

*From the Chief Nursing Officer*  
**Professor Charlotte McArdle**



**VIA EMAIL:**

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Dear Colleagues,

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

The guidance document “**Visiting With Care – A Pathway**” sets out a phased plan for the safe management of care home residents receiving visitors, as well as residents being able to visit other households, community facilities and take part in excursions.

Colleagues in the Public Health Agency have recently completed their latest formal review of the data available, as prescribed in the Pathway to include:

- Community prevalence
- Care Home Outbreak status
- Care Home COVID-19 Testing results
- Mortality associated with COVID in Care Homes
- Hospital admissions
- Vaccination status of staff and residents in care homes

In summary, surveillance information reflecting the current impact of COVID-19 on Care Homes shows:

- **Outbreaks:** following the significant rise during July and August in outbreaks in care homes, and whilst the total number of homes in outbreak remains high (just under 30% of homes), the past few weeks has seen an encouraging drop in the

number of new outbreaks being reported. There are 125 open outbreaks reported as of 9th September 2021.

- **Mortality/Morbidity:** Hospital admissions with COVID-19 remain high, especially in older populations, reflecting continued high levels of community prevalence (highest in UK and Ireland). On the 9th September 2021 there were 472 COVID-19 confirmed in patients in all trusts compared with 311 on 9th August. Thankfully deaths in residents from Care Homes remains low, both in terms of absolute numbers and as a proportion of the overall deaths associated with SARS-CoV-2. However the numbers of deaths attributed to Care Homes associated with SARS CoV-2 reported to NISRA in the 4 weeks up to 27th August averaged 4.75 deaths per week as compared with an average of 1.5 for the previous 4 weeks. Morbidity and mortality changes have a lead in time of several weeks once community prevalence starts to rise.

- **Vaccine uptake rates** continue to reflect a slow but steady rise in coverage for staff. Vaccination rates for residents have remained similar over the past 4 weeks: for residents, first dose vaccination 92.6%, double dose vaccination of 91.5%; for staff first dose 81.5% and double dose 78.8% (Daily RQIA Data Return 9th September 2021).

- **Community Incidence** remains very high (538.8 per 100,000 population), especially in the under 40 year age groups. At 9th September, doubling time for confirmed cases in NI remains one of the highest internationally. It is higher in NI than rest of the UK (99.2 compared to UK 125.3). Ireland has a doubling time of 258.1 days. Children also returned to school in September, with high levels of incidence in this population. The 10-14 age group accounts for the highest number of individuals with a positive test per 100K population (1243 as compared with 538.8 or the population as a whole).

- **The delta variant** continues to be the dominant variant in N Ireland with observed increased transmissibility but is sensitive to the vaccine. It is noted that numbers positive of cases of COVID-19 in vaccinated population in care homes may also be increasing, indicating possible waning protection from vaccination. Health protection surveillance will continue to monitor this data closely.

Based on the above surveillance information and taking account of the understandable desire to increase visiting access and the benefits and risk of this, the Public Health advice is that it would not yet be appropriate to move forward to the second full stage – “**Gradual Easing**”.

Consequently visiting restrictions will continue to be implemented in line with the Pathway’s “**Cautious First Steps**” level in those care homes without outbreaks. In line with the Pathway, the next 4-weekly review has been scheduled for early October and we expect to be able to issue a further update shortly thereafter.

My officials have also reviewed the Care Partners scheme, and we remain content that the scheme is working well across the sector. We confirm that the guidance around the Care Partner scheme allows for flexible contact where appropriate which is above and beyond normal visiting arrangements, within reasonable constraints. Consequently, we reiterate that such arrangements should remain available even if a care home is experiencing an outbreak, subject to sensible risk assessment and management. For clarity, some minor amendments / additions have been made to the information leaflet, specifically around the operation of the Care Partner scheme when a home is experiencing an outbreak. This will be shared on the Department’s website shortly, and the expectation is that Care Homes should share the updated leaflet with all their residents and families to ensure that all are clear on the scheme and its outworking.

I would ask that this Pathway update, and the revised Care Partner leaflet, be circulated appropriately to facilities, residents/families and staff as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely,



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Chief Nursing Officer

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