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Dear Colleagues,

## **VISITING AND CARE PARTNER ARRANGEMENTS IN CARE HOMES: ACCESS TO COVID-19 TESTING FOR VISITORS OVER THE CHRISTMAS PERIOD**

Guidance on the principles for visiting in care settings in Northern Ireland, including care homes, was published on 23<sup>rd</sup> September. Supplementary information was provided on 13<sup>th</sup> November with a letter issued to providers and Trusts the same day. In addition, on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2020, the Department issued correspondence to all independent providers setting out additional guidance for visiting arrangements in care home settings over the Christmas period. This guidance is in addition to the extant regional visiting guidance which identifies a range of options for visiting to take place in line with a care home's visiting policy.

The decision to permit visitors into a care home and how this is organised is the responsibility of the care home manager; such decisions should be based on a dynamic risk assessment, taking into account the particular circumstances of the individual care home, in order to ensure the safety of all residents and visitors.

However, it is clear that there are a significant number of families who feel that they have not been able to visit their relatives or set up care partner arrangements, in line with regional guidance. Some of the stories told by families are deeply concerning.

We know that they do not reflect the sector as a whole and appreciate how hard many homes have been working to facilitate safe visiting arrangements between residents and their families or friends.

To be clear, it remains the Department's position that care home visiting and care partners can be safely facilitated through compliance with the regional principles for visiting in care settings clearly set out in the existing guidance.

As the Minister has stated publicly, it is difficult to understand how some care homes have been able to facilitate visits while others have not.

The Department understands that some care homes remain cautious about permitting visiting based on their experiences to date of managing the transmission and the impact of COVID-19.

Nevertheless, there is a need for care homes to understand and appreciate the right to a family life for those living in a care home setting, and in particular to acknowledge the critical importance of sustaining relationships between residents and their family and friends, particularly at this time of year. This time is precious and if lost could be irrecoverable.

To help ensure the right balance is being struck by individual care homes, in line with regional guidance, the RQIA will assess the approach being used when undertaking inspections of residential and nursing homes, and considering compliance with the relevant care standards: Care Standards for Nursing Homes 2015 (particularly standards 3, 5 and 8); and Residential Care Home Standards 2011 (particularly standard 2).

Visiting policy and practice will therefore be a material consideration in the inspection and regulation of each care home.

Support and funding continues to be available to help homes implement the approach set out in regional guidance. Trusts have been asked to assure themselves that care homes that accommodate their clients are operating in accordance with guidance and have implemented a dynamic risk assessed approach to visiting at their premises. In addition, Trusts should be providing support and advice where there are difficult to navigate situations relevant to a particular Trust client. The PHA will continue to provide advice to homes in the event of outbreaks and both the Trust, RQIA, HSCB and PHA will continue to provide advice and support through existing forums and directly to care homes as and when needed. A number of homes have already undertaken training and support made available to help them complete their dynamic risk assessments.

Free training continues to be available through the Northern Ireland Social Care Council (<https://learningzone.niscc.info/learning-resources/96/supporting-good->

infection-control). In addition, CEC are developing a new training video which will be available by the end of this week and accessible to families and carers on the PHA and PCC websites. Care homes may wish to direct families to this guidance to help ensure appropriate infection prevention and control steps are taking, including correct putting on and taking off PPE.

Many care homes will already have received their first payments from the additional £27m the Minister announced at the end of October, which built on previous financial packages. Officials are also considering the future of the income guarantee for care homes, regardless of occupancy. Any continuation of the income guarantee is likely to be linked to the implementation of appropriate visiting arrangements.

However, in recognition of the concerns felt by many homes about visiting and care partner arrangements, the Department is moving to provide further support and assurance to care homes for an interim period. Should a provider, in order to enable visiting to take place, perceive a need for additional risk mitigation within the care home setting, then COVID-19 testing will be made available for visitors who are not displaying symptoms of infection. It is important to note that this extension to the existing COVID-19 testing arrangements is limited to **1 visitor (or care partner) per resident per week** and will be accessible from the date of this letter until **Friday 8 January 2021**. Details are set out at **Annex A**.

We stress that this is an additional assurance measure; visiting can and should be accommodated safely now as set out in regional guidance documents and safe visiting should not stop after 8<sup>th</sup> January, but should continue in line that guidance including strict adherence to all Infection and Prevention Control standards.

Testing, if required, must therefore be treated as addition to existing safe visiting measures. It is essential that care home managers take responsibility for ensuring that families and staff do not place excessive reliance on testing alone.

Testing is not, and never can be, a substitute for Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), social distancing, good hand hygiene, and other robust Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) measures.

We would wish to assure providers that the Department remains fully committed to supporting and taking all necessary measures to ensure that care home residents and staff are protected. In that context, we will continue to carefully consider how new and emerging testing technologies can be implemented and extended more widely across a range of care settings in the future.

The Department fully acknowledges the dedication of all independent care home providers and staff who continue to work tirelessly to provide care to residents under such challenging circumstances. Thank you for your ongoing and continued support, it is greatly appreciated.

