

## Ownacarehome (OACH) interview with Stephen Geach (SG) of English Oak, specialists in residential dementia care home provision

From opening his first care home in August 1998, 2022 marks a milestone of 24 years for Stephen Geach, as he talks to Julie Hopkins of ownacarehome.com, about English Oak and its work to revolutionise the residential care home sector.



**OACH:** *Firstly, please tell me what did you do before moving into the provision of social care and why residential dementia care?*

**SG:** I was in the Royal Navy for 9 years before entering social care. I have had nursing and old persons care homes, and the old persons category is very rare now commercially speaking, as they tend to stay in their own homes entering a care home at a later stage and at a point of need. Despite dementia being a challenging condition, as a team we endeavour to bring fun and joy in a person-centred way to give Residents their best life.

**OACH:** *What methods have you used to grow your business, innovate, and meet challenges along the way?*

**SG:** It is very important to listen to *staff, residents, and families*, respond and be proactive to the challenges of 'now' and then forecast the future as best you can. We can see already over the past 10 years for example, that we get our residents later in their life. Whereas they used to come to us with mild memory loss and lived with us for around 8 to 10 years, now they come to stay later in their lives and we only enjoy their company for around 2 years. This in turn changes resident's needs and therefore our delivery of service.

Innovation has been an important part of our care provision. To date this has included developing our own bespoke visitor signing in App which includes a coffee and lunch service, updating the kitchen staff in real time and ensuring that all our visitors are looked after. The App has revolutionised the visitor experience with feedback as they leave our care homes in addition to providing a fire safety record.

The development of our 'train carriage' and 'moving scenery' have been a huge success with everyone, including our staff! The innovative idea came from people wishing to stay in the

care home environment where they felt safe due to their declining health conditions. We are now creating the London bus experience, again with 'moving scenery.'

We continue to provide all our residents with iPads which enhances their contact with their relatives and friends with caring time built in to assist with its use.

Our enhanced infection, prevention and control includes an increase in hand wash basins and clinical covering, and we now have our own hair salons and libraries.

We are continuously seeking to improve the care home environment to enhance the working life of the staff as well as the person-centred care for our residents. We are currently building a Sky lounge so that residents can look over the 20-acre parkland during the day, and each care home has a beautiful pergola with alfresco dining tables and chairs. The carbon efficient heat and lighting system together with canopy covers ensure Spring and Autumn use which has also provided an outdoor space area should it be needed for visiting. Our reinvestment strategy ensures care homes fit for purpose into the next decades to come.



Increased safety measures include CCTV in the public areas which has also assisted in lessening hospital occupancies and has been embraced by the entire team.

**OACH:** What are the principles your care group is built upon?

**SG:** I keep this very basic to lesson any misunderstandings. The care we deliver and the standard we keep for each individual client must be the same that we would give to our own parents.

**OACH:** What strategies can you recommend to other care home owners to continuously improve and innovate?

**SG:** I often provide free consultation to other independent care home and group owners on how to keep improving the level of care we deliver, and the amenities we offer. Care peers have been very appreciative of the show around and visits to their homes.

*I would like to help the care industry as a whole improve, and for that we need to share ideas.*

**OACH:** How has the provision of residential dementia care changed?

**SG:** The care support has changed from 1 carer to 8 to 1 to 5 now, sometimes more of course if our residents have greater needs. CCG top up most of our residents funding now, as the Social Care rate would not pay us enough to break even. Our break-even point has been around £1,030 per week but this is increasing due to the current cost of living crisis and the supply chain impact.

**OACH:** How important is business agility in light of the Regulator's (CQC) evolution and the increased complexities of an ageing population?

**SG:** The ageing population was always predictable and could have been calculated and provisioned for many years ago. The data has very much followed trend, where the post war baby boom started around 1947, with those babies now around the age of needing care, and in 5 years' time even more care will be needed as they all reach their 80's.

