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20 May 2022

Dear Colleagues

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

As scheduled, 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 the available surveillance information (see **Appendix 1** below) I can confirm that the Department has accepted the recommendation for visiting in Care Homes to continue to be facilitated within the parameters set out in the third full stage of the Pathway – “**Further Easing**”.

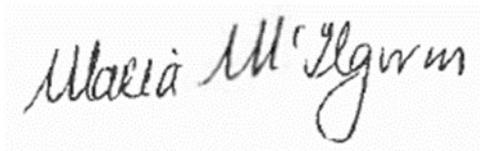
As was flagged in last month’s update notification letter, we have worked with PHA colleagues to develop a useful information leaflet which should be shared with residents and their families. The leaflet, which conveys the outcome of the latest review in an accessible way, is attached at **Appendix 2** below. We intend to provide an updated version of this following every

review cycle, which will include details of the review outcome alongside other key messages around the safe facilitation of visiting as we move forward together.

Finally, to reflect a recent update to the PHA advice for visiting arrangements in care homes experiencing an outbreak of COVID-19, the Outbreak algorithm has been updated to reflect the recent changes in testing and is attached for information at **Appendix 3**.

Thank you for your ongoing efforts to provide safe effective care for our care home residents.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Maria McIlgorm". The signature is written in a cursive style and is centered within a light gray rectangular box.

**Maria McIlgorm**  
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:

Key indicators of the epidemic are summarised in table 1 below.

**Table 1. Summary of key indicators of COVID-19 prevalence and severity**

Measure	Source	Most recent date	Value	Trend	Limitations
Care home outbreaks	PHA	26 April 2022	7-day rolling mean of 1-2 new outbreaks per day	Falling	
Estimated percentage of the population that would test positive for COVID-19	ONS Coronavirus (COVID-19) Infection Survey	10 April 2022 to 16 April 2022.	3.56% of the population would have tested positive, which is half of the recent high peak	Falling	Time lag of ~2 weeks from study period
COVID-19 cases	PHA	23 April 2022 (by specimen date)	7-day rolling mean of 565 cases/day.	Falling	Affected by recent changes in testing.
Rate of reported COVID-19 cases by age group per 100,000 population	PHA	23 April 2022 (by specimen date)	240 cases in 7 days per 100,000 population for people aged 80+ in Northern Ireland	Falling slowly	Affected by recent changes in testing.
Emergency hospital admissions for community-acquired COVID-19	PHA	21 April 2022 (by admission date)	7-day rolling mean of 13 emergency community-acquired COVID-19 per day	Falling slowly	Admissions reflect infections that occurred ~10 days earlier
COVID-19 related deaths in care homes	NISRA / General Registrar's office	Week ending 15 April 2022 (by date of death registration)	Two deaths were reported in the most recent week	Falling	Time lag for this indicator may be ~4 weeks.

- At the time of the review, one to two new care home COVID-19 outbreaks have been reported each day, on average.
- The Office for National Statistics Coronavirus COVID-19 Infection Survey has become an increasingly important indicator of the prevalence of COVID-19 as it is unaffected by changes in population testing policy and practice. This shows that following the period of very high prevalence since the beginning of 2022 the percentage of people in Northern Ireland who would have tested positive which is a proxy measure of prevalence had fallen to one in 30 people during the period of 10 - 16 April 2022.

- The total number of cases has fallen to a seven day average of 565 each day.
- Cases aged 70-79 years and 80+ years show a slow reduction over the last week.
- Reduced testing will increasingly affect the reliability of case counts and rates.
- The daily number of people admitted to hospital as an emergency with community acquired COVID-19 has reduced over the last four weeks.
- The number of care home residents who died and had COVID-19 mentioned on their death certificates fell in recent weeks with two such deaths reported in the week ending Friday 15 April 2022.
- The COVID-19 vaccine coverage in care home residents and staff is illustrated Figure 7 A and B. Most cases of SARS-CoV-2 infection in Northern Ireland are of the Omicron lineage. This is very easily transmitted, but it carries a lower risk of hospital admission or death for cases than previous variants. We have reported 16 cases of a new variant, XE which contains parts of the BA.1 and BA.2 Omicron sub-lineages. This variant has spread more quickly in England than BA.2, but there is limited information available at this time about any change in severity.

### **Testing and Transition**

A change in testing took effect on 25 April 2022 with further changes planned towards the end of June 2022. This signals a change in approach and management of COVID-19 in care homes. The overall assessment and pathway recommendation takes account of those changes.