

Helen Whately MP  
Minister for Care  
Department of Health & Social Care

**Date:** Friday 29 May 2020

Dear Helen,

### **Support for Care Homes in Somerset**

Supporting social care providers has been a key priority for Somerset County Council and its stakeholders throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. In recognition early on of the vital role our care sector plays in our collective system resilience, we have sought to offer whatever support we can to minimize the risk of provider failure during the COVID-19 crisis and, crucially, offer additional protection to those individuals reliant on our local provision.

Somerset County Council prides itself on having long had robust and supportive oversight arrangements in place with our care provider market. The proportion of Good and Outstanding-rated care provision in the county exceeds national and regional averages, and we work closely in partnership with the Registered Care Providers Association (RCPA), Care Quality Commission and Clinical Commissioning Group as part of our routine commissioning activity.

Together with our Public Health and Clinical Commissioning Group colleagues, Adult Social Care has been working hard with care homes to support them to manage and respond to the unique pressures that COVID-19 has placed upon them and take all possible steps to mitigate and prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

This covering letter sets out an overview of current activity and our forward plans, in response to your 'Support for Care Homes' letter of 14<sup>th</sup> May 2020, supported by a completed Capacity Tracker template (attached as an appendix).

We understand that, in the spirit of transparency, these planning returns should be made public and can confirm the documents have been published on our website.

## **Joint work to ensure care market resilience**

Somerset's Adult Social Care Service quickly established a COVID-19 Incident 'Room' staffed by strategic managers and business support to serve as a central advice point and repository, with a dedicated phonenumber and email address. From feedback received, we know that providers and other stakeholders have found this single point of contact extremely helpful. We have also provided additional out of hours capacity, including over weekends, to ensure 7-day support is available as and when required.

Update briefings have been routinely emailed to our local care providers since the start of the national outbreak - sharing latest guidance, advising of developments, and providing responses to frequently asked questions. Additionally, a dedicated provider webpage was established to host and manage information flow and promote the range of support available.

Structured follow-up arrangements for homes that have notified outbreaks to Public Health England (PHE) has been developed by our own Public Health team and agreed across the system; this has ensured the co-ordination of resources and limited additional workload for homes.

Welfare calls and contacts have been shared across our health and care services to routinely 'check in' with local care settings and offer infection prevention and control (IPC) advice and guidance. We have also ensured a commissioning presence at virtual meetings hosted by the RCPA.

We can confirm that daily arrangements are in place to review local care market data and intelligence and respond accordingly. Capacity Tracker champions are in place within the Local Authority and CCG, and have monitored and prompted completion of the database to support oversight activity. Daily public health dashboards are available detailing outbreak information, and additional work is being undertaken to compile multi-agency information into mapping functionality and datasets to better inform system responses, with data being broken from County to District to Primary Care Network (PCN) and ultimately provider level.

The Local Authority secured access to testing for care staff through the local NHS staff testing route from early April, removing the need for care staff to travel to a regional testing centre. Additionally, the Council has made weekly nominations (from 22/05/20) for whole home testing to inform the management of vulnerable individuals.

The Local Authority has also procured and distributed, free of charge, as much Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) as needed to supplement national supplies. This comprised frequent deliveries to care homes as well as other regulated settings, including domiciliary care providers and affiliated micro providers. Care provider responses on the tracker help to illustrate the results of these efforts on PPE. The Local Authority will be reviewing the financial sustainability of this provision into the future.

### **Collective level of confidence**

The Somerset system has a collective level of confidence that actions are being implemented and plans being put in place to ensure resilience locally. With both operational and strategic-level Care Sector Boards established during COVID-19, supplementing existing contract, quality and safeguarding activity across commissioning authorities, we are assured in our ability to identify or be alerted to any concerns promptly, and respond accordingly.

These Boards have included representatives from the Care Quality Commission, Public Health, Primary Care, Community Health and Acute Trusts, the RCPA and the CCG as well as Adult Social Care making them well placed to join up all the support initiatives available, including the Community Health settings guidance and Primary Care response.

