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Helen Whately MP
Minister of State for Care
39 Victoria Street
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Dear Minister of State for Care

Re: Support for Care Homes

Cumbria is a diverse county, covering an area of 2,635 square miles. The large and rural nature of Cumbria presents unique challenges in service design and delivery. Cumbria County Council (CCC), the six District Councils and two National Park Authorities, two Clinical Commissioning Groups and 4 acute Hospital sites service a population of 498,900.

There are 150 registered care homes in Cumbria (providing 4424 registered beds). 50% of these care homes are operated by local providers, 13% (19 homes with 626 registered beds) are provided directly by the local authority and 37% operated by national organisations. Approximately 3500 people were resident in care homes prior to the COVID-19 emergency.

Cumbria County Council's Adult Social Care Commissioning and Public Health teams, Cumbria Care (CCC In house care provider), the Clinical Commissioning Groups, Primary Care and NHS Providers are working together with the Cumbria Resilience Forum to facilitate the support needed to coordinate Cumbria's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Strategic Coordination Group (SCG) of the Cumbria Resilience Forum had established support to care homes as a key objective in early April and established a Care Homes sub-group to direct and coordinate the strategic support response.

A range of joint measures are in place to support local market resilience in Cumbria during the COVID-19 pandemic. Joint measures have a particular focus on the following areas:

- Daily information collection to assess the state of the local market;
- Managing COVID-19 outbreaks in care homes
- Access to and supply of emergency PPE;
- Support with workforce shortages and other related issues;
- Assess to and coordination of testing facilities for care home residents and staff; and
- Support for short-term financial pressures
- Access to information and guidance supporting the COVID19 situation for staff, providers and residents and families

Daily information collection to assess the state of the local market

Cumbria County Council's Commissioning Team coordinates daily phone calls to all local Independent care homes. These are supportive conversations with care home managers to provide the offer of support to and assess the key market risk factors. The relationships built up with the care homes is a key feature of Cumbria's response to the COVID-19 emergency with the supply of key information being used to effectively coordinate the local response. Feedback from care home providers overwhelmingly supports this personal approach to COVID-19 related reporting compared on the online self-assessment system offered by the NECS Capacity Tracker. CCC is working with NECS to ensure that the baseline information required for national reporting is fed in to the Capacity Tracker in order to reduce the burden of reporting requirements on providers. It should be noted that, throughout the COVID-19 emergency it has proved exceedingly burdensome for both the Local Authority and Care Providers to use the NECS Capacity Tracker and that as I write, the reporting required to complete **COVID19 Care Home Support Implementation Status Template** is still not available via the tracker. CCC has undertaken a significant piece of work with the care sector to provide the information required to complete this template.

Information collected as part of this process is used to inform local market intelligence, the daily multi-agency SitRep and escalate any required emergency response to the Strategic Coordination Group of the Local Resilience Forum (LRF). Service critical information and requests for support are used in inform urgent local response measures such as supply of emergency PPE, support with workforce shortages and short-term financial pressures.

Managing COVID-19 outbreaks in care homes

Managing outbreaks of COVID-19 within care homes has been a real challenge in Cumbria, with the national issues of testing, hospital capacity and PPE supplies being felt locally. Sadly the care home sector has experienced a higher than usual loss of life during April and May 2020 despite the best efforts of local response organisations. The Local Authority, CCGs and hospital trusts and the care sector have over the last few months been required to quickly adapt to the emerging situation and changing government discharge policies in order to balance required hospital capacity with safeguarding vulnerable people in care homes.

Early decisions to close homes to all but end of life visitors, only essential maintenance and only essential clinical visitors were taken. In addition many providers including Cumbria Care have restricted staffing to only working at one home through this period. All homes have limited the use of any external or agency staff to only in the circumstances where they were required to keep residents safe. Increased use of video links for GP assessments, district nurses assessments etc have also reduced the need for visitors into the care homes.

Other measures such as moving residents to close separate units to support reduced staffing levels have needed to be taken and families informed throughout of any changes made. Several homes have however identified that effectively isolating residents with dementia has proved challenging within their services. Where residents have been identified as being potentially symptomatic they have been immediately cared for in isolation and the appropriate PPE worn by care staff.

