Superman

SuperCarers aims to use technology to disrupt the traditional home care model. **Ploy Radford** talks to the firm's CEO, Adam Pike, to find out more

"If I was in charge I would say that by 2020 there wouldn't be a single residential care home allowed to operate in this country," proclaims Adam Pike. It's a bold statement to make even for the boss of a firm that is all about providing elderly care in the home. However, Pike's company, SuperCarers, was set up with his brother Daniel, to do something different and new from traditional domiciliary care agencies, so bombastic statements probably go hand in hand.

The painfully hipster tech hub near Old Street, London, that I meet Pike in, certainly suggests SuperCarers is different from home care's usual firms. SuperCarers is an online platform that acts as a brokerage service for home care, letting families find carers in their local area.

After the care searcher (often the relative of the person who needs care) fills in the online form stating what they are looking for, SuperCarer's technology will search its carers' list for ones who match those requirements and live within half a mile of the end user, and then suggest up to three possible matches. The person searching for care can then either arrange a meet and greet with one or more of the suggested carers or go ahead and book a carer and organise a care plan with them. "So rather than working with a traditional agency which might have carers on a rota system, you can choose your own carer and manage that relationship directly with them," says Pike. All the carers on SuperCarers' books are checked by the firm that they are who they say they are and are suitably qualified, but it is down to the carer to take responsibility for the care itself.

Currently the firm offers predominantly private day care, night care and live-in care services within London and Greater London, with live-in care services also available nationwide. The firm also caters to those with learning disabilities, but it is a smaller part of the business, so marketing is geared towards elderly care. It is currently on track to deliver 20,000 hours of care per month by the end of this year. Pike is proud that the company is able to deploy carers within an hour. He points to the example of one customer who was having to stay overnight in the hospital with an elderly relative with dementia because they were getting distressed and pulling out the plugs – SuperCarers was able to get a carer to the hospital within an hour to allow the customer to get some rest. ▶

Adam Pike, chief executive, SuperCarers

£14
starting cost per hour of day care

£110
starting cost per night of night care

£750
starting cost per week of live-in care

"We're not a pure marketplace business," Pike wishes to clarify, though. "We talk about being a care business being fuelled first and foremost by technology and I know that sounds a little bit cute but the reason behind it is we want to personalise the choice available to people and curate it better." He points to the fact the firm doesn't just suggest one carer that matches a care seeker's requirements, but several, so not only do they get a choice of carers for their relative's current needs but also useful introductions to bring extra care in more quickly once its needed. "We know that in two or three weeks' time, you will probably need a second or third carer, so we anticipate how your needs will change," says Pike. "We build care teams." And SuperCarers' technology helps those teams communicate effectively. Plus, the firm is often recruiting carers who know each other and have worked together before, which helps with the teamwork aspect, if they end up working together.

Being able to provide choice for customers of course ultimately relies on having a large workforce of carers on the books. With, many home care providers struggling to recruit and retain, how will SuperCarers ensure true choice for its customers? "Recruitment is not the problem – retention is the problem. If you talk to some of the most seasoned home care operators, they suffer from about 40% attrition," says Pike. This has not been such an issue at SuperCarers, he claims because of the money they earn, with service fees starting at £14 an hour, of which SuperCarers only takes 20% in commission. This wage, he points out, is "transformative for a carer that's used to earning minimum wage". It is not only the money that attracts carers, he argues, but also the fact they can decide who they work with (if they don't get on with the family they can walk away), manage a care plan, work as part of a team – a plus in a normally isolating profession – and they also get paid on a weekly basis.

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SuperCarers' ability to let carers have a bigger cut of the client's fee means Pike's ambitions for the company are not limited to the private pay market. He points to the dual factors of many agencies handing back their local authority contracts because their value is too low and the Care Act 2014 dictating that local authorities are "obligated" to give people 'direct payments', whereby they are allowed to choose how to spend the money local governments have allocated for their care. SuperCarers, will be able to pick up work through direct payments because its "price point is what [local authorities] are asking agencies to provide care for" anyway, but it actually has the workers to carry out the services because they are well paid, he argues. Pike is optimistic that with the likes of Mears handing back large numbers of contracts, SuperCarers can snap up lots of customers this way.

The company is also talking to NHS trusts about how the service can help them free up beds yet ensure a patient has suitable care upon discharge because "putting people in residential care homes after hospitals is an emergency measure and it must not become the norm," says Pike. He worries that using care homes as a step-down measure when hospitals beds are full means that patient will perhaps never go home, "because the fundamental problem hasn't changed – how do you get someone discharged from a residential care home to their own home".

This train of thought is what led Pike to make his statement about closing all care homes by 2020. "I'm not against institutions per se, but I'm saying residential care homes have become this monolith that people end up in with acute wards and dementia wards and that's not what I aspire to have for myself let alone for my parents."

Arguably, given the poor press home care agencies have been receiving in terms of care quality and rushed 15 minute visits, home care may not be what some people want for their frail relatives either. This point seems even more poignant given that SuperCarers is not regulated because the care onus is on the carer. This fact would reflect badly, surely, should one of their carers ever be featured on Panorama? "It's a very high business risk, but it's our job to communicate to families what we do and what we don't do," says Pike. "And it is regulated care businesses that have been on Panorama specials – so [good care] isn't about ticking boxes, it's about whether those businesses are well led, whether the carers feel motivated, whether they are forced to do 15 minute visits, etc."

As well as the not so small issue of care quality, another headache for a technology-led care business is, well, the technology. And in the beginning "we made a tonne of mistakes in the way we delivered the platform". For example, Pike was surprised at how quickly the care needs of a service user changed to require more care. "That meant our whole platform, the way we do scheduling, time sheets and invoicing all has changed."

These stresses aside though, Pike is confident the company will be rolling out all its services nationally within three years. Indeed, it has the likes of former care minister Paul Burstow on the board, investors such as JamJar (who were behind Innocent Smoothie) and Sir Tom Hughes-Hallett, the former chief executive of Marie Curie, and it completed a successful £500,000 crowdfunding round on Seedrs at the end of 2016. All of which are good portents for success.

If this expansion happens one imagines Pike and his brother will have a range of investors and trade buyers queuing up to offer them a lucrative exit option. Pike maintains his brother and he are in it for the long-term, though, so there is no exit planned for them within four or five years. "We've not building a business to think about a sale, we're building a business to become the best loved care company in the country." It's an ambitious aim and care home operators possibly won't have to worry about being out of work by 2020, however, maybe we will see a much needed revolution in the home care sector.