

The adult social care sector: The second wave and beyond

The Covid-19 pandemic has posed an array of unprecedented challenges to the adult social care sector. As we now move into 'the new normal' we must take account of these issues and reflect on what we have learned collectively in order to improve preparedness for the possibility of a second wave of the virus.

The concurrent relaxation of Covid-19 related guidance has posed a significant likelihood of increased transmission, as we have seen from localised outbreaks, such as in Leicester. Care services must be placed at the forefront of any coordinated response to developing outbreaks. Ultimately, we are only as healthy as our most vulnerable. The care sector must be adequately supported given that it is, and continues to be, the frontline of the Covid-19 pandemic.

It is vital to ensure that the policy mistakes made at the start of this crisis are not repeated; we cannot go back to a situation where political actors are unreactive to the needs of the independent adult social care sector. The next few months will continue to be difficult for care providers, with situation-specific, person-specific decision-making in a kaleidoscopically changing environment of relative risk. Emerging systems to manage the virus have been put in place as a result of the change Covid-19 has demanded. This impetus for change needs to be harnessed, not forgotten in order to facilitate a fully integrated health and social care system.

Care England's research indicates that the costs incurred by the adult social care sector extend into the hundreds of millions for April and May alone and pose a significant threat to the financial sustainability of this already imperilled sector. In the last 20 weeks the Government has allocated an unprecedented amount, approximately £4bn, to local authorities. However, the delivery of the money through the failed mechanism of local authorities has been an obstacle to its timely and effective delivery. This was evidenced in the Public Accounts Committee on 22 June.¹ Now is the time for delivery; part of this can be through a cultural reorganisation. We can't use financial starvation to change the market without working with all providers and those that need services.

Social care needs to be placed at the forefront of future policy planning. It can no longer remain an addendum to the NHS. The Government cannot again invest vast amounts of its organisational capacity into the NHS whilst neglecting adequate consideration of the adult social care sector and the threats which the pandemic poses to it. Nor should care providers ever be pressurised to admit untested individuals in order to preserve the structural integrity of the NHS.

In the absence of meaningful government direction, organisations including Care England, have been required to fill the policy vacuum. It is essential for the Government and the regulator to make a firm commitment to support a human rights-based practice, by offering

¹ Public Accounts Committee (2020). Oral evidence: Readying the NHS and social care for the COVID-19 peak, HC 405. House of Commons. Available online at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/550/pdf/>

clear guidance with centralised oversight. Going forward there must be a better mechanism for aligning preparatory plans from the various industry bodies and dispensing the guidance from a single centralised body.

Against a backdrop of historic underfunding, the independent adult social care sector has mobilised and managed the unprecedented challenge of Covid-19. Specifically, the workforce has gone above and beyond its duties in order to provide care for some of society's most vulnerable. In planning for a possible second wave and the coming winter the Government must set out how it intends to ensure the funding, PPE, testing and clinical support is ready and available to continue to sustain the sector as it continues to care and support people. This sector is a fundamentally key part of our health and care system and one that can help lead us into a new integrated and stronger future with services centred around individuals and free of much of the excessive bureaucracy and neglect within government that has characterised the attitude to this sector for too long. What is required now is a different culture, one where success is measured in outcomes.

Care England