly people in care homes is a very welcome publication as it is loaded with facts, tables and thoughtful analysis (Laing & Buisson 2007).

This report from the care industry's leading analysts reveals some interesting trends, and usefully reviews the key policy drivers that affect commissioning of care services by local authorities and PCTs. Priced at £645 it's obviously not intended to lay around on coffee tables in staff rooms, but will be valued in boardrooms.

According to the report, for the first time in 14 years there was no decrease in the number of older and physically disabled people living in care homes. This is significant.

It was in 1993 that local authorities took on the responsibility for assessing people's care needs before committing public money to paying for care home places. The number of privately owned homes had grown rapidly during the previous decade because any individual who passed a test of their financial means could arrange to move into a 'retirement' home with the cost being met from the social security budget, even if their need for care was such that they could have managed to remain at home – sometimes with only minimal support.

Homes' closures

So, it was against this backdrop that professional judgements were used to slow down the rate of admissions, and this block on spending led in turn to many homes closing. The number of residents fell, even though the population of older people continued to grow. Some commentators and politicians

called this a 'market correction' – but tell that to distressed residents forced to move home, often at short notice, when care home owners faced with falling occupancy and financial worries sold up or closed down.

Although homes have continued to shut, the rate has slowed significantly and the number of places lost is now almost matched by the number of new home registrations. Therefore, the figures reveal a trend that will most likely match with readers' own experiences, namely that the capacity of homes these days is generally bigger than in the past.

Last year 269 care home closures led to 6,421 fewer places, suggesting that those homes were on average looking after 24 residents, while 98 new homes between

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them provided an additional 5,215 places – equating to around 53 residents per home. Newer homes are bigger so it can be said that the rate of closures has slowed, in part because the pool of smaller homes that are most vulnerable to financial pressures has itself decreased – narrowing choice for people looking for a place in a home.

But improved funding has also contributed to the stabilisation of the sector, with higher fee levels paid by public sector purchasers, the impact of the Registered Nursing Care Contribution and increases in the number of people whose fees are met by NHS Continuing Care funding. Around one in four residents of care homes with nursing are having all their fees paid by the NHS. This number has grown significantly following a series of critical reports from the Health Service Ombudsman.

Whether all of these improvements will be sustainable in the present climate of tighter public spending is a matter for speculation. However, it has been recognised that a

shortage of care home places has the potential for impacting negatively on the efficiency of hospitals – one person's delayed discharge is another's delayed operation, and so the fortunes of homes are linked to wider NHS goals and performance measures.

A sense of relief

And there is something else – less fact, more a feeling – lurking within the pages of this very comprehensive report, and that is a sense of relief at having got over the worst situation that the sector has ever confronted, and come out the other side.

It's not so long ago that a Green Paper on social care talked of establishing 'the right to refuse residential care'; perhaps suggesting

that there would be further forced contraction within the sector. And what made this even more bizarre was that it was being suggested as a way of broadening consumer choice! Now it is possible for care home operators and staff to face the future with confidence that population growth means that even more places will be needed.

Older people and their families will continue making a positive choice to live in care homes so long as standards are high and continue rising. While economic analysts and forecasters can have views on whether that is achievable, the workforce and professional leadership each has an even more critical role to play ■

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Reference

Laing & Buisson (2007) *Care of Elderly People Market Survey 2007*. London, Laing & Buisson