

WCS Care

READING TIME

15 mins

TYPE OF INNOVATION

- Social
- Business model
- Systems

TARGET POPULATION FOR THE INNOVATION

People who draw on care and support including older people, people living with dementia, younger adults

1 THE INNOVATION



WCS Care is a not-for-profit care home group in Warwickshire. It manages 13 care homes in a single local authority (LA); 11 homes provide residential and respite care for older people and people living with dementia or other needs, and two provide rehabilitation, respite and residential care for people with physical disabilities or long-term conditions. Three of their homes are care villages with additional amenities – the most recent home having smaller 'households' for between 5 and 7 residents. Around 50% of residents are self-funded.

WCS Care is focusing on improving the care home business model largely through leveraging technology to improve the lives of residents, but also through built environment improvements such as designing new build homes as care villages. For a period of time WCS Care operated an Innovation Hub to showcase the technological innovations in situ and support their spread.

Technologies implemented by WCS Care include acoustic monitoring, which detects unusual sounds in resident rooms at night, thereby improving residents' safety without disrupting sleep; circadian lighting, which mimics natural light cycles aiming to improve wellbeing; electronic care planning with a Relatives' Gateway, offering families live access to care, reducing paperwork and providing greater reassurance; and the BookJane App, which enables staff to manage their shifts, improving scheduling flexibility and reducing administrative workload.

The vision

WCS Care is a values-based organisation, guided by a clearly-stated ambition for resident wellbeing: Every Day Well Lived (EDWL). This vision "drives the organisation", giving the management and staff permission to innovate and introduce change where this improves resident wellbeing. The commitment to innovation for wellbeing is seen as "good for business". WCS Care cite evidence that innovations have reduced staff turnover and increased occupancy, providing funds for further innovation.

The innovation journey

WCS Care was established in 1992 when it took over council-owned care homes. However, it was not until 2012 when a new Chief Executive was appointed that the innovation journey began. The new Chief Executive was keen to explore how technology, and other types of innovation, could be brought into care homes to improve resident wellbeing. She led a strategic shift in WCS Care away from a focus on finances towards quality and better care, through introducing the values-based vision for resident wellbeing. This shift created space for conversations about investing in innovating for wellbeing.

Having a Chief Executive willing to champion innovation in turn gave the Director of Operations formal permission and support to "unleash" his desire to seek out and implement wellbeing

TIMELINE

2012

Focus shift towards quality and better care with appointment of new CEO

Search for suitable innovations to improve resident well-being



innovations. His job title became ‘Director of Innovation and Delivery’, which he felt “put a stake in the ground” confirming WCS Care’s commitment.

After an unsuccessful search in the UK for suitable care home technology, including a Dragon’s Den-type exercise to try to flush out suppliers, WCS Care staff visited and observed innovations in De Hogeweyk care village in the Netherlands. This visit highlighted the disparity between UK practices and the potential for improvement. They learnt of the benefits of overnight acoustic monitoring, which had reduced residents’ falls, improved their sleep, increased daytime alertness, and improved eating. In 2016, WCS Care became the first UK adopter of this technology, initially implementing it in one care home with similar positive outcomes.

In 2016, a senior marketing and communications role was established, which was described as a significant step on WCS Care’s innovation journey. Internally, it facilitated communication on innovation developments and outcomes, tailoring stories for different audiences; externally, it helped to build a stronger WCS identity as an innovative organisation in the sector. Together this work constituted a “golden thread” to maintain positive attention on innovation at WCS Care .

Across 2016 and into 2017, interest in WCS Care was growing after six of its (then) 12 homes achieved Outstanding ratings from the Care Quality Commission. With frequent requests for visits from other providers, and interest in its use of technology growing at the same time, WCS Care established an Innovation Hub in 2017 to showcase its innovations and share innovation learning.

The Hub attracted others willing to showcase their products and sponsor a space in the Innovation Hub and WCS Care entered a partnership with Coventry University to support the delivery of 9 PhD studies. To manage growing demand to learn about its work, senior leaders conducted weekly Hub visits, explaining

its values-based innovation approach and sharing learning. The Hub raised the profile of WCS Care as a leading innovator, attracted innovation suppliers and sponsorship, and provided opportunities to influence the sector.

The Hub paused in late March 2020, owing to the pandemic, and innovation tours moved to the new-build Woodside Care Village, which had opened in 2019 and incorporated the wide range of innovations that WCS Care had introduced. WCS Care, under a new Chief Executive (the previous Deputy and Director of Innovation, appointed in 2020), have continued to concentrate on spreading innovations internally, throughout their own estate.

