

Visiting With Care – A Pathway

Supplementary Visiting Arrangements Christmas 2021



NB: the normal arrangements for managing exceptional circumstances, including visiting at end-of-life are not impacted upon by this update. Furthermore, Care Partnering arrangements will continue in addition to the provisions of this guidance.

Celebrating Christmas in our Care Homes

We recognise the importance that we all attach to seeing family and friends over the Christmas period, and want to reflect this by ensuring the right to family life for all our care home residents is fulfilled at this time of the year. The past two years have presented challenges like no other, and whilst we must maintain our vigilance to reduce the spread and impact of COVID-19, our intention remains to make sure our care home residents can enjoy the festive season in the company of family and friends.

This supplementary document outlines the guiding principles to support visiting in care homes over Christmas that is meaningful for residents, families, loved ones and care home staff while optimising protection from COVID-19 transmission.

The guidance will be implemented taking account of the terms of the [Visiting with Care - A Pathway](#) guidance document and will apply from **Thursday 23rd December**, up to and including **Tuesday 28th December** and then on **Saturday 1st January 2022**.

It is important to note that in light of the scientific and medical evidence which continues to emerge on the pandemic, this guidance is subject to ongoing review, and may need to be updated in light of any evolving situations including new variants, prevalence and impact of COVID-19 across our society. In particular, the evolving context relating to the omicron variant may require this guidance to be updated at relatively short notice. **It is imperative that everyone involved in facilitating and participating in visiting in our care homes this Christmas and New Year ensures that they follow all relevant public health guidance and that best practice is implemented to help keep our residents safe.**

Guiding Principles

When making decisions in relation to visiting arrangements over the Christmas and new year period the following principles should be applied:-

- **Responsibility** – everyone, including family members, has a responsibility to follow all applicable advice and guidance, and to take action to help our care homes stay safe homes.
- **Maintaining well-being** – decisions should focus on supporting meaningful contact to happen safely wherever possible, to protect and restore well-being of residents and their loved ones, and in line with residents' care needs.
- **Safely balancing risks of harm** – visiting or not visiting carries risks of harm and everyone should work together to consider and minimise these.
- **Individualised approach** – every resident should have an individualised visiting plan (within their care plan) which is person-centred and takes account of individual preferences and needs, and is balanced in the context of the needs of everyone in the care home, so that any restrictions to meaningful contact are proportionate.
- **Flexibility** – local flexibility and professional judgement remain key to decision making in complex circumstances.
- **Partnership working** - it is important the arrangements are discussed with mutual respect, recognising that everyone is seeking a positive outcome for our residents in care homes.

It remains important to ensure a balanced approach is adopted to address the potential risks presented by COVID-19 alongside the benefits of family time for residents living in our care homes. Therefore care home managers should update dynamic risk assessments already in place in partnership with the resident and their family / loved-ones.

All visits, or trips out of the home must take account of a number of factors, such as the care home capacity to implement additional visiting permissions safely whilst ensuring that IPC guidance is adhered to, as detailed in the following approach.

The following summarises the compassionate and risk assessed measures outlined in this supplement. Care home providers should:

- Take a compassionate and person centred approach to managing the overall footfall through the home in line with the broad principle of facilitating “up to 4 visits per week, from up to 4 persons from no more than 2 households at any one visit”, and in consultation with all parties to ensure that care home residents can enjoy sufficient family time at this special time of the year for us all.

In doing so, there is an expectation that providers should proactively and collaboratively make the best use of visiting slots to support the specific needs of residents and families. In light of the ongoing and emerging risks, families should actively consider limiting the number of different individuals visiting the care home at this time.

- Take a similar approach to managing the length and frequency of arrangements for friends / families to visit with their loved ones in care homes on Christmas Day itself, and on other days where this may be more suitable for those travelling long distances and from overseas.
- Again, there is an expectation that providers will work with residents and families to ensure that the available visiting slots are utilised to meet the identified needs of all residents.

