

Care homes – Christmas family visiting (23 – 27 December 2020)

The regional visiting guidance continues to apply during the Christmas period. This guidance is available at <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/Covid-19-visiting-guidance>.

However, 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, and make particular efforts to facilitate visiting in line with this guidance over the Christmas period.

Given the possibility of increased demand for all forms of visits to care homes over the Christmas period, including outside visits, virtual visits etc. families and friends should ensure they schedule visits in line with any guidance provided by the care home. Homes will wish to manage the flow of visitors to minimise any risks of visitors mixing.

Visits into care homes are preferable to visits out of care homes by the resident. Visits out of care homes over the Christmas period from 23rd to 27th December are therefore discouraged, given the risks associated with bringing infection back into the care home. A resident's wishes will be the primary consideration but any resident who does wish to leave, or families or friends who do wish to take a resident out of a care home in the period from 23rd December to 27th December, should discuss this with the care home. Homes will want to consider the needs, choices and wishes of every resident and their family and ensure professional assessment and care planning supports this process. Particular account should be taken of the risks that may exist to elderly or frail residents, if they leave the home – residents and family members should be made aware of the risks and helped to make informed decisions about them.

Any discussions should note that visits away from the home carry both a risk of infection for the resident and the risk of carrying infection back into the home. It is particularly inadvisable for a resident to leave a care home where that home has an active outbreak, for instance. Where a visit out of the care home is agreed, having taken account of all the issues and risks, a number of steps, set out below, should be taken to minimise risks.

Longer visits away from the home carry greater risk and shorter visits, ideally for a few hours, are therefore preferable if a visit away from the home is to take place. Overnight stays away from the care home carry greater risks but may need to be arranged by the family for practical reasons. On returning to the care home residents should be facilitated to self-isolate for 14 days, to minimise the risk of any infection being transmitted (this is required even if the visit out has only been for a few hours). The impact of this period of isolation on the resident should be considered by the resident, families, friends and care home staff in any discussions. Consideration will also need to be given to the care home's ability to accommodate periods of isolation, particularly if several residents wish to visit out. Alternatives to face to face visiting in this isolation period should be accommodated. Routine testing, and testing for symptomatic individuals or residents and staff of a home in outbreak, should continue to apply once the resident is back in the care home.

When away from the care home the resident should only be in contact with one household bubble (more information on household bubbles is available here: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-regulations-guidance-what-restrictions-mean-you>). Members of this bubble should strictly limit their contact with others in the two weeks before a visit from the care home resident. Good personal hygiene and regular handwashing by everyone must be maintained, social distancing should be maintained as far as possible during the visit, rooms should be well ventilated and the resident should limit their time in any one room.

Families and friends should take account of the particular vulnerability of anyone in the household bubble whom the care home resident will be visiting and the risk of transferring infection to them (for instance, if a member of the bubble is clinically extremely vulnerable).

When travelling for their visit general guidance on minimising the risk of infection in transport applies (available here: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-regulations-guidance-what-restrictions-mean-you#toc-5>).

To minimise risks, ideally only one visit away from the care home should take place for each resident during this period (23rd – 27th December).

Care homes will need to discuss the care regime with family and friends and the resident how to meet the resident's needs outside of the home. There should be no assumption that community based support (such as domiciliary care or District Nursing) will be able to provide support at the visiting location, unless this has been confirmed by the Trust.

Families and friends should provide advance notice to the care home where they wish to discuss a resident making a visit away from the home. Where the resident does not have capacity in relation to this decision, usual processes regarding best interests should apply.