Outbreak Control Team (OCT)

Local multi-agency health and social care systems were established at the outset of the emergency to assist care homes with managing an outbreak of COVID-19. In Cumbria, outbreaks of COVID-19 are overseen by the **Outbreak Control Team (OCT)** which includes representatives from C C C, North Cumbria CCG and Morecambe Bay CCG. The OCT coordinates and discusses daily all outbreaks in care homes using intelligence received from the daily update calls and other contact with homes by the Infection Prevention and Control Team, County Council and NHS IPC staff. It then arranges additional Infection Protection Control (IPC) and public health advice for homes and co-ordinates urgent testing for all symptomatic residents using local testing arrangements under Pillar 1. The OCT may also arrange testing for care home staff under Pillar 1 or Pillar 2 where appropriate.

In accordance with national guidance, care homes report suspected cases of COVID-19 to the Public Health England (PHE) Health Protection Team (HPT). This is supplemented with local intelligence from the daily sitreps to ensure all potential outbreaks are recorded and supported. All suspected cases are reported to the OCT for oversight and detailed management. This includes approving steps to declare when an outbreak has formally concluded and subsequent discharges to a COVID19 negative home can begin.

Public Health and IPC advice and support

Local IPC and public health advice has been available to all care homes via the local Public Health and IPC teams throughout the pandemic. Care homes have access to a central point of contact for IPC advice (IPC@cumbria.gov.uk) and direct advice is available from public health professionals. In addition specialist Infection Prevention training is being rolled out to all care homes on an individual, web-based face-to-face basis by both CCGs.

The County Council is in daily contact with all care homes (both internal and external) and collect daily information on the number of confirmed and suspected cases of COVID-19 within the sector and feed this information into the OCT and daily COVID-19 SitRep.

Access to and supply of emergency PPE

Local supply chains of PPE to care homes and community based providers have been stretched during the pandemic, with many providers of social care being forced to rely on short term emergency supplies. CC C have supplied details of alternative PPE suppliers and encouraged providers to comply with national PPE guidance. Care providers have continually advised us that national solutions, such as the **Supply Disruption Service** and the delayed **PPE Dedicated Supply Channel** have not met their emergency requirements for PPE and as such this role has fallen to the Cumbria LRF and Cumbria County Council.

Early in the pandemic Cumbria's SCG established a multi-agency **PPE subgroup** to provide system wide shared situational awareness across health, social care, education and the voluntary sector in relation to the availability and demand for PPE and to enable prioritised coordinated decision making in relation to the allocation of the LRF stock of PPE. This built on earlier work by a County Council PPE group to review guidance, review supply levels and ensure that mutual aid was in place for both Independent sector care homes, Cumbria Care services and County Council services.

MAST

Cumbria's LRF receives shipments of PPE from Central Government. However, Cumbria County Council has also undertaken significant procurement to ensure there is sufficient PPE to meet the needs of the care sector, with orders by the end of May exceeding £500,000. The Council manages these PPE stocks on behalf of the LRF providing warehousing, stock management, transport, PPE emergency contact centre and overall management via the MAST Team.

Cumbria County Council has around 15 staff deployed into MAST and provides direct PPE deliveries to care providers at their services. This service has worked to ensure that it understands the PPE demand of the care sector based on their staff, service user numbers and use of PPE in line with national guidance. PPE usage and stock-level information collected as part of the daily provider contact is used to identify any potential PPE gaps and to provide a proactive response in order to keep people safe. MAST provides a 7-day per week emergency PPE contact centre to respond to short-term shortages and to date we have delivered over half a million items of PPE to the care sector.

In early April when the care sector simply didn't have access to enough PPE (government deliveries had not started and our own procurement had not yet arrived) the Council arranged mutual aid from the hospitals in Cumbria to support the care sector. We transported this to them where necessary. We have coordinated huge volumes of donated PPE (late March into April) and warehoused and distributed this to care homes following checking that it met the required standards in line with national guidance.

PPE advice and guidance from local Public Health team

Cumbria County Council's Public Health Team has ensured that the care sector is in receipt of the latest guidance as this has evolved and changed, and has supported the sector by developing tailored PPE guidance for individual care settings to aid understanding and compliance with the National Guidance. In response to a significant number of queries around PPE a separate FAQ County Council website page was established that was available to all providers and the general public providing clarification and additional advice on many issues raised. Clarification was provided by the Public Health team supported by the council's health and safety team and Cumbria Care's infection control lead.

Support with workforce shortages

Emergency Response Cell and COVID-19 Provider Emergency Response Line

Cumbria's SCG established an **Emergency Response Cell** on the 24th April. The cell provides a dedicated 24/7 response service for care homes experiencing staffing shortages and other critical service pressures. The Emergency Response Cell is able to quickly deploy mutual aid or alternative staffing measures in order to keep services operational. Financial support for additional emergency staffing is also available to support providers with the financial burden of additional staffing and to reduce the movement of agency staff between care homes.

