

5 March 2021

Dear Family Member

CARE HOME VISITING UPDATE – NEW GUIDANCE FROM 8 MARCH 2021

As you may be aware, new national guidance on care home visiting was published today. It recognises the benefits of visiting on wellbeing and quality of life for residents, but also highlights the continued risk to health of Covid-19 for both residents and staff in care homes.

Over the last few months care homes have had to adapt to changing guidance and have worked with you to use different virtual ways of helping residents and families/friends to stay in touch.

The guidance applies from 8 March 2021 and confirms that all care homes, except in the event of an active outbreak, should seek to enable the following types of visits. We have set out below some information about the different types of visits which we hope helps you to plan your visit in partnership with the care home.

Indoor visiting by a ‘single named visitor’. If you are a named visitor, you may find the follow guidance/information helpful:

- All visits must be planned and booked with the home, this will help them to manage the number of visitors and ensure safe visiting for everyone.
- The care home will share any instructions they need you to follow. Please ask the home if you have any questions, but it’s important you follow these instructions. The home is not being difficult, they are just trying to keep everyone safe.
- For many families, nominating a single consistent visitor will be a difficult choice. However, we ask that you try and reach this agreement amicably and of course take into account the wishes of the resident. Care home staff and social workers can assist with these discussions if needed.
- You will be asked a series of screening questions which you must answer honestly. They are there to protect you and the person you are visiting.
- You will need to have a negative rapid lateral flow test before every visit. If you test positive, the home will arrange a PCR test for you and you will be asked to leave and isolate in line with national guidance.
- You will be asked to keep physical contact to a minimum, however we appreciate you may wish to hold hands with the person you are visiting. Before doing so, you are asked to bear in mind that any contact increases the risk of transmission.
- You must observe social distancing, hand hygiene and PPE use, and follow all necessary infection control measures.
- Where a resident lacks capacity to decide if they would like a visitor/who is to be their single named visitor, you are reminded that this person can only be nominated if it’s in the resident’s best interests in accordance with the Mental Capacity Act. The care home and social workers can support with these decisions if needed.

Visiting for an essential care giver. In addition to a single named visitor, where close contact personal care is critical for the resident's health and wellbeing, arrangements for the visitor to provide that care should be made. If you are an essential care giver, you may find the following guidance/information helpful:

- Some residents may have care and support needs that mean some caring tasks cannot easily be provided by a member of staff (or not without causing substantial distress). There may also be some situations where it is the presence or company of the visitor that is critical to provide emotional and mental support. It is likely that these arrangements will already be part of (and documented in) their care plan – although this is not a condition.
- You will need to follow the same testing arrangements as care home staff. This includes a minimum of 3 tests a week: one rapid lateral flow test on the same day as the PCR test, and one further rapid lateral flow test. These rapid lateral flow tests must be done on site and visitors cannot self-test at home. If there is a Covid outbreak, you will be subject to any additional testing that may be required. If you test positive you will be asked to leave and isolate in line with national guidance.
- You will need to follow the same PPE and infection control arrangements as care home staff. The care home will advise you of these and if you are unable to comply with these, the home may no longer be able to support you continuing as an essential care giver.
- You will need to clearly agree with the care home what care and support you will/will not provide. The care home may ask you questions about this to ensure you have the appropriate skills to provide this support. The care home may also ask you to sign a document confirming this. Please don't be offended by this, it is an important part of the care home risk assessment.
- All visits must be planned with the home, this will help them to manage the number of visitors at any time and ensure safe visiting can be maintained.
- The care home will share any instructions they need you to follow. Please ask the home if you have any questions, but it's important you follow these instructions. The home is not being difficult, they are just trying to keep everyone safe.
- You will be asked a series of screening questions and you must answer these honestly. These are there to protect you and the person you are visiting.

Outdoor visiting, use of visitor pods where there are substantial screens and other visiting spaces where there are substantial screens and/or window visits will continue. If you wish to visit using these arrangements, you will be required to socially distance at all times, wear PPE and follow any infection control procedures in the home. You will also require a negative rapid lateral flow test before each visit.

Essential visits including end of life – Sadly the person you are visiting may be receiving end of life care or have been advised they are in the last year of their life. These visits remain a priority and should always be enabled by the care home. End of life doesn't just mean the last few hours or days, but includes consideration of planned visits in the last months of a residents life. In these situations you will be required to wear PPE and follow any infection control procedures in the home. You will also require a negative rapid lateral flow test before each visit.

Having a Covid vaccination is not a condition of visiting care homes, however we would encourage everyone who is eligible, to take up the important offer of vaccination. This will help to protect; yourself; your family; the person you are visiting; other care home residents and staff; and of course the wider community.

Each care home is different, but they are all working hard to put in place the necessary procedures and policies to arrange safe visiting as soon as possible. Some care homes currently have Covid-19 outbreaks, so they will not be able to offer visits at this time (apart from in exceptional circumstances including the new arrangements for an essential care giver and/or where a resident may sadly be receiving end of their life care). However, please be assured that as soon as it is safe to do so - and care homes are Covid-free - they will be working to open for visits safely.

If the care home does have any outbreaks of Covid-19 they will need to suspend visiting until they are Covid-free for 28 days, under the guidance of Public Health England (except in exceptional circumstances such as end of life/essential care givers).

Healthwatch Birmingham are happy to receive any feedback about any visits you make to care homes, in particular anything that has gone well or anything you are concerned about, please call 0800 652 5278 / 0121 636 0990.

The Council also has a dedicated whistleblowing helpline that you can use to raise any concerns about Covid-19 working practices in care homes:

<https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/xfp/form/762> . If you are unable to use this form then please call 0121 303 1116.

Visits to care homes are being carefully introduced, based on ongoing assessment of risks. Arrangements will be subject to the specific circumstances in the care home and those living and working in it. Please do be patient with the care home staff, they are doing there best to manage a number of priorities and keep everyone safe.

We would like to thank you for your patience and support over these difficult months to keep our vulnerable residents safe and to reduce the spread of Covid-19. Finally we ask for your patience with care homes while they get things in place to enable safe visiting and your understanding with those homes that may be experiencing outbreaks and cannot currently support safe visiting.

Yours sincerely

Dr Justin Varney
Director of Public Health

Professor Graeme Betts
Director of Adult Social Care