

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



**VIA EMAIL:**

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

Department of Health  
C5.14  
Castle Buildings  
Stormont Estate  
Belfast BT4 3SQ  
Tel: 028 9052 0562  
Email:  
[Charlotte.McArdle@health-ni.gov.uk](mailto:Charlotte.McArdle@health-ni.gov.uk)

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Dear Colleagues,

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

The guidance document “**Visiting With Care – A Pathway**” set out a phased plan for a return to more normalised visiting arrangements. The Pathway is intended to ensure 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.

In line with that phased approach, 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-19 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**

The incidence of new care home outbreaks per week has dropped sharply and steadily from a peak of 30-35 per week in mid-July to less than 10 per week. Around 50% of outbreaks in the past week were staff only, 20% resident only and 30% a combination of resident and staff, at notification.

**Community Incidence**

The current wave of COVID-19 has seen sustained high levels of community prevalence with frequent fluctuations creating a seesaw effect over the last three months. No downward trend has yet been established, with a seven day rolling

average of 1,272 noted on 7 October (max 1,679 on 20 August – min 1,073 on 28 Sept). The highest number of individuals with positive test per 100K population is the 10-14 age group accounting for 21% of positive tests across the population in the last 7 days from 10 October. Higher rates in the 35-50 year old age groups may also indicate increased household transmission from children to parents. People aged 0-19 years have accounted for around 45% of cases, in recent weeks.

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

There are continued low levels of mortality associated with COVID-19 in care home settings. There were six care home deaths associated with COVID-19 during the week to 1 October 2021. Care home deaths as a proportion of total deaths where COVID-19 is noted on the death certificate remains significantly lower than in all previous waves (NISRA).

### **Hospital admissions**

Daily admissions and number of inpatients have reduced considerably in the past month. The majority of inpatients are from older populations with 57% of inpatients being aged 70 years and over.

### **Vaccine uptake rates**

Vaccination of residents with 2 doses = 91.5%; staff with 2 doses = 80.1%. Variations in care home staff vaccination at trust level is reducing. A small number of homes still have low levels of coverage (especially in staff). Many of the homes with low uptake rates are either very small or have a relatively high turnover of residents as they provide respite or intermediate care. Ongoing efforts are in place to improve data quality. Increased numbers of positive cases have been noted in vaccinated residents – indicating possible waning protection.

### **Variant of concern**

The delta variant continues to be the dominant variant in Northern Ireland with observed increased transmissibility but remains sensitive to the vaccine. Waning protection from vaccination is a concern but expected to be offset by a booster (3rd dose) being offered to selected populations (including care home residents and staff). Health protection surveillance will continue to monitor this data closely.

Based on the above surveillance information, I am delighted to confirm that the Minister has accepted the Public Health advice that now is the time to move forward to the second full stage of the Pathway – “**Gradual Easing**”. This change will take effect from tomorrow, Wednesday 20 October 2021, and the Department’s website will be updated to reflect this.

You should also note that some minor tweaks have been made to the text of the Pathway document to reflect the learning since May, and some additional clarifications have been added around arrangements for residents to leave the care home for short periods where they have capacity to do so.

In line with plan outlined in the Pathway, the next 4-weekly review will be completed in early November and we expect to be able to issue a further update shortly thereafter. We expect that this review will also include some additional recommendations to cover the Christmas period.

## **Lateral Flow Device (LTD) Testing**

I would also take this opportunity to remind all care home providers about the guidance previously circulated about Lateral Flow Device (LFD) testing for asymptomatic visitors. In addition to the comprehensive range of measures in place across care homes, testing of asymptomatic visitors (that is those who do not have any symptoms of COVID-19) can be used as an additional support to help safely maintain a balance between infection control and the very important benefits of visiting to the health and wellbeing of care home residents. Therefore, although there is no mandatory requirement for a visitor to have a COVID-19 test in advance of a visit to a care home, I would encourage all care home providers to ensure that they draw down appropriate stocks of LFD test kits, and continue to strongly promote the availability of LFD testing to all care home visitors.

I would ask that this update, and the updated Pathway document (enclosed), 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,



## **PROFESSOR CHARLOTTE MCARDLE**

Chief Nursing Officer

cc: Trust Directors of Older People Services  
Richard Pengelly  
Sean Holland  
Dr Michael McBride  
Dr Lourda Geoghegan  
Julie Houston  
Linda Kelly  
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