The Emergency Response Cell has also developed a multiple system failure process to ensure continuity of care arrangements in the event of a critical service failure.

The Council has developed an express recruitment, employment checking and training programme for volunteers and redeployed staff and newly recruited bank staff. These staff form part of the emergency staffing response offer and can be deployed quickly onto a care provider's staff bank if required as part of mutual aid arrangements. Mutual aid from local NHS teams is also in place and can be accessed if required.

Access to and coordination of testing facilities for care home residents and staff;

It is well documented that the National response to testing for care homes residents and staff has been haphazard. Early communications by the Care Quality Commission advising care sector staff to travel to national testing centres in Gateshead and Preston (with return journey times in excess of 3 hours) were unhelpful and did little to ease the anxiety of a workforce already feeling the strain of working with vulnerable people with COVID-19. To assist, Cumbria's LRF established mobile local testing centres run by the military to provide testing for care home staff closer to their workplaces. Additional local testing sites have also now been established in Cumbria and staff have been supported to access testing where required. It is a personal decision by staff to attend testing.

Testing for care home residents via the local Pillar 1 testing regime is managed by the OCT with detailed records of confirmed and latest cases maintained to support and manage outbreaks within care homes. Local universal testing for care home staff is also managed via the OCT to ensure any outbreaks within staff teams can be managed by emergency staffing support and mutual aid measures described above.

Support for short-term financial pressures

The Council is fully aware of the financial pressures faced by the sector during the COVID-19 pandemic. Daily liaison with care homes has demonstrated drastically escalating costs for PPE (both in terms of usage and unit costs), the cost of maintaining services due to high absence rates and sick pay, and increasing the impact of reduced occupancy. The Council is coordinating a range of support measures for the care sector and is considering requests for additional funding on a case by case basis, as per the PNN 02/20 guidance from central government.

Mature funding agreements are in place with both CCGs to ensure that support measures are correctly funded via the COVID-19 NHS discharge funding and the other COVID-19 financial support packages managed by the local authority.

Access to information and guidance supporting the COVID19 situation for staff, providers and residents and families

Throughout this period there has been a commitment to joint communications across the care sector. Both CCGs have agreed that Cumbria County Council will manage communications to the care sector on their behalf. Cumbria County Council has also ensured that Independent sector providers have access to the same level of advice and guidance as the Council's in-house services. Key communications to the sector have included changes in approach from community nursing teams, requirements around enhanced care planning with families, GP changes to on line consultations etc. All of this information has been made available on a publically available website page. In addition as part of the Care Home Group support work additional information and guidance has been added to ensure all care homes have access to the available support from NHS colleagues, IPC teams etc.

The advice and guidance will continue to be updated as further clarification of discharge principles and requirements, outbreak control team decision making and the overall approach to ensure safe discharges continue into the future are updated.

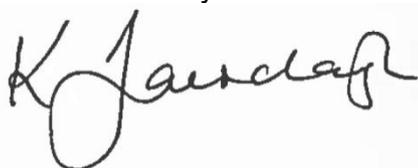
Alternative accommodation and care arrangements for people who need be isolated and shielded

The provision of accommodation and care arrangements for people outside of their normal care home has been challenging given the fragility of the care sector as a whole and the high number of staffing vacancies within existing services. In March and early April, sufficient national testing capacity was not available to provide pre-discharge swabbing for all hospital patients and therefore any discharges that did take place during this period were made with direction to isolate residents within their care home (regardless of COVID-diagnosis) in line with national discharge guidance at the time.

As the staffing position within the care sector has gradually improved, the Council and NHS partners are working with the sector to develop specialist COVID-recovery facilities, but only in where identified homes can provide assurance of designated separate facilities, a dedicated staffing cohort and can demonstrate completion of the enhanced IPC training being delivered by the NHS. There is a clear need to understand the hospital capacity situation but this needs to be balanced with robust IPC and cohorting arrangements which effectively minimise the risk of transmission between vulnerable people and protect care home staff. It is recognised that effectively cohorting staff and residents within care homes will add additional challenges to an already fragile sector struggling to cope with the burden of reduced staffing and escalating costs. The health and social care system is working closely with the care sector to understand and minimise these risks whilst recognising that prolonged periods of hospitalisation must be minimised for people who no longer require acute hospital care.

I trust the information supplied is sufficient to confirm to you that the county council is focused on supporting the care market through a range of measures and that this has been a key priority for us over the last few, very difficult months. As always we welcome feedback and look forward to playing an active part in any future developments on a national level.

Yours sincerely



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CC'd

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