

PD

Email Pauline.sharverd@ihcp.co.uk

Mobile N° **I&S**

By email -20 April 2020

Minister Robin Swann
Health Minister
Department of Health

Dear Minister

Re: Urgent Issues in Care Homes and Homecare services

Independent providers of Care Home and Homecare services very much appreciate your recent comments about the importance and value you place on our sector and that the current pandemic requires a system-wide approach going beyond organisational and sectoral boundaries. We have no doubt about your sincerity in these comments and we are very keen to work in equal partnership with the HSC to deliver services to the very vulnerable people in our care.

It is with regret however that I write, on behalf of ihcp members, to express serious concerns about a number of issues the sector is facing. We have been seeking help to address these issues for some weeks without success. We therefore would like your assistance to find urgent solutions to the following matters:-

1. Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) – Following many weeks struggling to secure PPE we are grateful that the initial supply has now been distributed to providers. The continuous replenishment of this is critical and it is hoped that there is now a system in place to ensure that the flow of equipment will continue. However, in parallel to the issue of supply there has been confusion about the guidance on the use of PPE. There is inconsistent interpretation of the PHE guidance and Trusts have applied different approaches resulting in much complexity and confusion to the degree where services in the SHSCT have been directed to wear visors/eye protection in all circumstances even where there have been no Covid 19 symptoms. We have been seeking clarity through CNO, PHA, RQIA and DoH for a number of weeks without success. This needs an urgent Trust- wide agreed position and a one-page simple guide.
2. Testing- The testing of staff is on-going and has resulted in a welcome return of people to work from self-isolation. In relation to the testing of residents we remain concerned about how this is being managed. We welcomed the notification through RQIA last Sunday that care home residents will be tested however it quickly became apparent that the actual process was not in place and Trusts were unprepared for the questions on how this will

work. A critical aspect of this is the need for pre-admission testing of patients discharged from hospitals to care homes. Care Home owners are working extremely hard to prevent Coronavirus entering homes and, where this happens, then to prevent it spreading. This can only be achieved through testing and self-isolation. Care Home owners are now moving to refuse admissions to Care Homes where there is a risk to the residents already in their care. This has caused tensions between Trusts and providers where the Trusts are pressured to discharge patients quickly. We have all seen the extreme vulnerability of care home residents and we are seeking to take all actions to look after the very vulnerable people in our care. We would like the same efforts put into this area as has been put into preparing for critical care services.

3. Homecare (domiciliary) services financial pressures – This market was very fragile before the pandemic and continues to struggle under severe financial pressures. We appreciated your letter of 26 March outlining a range of support mechanisms however there are on-going problems that have not been resolved. The problems have been further exacerbated by notification of the annual uplift to the tariff which does not meet costs. I have a separate letter to you providing further detail.
4. Care Home funding pressures- I wrote to you on 9th April and await a reply.
5. Government Funding for Coronavirus – there have been a number of announcements on additional funding for NI for pressures arising from Coronavirus .Other parts of the UK and ROI have already distributed funds to the social care sector including Care Homes and Homecare. We ask that you consider as a matter of urgency the financial support necessary to sustain Care Homes and Homecare services in NI. Examples of other support packages include in ROI 72m Euros to support Care Homes, Wales £40m to support the care home sector and England an increase of up to 15% in tariffs through local authorities.
6. Psychological support-the psychological impact of caring for people through this pandemic is far-reaching. Staff providing care are doing so in very challenging circumstances and with fear for themselves and their families. We are appreciative that independent sector staff have been included in the psychological support services just announced.
7. Valuing social care staff -The Minister for Health, Matt Hancock, revealed last week that he will be 'branding' social care in the same fashion as 'NHS'. This was signified by the small green badge with the word 'Care'. Ihcp would like assurance that if there is any intention to introduce this in Northern Ireland that it will include the entirety of the social care workforce in the independent sector and that this workforce will not be forgotten.
8. Reform of adult social care- At the end of this pandemic when we return to some form of normality we suggest that Ihcp is included in a 'lessons learnt' review of how the independent social care sector was engaged with, and the value of the contribution of the workforce, during the pandemic. Going forward those lessons must inform the decisions needed within the reform of adult social care. In particular the recognition of staff in this sector must equate to the value of their contribution and we should no longer have people in the front-line being paid National Minimum Wage.
9. Request for a meeting- I wrote to you on 6 March requesting to meet on general issues within the sector. I received a response on 22 March declining to meet at that time due to the Coronavirus pandemic ,which understandably took priority. However, in the interim

period I had provided evidence to the Assembly Health Committee outlining many concerns that the sector had, given our key role in assisting with the pandemic. As a consequence, I sought to clarify on two occasions if the decision not to meet at this time still stands and I have received no reply. It is very difficult to align the decision not to meet ihcp with the comments about equal partnership and I am being asked by members why there has not been a meeting. Perhaps you could reconsider this decision in light of this letter and the pressure now focussing on Care Homes in particular regarding increased deaths.

Many thanks for your continued support and efforts in positioning the independent sector and social care as equals in the provision of care.

Yours sincerely

Pauline Shepherd
Ihcp CEO

Cc Dr McBride

NR