

29<sup>th</sup> May 2020



Helen Whately MP  
Minister of State (Minister for Care)  
Department of Health and Social Care  
39 Victoria Street  
London  
SW1H 0EU

By email to: [CareandReform2@communities.gov.uk](mailto:CareandReform2@communities.gov.uk)

**Chief Executive**

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**Your Ref:**

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Dear Mrs Whately,

**Support for Care Homes Return**

I write in response to your letter of 14<sup>th</sup> May 2020. This letter is accompanied also by our completed template (appended to the same email as this letter).

**Current position**

I am able to confirm that my staff are carrying out daily assurance/support activities for care homes within West Berkshire in relation to the COVID pandemic. This activity relates to all care homes in the district and is inclusive of all client groups.

This assurance begins with the monitoring of the online Trackers. This is to avoid any unnecessary drain on care home staff time because Providers have expressed their frustration at responding to multiple requests for information.

Our message to all care homes is to highlight the benefits to all of ensuring the Trackers are up to date. There are 45 care homes in West Berkshire. The tracker records 46 care homes because one provider is registered on the tracker twice. Of the 45 care homes, 40 have updated the Tracker in the last seven days. Where care homes are not completing or updating the Trackers, we are making direct contact to gather information and to reinforce the expectation. We are also exploring using contractual mechanisms to prompt compliance where they are available. We have also made further contact with homes over the past week to get as full a picture as possible in order to complete the required return.

In addition to this work, West Berkshire Council staff regularly liaise with others providing support to care homes. Our approach has also been informed through discussion with local advocacy groups (Healthwatch and The Advocacy People). In preparation for submitting this return, we have also liaised closely with the neighbouring authorities of Reading and Wokingham and our local Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG). The work of Berkshire Healthcare Foundation Trust's Care Home Support Team has been especially valuable during this time.

We have been well supported by colleagues in the CCG who are continuing to develop and expand their support offer including work on:

- Infection Control visits
- Training on a range of relevant topics including infection control, medication and verification of death
- Access to Clinical support
- Digital and Analytic support

At the time of writing, the CQC Tracker indicates that there are 2 care homes in West Berkshire with active Covid infections. The current position in West Berkshire does not give any reason for particular concern. Where we identify that a care home is experiencing difficulties, a suitable support offer is mobilised.

In terms of market resilience, I confirm that West Berkshire Council will make at least 75% of the specified funding available to care homes in the area. The terms of the grant – namely those costs which are considered in-scope – are restrictive and do not leave care homes with the flexibility they need to ensure effective future work.

I confirm that information about the available funding and support offer will be published online once the requirement has been confirmed. There is already reference to the funding available to the care sector on the following West Berkshire Council web page:

<https://info.westberks.gov.uk/commissioning>

West Berkshire Council has already taken a range of actions to support the care market locally. This has included establishing a process to evaluate requests for additional funding in addition to agreeing inflationary uplifts as required. We are also undertaking a more comprehensive piece of work to update our Market Position Statement.

It should be noted that there remain concerns about the funding for social care in the future. The costs to social care providers will not be reducing in the near future. PPE is increasing in cost and there are the associated costs of supporting time out for care homes to support increased sickness, staff training and annual leave.

I will now address some of the more detailed domains identified in your letter.

### **Infection Prevention and Control**

The Berkshire West Clinical Commissioning Group are supporting care homes with an Infection control nurse, who is offering training and guidance to care homes. Pulse oximeters are now being made available to the care homes locally along with extra stethoscopes and thermometers. Training materials have been provided to the care homes locally. The need for ongoing support of this nature is being considered in a Berkshire West group. The Berkshire Healthcare Foundation Trust offers support and guidance to care homes locally through their Care Home Support Team and Rapid Response and Treatment services.

Most of the homes in our district are limiting their use of agency staff. Where agency staff are in use, they are being ring-fenced to specific homes where possible. 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.

We continue to make arrangements as required for people unable to return to their usual accommodation and this is managed on a case by case basis.

### **Testing**

The availability of comprehensive and regular testing for care home staff and residents with or without symptoms is only now becoming more available and we have been linking the prioritisation of testing with our support calls to homes. 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

There is a local testing resource for symptomatic cases. This has been in place for some weeks and is a valued resource.

### **Personal Protective Equipment and Equipment Supply**

The availability of PPE has been problematic through this crisis. West Berkshire Council has a well-established process to supply emergency stocks of Personal Protective Equipment to provider services. While the immediate requirement is being met, the supply chain may again become stretched as other businesses/organisations begin to source it. Clearly, care homes are not the only settings in which PPE is a requirement.

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.

### **Workforce Support**

West Berkshire Council has not been approached by significant numbers of returning practitioners or new volunteers offering to work in care home settings. It is an environment where robust and skilled practice is needed. On that basis, the use of volunteers/returners may increase infection risk.

Volunteers have principally been deployed in our Community Support Hub. As things stand currently, we do not believe that we need to call further on volunteers or returning professionals but we will keep this position under review and will respond where approached by care homes to do so.

## **Clinical Support**

General Practices are increasing their offer of support to care homes which takes the form of:

- Weekly check-ins to review patients identified as a clinical priority for assessment and care (via Multi-Disciplinary Teams, where possible), development and delivery of personalised care and support plans for care home residents
- Provision of pharmacy and medication support to care homes
- 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.

It should be noted that there remain concerns regarding the role and accountability of the Clinical Leads.

## **Plan Going Forward**

Social Care and Public Health Teams across West Berkshire Council will continue to work with system partners across Berkshire West to enhance the support offer to care homes. This work will be done with partners including:

- Wokingham Borough Council
- Reading Borough Council
- Berkshire West Clinical Commissioning Group
- Berkshire Healthcare Foundation Trust
- Berkshire Care Association

## **Summary**

In summary, the position regarding care homes in West Berkshire has improved significantly over the last few weeks due to a combination of factors. This includes a greater understanding of the virus and an improved support offer. It is also very much due to the dedicated efforts and highly skilled work of the staff and managers who deliver care home services.

That said, there remain a number of risks and challenges which will need further work. Some of this work will need either guidance or intervention from central government. We continue to monitor the situation closely because it is clear how quickly the position can change.

Yours sincerely,



**Nick Carter**  
**Chief Executive**

Enc: West Berkshire Council Care Home Return