### **Commissioning approach to address short-term financial pressures**

We recognized that many provider organisations risked suffering financial losses as a result of the challenges and consequences of COVID-19, and established early on our commitment to continuing to fund contracted services, whether delivered or not, at agreed/contracted levels, even where services are unavoidably reduced and support not delivered.

In addition to the PPE distributions at no cost to care providers, both the Clinical Commissioning Group and the Local Authority implemented a 10% fee uplift on fee levels, which was paid as a lump sum (three months in advance by Somerset County Council, and monthly by the CCG). This premium was paid on all our contracted rates across homecare and residential/nursing care (including all Learning Disability and Mental Health services in these categories) and was welcomed. For Somerset County Council, this investment totaled £3m. We have ensured all payments were made as promptly as possible to support business sustainability.

Somerset County Council is contractually required to review fee rates paid to social care providers on an annual basis and to ensure that in doing so it considers the costs of providing care. For 2020/21, fee levels and uplifts varied from 3% to 6%, representing a significant investment on the part of the Local Authority in recognition of the vital part that social care provision plays in the overall health and care of people in the county. This settlement was agreed in March and commenced from April.

### **Alternative accommodation approach**

In partnership with Somerset Care Limited, the Local Authority has opened up a new 37-bedded 'pop-up' care home in Yeovil as an alternative accommodation source for people who have tested positive for COVID-19 or are displaying symptoms but cannot safely return to their care home or own home. The scale and speed of the project was considerable, including a fit-out that would usually take some 4-6 weeks being achieved in just 2 days. At the start of the pandemic, the Council issued an appeal for carers and received 184 external applications. 65 staff members were recruited, including a County

Councillor who retrained for the role. A Registered Manager for the home was redeployed via Somerset CCG.

The Local Authority has also commissioned 90 beds from Somerset Care, as well as additional block beds for hospital discharge complex OPMH and made 60 spot placements.

We have also implemented additional Mental Health support, with “step down” accommodation established to free up acute Mental health ward space and reduce the risks of infection in those settings.

### **Local coordination for workforce support**

Prior to the 10% fee uplift, the Local Authority covered additional agency staffing costs, including supplying nurses and health care assistants to replace care provider staff that were sick/shielding due to COVID.

In collaboration with our Acute Hospital Trust colleagues, the Local Authority has also recently established a new Temporary Staffing solution to our care provider market, enabling providers to access bank/agency staff at competitive rates. The Temporary Staffing Team at Somerset NHS Foundation Trust is taking the lead role in the coordination of this service. With a skilled team that have access to a wide range of bank and substantive colleagues, as well as bank reward schemes that can be used to promote specific vacancies and an in-house Lead Nurse service that can provide clinical advice and guidance, the service is well-equipped to support provider staffing needs when internal solutions have been exhausted. This is a real positive to come out of the crisis - providing future access to a joined-up collaborative bank between health and social care providers which will further develop our partnership working and support efficiencies across the Somerset system longer term. Infection control measures are in place to mitigate the known risk of staff working across settings.

In addition to this we have joined forces with our community health trust to establish joint locality teams and shared resource to support homes locally. These teams have been ready and able to also step in should care homes require an immediate response or experience short term staffing issues.

The NHS in Somerset is doing all it can to offer support to care homes, and is working hard to provide additional and consistent support in three areas:

- weekly check-ins and rapid access to GP and community services for every home;
- compassionate and thoughtful advance care planning;
- clinical pharmacy support for medication reviews.

I trust this letter serves to outline some of the work undertaken by stakeholders across Somerset to work in partnership with our care provider colleagues and offer support where it is required. National feedback has been that Somerset's care providers have felt incredibly well supported during the pandemic and we, in turn, have been immensely grateful for their hard work and dedication to our local residents.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'P. S. Flaherty', written in a cursive style.

**Patrick Flaherty**

**Chief Executive**

Somerset County Council

*Attachment: Capacity Tracker Support Information, 29/05/20*