



Care or Despair?

We may be entering a new age - the "Age of Despair". This is a period whereby our political elite introduce measures, plans and regulations knowing that they have no chance of working, but doing it anyway. Why? Because political dogma dictates that certain truths shall not be recognised or admitted, regardless. This is particularly evident in the care sector, which is what concerns East Midlands Care as a representative of the independent care suppliers for this region.

All parties are campaigning for free care at home for the elderly, but none of the parties have viable plans [that they wish to make public this side of an election] as to how to afford such an admirable aim in today's austere climate. The prospect of adding such a substantial cost to the existing public purse is unacceptable. So, how to do it? Charge elderly people a one-off lump sum for this "free" care? Increase taxation for everyone? Abolish an existing benefit, like Attendance Allowance, to pay for it? All have been proposed. The chances are that some method will be cobbled together, providing inadequate services to a limited number of the most severely incapacitated elderly folk and the result proclaimed a resounding success. One can only despair!

Why do we despair? Well, we have seen this political attitude applied before - in fact, two years ago Leicestershire County Council put up six of their own care homes for sale, on the basis that by transferring them to independent providers they would reduce costs, since the council would then only pay the tariff that they pay to the independent sector, rather than their own higher charge. The council finally awarded the sale of the homes to a voluntary sector organisation. However, when the transfer was almost complete this independent organisation looked closely at the deal and were unable to proceed, presumably because they found that to operate on the Social Services tariff and provide an adequate service was financially unviable, even at zero profit! The sale is now no longer going ahead and the council is once again consulting on how to divest themselves of their care homes. So, knowing from first hand experience that the fees that the County Council pay to the independent sector are inadequate, what do they do? The Council propose to make no increase in fees in April, even though the residents' benefits from central government will increase! So there you have it - the Council know that they are underfunding care of the elderly in independent care homes, but they are going to cut their contribution, anyway!

What do independent care homes do in such circumstances? Well, as businesses they could either sell up, shutdown, or reduce costs. The greatest cost factor in a care home is the wage bill, and care homes must have certain minimum staffing levels to provide adequate care to the residents. Care homes do not want to provide sub-standard services, so for many the only other solution is to ask the families of residents to supplement the Social Services fee with an additional "top-up". Of course, Social Services do not encourage this since it is a stark reminder of the inadequacy of their fee tariff, but the alternative would be a reduction of capacity in the care home market, which would drive up fees, anyway.

Regardless of moves towards looking after more elderly people in their own homes, there is a substantial number of people for whom residential and nursing care is the only safe alternative, and this is increasing year on year. So why does the local authority pursue a policy of knowingly underfunding the independent care home market? If these issues affect you then ask your councillor today and if the answer is that the council cannot afford to increase fees [even though residents' benefits have increased!] be aware that this is an unacceptable reason since all local authorities are required by government to pay the "actual cost of care" regardless of budget considerations - and costs do increase every year. This is a legal duty that they have conveniently chosen to ignore on occasions in the past - so please help us to remind them.

This information sheet is issued by East Midlands Care Ltd which is a trade association representing independent care providers in the region.

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