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Helen Whately MP, Minister of State for Care
39 Victoria Street,
London,
SW1H 0EU
(sent via email)

Dear Helen Whately MP,

SUPPORT FOR CARE HOMES RETURN

As a response to your letter and request, sent on 14th May 2020, we have written this letter and also sent through our completed template (attached to the same email as this letter).

Before we appraise you of the action that has been completed by our partnership locally, here is an overview of Wokingham's response to COVID – 19 and our support of care homes in the borough.

As Councillors and Council Officers became increasingly concerned about the situation in care homes locally, we lobbied our MPs, the Local Resilience Forum, Public Health England and the NHS for testing of those being discharged to our care homes. We also lobbied for improved supplies of PPE, more testing in care homes and more infection control nursing support. We increased our support to local care homes, including providing emergency supplies of PPE and sending staff teams into homes to support with specific issues.

Despite this lobbying and support, Government guidelines continued to allow the potential discharge of patients with coronavirus into our care homes, so we took the decision on 21st April to suspend hospital discharge into our care homes. Discharges could only occur if the patient had been tested or the care home had the correct infection control procedures in place and could confidently isolate the resident if needed.

Locally, we established a protocol and task force with health and social care colleagues. This process works proactively with our care homes to prevent the spread of COVID-19, assess and support their readiness to take and manage positive cases and ensure they receive all the support they need. It also supports the Councils safeguarding function. We welcome your letter dated 14th May which brings a national framework and requirement for this type of approach.

During the crisis, we have provided support to care homes, this has included:

- An improved funding deal for care homes we contract with, prepayments to support with cash flow plus ability to apply for additional temporary funding



- Help with supply of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) – over 386,000 pieces of PPE have been supplied to our care homes.
- Regular advice and guidance including financial sustainability and infection control- over 400 calls to registered care homes
- Testing for staff with symptoms – more than 250 staff tested, plus others who have self-referred for testing via the government website (we are unable to quantify how many have self-referred, as we do not receive this data).
- Offer of access to staff in an emergency Infection control hotline established

Adults Social Care has been working with our local providers to facilitate mutual aid across the sector. This has included:

- Wokingham Provider Portal; online access to relevant guidance and supporting information
- Establishing the Care Workers Support Team; pool of care worker staff and facilitated central recruitment programme
- 7 day working across social care and commissioning to facilitate hospital discharge and support providers
- Spiritual and emotional support is available through the Community Hub

We now have most of the relevant support from the system to keep residents safe.

Support is also provided by Health & Social Care to providers of residential care, nursing care, supported accommodation and Extra Care Sheltered Housing. The latter two provider types are not currently under governmental focus but are also important. It is delivered by a 'COVID-19 in a care setting Taskforce' which is jointly staffed by Health & Social Care. The Taskforce offers vital and dynamic support to the providers to mitigate risk around outbreaks and the management of the virus in the community as far as possible.

This approach has been adopted across the West of Berkshire health and social care system

The protocol covers all care provision in Wokingham Borough and for ease of reference is divided into four phases.

Phase one relates to proactive work in the default stage of no new outbreak in a setting, whereby a daily dialogue with providers reviews current circumstances and concerns in a home.

Phase two relates to the dynamic triage of the information collated to identify emerging risks or concerns, further problem solve if appropriate and/or escalation to the task force if required.

Phase three will be initiated as soon as two (likely) cases of COVID-19 are identified in a setting or if the information collated is suggestive of preventative measures being problematic to implement in a setting. No hospital discharge will progress without the current COVID status of the person concerned being confirmed. This phase will be undertaken by the 'Taskforce' and which will offer support to the provider to mitigate risk.

Phase Four will be initiated following the completion of the Task Forces work, and the provider has a need for 'recovery and resilience' support. This returns the Provider prior to phase 1.

Since the 21st April, when this system of work was implemented, there has been a reduction in deaths and infections in care homes in the borough. For ease of reference the protocol is included in the appendix to this letter

As requested in your letter of 14th May and in the follow-on guidance of 22nd May, here is a summary of the response, and a brief overview of plans that are in place to support services going forward.

Infection Control

- **Training**

The Berkshire West Clinical Commissioning Group are supporting care homes with an Infection control nurse, who is offering training and guidance to homes in the borough. 200 Pulseoximeters have been made available to the care homes locally, along with extra stethoscopes and thermometers to aid care homes. Training materials have been provided to the care homes locally.