Continuing the innovation journey

Over time the frequency with which WCS Care introduces innovations across its estate has increased as WCS Care has become increasingly adept at finding, assessing, adapting and implementing innovations. WCS Care sees itself as being on an on-going, evolving and dynamic journey since there were always more ways to improve wellbeing and the innovation process. The Board had discussed expansion and modernisation of older buildings, and growth will be focused on the care village model which will incorporate all innovations. WCS Care focuses on remaining big enough to cope, small enough to care.

While WCS Care has introduced many innovations, their spread across homes in the group has been limited by financial and capacity constraints, which have slowed the pace of change (see below). Technological developments (e.g. advances in wireless technology), however, are making it cheaper to spread technologies like acoustic monitoring across the estate without expensive remodelling. The focus on internal spread is in turn strengthening WCS Care’s internal communications in relation to taking learning from implementation at one home to another.

TIMELINE





2 ROCKS/CHALLENGES



Financing

Finding the money to invest in innovations is a key challenge. The charity has a key objective to support publicly-funded residents, however the below cost of care funding achieved for these placements has an impact on the overall financial model and surpluses generated to reinvest in innovation. Finding ways of financing investment in innovation has required continuous creativity and ingenuity to reduce the cost of innovation to WCS Care, alongside careful management of financial risk throughout the innovation journey to ensure the limited resources are directed well.

Capacity of the organisation

In common with other care providers, WCS Care has faced challenges recruiting and retaining care workers. Staff turnover is a concern since it can dilute the shared culture which WCS Care sees as crucial for maintaining a favourable climate for implementation. To address this, WCS Care has sought to make the organisation more attractive and has used innovation to achieve this. For example, the BookJane App through which staff book/manage their own shifts, has reduced the use of agency workers to less than 1%, benefitting residents and saving money. These savings were passed on to employees through a pay rise.

Regulations for care organisations

WCS has reported challenges in getting its innovative efforts recognised by the regulator. For instance, an outdoor water feature was criticised by inspectors as a hazard, despite its positive impact on residents. Similarly, acoustic monitoring was perceived as an invasion of privacy, although its impact was positive. To avoid a poor inspection rating, WCS Care has had to invest significant time and effort in

demonstrating the value and impact of these innovations to inspectors.

Resistance to innovation

Staff resistance was recognised as a challenge facing any innovating organisation, as “naysayer” views are quick to take hold. To counter this there is a strong focus on organisational culture. WCS Care use values-based recruitment for all staff appointments to find staff whose views align with the organisational culture.

It also accepts that some staff may choose to leave if they dislike certain innovations, as was the case with acoustic monitoring. Although it was welcomed by the overwhelming majority of night staff, some interpreted it as WCS Care 'spying' on them. The innovation has raised the quality bar for staff, both showcasing the tangible benefits to residents of the work they do and highlighting where changes in practice would benefit residents which some staff inevitably found uncomfortable.

Difficulty finding innovative products

WCS Care sees technology as an enabler of innovation, but has found it difficult to find both examples and suppliers in the UK. For inspiration it has looked abroad, initially visiting the De Hogeweyk care village in the Netherlands and more recently, for example, purchasing the Canadian BookJane app.

It has also started to look to other sectors, having noticed that UK technology suppliers tend to focus on the NHS and do not market their products to the social care sector. In particular, WCS Care has found it difficult to find products that can be easily retrofitted in older buildings and do not change the homely feel of rooms. This was the case for both

Below the cost of care funding for placements slows the pace of innovation

Staff turnover can dilute the shared culture and a favourable climate for implementation of innovations

Getting innovative efforts recognised by the regulator requires significant time and effort



Acoustic Monitoring and Circadian Lighting, which in both instances have led WCS Care to drive suppliers to develop suitable products. In the case of Circadian Lighting, WCS Care has worked with a lighting consultant, Oxford University and a supplier to develop a product that is suitable for care homes, can be retrofitted into existing light fittings, and is at a price point that other care providers are likely to find reasonable.

Understanding impact

To manage financial risk associated with innovation effectively WCS Care needs to understand both the likely impact of the innovation and its actual impact once implemented. Where there were tangible benefits to residents and staff wellbeing formal scientific research was not considered necessary for the investment decision; instead it is “a means of moving

things on, because you get data that persuades others, persuades government, sets the doubters a little bit aside, and demonstrates ...where you can go [to innovate] with less risk.”

