



Covid-19 update 23 September

Dear All

As always, I hope this letter finds you well.

I cannot quite believe that it has been nearly 12 weeks since the last time I wrote to you. In some ways, this is testament to how settled things have been, and that we have had systems and processes in place that have worked well. However, I do recognise that some of you may have felt the absence of a regular update, and I will endeavour to communicate more regularly, especially as the dreaded second wave now seems to be upon us.

There are a number of items I would like to cover in this update, including changes we have made to each home to help us manage and control Covid-19 better, our management plans for the second wave and, of course, the key issue of visiting our homes.

Firstly, we have spent the last few months continuing to make improvements to the environments in both homes. We have been focused on making improvements that allow us manage infection prevention and control procedures more effectively. These changes mean that we can make the best use of new cleaning and disinfecting procedures. We have also made changes to some of the communal spaces so that we can, in the event of any outbreak in the home, safely cohort residents and staff in different spaces.

We have developed and issued a set of policies about the management of Covid-19 and all staff are undertaking revised infection prevention and control training. We have continued to purchase PPE at levels higher than we have needed, and now have a good stockpile of masks, gloves and hand sanitiser, should further shortages in the supply chain be experienced. All staff have undergone risk assessments and where enhanced PPE has been identified as being required, we have been able to provide this.

Some of you will have seen the recent posts on Facebook about the new summerhouses we have erected in the gardens at both Homes. They are due to be painted in the next few days, and we will be running lights and heating to them. Our plan is to use these summerhouses to support relative visits over the winter months. We have also identified a room in each home that we may also be able to use to support winter visiting.

This brings me on to visiting. As you all know, we have been operating a plan of one regular named visitor for each resident. I know that this has been far from ideal. I want to say a huge thank you to all of you who have followed this principle and have worked with us to make this plan successful. I am pleased to say that since we have adopted this programme we have only had a few isolated positive results returned and have been able to manage these cases appropriately. Whilst the visiting arrangements are far from ideal, I hope that you can take some comfort that they have played a crucial part in helping keep this virus at bay.

I know that this has been exceptionally tough for you all. No-one wanted to be in this situation. Unfortunately, we have had a few incidences of people trying to bend our visiting rules. Some people have also been somewhat rude and at times hostile towards our staff because they cannot visit as they would like. Whilst I understand that this situation has caused emotions to run high, I must stress that this type of behaviour is unfair and we cannot tolerate it. If you do not agree with the decisions that we make – based on government and local guidance – then please raise these concerns politely and rationally with us, and we will do our best to answer any questions you may have.

I fully expect over the next few months that there will be a lot of coverage of care homes, and the arrangements for visiting (or not visiting) in both the local and national press. I would like to take this opportunity to set out my thoughts on this ahead of what I anticipate will be challenging winter.

Visiting in a care home is a vital part of providing holistic and person-centred care. Visiting plays a key role in supporting peoples' mental health as well as their spiritual and emotional wellbeing. It is important that we take this into consideration when making decisions about visiting arrangements and balance this against the risk of Covid-19 entering the home. Throughout this pandemic we have seen a range of approaches to visiting arrangements. Some providers have closed doors altogether and have remained closed. Some providers have been more-or-less open as usual. Most have fallen somewhere between the two, following guidance and the counsel of one another and adopting the one named visitor and garden visit approach – much as we have.

The publication of the Social Care Winter Plan published last Friday (18th September) takes a much stronger line than previous government advice and comes very close to suggesting that outright visiting bans may well be necessary (and enforced). The plan, which outlines measures already in place in 'areas of intervention' across the Midlands and both the North East and North West of England, clearly states that no visits can take place – no garden visits, no window visits, and no visits inside of the home.

Whilst it is understandable that policymakers want to protect care homes, and belatedly throw a 'ring of steel' around them (possibly trying to make up for the lost ground in wave one), a move to blanket bans does not balance the risk to peoples' mental health and wellbeing against that posed by the virus.

Please be assured that we, as providers, are fighting this approach and advocating for an approach similar to that taken over the last few months, where the risk for people and places is assessed on an individual basis. However, for this approach to work, we are dependent on testing being more widespread, effective and immediate. The designation of a named or special visitor should continue. This person would be eligible for regular testing, training on infection prevention and control and safe use of PPE. There is also a need for our insurers to follow the NHS and indemnify providers on issues related to Covid-19.

Where does this leave us now? At present our plan is carry on as we are with one named visitor. We will be enforcing this rigorously. As the weather changes we will move from garden visits to safe indoor spaces. We continue to monitor the R value, follow the advice from the Department of Health and Social Care and of the local Director of Public Health. We actively participate in the both the pillar 1 and pillar 2 testing schemes. However, as we are all now aware there are problems with testing and the R value has started to rise. We review our visiting policy weekly, and we will respond to any changes to these four key areas accordingly. As soon as we are aware of any need to make changes we will let you know. We can anticipate the need for changes to happen fast and we will communicate these as quickly as we can.

I hope this update provides you with the information that you feel you need now – as far as we have it – and on our plans for the future.

Stay safe everyone

Richard