Our Approach to Christmas 2021

Below is an outline of the recommended approach and principles to be followed to make it a truly FESTIVE time, while keeping us all as safe as possible:

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Family visits into the home

Extending the Christmas holidays

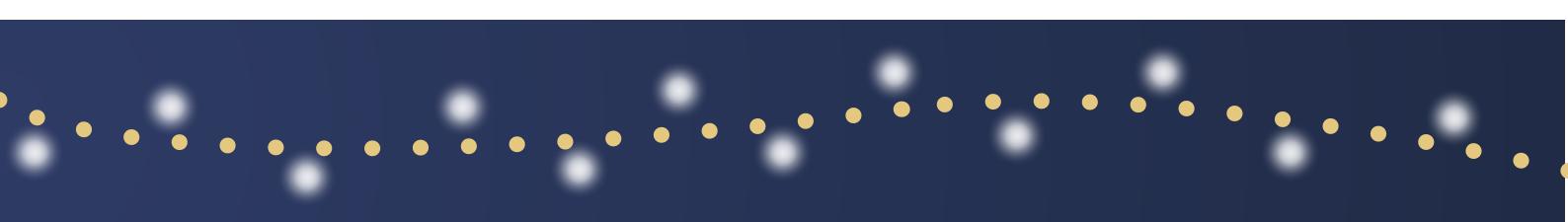
Sharing the season

Testing for visitors, Care Partners

Infection, prevention and control measures

Vaccination and booster

Enhanced cleaning



Family Visits

Flexible, compassionate arrangements should be considered to allow friends / families to visit with their loved ones in care homes on Christmas Day itself, and on other days where this may be more suitable. Families should discuss in advance with the care home the potential for them to enjoy festive refreshments together as would have been common prior to the pandemic.

The existing [Visiting With Care – A Pathway](#) guidance document sets the scene for the management of individual resident's visits outside of their care home to reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19. During the festive season it is a natural desire for families to be together in their family home. We welcome this, while recognising that increasing the number of people present at a family or other gathering does increase the risk of transmission to the individual and the wider care home population. Therefore it is important families are aware of and follow the best practice guidance [here](#) to ensure that care home residents can safely participate in family gatherings.

Further to the current guidance, it is recommended all those attending family gatherings, at which a care home resident will be present, should undertake Lateral Flow Testing (LFT) 24 hours prior to the event. Details around how to obtain LFT testing kits is available [here](#). LFT testing is an additional support. Even with a negative LFT result, it is important that those attending the family gathering do not change their behaviours and they must continue to adhere to all public health measures. Anyone who has symptoms of COVID-19 should not attend a family gathering.

Virtual Visiting arrangements should continue to be made available for families who are not able to physically visit and to ensure that all residents can enjoy family time over the festive season. Visits out will continue to be facilitated in line with Visiting with Care - A Pathway Appendix 1b.

Should an outbreak be declared within the care home, the care home manager will continue to take direction from PHA health protection Duty Room regarding management of the outbreak and the infection prevention and control measures required.

Extending the Christmas holidays

We have been listening to our care homes to understand what initiatives were put in place last year. Spreading the joy of Christmas over a number of days worked well for both residents and families last year. In order to optimise both the number of visits and the number of people visiting (up to 4 visits per week, from up to 4 persons from no more than 2 households at any one visit), we encourage families and friends to visit with their loved ones in care homes over the entire festive period **Thursday 23rd December**, right through until **28th December** and on **1st January 2022**.



Sharing the season

We recognise the fantastic work through which our care providers have always managed to bring a sense of festive cheer to the residents in their homes, including festive decorations etc. and would support the continuation of this approach, while being mindful of the need to identify and mitigate risk.

Activity Co-ordinators within care homes work closely with residents to ensure all enjoy festive cheer, whilst also keeping everyone safe. Information, advice, tips and ideas were shared on Christmas activities which are suitable during COVID-19 with Activity Co-ordinators; and presentations summarising these can be shared with care homes.

Suggestions include, how activities can be adapted to facilitate social distancing and infection control, e.g. not sharing activity materials between residents, having individual or small group activity sessions, making use of outdoor space where weather permits.

It's no surprise with the current context we are still unable to welcome visitors from our nearby schools, nurseries or Youth Organisations into our care homes. We would encourage all care homes to maintain those special bonds through the use of technology, for example by enjoying a virtual recording of a pantomime or a carol concert.

