

1. Summary

This briefing outlines the importance of social contact for people living with dementia during the COVID-19 pandemic. It summarises our [full briefing paper](#) on this issue¹ and sets out what actions local government can take to ensure that people living with dementia do not see their symptoms deteriorate as a result of limited social contact.

2. Introduction

Alzheimer's Society has been responding to the issues raised by the pandemic that affect people living with dementia. Our Dementia Connect support line is being flooded with thousands of calls, with people desperately worried about their loved ones in care homes, hospitals and the community.

People living with dementia have been hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. Dementia is the most common pre-existing condition found among deaths involving COVID-19, and there has been a huge surge in the number of deaths of people with dementia who do not have COVID-19².

It is vital we thoroughly examine why people living with dementia have been so disproportionately affected by this pandemic, and **we should act urgently** when we have evidence that harm is occurring. We know the damaging impact that the loss of social and family contact is having for people with dementia. Social stimulation and regular face to face contact with loved ones not only helps people living with dementia to feel secure and improve anxiety and mood, but also helps them to maintain basic cognition and communication skills and maintain independence.

3. The impact of COVID-19 on people with dementia in the UK

Although dementia wasn't initially thought to have been a high-risk condition, it's become clear that people with dementia have been the most severely affected by the coronavirus pandemic.

- A quarter of people who have died in the first two months of the pandemic in England and Wales had dementia (over 8,500 people in March and April 2020).³
- Dementia is the most common pre-existing condition for coronavirus deaths.⁴
- Aside from coronavirus, deaths from dementia are running 83% higher in England, nearly 10,000 deaths in total in April.⁵

COVID-19 poses risks to the health and wellbeing of people with dementia needing social care, reduces the ability of families, friends and social care staff to provide support, and puts at risk the availability and quality of care due.⁶

- In a recent Alzheimer's Society survey⁷, 79% of care home managers told us that the health and wellbeing of their residents is deteriorating because of a lack of contact with loved ones.

¹ https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/Social-Contact-Briefing_June-2020.pdf

² ONS (2020) Deaths involving COVID-19, England and Wales: deaths occurring in April 2020 [Online] Available at: www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/deathsinvolvingCOVID19englandandwales/deathsoccurringinapril2020
Alzheimer's Society (2020) Briefing: Data on dementia and COVID-19 [Online] Available at: www.alzheimers.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-05/Briefing_COVID-19_and_dementia_data_15052020.pdf

³ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/deathsinvolvingCOVID19englandandwales/deathsoccurringinapril2020>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-05/Briefing_COVID-19_and_dementia_data_15052020.pdf

⁶ Comas-Herrera, Adelina, Fernández, José-Luis, Hancock, Ruth, Hatton, Chris, Knapp, Martin, McDaid, David, Malley, Juliette, Wistow, Gerald and Wittenberg, Raphael (2020) COVID-19: implications for the support of people with social care needs in England. *Journal of Aging and Social Policy*. ISSN 0895-9420 (In Press)

⁷ Alzheimer's Society survey of 100 care homes April 2020

- People calling our Dementia Connect support line are telling us how quickly their loved ones are 'going downhill', with examples including people losing key skills such as their ability to talk or feed themselves.
- People living with dementia have expressed⁸ concerns to us that they feel like they are losing certain basic cognitive and communication skills during the period of imposed social distancing restrictions.

Interruptions to usual health services could also be a contributory factor in the high number of deaths among people living with dementia. The implementation of personalised care planning with daily social interaction has been shown to improve quality of life and reduce agitation in people with dementia. The lack of contact and communication with carers and family members under the conditions of lockdown is impacting on the quality of person-centred care planning and individual needs are being lost or ignored.

4. What Alzheimer's Society is asking local government

We know what good care looks like, and have evidenced based solutions – these have not changed, however the context and the ability to implement them has.

As we move away from the immediate crisis caused by the pandemic, we want local authorities to address how to provide high quality, effective care for people with dementia during the ongoing COVID-19 restrictions and longer term, a vital element of which is social contact.

We are calling on the UK Government to lead a task force that includes and works with local authorities to address how we can support people with dementia as the country emerges from the lockdown over the next 6-12 months, with social contact at the heart of the solution.

Most of the solutions will be delivered locally, and so we are calling for local authorities to put in place an action plan driven by high level leadership, to address the impact of social isolation on people living with dementia and their carers. Actions may include:

- Through contract monitoring, ensuring local care homes and domiciliary providers have sufficient PPE supplies and staff resource in place.
- Short breaks for informal carers should be re-instated as soon as possible, with those carers also being prioritised for wellbeing support.
- Care plans should be reviewed to ensure there are emergency arrangements identified if an informal carer is suddenly unable to provide care; these arrangements could include prioritising domiciliary care for the person being cared for.
- Through contract monitoring, ensuring local care homes have in place appropriate measures to support and maintain contact between residents and their loved ones. This could include supporting them to access digital infrastructure or utilise wellbeing assistants to support such contact.
- Through the local CCG/HWB, ensure there is appropriate levels of in-person clinical support for care homes and domiciliary services for end-of-life care

For more information please contact:

Rosemary Brotchie, Regional Public Affairs and Campaigns Manager Rosemary.brotchie@alzheimers.org.uk

⁸ Alzheimer's Society Three Nations Working Group April 2020