**Social care ruing a surreal end to 2023**

There is an Alice in Wonderland quality to how this year is ending for adult social care, with a combination of surreal events playing out in the last month to the obvious detriment of those relying on and working in the sector.

First down the rabbit hole are the suite of reports from the pilot Care Quality Commission assurance visits to councils. These test how well councils are implementing their Care Act responsibilities. Four of the five councils were judged good, with one requiring improvement. This will be welcome reflections on the job they are doing in a tough context. The surreal element is reaching these conclusions without reflecting the resource constraints affecting councils, two of whom have, or are issuing, Section 114 notices, and their consequent impact on those hoping for support and fees paid to providers.

At the annual gathering of sector leads in Manchester, several commentators expressed concern about the lack of a unified voice for the sector in seeking public support and lobbying government for investment and reform. Meanwhile, to the incredulity of many, the care minister praised councils for the effectiveness of their representations. Not that anything happened as a result, of course.

Everyone, government included, accepts there is a workforce crisis in the sector with over 150,000 vacancies at any one time, albeit a little down on a record high in 2021/22. Two different bits of government chipped in this month with announcements not out of place at Alice’s tea party. The increase in the National Living Wage is welcome but not funding councils fully for its implications is ridiculous.

To make matters worse, the government’s latest attempt to control migration to this country impairs the international recruitment efforts of providers seeking to full gaps in their workforce. To top it all, the recently department Home Office minister defending it said such approaches had no part to play in a sustainable workforce strategy for the sector and to add insult he misunderstood that the NHS workforce plan does not cover social care.

To add to the muddle, a new secretary of state for health and social care was shuffled in last month. The new queen of health will no doubt wish to avoid any significant announcements on social care and her impact will be marginal given the impending election. Tiny doses of funding will hardly grow or reform the sector in the ways that are blatantly needed.

The final act before the curtain falls on 2023, is hearing the painful evidence given to the Covid-19 inquiry by ministers and officials. The worst fears of the sector about how little it was understood and regarded at the centre of government has been laid bare.

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