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The personal touch

Eden Futures is paving the way for future social care, finds Sunniva Davies-Rommetveit

The aptly rebranded Eden Futures appears to have pre-empted an ongoing shift in the social care sector. The recently established 2014 Care Act leans heavily upon operators and local authorities to focus on personalised care packages. This individualised approach is something that Sovereign Capital-backed Eden Futures has already had for a while now.

"People are different, unpredictable and their circumstances evolve with time. We need a social care system that really understands that. With this in mind, we established our care pathway, which has a variety of services for our clients," explains Alistair How, chief executive of Eden Futures.

Founded in 1994 as Eden Supported Living, the company provides a whole cohort of services for people with a range of learning disabilities and mental illnesses; many service users have more than one diagnosed condition. Eden Futures offers anything from single- or multi- occupancy assisted-living flats and houses, to one small, community-based hospital in Nottinghamshire.

This hospital does not, however, have wards or any other stereotypical hospital features. It is, to all intents and purposes, a cluster of six bungalows, each with their own front door and a small garden. "We have to call it a hospital due to the Mental Health Act, but it's much more. It's specialist assisted-living, in as free an environment as possible."

This wide spectrum of services is designed to encourage "movement down the care pathway". People's conditions do evolve, and making people more independent is not only inherently positive, it also helps to reduce costs. Eden Futures, therefore, has made itself an attractive option for financially-challenged local authorities.

The fact that healthcare has increasingly become a "rationed and audited" resource is, says How, Eden's biggest challenge. "There's an onus on providers to be as efficient as we possibly can, and that's why we adopted the care pathway in the first place," How explains.

This rationing is all while demographics place further financial pressures on the care sector. The increases in illnesses such as dementia are described by How as "hugely problematic" and will mean increased demand on an already-stretched system.

How joined in 2012, following 15 years of growth for the company, because he recognised what innovative work it was doing. "I wanted to get back on the healthcare frontline, following a 10-year stint as managing director of Bupa," he explains. "I felt as though social care was going through a revolution, and I wanted to be a part of that."

This revolution is a gradual shift away from traditional mental health institutions in the middle of nowhere, where people were at times left out of sight and mind. Shifting demographics, care scandals and increases in illnesses such as dementia, have meant an increased focus on services that encourage independence, and in the right cases, integration into the community.

Speaking of one young man in their Nottinghamshire hospital, How says that he should leave in the next couple of months, moving to single, assisted accommodation. "Positively, this individual has not been institutionalised and, with the right support, he will live as normal a life as possible; he won't end up getting lost in the system as many people have."

"It's perfectly possible for these people to lead happy, long and healthy lives," he adds. "If you see some of our clients and our staff walking to the shops, you'd just think they were mates."

How relays further instances where Eden Futures enabled its service users to integrate into the community further. One client now has a job in Starbucks following encouragement from the Eden team, despite him feeling extremely vulnerable when he first arrived.

Another came to Eden having never bought her own clothes. "We went to Matalan, told the shop that there could be some difficulty at first, but that we would pay for anything if needs be." Gradually, with trial and error throughout, she got the experience and courage to regularly buy her own clothes.

Some people have even left Eden Futures' services altogether – a previous client recently got married, for instance, and their spouse's parents were able to provide the support that was needed.

Since How's appointment Eden Futures has grown from 270 to 500 service users, and now has 977 staff. How claims that all of their services make margins and that the company has a run rate ebitda approaching



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£5 million. "If you've got a hospital with 50 beds in it, your job is to fill the beds up," he says. "With the variety of services we offer, we don't have that problem. Our job is to find the right outcome for the client; whether it's the hospital this month, and supported living the next."

As for the 977 staff, anyone from an ex-professional football player to former landlords have found employment at Eden Futures. Staff loyalty has been retained by the fact that they can work their way up the Eden Futures hierarchy if they so choose. Their current human resources director, for instance, formerly used to be a carer.

Eden also tailors staff training to the individual to cultivate loyalty. "Some people become fascinated by understanding the needs of people with, for example, Asperger's. So we provide specialist training in the area that most suits them."

The fact that Eden Futures does not own the majority of its portfolio does not seem to worry How. Apart from the hospital freehold, which Eden bought and developed around two years ago, the company has been working with social housing landlords for the past five years. The companies include Progress Housing, Bespoke Supportive Tenancies and Golden Lane Housing.

Eden uses this model because registered social landlords (RSLs) have "the infrastructure to deliver a good tenancy experience" and the ability to "access a higher level of housing benefit".

Commissioners also prefer landlords and care providers to be separate, he says. This is to "minimise any potential conflicts of interest". Freehold property is also "very capital intensive and is not the best use of our resources," he adds.

"This decision is led by circumstantial opportunities more than anything else though. "Sometimes developers come to us with a site, other times we'll find the site and will go to the best RSL [registered social landlord] and best developer."

So what does Eden have planned for the future? For a fleeting second, How is reserved, not wanting to give anything away too soon. Demand is pushing Eden Futures towards the higher end of the spectrum, he finally says, and a new hospital site is already being considered.

"There is a real push to close Winterbourne style institutions. We get constant requests from CCGs [clinical commissioning groups] asking us to help. No one is building large-scale institutions now," says How.

In five years' time, the expansion model they've used will not change; no satellite services will be launched in far-flung places. Instead, Eden Futures aims to connect the dots between its existing services. For example, it acquired Housing & Support Solutions in July 2013, which is just over the border from their Nottinghamshire stronghold, in Lincolnshire and Grimsby.

"I can see us becoming a multi-regional player in the future through this growth model," How explains, "Compared to being in a traditional ward style mental health hospital, which costs around £1,500 daily, our hospital model is much cheaper. Plus there's more scope for individuals to move on with their lives when they leave."

Expansion will not be coming at the cost of personalised care though. "I will only ever understand how to work with someone when I meet them in person," says How. And that seems to be Eden Futures' motto in a nutshell. Until you have met someone, and can understand them first-hand, you will not be able to assist their needs, or their progression down the care pathway.

Eden Future's aims all make sense, as various awards have shown. *HealthInvestor's* own 'Community support provider of the year 2014' is another recent string to its bow. With deals very much on the agenda, Eden Futures may well become the regional player that it envisages for itself in the next five to 10 years; and good for them.



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