People's needs are much higher now when they seek care. I remember in the 1980's when residents could drive themselves, and care homes had to provide a car park space! That's not the case now, with many clients cycling their memories every 5 minutes or less. More recently, we have also found a younger adult need with the Korsakoff dementia taking effect.

**OACH:** How has your care provision coped during the pandemic?

**SG:** This was very difficult. In May 2020 it swept across the south coast, we could see its effect upon the care group, with residents and staff affected. It was so difficult to see people suffering with dementia and covid having to stay in their rooms, since within minutes they would forget the request and then move around the home.

We hired even more staff than the 1 to 5, even had additional housekeepers with their sole job to sterilise all surfaces for 12 hours a day, then repeat. The costs went up at an alarming rate. We installed additional hygiene equipment which would spray a cleared room for 90 minutes. Everything that the spray touched stayed virus free for 5 weeks. We stocked to last several months due to the length of the supply chain. PPE costs were astronomical which was an initial cash flow shock before the government assistance. Despite this we managed to keep our staff with full PPE, which included creating our own visors due to supply shortages. It was all hands-on deck, and being a creative team, our residents helped to make the visors too!

The whole team went above and beyond, something which words cannot express.

**OACH:** How is your care provision adapting to the new era?

**SG:** It's evolved, like most businesses have had to do over the years. The staffing ratios have



changed, and the accommodation is totally different and will continue to adapt as we seek to become carbon neutral. We like to offer a range of accommodation thus our Standard, Deluxe, Executive, and master suites. The suites are named after past residents that had stayed with us for many years, including a member of the team.

The staff have a huge involvement in the design and facilities, so that they all feel fully engaged with the business. We have also created a progressive staff ranking system which demonstrates how valued they are as care professionals. We now have new entry to senior carers rank badges, team leaders, head of care, deputy manager and manager. This creates a level of pride and ambition, with attainable career progression.

We have also addressed the staff remuneration package, including above average pay rises, private medical cover, full training, including any exams which may not have been attainable when in the education system to support staff to attain the next professional care rank.

During covid and experiencing the loss of residents along with my team, I started a 24 hour a day hot line to mental health professionals with all costs covered by the business. Our residents our like family and I had to ensure our teams had full emotional support which I have continued.

**OACH:** How has the impact of the pandemic impacted your net zero plan?

**SG:** It didn't even slow us down; we are fully engaged with our green policy. We have 100% of our energy now coming from renewable sources. We use solar energy in addition to air source heat pumps which provides much of our heating, with the balance that comes from pipes and cables from 100% renewable sources. We are continuing to increase the solar panels and install more heat pumps to our care homes going forwards in order to reduce reliance on supply from other companies.

We have also started to install electric car charging points with the current aim to have two points at each care home. In addition, we are starting a green 'ride to work scheme' and will buy a bicycle or electric scooter for our staff to provide an alternative to their cars.

**OACH:** What do you consider to be the current challenges for the care home sector? Are solutions out there?

**SG:** Recruiting staff; we now employ full time a person to hire staff, including from abroad.

**OACH:** What do you see on the horizon for the social care sector?

**SG:** I see a rising need for social care, and with the government's new price limit on personal care spend coming in next year, people will feel happier that a provision will be made for mental health, not just physical health such as hospitals.

I also think that a more favourable way forward would be to blend levels of care at an earlier stage in people's lives. A care village would suit this perfectly, where you could enjoy a true village and community feel from the age of 50. I have designed one, and just seek the land with planning to commence the build! And yes, I already qualify for the village myself..... I believe my son has already earmarked me a bungalow.....!

*'Life's worth living. Imagine how you'd like a care home to be, alive with conversation, good humour, and genuine companionship.'* (Oak View)

To find out more about English Oak visit [englishoakcarehomes.co.uk](http://englishoakcarehomes.co.uk) or email [stephen@englishoak.eu](mailto:stephen@englishoak.eu)