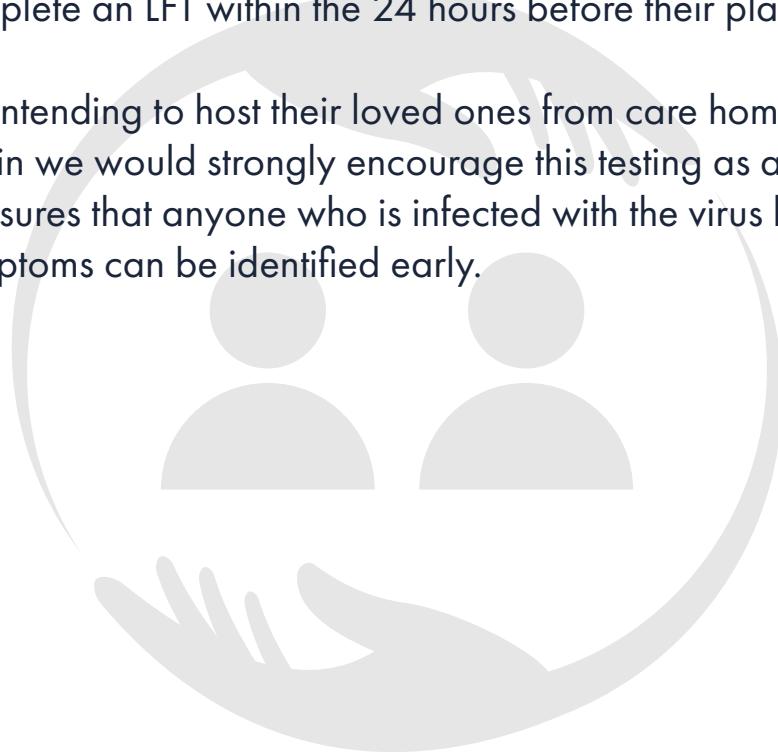
Many of our care homes have also thought of other ways for these intergenerational celebrations to continue, with a firm favourite being festive pen pals or homemade Christmas card exchanges. Some schools have also attended care homes to sing carols outside.

Testing for visitors, Care Partners

Christmas is a time for giving and receiving. The best gift that anyone in a care home would wish to receive is a visit from their loved one, safe in the knowledge that their visitor has been tested and has returned a negative test result. All our care homes have testing procedures in place for staff, and this testing is also offered to those acting as care partners.

Care homes also offer optional Lateral Flow Testing (LFTs) for use by anyone seeking to visit a loved one in the home, and we strongly encourage all visitors to take up this option and to complete an LFT within the 24 hours before their planned visit.

In addition, those intending to host their loved ones from care homes can access LFTs [here](#) and again we would strongly encourage this testing as an added level of protection, as it ensures that anyone who is infected with the virus but who may not be displaying symptoms can be identified early.



Infection, prevention and control measures

Relatives and friends understand the risk of spreading infection to vulnerable people. All visitors should postpone their plans to visit if they have any symptoms of infection.

All visitors should be encouraged to maintain good hand hygiene at the start, during and the end of each visit. This means washing your hands well and often, using soap and water and drying hands with paper towels and using hand sanitiser. This advice applies especially to young children who are more likely to want to touch things throughout the home. The care home manager can advise on relevant infection control precautions that may be required.

Whilst the use of aprons and gloves are not required, we are asking all visitors to wear Fluid Resistant Surgical Masks for the duration of their visit and these will be available on entry to the home should the visitor not have a suitable mask with them.

Vaccination and booster

Vaccines teach your immune system how to protect you from diseases. The PHA provides a useful information resource on the benefits of the vaccination programme [here](#). As well as reducing the risk of transmission of COVID-19, vaccination provides additional protection from the risk of serious illness, hospitalisation and death.

Everyone in Northern Ireland aged 12 years and over can receive a COVID-19 vaccine. It is important to have the full primary course to give you the best protection. While the first dose acts as an important immune response primer, the second dose is needed to boost your body's immune response to the COVID-19 virus, providing the best protection for you.