Locally additional specialist infection control has been drafted in to support the protocol work that has been undertaken. It is now important that this is commissioned permanently to provide dedicated and enhanced infection control nursing resource for the foreseeable future. This plan will look to address this.

Additionally, Berkshire Health Foundation Trust are offering wellbeing support and guidance to care homes. Their Care Home Support Team and Rapid response and Treatment services (both of which are integrated into the Wokingham task force) continue in care homes, offering advice, guidance, and training, to enhance carer skills.

- **PPE**

There remain ongoing concerns about PPE that are well documented. Nationally, there has not been a sufficient supply of PPE. Due to this lack of supply, we have worked hard to support all our providers to have an appropriate amount of PPE, the Local Authority has to date distributed 386,000 pieces of PPE, spending approximately £387,000 of Council funds. There continues to be weekly PPE supply drops by the Council to care homes in the area. There is still currently a low level of confidence in supply routes, so this has increased the reliance on Local Authority supply chains rather than providers solely using their own suppliers or a national supply solution that has been promised. This means that comfortable stock levels are problematic to maintain, and this requires constant attention.

There is also an anxiety for other social care services that do not support older people (for instance Learning Disability, Mental Health & Drug and Alcohol rehabilitation services). It is important to note that confidence in supply of PPE leads to appropriate use of PPE therefore continuing the national push for PPE imports will continue to support this enterprise.

- **Movement between homes**

Most of the homes in our borough are already limiting their use of agency staff. Where agency staff are in use, they are being ringfenced to specific homes (where possible). We know this, as our taskforce are in daily contact with our providers. We will continue to keep this regime up as we agree it is important

As a further measure our plan going forward will need to include requesting Care Homes and agencies to speak to all their staff, to ascertain if their staff work elsewhere.

- **Quarantining**

The social care market in Wokingham has retained a level of capacity during this crisis. Hospital admissions and any movements within the market have been monitored throughout this period, and when appropriate, additional capacity has been commissioned.

Wokingham is working with its neighbouring boroughs to commission alternative accommodation as required and is seeking to enhance its ability to effectively isolate COVID-positive residents, making sure discharges into nursing or social care do not put residents currently in those settings at risk.

Our Taskforce is supporting homes, where appropriate, to cohort people with a similar COVID-19 status, allowing people to return to their own homes. Returning home, where safe and appropriate, is best for the person. There are currently 6 homes that have been deemed safe to cohort new placements. Where people are returning to their placement, all bar one, have been supported to return home. We expect more homes to be risk assessed as being able to safely cohort in the coming weeks. We believe that working in this way will also support our local providers to keep capacity levels in home up and therefore support these businesses.

Additionally, options are currently being scoped via an options paper. These include options for people with a learning disability, whom would need a smaller scale and individual response.

Clinical Support

General Practices are providing the following support to care homes:

- Delivery of a consistent, weekly, check in, to review patients identified as a clinical priority for assessment and care (Via MDT, where possible), development and delivery of personalised care and support plans for care home residents
- Provision of pharmacy and medication support to care homes
- The Care Home Visiting service has recently started, to offer GP and Berkshire Health Foundation Trust support to care homes.
- Named Clinicians will be in place by the end of this week.

GPs in the locality would welcome further clarity about the named clinician role, including any accountabilities which this would include.

Comprehensive testing

The availability of comprehensive and regular testing for care home staff and residents with or without symptoms is only now becoming more available. Services that do not support Older People are not yet able to access comprehensive testing, despite some of these other services being at risk of not effectively managing risk of transmission. We urge the government to support this being available to all care settings as quickly as possible

Opening testing to the people that use these services and their carers would be seen as essential. More limited testing has been available in Wokingham for a while; however, it has taken an extreme effort on the part of the health and social care colleagues to implement

against a backdrop of multiple national offers. This has led to an unnecessarily complex testing offer to care homes that this plan will look to simplify.

There is a local testing resource for symptomatic cases this has been working effectively for several weeks and has tested 305 staff locally and 14 care homes have been tested.

Building the workforce

The Council has supported a campaign to recruit people into the care sector (again over a month prior to the national government taking action).

There has been a low level of demand for NHS returnees locally, and where they have been sought, many have a high training requirement (as they have been deskilled during their retirement). Also, as many of the retirees fall within at risk groups, it can be difficult to support their placement.

