

Social care micro-enterprises more effective than larger providers, says report

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'Smaller is better' when it comes to providing social care, according to a new study from the University of Birmingham.

The report, launched today (23 June), finds that micro-enterprises – defined as organisations comprising five or fewer full-time staff – offer a more personal service to customers than larger enterprises such as agencies or local authorities, as well as providing better value for money.

Smaller providers also deliver a more valued service, helping people who require care to do more of the things they enjoy, while micro-enterprises often demonstrate greater innovation.

The report calls for additional support for micro-enterprises, including start-up assistance with access to care sector expertise, and urges regulators to ensure their processes are proportionate and accessible to very small organisations.

The findings are based on in-depth studies of a range of micro, small, medium and large social care providers.

Dr Catherine Needham, who led the research, said: "Previous studies have shown the poor quality of much large-scale [social care](#): 15-minute home visits with a revolving door of poorly trained staff. Our research shows that very small enterprises can provide much more personalised and high-quality support, without it costing any more than large provision."

Twenty-seven care organisations in England took part in the study, covering a range of sizes and functions, including day activities and support in the home. Among the 143 people interviewed were owners, managers, members of staff, carers, and those receiving care services, including older and disabled people.

Interviewees included Barbara, a former member of staff at an agency who set up her own business as a micro-provider and now cares for 14 people in their own homes. Barbara described 'getting in trouble' with her previous employer for 'doing too much, like cooking meals and doing somebody's washing'.

Pam, who runs a small day service, spoke about her staff's relationship with the local community: "Our members go out and get recognised by the shopkeepers and people and they develop relationships with folks in the community."

Janet, meanwhile, left a local authority care service to set up on her own, seeking to provide a more flexible service. Janet described building up 'strong relationships' with her clients.

People receiving care also spoke positively about their experiences with micro-enterprises – particularly the personal nature of the service.

Dr Needham, Reader in Public Policy and Public Management at the University of Birmingham, said: "A lot of micro-enterprises are set up by people who are disillusioned with working for large organisations, or have experienced poor-quality care for a member of their family. They need dedicated start-up business support that can help them understand care sector regulation and funding, as well as more general small business advice. They also need help to market their services to potential users, as they aren't likely to have a formal contract with the local authority in the way a large care company will."

Provided by University of Birmingham

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