

From the Interim Chief Nursing Officer  
**Linda Kelly**



**VIA EMAIL:**

Care Home Providers  
Chief Executives & Directors of Nursing  
(Trusts)

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Date: 14 January 2022

Dear Colleagues,

**LATEST REVIEW OF “VISITING WITH CARE – A PATHWAY”**

The Public Health Expert Reference Group within the Public Health Agency has recently completed its latest formal review of surveillance information as required in “Visiting With Care – A Pathway”.

Review Outcome

Based on the analysis of that surveillance information (see details at Annex A), I can confirm that the Public Health advice is that we should remain at the second full stage of the Pathway – “Gradual Easing”. The next 4-weekly review will be completed in early February and we expect to be able to issue a further update shortly thereafter.

Key Messages

I would like to take this opportunity to reinforce the key message that, since the effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccines and vaccine coverage is apparent at this stage in reducing the severity of COVID-19 infections and the risk of hospitalisation, it is crucial that care home managers and Trusts continue to encourage uptake of the COVID-19 vaccination (including booster) for care home staff and continued engagement with the regular testing programmes for staff, visitors and Care Partners.

Care Partner Scheme

It is also important to reaffirm that when a Care Home is experiencing an outbreak, care partner arrangements can continue in place for those care partners who are demonstrably infection free. Ongoing participation in the regular testing regime by anyone seeking to maintain a care partner status will allow this assessment to be made.

I would ask that this update be circulated appropriately to facilities, residents/families and staff as soon as possible. Thank you all, once again, for the efforts you continue to make to deliver top quality care in these difficult times.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Linda Kelly', written in a light grey or blue ink.

**LINDA KELLY**

Interim Chief Nursing Officer

cc: Trust Directors of Older People Services  
Sean Holland  
Dr Michael McBride  
Dr Lourda Geoghegan  
Tim Johnston  
Debbie Murray  
Geraldine Traynor  
William Stewart  
Janet Humphries  
Pauline Shepherd – IHCP  
Leslie-Anne Newton – ARC  
Vivian McConvey - PCC  
Sandra Aitcheson – PHA  
Malachy Finnegan - RQIA

## Summary of Public Health Expert Reference Group Findings:

### Care Home Outbreaks

There has been a rapid increase in COVID-19 cases and outbreaks in care homes since the end of December 2021. Over one third of all care homes in NI are now reporting active COVID-19 outbreaks in NI, with 177 confirmed outbreaks as of 5 January 2022. The majority of outbreaks are declared due to infections in staff members or care partners (73%), 31% due to staff and residents, and 6% in residents only. The vast majority of the outbreaks are small with only a very small number (<5) of homes have experienced high numbers of cases.

Importantly, the severity of illness is low overall to date, with very small numbers of hospital admissions noted.

### Community Incidence

The Omicron variant has spread at an unprecedented rate throughout the community, replacing Delta as the dominant COVID-19 variant with 94% of new cases now being identified as Omicron. NI has recorded the highest rates of new confirmed cases of COVID-19 across the UK in the past 2 weeks. The 7 day rolling average 407.5 per 100,000 population on 30 December 2021, (UK 282.8 on same day). This level of infection in NI is unprecedented.

### Mortality associated with COVID-19 in care home settings:

Continued low levels of mortality associated with COVID-19 in care home settings are noted. 5 deaths in Care homes where COVID-19 was listed on the death certificate are reported in the 5 weeks between 19th November and 17 December 2021 (NISRA). The highest number of deaths in a single week during this wave was 10 as compared to 35 in the second wave and 72 in the first wave.

Care home deaths as a proportion of total deaths where COVID-19 is noted on Death certificates remains significantly lower than in all previous waves (NISRA).

### Hospital admissions

Data on severity of disease associated with Omicron remains limited, however, early indications suggest that it is associated with milder illness, even for hospital admissions. However, whilst disease severity may be less, the sheer volume of infection with Omicron across the population is likely to result in more admissions to hospital. In addition normal winter pressures associated with respiratory illness are also to be expected across the HSC system (very low rates of influenza circulating).

Whilst numbers of admissions to hospital from Care Homes remain very small, data on disease severity will continue to be monitored closely in the coming weeks in the care home population.

ICU occupancy has remained relatively stable since the beginning of October with 31 ICU inpatients on the 3 January 2022.

## Vaccine uptake rates

Early evidence suggests that a third booster dose is required to provide vaccine effectiveness against symptomatic disease with the Omicron variant i.e. 2 doses which were effective against Delta variant may not be enough to protect against severe illness with Omicron.

Care home reported uptake rates indicate that:

- 95% residents have had 2 doses, 89% have received a booster.
- 80% staff have had 2 doses, 58% have received a booster.

Information on vaccination uptake has been shared with Trusts to support continued work to further increase levels of vaccine cover.