

Personal protective equipment (PPE) in the social care sector

1. Background

- 1.1 A member of the Advisory Board was contacted by the manager of a provider organisation, who expressed concerns about the availability of personal protective equipment (PPE) for staff, especially when asked to take on service users who tested positive for Covid-19 whilst in Southend Hospital. Concerns had also featured in national media coverage.
- 1.2 The Advisory Board agreed that further action ought to be taken to validate these concerns and to raise them with the appropriate agencies as required.

2. Provision of PPE

- 2.1 All care homes and domiciliary care agencies who contract with Southend Borough Council are contractually obliged to provide all equipment and supplies needed by staff to deliver a safe service. This is reinforced by the Health and Safety at Work Act, 1974, which places a legal obligation on employers and will be covered in inspections by the CQC.
- 2.2 Care homes and agencies will make their own arrangements for the supply of PPE. Those who are part of larger organisations may benefit from economies of scale; smaller organisations may have less bargaining power with suppliers. In any event, the pressures caused by the current crisis in this country and internationally, especially with other public sector bodies also competing for PPE, has caused difficulties as normal supply chains may have broken down.

3. Contingency measures

- 3.1 As part of the Government response to the coronavirus crisis, additional funding is available to the social care sector via local authorities. In addition, local resilience forums in each area are charged with overseeing the response of the public sector and making arrangements to address any deficiencies. Finally, a National Supply Disruption Response has been established by Government, to take calls for emergency supplies; this is complemented by a Parallel Supply Chain which can bring additional capacity to logistics.

4. Key lines of enquiry

- 4.1 This piece of work sought to test two main issues
 - 4.1.1 Is there a problem in sourcing PPE?
 - 4.1.2 Is the official advice about the use of PPE accessible?

5. Methodology

- 5.1 A random selection of care homes and domiciliary care agencies was made. This was not meant to be a scientific approach, but aimed to reach a variety of types and scale of organisations across the Borough. There are approximately 100 care homes registered with CQC in the Southend area, with approximately 200 home care agencies on their website.
- 5.2 Between 22 – 24 April 2020, telephone calls were made to each by members of the Healthwatch Southend team. In each case, the intention was to speak to the duty manager wherever possible. Care was taken to acknowledge the pressure these staff were under and to keep time on the 'phone to a minimum.

6. Results

6.1.1 In total 21 organisations were approached over the three days – 6 domiciliary care agencies and 15 care homes. Responses are awaited from one of each at the time of writing.

6.1.2 PPE

None of the respondents identified any problems in obtaining PPE. Some said that there had been some problems over the previous couple of weeks, but that supplies were now reaching them. Some had made arrangements with additional suppliers to ensure there were no breaks in supply. Positive comments were received about the support provided by Southend Borough Council.

6.1.3 Public health advice

This area of questioning received a wider range of responses. It appears that there are a number of organisations issuing advice and guidance, including Public Health England and Southend Borough Council. However, we were also told that Essex County Council was running webinars. Some respondents also used their membership of the UK Care Homes Association to access advice (including about suppliers of PPE). ACAS was also mentioned.

The use of masks was the main source of confusion, with respondents being aware of the differences between PHE and WHO advice. Some felt that whilst some service users might not display symptoms, there was no guarantee that the service user was not infectious. On this basis, all staff should wear masks; one home had just been advised to do so by a local GP. Mention was also made of emerging guidance about single versus sessional use of PPE, which was felt to be unclear.

7. Other comments

7.1 During the course of the calls, other issues were volunteered by respondents.

- All the care homes contacted were not admitting new residents
- Only one respondent made reference to the Local Resilience Forum, which was not felt to have made much impact
- One queried the speed with which the Council were distributing the additional funding allocated by the Government

8. Conclusions

- 8.1 It has to be acknowledged that this is a fast-moving area. At the time of the initial comments, there did appear to be a problem with the supply of PPE across the frontline. By the time of the telephone survey, supplies might well have improved. Equally public health advice about the use of PPE has changed, but this seems not to have had an adverse effect on supplies of PPE.
- 8.2 However, there does seem to be some confusion around the advice given and its interpretation. This may place staff and service users at risk. It must also have an adverse effect on the wellbeing of these staff and service users, whose anxiety levels must be raised.

9. Recommendations

- 9.1 From this piece of work, it appears as if supply issues relating to PPE are not currently a major concern within the Borough. However, we ought not to be complacent and 9.1.1 Will review the situation in a 6-8 weeks' time, using a similar methodology
- 9.2 Of more concern is what organisations perceive to be conflicting guidance about the use of PPE. In line with our responsibilities to raise concerns with commissioners, we will
 - 9.2.1 Send a copy of this report to the Cabinet Member for Health & Adult Social Care, seeking assurances about the steps being taken to address these concerns

Appendix

Response from Southend Borough Council to Healthwatch Southend's report on personal protective equipment (PPE) in care home and home care agencies

I can confirm that SBC are actively working with colleagues in the health and social care system on a daily basis to support providers with accessing the required PPE based on the relevant guidance. We are also ensuring that they are aware of who to contact in the Council if they urgently need PPE or in the CCG if they need infection control advice.

You raised concerns about Covid-19 patients being discharged from Southend Hospital with the expectation that the care provider has supplies of additional PPE. In response to this, Southend Council are working in partnership with our trading company, Southend Care Limited (SCL) to provide a care unit for people awaiting a COVID 19 negative test result. This will offer a place for people to go to until they are COVID free.

With regards to the quantity of public health advice, Covid-19 is a novel condition and therefore, across the globe, we are all on a steep learning curve regarding good clinical practice. This is reflected in the frequency of updates to national guidance, which may contribute to a perceived inconsistency with what was seen as good clinical practice. Locally, the council including public health, alongside health colleagues, in the form of enhanced care teams are supporting providers with interpreting guidance and providing practical support with regard to infection prevention and control. They have the details of how to contact us if they have any questions or concerns and we get in touch with them via a call every couple of days.

The testing of both SBC staff and provider staff was rolled out a couple of weeks ago and the uptake has been very positive. These tests have supported in providing reassurance in regard to staff's COVID status. Additional guidance has been published around the testing of people in care homes and we are working collectively to move forward with the plans to test all residents.