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Hi everyone,

I hope that you are all as well as can be and that you managed to spend some time with your loved ones over the festive season. Once again in what continues to be a particularly challenging time, individuals and teams have gone above and beyond to help the people we support, colleagues and themselves to stay safe.

On behalf of Aspire, I would like to extend my utmost gratitude to you for your hard work and commitment.

Impact of rising infection rates on services

You will be aware that there has been a significant increase in infections up and down the country and government are constantly reviewing their position on restrictions. In the last 3 weeks we have had 105 staff diagnosed positive with Covid and numerous more staff members having to isolate due to close contact. In consultation with Leeds City Council we therefore took the difficult decision to pause our buildings based day services and all but emergency respite services. Our priority is to maintain the health, safety and wellbeing of all the people who use our services and we believe this has been the best approach given the circumstances, as it enables us to have sufficient staff to run our supported living services safely.

There may be some good news on the horizon because we have seen a slight downward move in the number of absences in the last week. If this positive trend continues over the coming week, then we hope to be in a position to implement our Covid Recovery Plan. We cannot guarantee this at this point in time but, potentially, this could enable us to resume both day services and respite services as early as the week commencing Monday 24 January 2022.

Mandatory vaccinations to be extended to all regulated social care settings

You will be aware, from previous letters from me, that we are no longer legally able to deploy staff in our respite and crisis units unless they have been fully vaccinated or have a medical exemption in place.

You may have also seen in the press, or previous letters, that the government have now extended mandatory vaccinations to wider parts of the health and social care workforce which includes all regulated care settings. For us this will apply to both our respite services and now our supported

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living services, both of which are regulated by the Care Quality Commission (CQC). This will come into effect from 1st April 2022. This will mean that staff who work in our supported living services will need to have had their first dose of the vaccine by 3rd February 2022 in order for the second dose to be given before the 1st April deadline. Any day service staff who occasionally work in, or visit, our supported living or respite services will also need to be fully vaccinated by 1st April.

I have written to all unvaccinated staff in our supported living services to invite them to attend group meetings with me this week, so that I can talk through the options that are open to them. These will be followed by opportunities for those staff who either remain unvaccinated or do not have a medical exemption in place to have 1:1 consultations with HR in the following two weeks. We are having concurrent discussions with the Trade Unions about the impact of the legislation as, currently, we have significantly more unvaccinated staff in supported living services than we have vacancies in our unregulated services. We will seek to offer redeployment to unregulated services as an alternative to dismissal wherever possible.

As ever, I would encourage anyone who has not been vaccinated to do so, as this is the best defence against any serious effects of contracting Covid-19 – as well as encouraging booster jabs and flu jabs, which will help keep ourselves, family, friends, colleagues and the people we support to keep as safe as possible through the winter months.

Covid Pass

Tied in with the above is the requirement for all staff who work in regulated services to have a Covid Pass to verify that they have had the full course of one of the covid-19 vaccines, which can either be a double dose or single dose depending on the vaccine they have received. This pass will also be needed for any day service staff who undertake overtime or visit people in any of our supported living or respite services.

There is guidance on how to generate a Covid Pass on the following link: [Get your NHS COVID Pass letter - NHS \(www.nhs.uk\)](https://www.nhs.uk/healthcare-workers/covid-19/covid-19-vaccine/covid-19-vaccine-pass/)

It is necessary for Aspire to verify vaccination status for two main reasons:

1. Individuals that are fully vaccinated do not need to isolate if they have come into contact with another person who has tested positive for covid-19.
2. It is already a legal requirement that staff deployed into Aspire's Respite Services are fully vaccinated unless they are medically/clinically exempt from receiving the vaccine. As stated above, this legislation will be further extended to our Supported Living Services from 1st April 2022.

I appreciate that this continues to be a really difficult time, not made any easier by the role out of the government legislation to staff who work in our supported living services. For anyone who needs to access and support with their mental health, there are a number of avenues to pursue including:

HELP Employee Assistance Programme

The HELP employee assistance programme is a free service which is available for all staff and family members.

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This external organisation provides a helpline service staffed by professional counselling staff. It provides confidential support 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Support can be provided by telephone, online and through face-to-face appointments, and you can talk to a counsellor via any or all three of these options.

If you're having any issues at home or at work, the service is there to give you expert confidential guidance. All you have to do is phone **0800 028 5149** or visit [Optimise \(helpeap.com\)](https://www.optimizehelp.co.uk)

In addition to the confidential helpline you'll also have online access to practical self-help information and wellbeing tools to support you.

Mental Health First Aiders

Aspire has a number of staff who are trained Mental Health First Aiders (MHFA), each service has a matters poster displayed which identifies who the MHFA is in your team. A Mental Health First Aider in the workplace is the go-to person for anyone going through some form of mental health issue or emotional distress. The first aider will be present to listen non-judgementally, hold supportive conversations and help guide you to the relevant help you need.

If you don't want to speak with you team's MHFA you can speak to HR who will signpost you to another first aider or relevant professional.

All the very best



Andy Rawnsley
Chief Executive

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