

Foreword by the Rt Hon. Hilary Armstrong, MP, Minister for Social Exclusion (UK) to the report: "Caring and Sharing: The Co-owned Route to Better Care", by David Wheatcroft, on the UK 'Social Enterprise of the Year, 2006', Sunderland Home Care Associates. Published by the Employee Ownership Association, October, 2007.

You can see the full report at:

<http://www.employeeownership.co.uk/publications.asp>

Foreword

Earlier this year I had the pleasure of visiting Sunderland Home Care as Minister for Social Exclusion. I looked forward to the visit with great anticipation for two reasons. Firstly, Sunderland Home Care carried a reputation for innovation and good practice that I knew well from being an MP in the North East, and they had just won the prestigious Enterprising Solutions Award too. And secondly I have known Margaret Elliott since the days before I became a politician when I taught community carers, and this added a personal element to the visit.

I met many of the Sunderland Home Care care workers on that visit and spent time with a client at their home, and I can lay testament to the sheer dedication of the staff I met on that day. The 200 or so care workers own the organisation itself, adding to the sense of commitment not just to the client – which one hopes every care professional to have – but an extraordinary bond with colleagues and, most significantly, the enterprise too. In this instance it has created an organisation that is responsive, dynamic, enterprising, and client focussed.

Choosing to exploit the social enterprise model as a framework for Sunderland Home Care was a great idea. It meant that a people-centric organisation would be guaranteed at the outset and would remain into the future, with enough flexibility for management to shape the organisation and structure its ownership model to encourage the outcomes they sought.

Most of the general public will only recognise a few social enterprise brands and fewer still will be familiar with the concept and ideals of social enterprise itself. But social enterprise is a growing force within our society. The combined turnover of social enterprise in the United Kingdom is estimated at £27 billion with a contribution to GDP of £8 billion. Even though this is approximately equivalent in combined size with the agricultural sector, the potential for social enterprise is clearly so much greater than it is today. Measuring it in purely financial terms does not reflect the possibilities for social change either.

When I became Cabinet Office Minister in 2005, the Prime Minister introduced a new cabinet post, Social Exclusion, and also brought the Office of the Third Sector and the Social Enterprise Unit into the department too. This was recognition of the growing role and the future potential of the third and social enterprise sectors in supporting the hardest to

reach in our society. Some people have an understandable distrust of state agencies and seem able to form a much more trusting relationship with these organisations. As a result, they have the opportunity to become what Bill Clinton has called 'change makers' – people and organisations that change our society for the better.

And when it comes to social change what better example is there than Sunderland Home Care?

All employment has the potential to change lives for the better and fulfil people's aspirations. It is too easy when discussing social enterprise to underplay the contribution and importance that private enterprise makes to our society and to so many millions of people's lives. But in some cases more is needed over and above a straightforward employee / employer relationship in order to not just exploit people's talent, but inspire personal change. This can and should lead to wider change within our society, often among people with low aspirations or other personal challenges.

Poverty of aspiration is a particular problem faced in the North East of England, a part of the country close to my heart. A unique industrial past and rapid economic restructuring – brutally mismanaged during the 1980's - has left many people struggling to adjust to a globalised world where people aren't just competing for jobs with folk in the next village but often in another continent altogether.

By creating an organisation owned by its staff, Sunderland Home Care employees at all levels have been empowered to influence decisions including budgets, pay and conditions of employment. Risky, some may think. But in this case it has had a remarkably positive effect on everyone involved in the enterprise. Employees have had their aspirations raised – working together as a team they directly benefit from greater corporate achievement. Pressure to excel not only comes from above, but from every level of the organisation including from peers.

One lesson that comes from the Sunderland Home Care experience is that participation changes people's lives. This is outlined clearly in the paper you are about to read. By extending the benefits of employment to carers from all backgrounds and incentivising their development as a core activity of the organisation, the enterprise has evolved with the twin aims of offering superlative client care and a level of personal development to staff that is matched by few other organisations in any sector.

With a mission to provide the best service to clients yet leverage the power of entrepreneurial spirit to elevate the aspirations of the staff too, Sunderland Home Care has provided us with a model of changing society for the better that we all need to learn from.

We in the North East badly need this level of enterprising spirit and dedication to social development.

We have the talent, and we have the potential, but too rarely is either fully exploited.

I hope that you enjoy this paper, and learn from it, as I have. It is too rarely we come across true change-makers, and I have no doubt that in Sunderland Home Care we have just that. We should take heed of the lessons we can all learn from their example.

Rt Hon Hilary Armstrong MP