

PE1841/L

Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport letter to Health and Sport Committee of 20 February 2021

Dear Lewis,

I am writing to inform you of the impending publication of revised care home visiting guidance, which we intend to publish on Wednesday, 24 February. The guidance has been drafted to support the introduction of meaningful contact between care home residents and their loved ones.

There has been huge progress in introducing multiple layers of protection within our care homes to limit the transmission of COVID-19 including:

- adequate, available and properly used personal protective equipment for care home staff and visitors;
- testing of residents prior to hospital discharge and admission to care homes;
- routine testing has been enhanced for care home staff and introduced for professionals who attend care homes and designated visitors;
- vaccination of care home residents and staff; and
- support from local oversight arrangements, public health and primary care.

Protecting care home residents from the risk of COVID-19 has been our priority since the beginning of the pandemic. However, given the COVID-19 protections now in place we recognise that the balance of harm for residents is now the ongoing restriction of contact with their relatives and loved ones. There is now emerging information that prolonged isolation can result in physical, emotional and cognitive harm for residents, and can result in distress and significant emotional burden on loved ones.

We can see that the protections are working and that the picture in care homes is improving. The latest National Records of Scotland data shows that deaths from COVID-19 in care homes have fallen by 62% in the last three weeks.

As a result, the revised guidance will recommend that routine indoor contact between care home residents, relatives, friends and carers resumes from 3 March, on a safe and compassionate basis. It supports care providers to open up safe visiting for up to two designated visitors per resident, twice a week. Relatives and loved ones will be required to wear a face covering and any other PPE requested by the care home and will be offered lateral flow testing before entry.

The revised guidance has been developed with input from the following partners and I am very grateful for their insights and contributions:

- CNO, CMO, National Clinical Director, CSWO
- Scottish Care and CCPS
- Care home staff, managers and providers
- Clinical Professional and Advisory Group (CPAG) members
- CPAG engagement subgroup whose membership includes Age Scotland, Alzheimer's Scotland, Care Home Relatives Scotland, National Dementia Carers Action Network PAMIS, Scottish Autism, Tide UK
- Care Inspectorate
- HSCPs including commissioners and contract managers

- Directors Public Health
- Nurse Directors
- Chief Officers.

National and local monitoring will take place from the point the guidance is published and support will be in place for providers in the initial weeks of implementation.

Today, we will announce the publication of the guidance next week, with implementation by care providers from 3 March, where it is safe to do so. Although moving forward it will remain the case that visiting to individual care homes will be restricted to essential only in the event of an outbreak at a care home.

I hope that this early announcement will help to prevent further anxiety for many relatives and I ask that we all support our care homes and relatives in the immediate weeks ahead as progress is made to adopt the new guidance.

I will of course ensure you receive a copy of the guidance when it is published. Please note that I have also copied this letter to the Public Petitions Committee as well as opposition Health spokespeople, Willie Rennie MSP and Neil Findlay MSP.