

8th May 2020

25 Barns Street
Ayr, KA7 1XB
Tel: 01292 270240

Mr Lewis Macdonald MSP
Convenor – Health & Sport Committee
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

Short focused inquiry into the impact of COVID-19 in care homes

Dear Mr Macdonald,

I am writing to you in your role as Convenor of the Health & Sport Committee to express Scottish Care's reservations relating to the current inquiry the Committee is undertaking into the impact of COVID-19 in care homes.

As you know, Scottish Care is keen to engage with any inquiry or other Parliamentary process relating to social care and seeks to do so positively and constructively. As an organisation and across the independent sector, we welcome monitoring and scrutiny processes from which learning and improvement can result. At no time will this be more important than in relation to the current situation so that we can fully understand the response of Scotland and its various sectors to an unprecedented pandemic, especially to inform future planning.

However, our concerns around this particular inquiry are three-fold:

1. The purpose of the inquiry
2. How this is communicated to different audiences
3. The timing of the inquiry

I would like to outline these reservations in turn:

1. The focus of recent weeks has understandably been the care home sector due to the hugely distressing way in which these services, their staff and especially the people supported by them have been impacted by Coronavirus, including the many deaths which have occurred amongst this particularly vulnerable population. In seeking to help these services to prevent, control and minimise outbreaks, we welcome the support provided through Scottish Government and Directors of Public Health. These have involved working with care home services to understand what support they need, alongside the sector remaining in very close contact with Scottish Government to understand persistent and emerging challenges. It is our understanding, communicated by Committee members including yourself, that the purpose of the inquiry is to *'find out the issues care homes are facing, how they have been*

supported by the Government and what can be done now to help them deal with this unprecedented challenge. We would contend that this active and ongoing process is already in hand through the existing mechanisms outlined. Therefore additional requests for care homes to provide this information through the inquiry is a duplication of reporting at a time of challenge where the focus must be on care provision as the priority.

2. Rightly, everyone who wants to participate must have an opportunity to share their experience of care home responses to the pandemic and must be part of any reflection, inquiry or future planning. This includes care staff, families and residents. However, we are concerned about the inquiry's current lines of questioning to these audiences which ask for details of a care home's preparation, management and safety measures. As we know, understanding and therefore guidance relating to COVID-19 have changed and evolved continuously. Indeed, at the time of writing we are on version 7 of Health Protection Scotland guidance to care homes alongside frequent new editions of guidance from other bodies, some of which is at best confusing and at worst contradictory. It is therefore likely to be difficult for these groups to provide a robust and up to date picture of decisions and policies when much of this is obviously being progressed by senior management and is changing regularly, not least when most relatives are not able to visit care homes at present. Instead, there are really important questions that should be asked of these groups in terms of how they have been involved in decisions, informed and connected to loved ones and any changes, and what support residents, families and staff need at this time.
3. Whilst we recognise the importance of continual learning and information sharing during this pandemic, we do have concerns about the timing of this inquiry. Care homes unfortunately remain at the heart of COVID-19 challenges with many care homes currently dealing with outbreaks or working exceptionally hard to prevent or recover from them. Many staff, families and residents are in the midst of dealing with stressful and emotional circumstances, including grief and bereavement. In terms of services themselves, we do not yet know if we have passed the peak of the virus in these settings and whether those fortunate to have avoided cases thus far will continue to do so, whilst we of course hope that they do. The timing of this inquiry is therefore, in our view, premature and indeed risks further alarm and stress to individuals still very much dealing with the impact of the virus personally and professionally. It is important that these matters are handled robustly yet sensitively and we believe this is better achieved in the coming weeks and months once hopefully a period of reflection and fuller learning can take place.

As the representative body for independent social care services, Scottish Care of course has our own views on each of the questions posed by the Committee's inquiry and would be happy to contribute in any way that is considered helpful.

25 Barns Street

Ayr, KA7 1XB

Tel: 01292 270240

We would also welcome any further discussion on the points raised in this letter, including any assurances or adjustments that could be put in place to ensure that the Committee's inquiry is handled sensitively and fairly given the present circumstances.

If the issues we have raised can be addressed, we believe it will enable the Committee to obtain the necessary comprehensive picture of care home challenges during COVID-19, which is essential for us all to contribute to, understand and learn from.

Yours sincerely

Dr Donald Macaskill
CEO, Scottish Care