

Care homes – Christmas family visiting (23rd – 27th December) – Updated Guidance

Guidance for Christmas family visiting in care homes was issued by the Department on 9 December 2020. This advised that the regional visiting guidance continued to apply during the Christmas period. It also stressed that homes should recognise the importance many people attach to seeing family and friends over the Christmas period, and the right to a family life for those in care homes. Care homes were asked to make particular efforts to facilitate visiting over the Christmas period, with specific advice set out in “Christmas Visiting guidance”.

However, on 17 December 2020, the Executive announced new public health measures effective from 00.01 on 26 December 2020, which will be reviewed after four weeks. The justification for these additional restrictions is in response to the continued level of positive Covid-19 cases in NI, and to reduce the rapid spread of a new variant of coronavirus which has been identified. This new strain has been confirmed as more easily transmitted than other variants.

Given the introduction of additional restrictions and the identification of a new strain of the virus the guidance for Christmas family visiting in care homes has been revised and additional requirements to facilitate safe visiting to reduce the transmissibility of the virus must be introduced. It should be noted that current precautions including the use of PPE, social distancing and Infection Prevention and Control measures are all effective against the new strain. The strict adherence to these measures is critical in mitigating against an increased risk of infection.

The advice in this document replaces the guidance issued on 9 December 2020.

The key changes to the arrangements are:

- Residents are very strongly advised against leaving their care home to visit the home of family or friends and should consider cancelling all such arrangements
- For visits to the care home, outdoor visiting, window visiting or virtual visiting are the preferred methods
- However, recognising that this is not always practical or possible then visiting indoors should be accommodated within a large room with good ventilation, with strict implementation of all existing infection prevention and control advice.
- Covid-19 testing will be made available to one visitor or care partner per care home resident per week over the Christmas period and up to Friday 8 January 2021. The testing will be bookable at existing testing facilities, using the established PCR tests.
- The use of appropriate PPE is essential to help prevent the spread of this new strain of the virus and should be strictly adhered to by staff and all visitors

- Visitors should wear surgical fluid repellent face masks as these are most effective. Care homes may need to provide these for visitors. In addition, where possible, residents should also be strongly encouraged to wear surgical fluid repellent face masks during a visit.
- Visits accommodated at a window will require both the visitor, and the resident where tolerated to use surgical mask, if the window is opened.
- While visits are generally scheduled for an hour it should be stressed that the shorter the amount of time spent with a resident the lower the risk of infection transmission. All residents and visitors should consider the amount of time allocated for the visit and discuss this with the care home staff to ensure that visits are managed in the safest way possible.
- Care homes should continue to apply all of the existing advised IPC measures currently in place, including screening questions for visitors before the visit takes place, advising and using effective hand washing techniques, appropriate use of PPE, safe social distancing and enhanced cleaning regimes.
- Care homes experiencing an outbreak of infection must follow PHA advice on managing the outbreak, including restrictions to visiting.

These measures will be subject to further review by early January. As the situation remains ever changing and extremely fluid there is a need to continually review and revise the approach to visiting arrangements within care homes.