WCS Care works with researchers in various ways to build the evidence base and raise the profile of beneficial technologies. In the case of Circadian Lighting, where WCS Care has driven development of a product that can be retrofitted, it has worked with Oxford University to determine the technical specification for the lighting and the same researchers will evaluate the product once installed. However, it can be difficult to commission such technical research and WCS Care needed to search for the right university partner. This search, and recruiting a student took a long time; however the research with Oxford University is now in its third year.

3 NAVIGATING ROCKS

Leadership

The commitment to innovation is etched into WCS Care’s structures and processes. ‘Innovation’ was added to the organisation’s high-level objectives to ensure a strategic focus, which has in turn influenced the Board’s composition, with some members being sought for their expertise in innovation (rather than social care).

The innovation strategy is strongly supported by its Chief Executive, who previously served as Director of Innovation. While the Chief Executive is recognised as the innovation leader, he encourages other staff to take ownership of innovations. Senior care home staff act as early adopters, trialling and implementing new ideas, and sharing their learning with the Board and staff at other homes.

WCS Care views its commitment to innovation as a strength. It has a series

of strategies for creating a favourable climate for innovation, to “insulate” it from the low morale prevalent in other provider organisations who felt immobilised by external challenges: “We’re facing the same difficulties and same problems, just got a different attitude”.

The strategies include:

- A values-led vision and strategy with “Every Day Well Lived” driving the organisation.
- A focus on culture as both a delivery mechanism and motivational tool for innovation.
- Robust systems and processes for decision-making, risk management, and ongoing monitoring of innovations, ensuring that money is spent well.

The vision drives WCS Care in a variety of ways. It is supported by four values – ‘play’; ‘make someone’s day’; ‘be there’; and ‘choose your attitude’ – that guide



Strong senior leadership for innovation

Systems and processes in place for making decisions about innovations and managing associated risk



staff behaviour and encourage them to think creatively in their everyday relationships with individual residents. At Board level it is a touchstone for making decisions regarding innovations and has underpinned a range of developments, including values-based recruitment, staff training and a permissive attitude to care worker risk-taking in the best interests of responding to a resident's wishes.

Systems and processes for making decisions about innovations and managing associated risk are a critical element of WCS Care's strategic approach to innovation. Innovations are proposed to the Board, who assess the case according to WCS's values, priorities and capacity. Priority assessments can change, as was the case with the greenlighting of the BookJane App in response to increasing ASC recruitment pressures (owing to Brexit and COVID-19).

Innovations are trialled through a structured process to enable WCS Care to learn about the benefits and assess acceptability to staff (see below). If innovations are judged as beneficial, resources will be committed to roll them out, but the speed of adoption across the group will vary by innovation to manage various constraints arising from capacity, cost, the product specification, requirements for additional input from contractors, business planning and implications for staff working practices.

Learning

A commitment to learning has underpinned WCS Care's approach to innovating. WCS Care does not see itself as a developer of innovations, so the strategy has been to find good ideas from elsewhere that it can learn from and adopt. Following many years of pursuing this strategy and buoyed on by successes, WCS Care has established strong routines for finding, selecting, testing and embedding innovations within individual homes and throughout the group. These skills help WCS Care to be agile and respond to shocks like the pandemic:

Our experience of thinking outside the box, trialling new approaches, learning fast and applying change held us in good stead during 2020.

The process includes a thorough search led by the Chief Executive, followed by trialling the basic features of innovations in one or more homes, at the same time or sequentially to gather insight into whether the innovation could deliver the kinds of outcomes WCS Care wanted. Some innovations are abandoned at this stage, but for those judged to work well for WCS, a decision is then taken regarding whether the innovation could be rolled out and, if not, how the sticking-points, usually financial or capacity, could be tackled.

In terms of evidencing impacts from testing innovations, WCS Care's capabilities lie in gathering 'soft' evidence such as feedback from staff, residents and families, often used for developing first-hand stories. While it has less capacity for producing 'hard' data, evidence for some innovations was still sufficiently clear-cut for decision-making (e.g. the reduction of agency costs from introducing BookJane).

Other innovations (e.g. Acoustic Monitoring and Circadian Lighting) had more complex interactions with potential outcomes such as reduced falls or hospital admissions, which made determining causality difficult and beyond WCS Care's internal capabilities. In these situations, WCS Care has sought specialist expertise, either from the supplier in the case of Acoustic Monitoring, or universities for Circadian Lighting.

Relationships and collaborations

WCS identified research evidence and finance as two key enablers of innovation, the lack of which slowed progress. WCS Care has developed strategic relationships with academic collaborations and has sought a variety of cost-reducing quid pro quo

The strategy has been to find good ideas from elsewhere to learn from and adopt

WCS has developed strategic relationships with academic collaborators, suppliers and other charities



arrangements with suppliers to tackle these sticking points.

