

**PE1841/G**

Scottish Government submission of 9 February 2021

Thank you once again for this opportunity to comment on this important petition on allowing designated visitors into care homes.

At the outset I wish to confirm that the Scottish Government is committed to supporting further opportunities for opening up visiting in care homes. It has been an incredibly difficult balance to strike between keeping homes as safe as possible from the virus and allowing relatives to see their loved ones.

The recommended restrictions around visiting for those living in care homes have been one of the toughest decisions Scottish Ministers have had to make during the pandemic. Ministers are deeply sympathetic to the situation faced by people who want to see loved ones in care homes. We have been doing all that we can to allow people to visit safely, while also ensuring the safety of residents, which everyone accepts is of vital importance.

The announcement on 4 January of the need for further level 4 restrictions, serves as a timely reminder of the importance of taking immediate action if we are to stem the worrying rise in COVID cases associated with the new COVID variant, which is up to 70% more transmissible. This means that regrettably, indoor visits to care homes have been restricted to essential and outdoor visits only. An essential visit is classed as one where family members or friends visit a resident in pressing circumstances. This includes: where someone's health and/or wellbeing is changing for the worse; where visiting may help with communication difficulties; and to ease personal stress or other pressing circumstances, including approaching end of life.

Re-introduction of scaled back visiting to care homes was a difficult decision to take as we are acutely aware of how difficult visiting restrictions continue to be for care home residents and their families.

However, as the First Minister outlined on 4 January, the Scottish Government will ensure that these restrictions will not be kept in place for longer than is absolutely necessary.

Recommendations on visiting in care homes, informed by clinical and scientific advice, are constantly reviewed to ensure that we strike a balance between keeping homes as safe as possible from the virus and allowing people to see their loved ones. The Scottish Government has established the Clinical and Professional Advisory Group (CPAG) which comprises a range of stakeholders across health and social care and provides advice on issues relating to the pandemic including visiting. The Chief Medical Officer and Chief Nursing Officer consider advice from the CPAG and provide regular advice and recommendations to Scottish Ministers on issues relating to the pandemic. More generally the First Minister has confirmed there will be a public inquiry into all aspects of the pandemic, including care homes which will take place as soon as the immediate Covid crisis has been dealt with.

In consultation with Directors of Public Health, Public Health Scotland and the Chief Medical Officer, the Scottish Government is now recommending that the period of

closure to new admissions and visitors following an outbreak is reduced from 28 days to 14 days, which will mean that care homes will be able to open to visitors sooner after an outbreak. This will help prevent situations where residents are separated from family and friends for such long periods.

With significant progress being made in the vaccination and expanded testing programmes, the Scottish Government is working on plans to support a return to indoor visiting. We expect care home residents and staff to have received the first dose of either the Pfizer or Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine by the start of February and as of 09 February, over 29,908 care home residents have received their first dose of the COVID-19 vaccination, this being 99.7% of residents in older adult care homes, and 93% of residents in all care homes. The first dose provides substantial protection within 2-3 weeks of vaccination. The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport met with members of the Care Home Relatives Scotland group on 18 January, where she discussed proposals and invited members of the group to help shape this work.

In taking account of risks to care homes we now have 7 levels of protection in place which include: testing policy on admission and readmission, effective IPC, PPE, testing of staff, testing of visiting health professionals and visitors, vaccination in place.

Taken together these levels of protection offer the opportunity of opening up visiting in our care homes once again. The plans for a return to indoor visiting will be published shortly and will recommend that all partners should work together to ensure that indoor meaningful contact visiting is supported wherever it is safe to do so.

We are aware of the petitioner's view that legislation is necessary to ensure that care home relatives will always have a right to see a loved one. This was raised by the petitioner and Care Home Relatives Scotland at a meeting with the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport. Scottish Ministers believe improvements underway to the current measures and the progress in vaccination and testing programmes offer the fastest route to progressing visiting. However the Scottish Government is exploring all options and engaging with people, including relatives of care home residents and care home providers. The Cabinet Secretary has met with the petitioner along with members of the Care Home Relatives Scotland regularly and with representatives from all parties to discuss what further action is required. At a meeting with members from all parties on 25 January, she discussed the above plans for the reintroduction of indoor visiting and indicated that the supporting guidance will be developed following further clinical advice and consultation with stakeholders including care home providers and relatives.