Funding

Wokingham Borough Council fully appreciates the pressure that the whole sector is under and the exceptional job we are all doing to meet the current challenge. Wokingham Borough Council has always supported providers by paying very competitive rates within the funding envelope provided. In addition to this Wokingham Borough Council has sought to support our social care providers with their cash flow. We offered a pre-payment at the beginning of the current crisis, which was intended to supplement an uplift on fees in 2020/21. The uplift was benchmarked against the sector in Wokingham and sufficient funding was provided to meet the increase in the National Living Wage.

Wokingham Borough Council has also established a substantial Service Sustainability Fund to support providers in maintaining service continuity during this period.

The aim of the Fund will be to support providers in managing the additional costs associated with managing the response to COVID-19. To date, we have supported 12 registered care homes with additional funding for additional costs associated with COVID-19.

To qualify for reimbursement items of expenditure must be all of the following:

- related to clients in receipt of adult social care services that are funded by Wokingham Borough Council or related to self-funders within the Wokingham geographical area.
- over and above usual business costs.
- directly or indirectly related to the COVID-19 emergency

Our Care Home task force is speaking to our providers on a daily basis, and where issues of financial sustainability have been identified, Wokingham Borough Council has been quick to support our providers to ensure that services continue during this crisis.

Wokingham Borough Council is however, concerned about funding social care in the future. The costs to social care providers will not be reducing in the near future. PPE is acquiring cost and there are the associated costs of supporting time out for care homes to support increased sickness, staff training and annual leave.

Local Authorities will also continue having to pay increased fees and it has been noted that Wokingham's forecast deficit against the total additional COVID funding released by government currently stands at £4.421million pounds. There will need to be more support from

central government to increase sustainability and fully fund the social care market to operate effectively.

Our share of the £600 million to support care homes will be shared directly to providers and we will ensure that the grant conditions are adhered to.

Local Placement of Returning Clinical Staff or Volunteers

The Voluntary Sector response has been focused on the community, to support those that are shielded or vulnerable. This has been very successful, with more than 5750 calls to people in the community, and the implementation of a Population Health Management approach. Here is a short video link explaining how this works: pic.twitter.com/s7Hv3cKG2K

Each of the care homes in Wokingham has a link to a church. This arrangement offers spiritual support to the staff and residents, but also support with their wellbeing. Goody bags, cards, and shows of support have been organised by the church's for the homes in the area.

Looking to the future, there is room for befriending services to start to be introduced (virtually at first) to care homes. This should be targeted initially at those that do not have close family, friends or who are not eligible for a Paid Representative under DoLS or an IMCA for Care Act functions.

Plan Going Forward

As a result of completing this letter and the associated template, we plan to:

- increase specialist Infection Control support locally
- support efficacy of a comprehensive testing regime locally
- look at options to make permanent the Task Force staff resource
- continue to support providers using the protocol
- ensure mechanisms are in place to engage with care home residents and their families, to ensure that their viewpoint is included in the plan.

In closing, it would not have been possible to raise the response without the support of our partners, especially those in care homes. Our executive member for Adult Social Care, Cllr Charles Margetts is keen to thank all care home staff for the immense effort they are putting in to keep people supported. This has also been noted in response to requests to sign up for the NHS Tracker, with 100% of the care homes in the borough having signed up and 90% having updated it in the last week. This level of response would not have been possible without the effort, support, and guidance of the Taskforce.

All of the work detailed in this plan is guided and informed by a wide group of stakeholders from across the health and social care system. A governing group of key decision makers meets at least weekly to monitor progress and take appropriate actions. The voice of providers is key to this. The stake holder group is made up of:

- Wokingham Borough Council
- Reading Borough Council
- West Berkshire Council
- Berkshire West Clinical Commissioning Group
- Berkshire Care Association
- GP's
- Berkshire Health Foundation Trust

Whilst developing this letter and template, we sought advice from Public Health, Healthwatch, and the West of Berkshire Local Resilience Forum Representative.

Fidelma Tinneney, Berkshire Care Association, says that the Berkshire BCA has participated in the health and care system covid-19 calls, ensuring matters of concern are raised at the highest levels locally and addressed rapidly. From ensuring staff keyworker passes that are recognised across the patch for all care services, to supporting specific care organisations, their staff and families where there have been multiple tragic deaths, co-ordinating PPE and truly having a whole systems approach, this has been invaluable.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Susan Parsonage', written in a cursive style.

Susan Parsonage

Chief Executive

Enclosure: Care Home Support Template
Protocol for dealing with Covid Outbreak in Care Homes