

## Social Care *Adrian Roper*



# A market for care? No thanks!

**B**ack in 1982, services for people with learning disabilities consisted of NHS hospitals where people were routinely abused, and some scraps of support for families. People either lived with their struggling parents or went into one of the old institutions.

Along came 1983 and the government in Wales did an amazing thing. It stuck its neck out and said people have rights: to be individuals, to live in their home community, and to have a home of their own. There was strong leadership based on clear principles.

I was lucky enough to be involved from the start of this strategy. Mainly I worked in the not-for-profit sector, providing community-based support. In those days, support providers were viewed as essential partners in the planning and delivering of a better world. We used to have a seat alongside user and carer representatives at the same table as the big statutory players. This inclusive, values-based approach made Wales a world-leader in social care.

But it is depressing to see that so much of what is wrong now flows from those heady 1980s days. It was then that the seeds of a “market-place” for social care were planted. It was the then Welsh Office that promoted the out-sourcing of learning disability services. At the time, only not-for-profit agencies were put forward as the alternative to state provision. Little did we know that we were clearing a path for private capital to stride down later.

The changes really set in in 1990 when the Community Care Act introduced the joys of the “purchaser/provider split”. This concept lies behind a lot of the distrust with which providers of all kinds now have to live: *“Don’t trust them! Don’t talk to them! They only want to feather their own nests!”* Even worse, it brought to a crashing halt all the fruitful, joint planning and management in which statutory agencies, not-for-profits and citizens had previously engaged.

A few years later we started to see services for people with learning disabilities being re-tendered. For some not-for-profits, sadly, the opportunity to play the new competition game was irresistible. The first casualty of all this was support worker pay. Too many thought *“Hey! Let’s introduce a lower pay rate to beat those softies on price! Hey! It worked! Let’s do it again, before someone else does!”*

The market-place had arrived, in all its destructive, impoverishing glory, without even a whiff of private capital. When the purchasers decided to make providers fight for survival, they also brought poison into the heart of the not-for-profit sector. Then they and others could point and say: *“I told you so! All they care about is their own self-interest! Don’t talk to them!”*

And the poisoning has carried on. The view that the market did everything best rolled on, now under banners of “best value” and “modernisation”. Then European Union began drafting “procurement rules” which legally obliged public bodies to “go to the market” for more or less everything.

Now we have “procurers” overseeing tendering processes to ensure that the “rules” are followed to the letter, whilst the rights of citizens go out the window, along with stable relationships and the living wage. The ultimate winner is the venture capitalist who buys up, cleans up, sells up and re-banks the profits somewhere off-shore.

Sorry if I sound like a revolutionary. Actually, I was brought up in a mixed-economy Britain, when there was a consensus that business should freely do business, but that public service should have a different ethos. Public services were about collecting taxes, not avoiding them. Public services were about doing the right thing for society, not getting rich at someone else’s expense. OK, they were not always good at doing the right thing - those old NHS special hospitals, for example. But the trick is to change the policy, not abandon public services to the business jungle.

The people who are closing pubs at the rate of 30 a day because they can get a quicker, bigger return from destroying Britain’s community amenities are now big players in social care. They dominate Home Care, where wages are routinely illegally low and quality of care a scandal. Ditto Care Homes and ditto “Winterbourne View” units for people with learning disabilities, built as human warehouses, with a steady flow of patients and profits...because we, the inclusive public service sector, are too fragmented to plan and sustain alternatives.

These private companies, with their nice sounding names and marketing budgets, are *only in it for the money*. They have a *fiduciary duty* to maximise the dividend to their shareholders. Even the few small, good ones are at risk of being sold off to the large corporations. Most are already owned by some vast, faceless entity with little interest in people with a disability, or families, or service sustainability.

Now the good news. The Welsh Government has put on statute a new duty on local government to promote values-based social care organisations, such as user-led agencies, co-operatives and social enterprises. It doesn’t outlaw for-profit agencies but it does not recommend them at all. Secondly, there is growing support for the principles of co-production and co-operation. Co-production means delivering public services in an equal and reciprocal relationship between citizens and professionals. It means people



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being protagonists in the design and delivery of public services, not passive recipients. Social co-ops express co-production in their organisational form, bringing users, workers and community together as co-owners.

These ideas are a million miles away from rats-in-a-sack fighting to win the most tenders. These ideas are about talking with each other, and developing long-term, reciprocal relationships at the individual and agency level. This has to be the way forward, not just for services for people with learning disabilities but for all citizen-centred services. As we each contemplate our current or future need for social care, they offer hope. Individually and collectively we need to turn this hope into reality.

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