**THE SURVIVAL GAME**

**Or more properly,**

**Developing Contingency Plans for Adult Social Care Services**

There is no doubt that, considering the obvious fragility of the social care sector, not to make contingency plans for survival would be really silly. There are so many factors that can affect the provision of good care and business continuity, whether enforced by legislation, imposed by default, influenced by finance, undermined by Local Authority fee structures, affected by political inertia, weather and health, and unintended consequences of influences such as the CMA market study to name just a few. It was just over 18 years ago that the nation as a whole was under enormous pressure to ensure business continuity because there was just no knowing what would happen at midnight on 31 December. Candle makers may have become very wealthy overnight but the uncertainty of outcome mobilised the country to develop contingency plans to deal with the unknown. We learned a good lesson then, but now, more than ever, the social care sector needs to ensure it is prepared.

So, now is the time to dust off and review all previous work but also add to it where necessary in areas not formerly covered. So often we find that we plan for things we have experienced rather than things we hadn’t imagined would ever happen. We see more and more these days that it is the unexpected that can catch us out. One example may be the ever increasing dependency on and utilisation of IT and its vulnerability to cyber security. If the NHS can be affected by this then the small provider may be equally vulnerable. What is the back-up plan, can care provision continue for, say, 3 days without IT? How to manage during a flu pandemic which is less predictable and can be more serious than the usual winter flu. Indications are that up to 30% of staff could be absent with up to 50% of people be ill (4% of whom finish up in hospital). Major incidents due to terrorism, civil unrest, industrial accident and so on may affect staff safety and movements to and from work for instance, although this may be less likely in rural areas. Nevertheless, who could have thought that Salisbury would be so badly affected by what happened there recently and how long it will take to resolve.

Severe and adverse weather is almost common place, as are heatwaves. Advance planning is so important to have the necessary resources readily available to be able to deal with sustained adverse conditions. In a care home for instance, is there a room that can be maintained at a contact temperature below say, 26 degrees, during an extended heatwave. During extended periods of cold, are gritting stocks available, transport for staff to get to work and home, sufficient emergency food, alternative heating methods should power or gas supplies fail, availability of drinking water and so on?

We operate in an integrated way with our suppliers who are part of a supply chain delivering all the commodities that care homes are dependent upon so it is worth talking to with your suppliers about their own contingency plans and to impress upon them the importance of priority of service. It may also be appropriate to have alternative suppliers standing by to pick up where prime contractor service failure may affect your own sustainability.

Financial problems and the maintenance of sustainable quality services are the most profound of all the issues facing care providers. Lessons have been learned at corporate level following provider failure and much work has been done to deal with such failures as well as monitor financial performance in order to anticipate and hopefully mitigate potential impacts. This is much more difficult with SMEs and small providers where the incidence of closure as an outcome is much more likely. Plans in this area need to be developed around continuity where possible, anticipation and orderly closures, realistic arrangements with financiers and most importantly building all plans around the residents and their safety, and last but not least the staff. Where the quality of care is seen as diminishing it is so much better to engage early with the many organisations who can help to try and avoid closure – Skills for Care, your local Care Association, national Associations and Local Authority and private care consultants.

This is a very brief run through the world of Contingency Planning. The risks of failure in the social care sector are increasing by the day while the demand for contingency planning takes on more of a prominent feature of the day to day business of care provision. The key to keeping pace is to create the eternal circle which identifies the risks, decides what can be done to reduce them, puts the actions in place, practices and learns, then goes back to the beginning.

There are many sources of advice and guidance available to support you, such as:

* The Cabinet Office’s Business Continuity Management Toolkit.
* The Care Provider Alliance from whom much of this article has come.
* NHS England’s Quick Guide to Care Home Closures.
* Public Health England guidance for health and care services.
* CQC, NICE, SCIE, Skills for Care.

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