

Statement from the Assembly All Party Group on Carers on the reopening of day services and respite support

On 29 June, the All Party Group (APG) on Carers received briefings from senior officials in the Department of Health and directors from each Health and Social Care Trust on the reopening of day services and respite support. These services have been severely disrupted since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic and, more than two years later, patients and their unpaid carers are continuing to face barriers to accessing these vital sources of support.

The APG is encouraged that progress is being made in each Trust area to remobilise services. Members recognise the importance of striking a balancing between ongoing Covid-19 infection control and the damage done to service users and their unpaid carers when they are unable to access the services they need. While the threat of Covid-19 has not gone away, the direction of travel expressed by both the Department and Trusts seemed to be one of greater flexibility in regard to asymptomatic testing and isolation requirements – in recognition of the barriers that previous guidance in this area has caused to people accessing services. This is a positive development.

While the APG welcomes the progress that has been made, Members are also very clear that there is still a lot of work to be done before day service, short break and respite provision will resemble the pre-Covid environment. Trusts must continue to be held to account on targets for fully reopening services and, where issues are identified that prevent these targets being met, swift action must be taken.

The APG is particularly concerned about transport provision to take service users to-and-from facilities such as day centres. Continuing physical distancing requirements are impacting on transport capacity, leaving service users either having to arrange their own transport – which may not be possible – or miss out on the service they need. The APG believes this is unacceptable and would encourage the Department of Health, Public Health Agency and Trusts to urgently review the situation to allow for greater flexibility.

Members are also concerned that capacity in short breaks provision has reduced as a result of the withdrawal of some respite beds in care homes.

Short breaks provide irreplaceable opportunities for unpaid carers to re-charge their batteries and we would encourage the Departments and all Trusts to be proactive in seeking to replace the beds that have been withdrawn.

Day services, short breaks and respite provide not only critical sources of support for service users, but also a lifeline for their unpaid carers. Many of these carers have not have a break since the Covid-19 pandemic began and are well past the point of exhaustion and burnout as a result. During the worst of the pandemic, our unpaid carers were saving the public purse here an estimated £19m per day, so it is time that we start repaying their contribution by ensuring that they, and the people they care for, can access all of the services they need.

The APG will continue to scrutinise the situation closely and engage, on a regular and ongoing basis, with all stakeholders in this area.

Members of the All Party Group on Carers:

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