Yours,



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## **ACCESS TO COVID-19 TESTING FOR VISITORS TO FURTHER SUPPORT VISITING ARRANGEMENTS WITHIN CARE HOMES OVER THE CHRISTMAS PERIOD**

It will be a matter for the individual care home to determine the most appropriate mechanism for how its visitors should be tested, if this is deemed necessary. Visitor testing for COVID-19 will be possible through any of the following routes:

- Testing at one of the fixed drive through centres operating at the following sites:
  - Belfast: SSE Test Centre, Odyssey Car park, Belfast BT3 9QQ
  - Derry/Londonderry: The LYCRA Company Car Park
  - Craigavon: Central Sports Arena, Kernan Hill Road, Craigavon , BT63 5PY
  - Enniskillen: St Angelo Airport, 62 Killadeas Road, Trory, Enniskillen BT94 2FP
  
- Testing at one of the following walk through test sites:
  - Ulster University (Car Park 4), Cromore Road, Coleraine, BT52 1SA
  - Magee Ulster University, Northland Road, Londonderry, BT48 7JL
  - Ballymena Showgrounds, Slemish Drive, Ballymena, BT43 7DS
  - Car Park at Queen's Sports Club (PEC), Stranmillis Embankment
  - Longstone Car Park, Lisburn, BT28 1DD
  
- Testing at one of the following mobile testing units currently located at:
  - Albert Basin/St Christopher Park, William Street, Newry BT34 2D
  - Marks Arena, Antrim Forum, Lough Road, Antrim, BT41 4DQ
  - Woodlands Playing Fields, 146 Finaghy Road, Belfast, BT10 0JE
  - Dungannon Leisure Centre Rear Car Park, Killymeal Road Car Park, Dungannon, BT71 6LJ
  - Mid Ulster Sports Arena, Tullywiggan Road, Cookstown, BT80 8SD
  - Omagh Mobile Unit, Omagh Leisure Complex, Old Mountfield Rd, Omagh, BT79 7EG
  
- If necessary, the care home may facilitate testing of visitors through its regular programme of weekly staff testing using the PCR test kits accessed through the National Testing Programme;

**PLEASE NOTE:** The mobile testing units provide a temporary testing site that is set up in response to local demand. Individuals should therefore arrange to check the locations of the mobile testing units available at the following link: <https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/covid-19-coronavirus/testing-and-tracing-covid-19/testing-covid-19>

Individuals should access the website <https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/covid-19-coronavirus/testing-and-tracing-covid-19/testing-covid-19> to find out more information on the COVID-19 testing process. Individuals should be asked to watch the video instruction on how to self-swab. It will also be important for individuals to register their test kit on the website in order to get a test result.

Please note that individuals will not be required to book a test between now and **Friday 8 January 2021**.

On arrival at their chosen test site, the individual should advise the test site that they are a visitor from a care home only and this will facilitate access. After registering a test kit, the test result should arrive with the individual on the email address given and by text message to the mobile phone number given. The test result should take approximately 24 hours.

It is important to be aware that while a test for COVID-19 can reduce the risk associated with visiting, it does not completely remove the risk of infection. When used alongside Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), social distancing, good hand hygiene, and other robust Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) measures, it can support care homes to safely maintain a balance between infection control and the vital benefits of visiting to the health and wellbeing of care home residents.

Care homes will need to proactively engage with potential care home visitors to ensure that all reasonable steps are taken to reduce the risk of infection. Visitors should be advised to limit their contacts prior to their COVID-19 test and until after their scheduled visit to the care home. Visitors should also be reminded of the need to ensure good personal hygiene and use face coverings as required. Where possible, visitors should also be advised to exercise their judgement on the need to use public transport. Visitors should refer to the safer travel guidance for public transport users, walkers, cyclists and drivers which is available on NI Direct at the following link: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/safer-travel-guidance-public-transport-users-walkers-cyclists-drivers>

Visitors should ensure they discuss with the home the timing of their visiting slot and the timing of their test.

Care homes should also ensure that anyone showing or experiencing symptoms of COVID-19 or any other infection is instructed not to visit the care home, even if their symptoms are mild. In such cases, the individual should be advised to remain at home and follow the latest public health advice on self-isolation and testing; this is

available at the following link: <https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/covid-19-coronavirus>.

Care homes will also need to make visitors aware of the consequences of receiving a positive COVID-19 test result; this will include the requirement for the individual and their close contacts to self-isolate for a period of 10 days in line with the public health advice. Further information can be found at the following link: <https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/covid-19-coronavirus>.

If the visitor's test for COVID-19 is negative, the visit should proceed. Visitors should be reminded of the need to comply with the care home's visiting policy and to follow the specified IPC measures in place which will include wearing a face covering and using other PPE as instructed. Test results can be demonstrated by showing the care home the text message or email result of the test received.

As outlined above, these enhanced COVID-19 testing arrangements for visitors will remain in place until **Friday 8 January 2021**. The Department hopes that the introduction of testing as an additional support measure to further mitigate risk will assist all care homes to facilitate visiting in line with the published guidance over the Christmas period.