

Lewis Macdonald MSP
Health and Sport Committee
T3.60
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

14th December 2020

Dear Lewis

The impact of COVID-19 on care at home

Thank you for your letter of 11 November, accompanying the results of the Health and Sport Committee's survey into care at home.

First and foremost, I would like to pay tribute to all our health and social care staff who have been working on the frontline throughout this pandemic. I recognise that this has been an incredibly difficult time for those both receiving and providing adult social care and I would like to thank carers for the significant work they have done and continue to do.

I welcome this report and the findings of the Health and Sport Committee's survey on care at home as an opportunity to reflect on what has gone well for the sector and to review areas where further improvements should be considered.

I acknowledge the concerns raised by the survey respondents. It is critical that social care support is maintained and the Scottish Government has been working with Local Authorities and Health and Social Care Partnerships to assure people that temporary changes to support should not be long-term.

The recently published Adult Social Care Winter Preparedness Plan makes clear that Local Authorities must balance the risk of Covid-19 transmission from restarting some services with the need to ensure that social care packages allow people to live fulfilling lives. Our priority is to ensure that the care and support needs are met in a way that is right for people who require them and their carers.

I was interested to read of concerns that were raised around safety, in particular with regards to testing for care staff, PPE, training and workload. On 23rd October, I published the

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Strategic Testing Framework for the Pandemic, which sets out plans to prioritise testing for care at home staff. I discussed this further in Parliament on 25th November, taking a phased approach and targeting, in the first instance, from January those who work in areas of high prevalence of the virus.

PPE is, of course, a vital tool in our efforts to minimise the spread of Covid-19. Ensuring our essential social care workforce and unpaid carers have access to the PPE they need in order to be safe during the pandemic is absolutely crucial. Since March, we have been providing top-up and emergency provision of PPE free of charge to the social care sector to ensure that staff and unpaid carers have what they need. We have published advice for unpaid carers who provide personal care, which covers the situations in which they should be using PPE. Where that is the case, and the routes they normally use to access it are unavailable (or where they haven't used PPE previously), carers can contact their local Carers Centre, who will be able to assist and put them in touch with their local Hub, where they can access supplies. As we move into winter, I have agreed that current support arrangements for social care PPE should continue through to March 2021.

On recruitment, our national online recruitment portal, developed by NHS Education Scotland and Scottish Social Services Council is an important mechanism for enabling those with relevant skills and experience to support health and social care services and it remains available to providers. Employers have direct access to the portal enabling quick and effective redeployment of care workers.

Since May, we have provided an additional £100 million to the social care sector to support providers through sustainability payments with costs related to the pandemic, such as additional staffing costs, to increase the capacity of support social care and ensure fair working conditions for these key workers. Longer term, we are clear that attracting and retaining the right people and raising the status of social care as a profession is key to delivering quality care. Consideration is being given to further

We have established an Independent Review of adult social care to ensure that we address the challenges and opportunities that face adult social care in Scotland and we are committed to ensuring we have effective, person-centred, sustainable social care support that is right for people, including unpaid carers, now and in the future.

I appreciate that, as your report highlights, many unpaid carers are facing increased pressures as a result of the pandemic. We are in regular contact with carer representatives to make sure we understand carers' concerns and can act accordingly. For example, we are working alongside key organisations to ensure carers have up to date information on caring safely and what the coronavirus restrictions mean for caring situations. Our National Wellbeing Hub now has a dedicated section for unpaid carers with resources to support carers to look after their mental health and wellbeing. And, early in the pandemic, we established a £500,000 fund to help local carer organisations transition to remote working so that they can continue to provide their invaluable advice and support to carers in their areas.

With so many people becoming carers for the first time this year, it's more important than ever that we get the message out about what support is available. Our current national marketing campaign is designed to help more people to recognise when they are in a caring role and to access support. See www.nhsinform.scot/caring for more details.

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I note that your report also highlights concerns about access to respite and day care support, which I know has been a real challenge for many people throughout the pandemic. We have provided guidance to support safe reopening of respite and day care services; highlighted their importance to local partners; and expanded the Short Breaks Fund to enable more people to access Covid-safe activities. With some services still closed, and those which are open operating at reduced capacity to enable distancing, it is really important that there is dialogue with supported people and carers about alternatives. I know a lot of providers have been putting in place alternatives alongside traditional support.

In relation to the Care Inspectorate report, it was agreed with COSLA and social care providers that a new process for sustainability payments to the sector was required from December to March to support the Adult Social Care Winter Preparedness Plan. Drivers for changing the payment model were to streamline the process to minimise the administrative burden on local authorities and providers, and ensure transparency, equity and best value. Following intensive discussions, guidance detailing how support should be maintained and what can be claimed for has been developed and following Cabinet Secretary and COSLA Leaders approval, was issued to the sector on 4 December 2020. We will continue to review funding for the sector to ensure services remain able to deliver during this crucial time.

JEANE FREEMAN

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