The most substantial collaboration was the Innovation Hub with Coventry University and technology suppliers, which raised WCS Care's profile as an innovative provider. It was a route to collaboration with new suppliers, including those at product development and testing stage who also paid to showcase their innovations.

Hub visits by other charities also led to productive relationships, such as the hearing loss charity Deafinitely Independent, who secured two of the 12 households in Woodside Care Village for their members. Funds from payments made by suppliers to showcase their innovations at the Hub (and now Woodside Care Village) have been used to fund a PhD student at Oxford University to research Circadian Lighting.

WCS has also negotiated with suppliers to co-fund installation in return for an opportunity to expand into the UK market. It negotiated commission in return for helping a supplier to refine their product pre-launch. Additionally, it has used relationships with suppliers to encourage them to develop their products, for example encouraging the acoustic monitoring supplier to seize the business opportunity to develop a wireless version, which the supplier has taken.

Culture

WCS Care views a culture supportive of innovation as crucial for delivering on its vision and strategy. Building and maintaining this culture involves constant attention and work to combat the diluting effects of staff resistance and turnover. Key aspects of WCS Care's approach include:

- Framing innovation in terms of benefits for residents and staff.
- Encouraging staff to be creative and voice their ideas for improvements.
- Timing implementation "through the lens of the carer" to improve take-up.
- Allowing care home staff trialling innovations to test and "play with" them so they can find out for themselves how well they serve WCS Care's needs.
- Fostering an environment that gives staff confidence to trial innovations, by having manager support on tap and making it clear that mistakes are inevitable and valuable for learning.
- Instilling a sense of pride among staff in working for an innovative provider, e.g. through communicating successes and showcasing innovations to visitors.

As WCS Care has matured as an innovator, the role of internal communications has become increasingly important for helping shape and maintain desired behaviours, for example through sharing positive individual written and oral stories about the process of innovating and outcomes of different innovations for residents and/or staff.

Additionally, WCS Care believes its size helps to embed positive behaviours, since senior managers and Board members have capacity to visit care homes and have face-to-face conversations where they can motivate staff with their passion and commitment to innovation. Short chains of command also allow for open and easy communications in surfacing mistakes and implementation problems, reinforcing the culture of learning.

Its size enables WCS Senior managers and Board members capacity to visit care homes to motivate staff with their passion and commitment to innovation

Short chains of command allow open and easy communications



4 KEY LEARNING



WCS Care demonstrates how a medium-sized not-for profit care home group can repeatedly introduce innovations despite facing a difficult external environment. It has achieved this through a clear and positive values-based vision for the organisation, alongside a commitment to innovation and a set of strategies that have allowed it to create a favourable climate for innovation, including:

- Cultivating an innovative culture to address staff resistance to innovation and encourage and empower staff to trial and test innovations.
- Developing robust systems and processes for managing financial risk and ensuring that money is spent well.
- Developing routines and introducing roles to strengthen its ability to innovate.

Additionally, WCS Care has shown creativity and ingenuity in identifying ways of funding investment in innovation through its partnerships with suppliers and universities.

To further support innovation these areas need consideration:

- Raising awareness among technology suppliers about the social care market.
- Greater research around technology innovations to guide investment decisions.
- Developing relationships between universities and care providers to facilitate research.
- Improving CQC inspectors' understanding of innovation and how this can be captured in processes.
- Ensuring providers have sufficient levels of funding per placement to facilitate investment in innovation.

Authors

Written by Juliette Malley, Jane Maddison and Yvonne Birks
Content editing by Eva Cyhlarova
Design and stylistic editing by Sarah Moncrieff and Annabel Fenton

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank everyone who contributed to our research including staff at WCS Care and the people we interviewed from organisations associated with WCS. We are also grateful to Dr Kate Baxter for her work on this case study.

This study was conducted as part of the Supporting Adult Social Care Innovation project, led by the Care Policy and Evaluation Centre based at the London School of Economics and Political Science, in partnership with the University of York and King's College London. The support of the Economic and Social Research Council is gratefully acknowledged (ES/T001364/1).

Suggested citation

Malley J, Maddison J and Birks Y (2024). *Innovation Case Study Briefing 6: WCS Care*. London: London School of Economics and Political Science, Care Policy and Evaluation Centre, SASCI project (Supporting Adult Social Care Innovation) [www.sasciproject.uk/briefings].

© Care Policy and Evaluation Centre, London School of Economics and Political Science.

Contact

Juliette Malley
J.N.Malley@lse.ac.uk