



10 December 2021

Dear Care Providers and Directors of Adult Social Services,

In light of emerging evidence and clinical advice relating to the Omicron variant of COVID-19, I am writing to inform you that we need to take further steps from 15 December 2021 to keep residents in care homes safe.

Residents in care homes are more likely to suffer serious health consequences if they become infected with COVID-19. The latest data indicates that the Omicron variant may be more transmissible, with infections doubling every 2-3 days. It is possible that the number of Omicron cases may be significantly higher than those already confirmed, with the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) estimating there could be in the region of 10,000 cases of the Omicron variant in the UK.

Despite the challenge of Omicron, we are keen to ensure that visiting is still able to take place in order to enable residents to continue to see their families and friends. To ensure these visits can take place as safely as possible, along with current infection prevention and control (IPC) measures, regular testing, and PPE, we are introducing the following measures:

- In order to boost individual protection via the COVID-19 boosters vaccination rollout, we will guarantee that any homes that have not yet received a visit are offered one as a matter of priority (care homes can contact their primary care network clinical care home lead if they haven't had their first visit). We will ensure all homes get the visits they need to ensure everyone has a chance to access the vaccine. The NHS will closely monitor data on vaccination team visits to care homes and housebound people.
- Social care workers can continue to book a vaccination slot via the National Booking Service, and frontline care workers have priority status within the booking system. Care workers should book now if it is 2 months since their second dose so that they can receive their vaccination once 3 months has passed. With proof of employment, staff can also walk in to vaccination services to get protected.
- We will be increasing the number of LFD tests that each staff member should take each week from two to three, which is on top of their weekly PCR test.
- Each care home resident should be limited to three nominated visitors who can visit regularly. This will be in addition to all residents being able to nominate an essential care giver who can visit for companionship or for care needs. In line with the system that was in place earlier in the pandemic, the nominated visitors should remain the same, barring an exceptional change in circumstances. Visits at the end of life should always be supported.
- When going out of the care home residents should:
  - avoid visiting people they do not usually spend time with regularly
  - avoid visits out that involve mixing with a large number of people indoors



- have had a COVID-19 booster before taking part in a visit out of the care home if eligible, unless exempt
  - ask those they are visiting to undertake regular LFD testing, and receive a negative LFD on the day of the visit
  - ask those they are visiting to have had their COVID-19 vaccinations including booster if eligible
- Residents will still be asked to self-isolate following an emergency stay in hospital or following a visit out of the care home that is determined to be high-risk following an individual risk assessment.
  - For other visits out of the care home, to ensure that care home residents can continue to go out of the care home to visit loved ones or spend time in the local community, we will ask residents who have had two doses of the vaccine, or who are exempt, to take LFD tests every other day for 14 days when they return from spending time out of the care home.
  - For those residents who have not had two doses of the vaccine and who are not exempt, we will ask them to isolate for 14 days following a visit out in order to mitigate the risk that they endanger their fellow residents by bringing the new variant into the care home.

Care providers and Local Authorities should do as much as possible to facilitate visiting in line with this new guidance.

I hope that you will agree that the new arrangements provide appropriate additional protection to care home residents while ensuring they can continue to have meaningful contact with loved ones and take part in activities they enjoy in the context of a highly transmissible variant. The clinical advice is that these measures are needed. Further details on how care providers can implement these measures will be set out in guidance, which will be published this week for implementation from 15 December 2021.

Thank you for all your support in ensuring residents can safely spend time with their loved ones this Christmas. I very much appreciate all that you and your staff have done and continue to do to protect the most vulnerable people in our society.

Yours sincerely,

**GILLIAN KEEGAN**