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Going solo

Swanton Care & Community is going it alone having fully separated from Barchester Healthcare. Sunniva Davies-Rommetveit finds out how it's been so far

Alison Rose-Quirie is the new chief executive at Swanton Care & Community, a learning disability care business. She also runs triathlons at a competitive level. Both, she says, have one thing in common: they require a large dose of determination when the going gets tough.

This determination has thus far come in handy at Swanton. Rose-Quirie is a fresh face at the company, and in the learning disability sector more broadly. She joined Swanton in June, initially as interim chief executive, having left her role at Care UK as the firm's managing director of mental health services.

Though Swanton itself is relatively unknown, the company it was previously part of, Barchester Healthcare, is much more recognised in the sector. Being overshadowed by Barchester, though, was precisely the problem. "Barchester was heavily focused on the elderly care home business, so Swanton didn't get the focus it needed or achieve the growth it could," Rose-Quirie explains.

Now completely separated from Barchester (although the main shareholders are the same), Swanton is aiming to rebrand itself and become recognised as a leading provider for people with severe learning difficulties. To do this, it's back to the drawing board to establish the company's ethos and brand. "We're in the process of developing what the company stands for. We want a Swanton way of doing things that's consistent with quality and good care."

With 29 sites, 296 beds and a turnover of around £26 million, there are a number of ongoing projects that the company is busy with. Firstly, Rose-Quirie wants to ensure that all of Swanton's sites across the UK are consistently high-quality. "This isn't the case with all of our sites right now," Rose-Quirie admits, "We want outstanding ratings in every home." She recognises that doing this is multi-faceted and will not be a quick fix. It is also a journey that a significant number of learning disability providers must go on, she says.

Moreover, the "very steep learning curve" she's on has made her realise that sometimes providing quality care isn't the be all and end all. Problematically, the sector's focus is not on understanding service users' aspirations and helping them communicate with the outside world better, but instead solely on looking after their immediate needs.

"I liken it to a mother-child relationship: the mother nurtures but at some point wants her child to take calculated risks to get somewhere in life. Carers in the learning disability sector sometimes struggle to facilitate service users to make that leap."

Swanton is already helping a number of their service users based in Scotland to live more independently. Care workers have a tick box goals system to support their journey towards more independent, assisted living. "Wherever possible, service users should be given as much independence as possible."

Developing care workers is also a focus for Rose-Quirie. The fact that some of Swanton's care workers have been with the company for 25 years is, she says, both good and bad. "It's great for the consistency and knowledge base, but equally you have to keep that fresh through courses and goal setting." Therefore, she's ensuring that many of her staff are retrained to create more individualised, goal-oriented packages for service users.

Incentivising staff is increasingly difficult, though, with the "frankly appalling" amount of pay they receive within this sector for the very difficult job they do. Indeed, Rose-Quirie admits that she'd be first in line to pay care workers "what they're worth in terms of people's lives, which is a lot more than they currently get paid".

Frankly though, in the current economic environment upping income is extremely difficult. Similar to the



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dilemma faced by most care businesses at present, paying more means the books become increasingly difficult to balance. "Right now we're being stretched both ways. We've got local authorities pushing fees down and we've got the Care Quality Commission (CQC) pushing standards up. You're having to deliver a lot more for a lot less."

As a special advisor to the CQC for mental health services, moreover, Rose-Quirie admits that there can be "a risk of subjectivity in CQC inspections within the social care sector". "With NHS provider inspections, you've got large teams going in and cross referencing what they've found, but this doesn't happen in social care."

How does one begin to resolve the financial pressures or improve inspection discrepancies in the sector, then? One suggestion is to have an increasingly unified voice. Rose-Quirie points to her time in the mental health sector, when she was chair of the Independent Sector Mental Health Alliance. Due to organisations like these, mental health has increasingly become an important topic in the British political landscape. It now even forms a substantial chunk of the Liberal Democrat's pre-election health policy.

"Whereas mental health is at least now being discussed, on the social care side the main focus remains on elderly and dementia care," she says. "While this isn't wrong in itself, with an ageing population and medical advances in saving babies with birth defects, there is demographically an increase in people with learning disabilities. As a society, we're not currently addressing this, and we must."

Therefore part of her five-year plan for Swanton includes it becoming "a thought leader within the sector" and joining or establishing an association of learning disability care businesses. "We need to share information and good practice. We're stronger together, and we need to collaborate if we are to change this sector for the better."

Other aspirations for the business include the basics such as establishing the Swanton brand and ensuring that quality is consistent at all sites. Others, though, are more wide-reaching such as creating a care pathway for clients who are able to move to supported living. "I want to transform some of our residential homes into supported living."

Swanton is not ruling expansion out, either. Once it has bolstered and finessed its 29 services, it will look at surrounding geographical areas to see where opportunities lie. Rose-Quirie is also open to the idea of setting up shop somewhere completely new in future, but wants to establish the existing homes in their local areas first and foremost.

It's going to be a busy couple of years for Swanton Care & Community and Rose-Quirie, then. The determination that comes with training for those triathlons, therefore, may well prove very useful for her and the business she represents.



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