

Cllr Mark Ingall, Leader of the Council, and
Cllr Andrew Johnson, Leader of the Opposition
Harlow Council
Civic Centre
The Water Gardens
Harlow
Essex CM20 1WG

1 October 2020

Dear Cllr Ingall and Cllr Johnson

Re: Covid-19 Infections in Care Homes

Thank you for the letter sent on behalf of Harlow Council on 28th September.

We share the determination to protect care home residents and staff from the spread of Covid-19. We have worked closely with care homes, public health and with NHS partners to do this in recent months and it remains a key priority as we enter what could be a difficult winter.

We should also be under no illusion that stopping the spread of Covid remains a challenge for us all. Rising numbers of community cases will have implications for hospitals, care homes, and schools – indeed, in every part of our life. In this respect, our partnership with district councils, including Harlow, is vital.

Turning now to your specific points:

1. All care homes and their staff have had access to adequate and sustainable PPE for some months, from supplies available via ECC. Care providers have also been able to recover costs associated with responding to covid, through funding made available by ECC, to enable providers to claim additional expenses for PPE and other costs. ECC has also administered £16m of Infection Control Funding, made available to care homes and other care providers, to reduce the risk of outbreaks and maintain safe care for their staff and people who use their services. The government recently announced further such funds and we await detail on how this is to be distributed. Testing is not the responsibility of ECC, and care home staff are part of the priority 2 cohort, after the NHS, for accessing testing. We are aware of some of the challenges to access timely testing and continue to push for further capacity, nationally, through Public Health colleagues, while seeking to ensure that existing capacity in Essex is available where it is most needed.
2. Control measures are already in place with testing a key factor considered when looking to discharge someone from hospital. Care staff are subject to regular testing (though we note the capacity issues above), and care homes are asked to have clear disciplines around ensuring social distancing and wearing appropriate PPE.

The established local Care Home Hub for West Essex, but serving Harlow, maintains regular dialogue with care homes both to provide support and to ensure measures to reduce outbreaks are in place. These Hubs also give care providers access to advice and guidance from NHS and Public Health resources, to offer support in dealing with specific issues. A further funding stream was made available earlier this year when operators of multiple homes were asked to stop staff moving between the homes under their control.

On the question of visiting, it is the responsibility of the Director of Public Health to decide if care home visiting is appropriate, as well as the care-home owner. The Essex Health Protection Board has again confirmed that visits are permissible, but it is for the care home operator to determine their own rules – it is in their interest to ensure that such regimes do not bring the virus into the home.

3. ECC is engaged with all care homes through the Care Home Hubs, daily email updates, webinars and regular messages on the Essex Provider Portal. These continue to emphasise the need to follow all the appropriate guidelines to reduce the risk of any further outbreaks. ECC staff, together with NHS and others visiting care homes, are also essential in reminding care homes about compliance.

Turning now to your request for weekly reports, the Director of Public Health reminds me that you should be getting briefed on a weekly basis, or more frequently, by your environmental health officer who, like all his / her counterparts, sits on the Health Protection Board. Dr Gogarty would prefer using that channel for communication rather than creating a new device. You will appreciate that even weekly briefings can quickly become out of date.

I trust this letter adequately addresses all the points raised by you, but if you do have further queries, do not hesitate to contact me. My home and mobile phone numbers are: 01245 465108 and 07860 578058.

Yours sincerely



Cllr John Spence
Cabinet Member for Health and Adult Social Care
Essex County Council