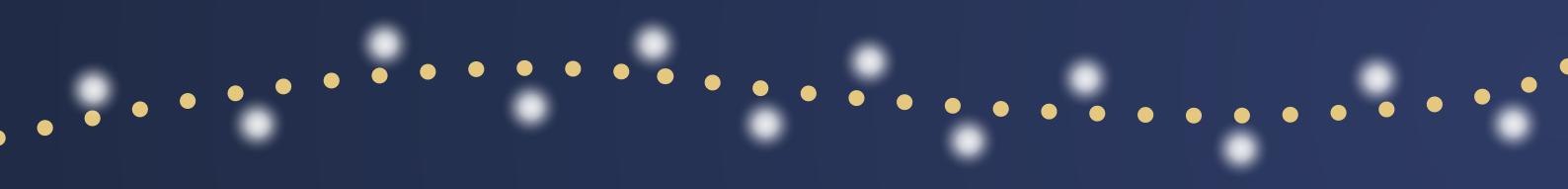
Based on National (JCVI¹) advice, the booster dose is now offered to everyone aged 18 and over in order of descending age groups, with priority given to the vaccination of older adults and those in COVID-19 at-risk groups. Booster vaccinations are available for all individuals aged 40 and over who are 3 months since the second dose of their primary COVID-19 vaccination. Further information on the COVID-19 booster vaccination programme is available at the following link: <http://www.health-ni.gov.uk/news/key-points-expanded-booster-programme>

We strongly encourage everyone to [access the vaccine](#), including the booster programme as it rolls out across the population as this is the best way to protect us all from COVID-19, including our loved ones in care homes who are among the most vulnerable in society. This is particularly important over the Christmas period.

¹ The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) advises UK health departments on immunisation. Full details of their role and make-up is available at www.gov.uk/government/groups/joint-committee-on-vaccination-and-immunisation

Enhanced cleaning

To ensure the safety of residents, staff and visitors there is a system of enhanced cleaning to support visiting at all times but especially at Christmas when our residents, families and staff will want to enhance our care homes with appropriate decorations. This may impact on the length of time of visits on occasions, and an appreciation of the operational needs in this regard will be required by visitors, residents and staff.



Implementation - Key Points

Arrangements for visiting in care homes must still be managed under the terms of the [Visiting With Care – A Pathway](#) guidance materials. The Pathway is subject to regular review, and this guidance material may need to change to reflect the outcome of forthcoming scheduled reviews ahead of the Christmas period, as well as updates in light of any evolving situations including new variants, prevalence and impact of COVID-19 across our society. In particular, the evolving context relating to the omicron variant may require this guidance to be updated at relatively short notice.

Our intention is to ensure a compassionate, risk based approach to the interpretation of the provisions of the Pathway to enable all our residents and their families to enjoy joyous and meaningful times together this festive period while keeping us all safe. Central to this is partnership working involving the care home manager, residents and families.

We would expect all conversations around potential visiting arrangements to be held in an atmosphere of mutual respect. We are all working for the same outcome; all of us must accept a degree of personal responsibility in ensuring that these arrangements are delivered in a safe manner for the benefit of all our care home residents, their families and, loved ones and our care home staff. This includes:

- Undertaking LFT testing prior to visits (ideally within the 24 hours prior to a visit);
- Ensuring adherence to the recommended Infection Prevention & Control requirements;
- Accessing the vaccine, including the booster programme as it rolls out across the population.

By showing mutual respect and understanding we will be able to find acceptable solutions to any challenges which exist or may arise.

Residents and families should note that arrangements for visiting must be based on a number of factors specific to the individual care home, such as the capacity to implement additional visiting whilst ensuring that all public health measures are adhered to.

During the Christmas period it is expected that care homes will take a compassionate person centred approach to managing the overall footfall through home in line with the broad principle of facilitating “up to 4 visits per week, from up to 4 persons from no more than 2 households at any one visit” per resident. In consultation with all parties they should work to ensure that care home residents can enjoy sufficient family time at this special time of the year for us all. In light of the ongoing and emerging risks, families should consider limiting the number of different individuals visiting the care home at this time. This should be agreed in partnership with families and in line with an updated and dynamic risk assessment. In doing so, there is an expectation that providers will proactively and collaboratively make the best use of available visiting slots to support the specific needs of residents and families over the Christmas period.

Additionally, where possible care homes should consider facilitating residents and their families to enjoy festive refreshments together as would have been common prior to the pandemic.

It is important for planning purposes that conversations are undertaken as soon as possible between care homes and residents, families and friends to allow the necessary arrangements to be put in place well in advance, and to allow any possible challenges which may arise to be identified and resolved early.

Finally we do hope that the provisions set out in this guidance allow our care home residents, their families, friends and loved ones, and our care home staff to have a happy, indeed joyous and safe Christmas 2021.





Department of
Health

An Roinn Sláinte

Männystrie O Poustie

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