

Coronavirus – visiting to begin again at care homes in March

The Scottish Government has announced that routine indoor visiting of care home residents by relatives, friends and carers may begin again from early March.

Care providers have been asked to support residents to have up to two designated visitors each and one visit a week for each visitor.

With a wide range of protections now in place against Covid-19 for care home residents, it is has been decided that meaningful contact should be made easier for the wellbeing of residents and their relatives. The most recent step is the Covid vaccine and now more than 99.9% of older care home residents and 92% of staff have been vaccinated with first dose.

The national picture of coronavirus outbreaks in care homes is improving. National Records of Scotland data shows that deaths from coronavirus in care homes have fallen by 62% in the last three weeks. The government has decided that the balance is now in favour of allowing contact to resume.

Guidelines will be published on Wednesday 24 February 2021 will support care providers to resume visiting for up to two designated visitors per resident. Every time someone goes into a care home it is a Covid risk, but the government believes

continued restriction of contact for residents with relatives might contribute to loneliness and isolation and worsening physical and mental health.

With the range of protections in place against Covid, the bigger risk now is assessed as the continued separation of residents from their own family. Visitors will have to wear face coverings and any PPE requested by the care home, and are strongly encouraged to take a Covid test on-site.

While visiting may sometimes still be restricted, for example in the event of an outbreak at a care home, the expectation is that homes will facilitate regular weekly contact as long as certain safety conditions are met. We will then work to continue to gradually increase the frequency and duration of contact.

Health Secretary Jeanne Freeman said: "The decisions regarding restrictions on visiting for care home residents have been some of the most difficult we have faced and I have the greatest sympathy for those who have been unable to see relatives and loved ones in person for so long.

"Care home staff have worked tirelessly throughout the pandemic to support continued contact between residents and their loved ones but these restrictions have been hugely challenging for them, as well as for care home staff and colleagues.

"We deeply regret the deaths and other harm caused by coronavirus in our care homes, but we also recognise the harm caused to the wellbeing of residents and families as a result of an inability to see those they love.

"We must remain vigilant about the risks but with multiple layers of protection now in place the balance is in favour of allowing visits. Everyone, including visitors, has a responsibility to ensure that visits take place as safely as possible by continuing to follow safety advice.

“The additional protection in place includes infection prevention and control measures (IPC); personal protective equipment (PPE) in care homes and testing of staff and visiting professionals to care homes, which have developed processes and protocols for safer indoor visiting to take place.

“The guidance we are publishing sets out an expectation that providers will put in place arrangements to enable regular visits to resume from early March and from the discussions I have had with providers, I now expect all care homes to have embraced this guidance by mid-March.”

Scottish Conservative Shadow Health Secretary Donald Cameron said: “This will be greeted with an overwhelming sense of relief by families who have loved ones in care homes. Many won’t have seen or had physical contact with their relatives for almost a year, and will be counting down the days until they can hug them again.

“While protecting our most vulnerable has always been the priority, this represents a hugely positive step forward for our care home residents and provide them with long overdue family time.

“SNP Ministers must ensure that the guidance they publish on Wednesday is clear and practical so the return of visitors to care homes can operate as smoothly and safely as possible.”

Scottish Labour interim leader Jackie Baillie MSP said: “Care home residents and families across Scotland will be relieved by the announcement that safe indoor visits can resume from next month. It is a testament to the campaigning efforts of families that we have found a way forward in the face of broken promises and confused messaging from the SNP Government.

“While stopping the spread of the virus must be the number one priority, it is precisely because of the SNP government’s

failures – over care homes, PPE, testing and contact tracing – that families have been deprived of essential contact for so long. It is vital that the new guidelines are clear and that safety measures are sufficient to ensure there are no more broken promises and false hopes so that loved ones can be reunited again.”

Leader of the Scottish Liberal Democrats Willie Rennie said: “The opportunity for families to once again be together will be a great emotional relief after a year of separation.

“I have encouraged the Scottish Government to make this happen for some time.

“The challenge now is to make it happen after so many false dawns when families were promised access only to be denied later.

“I will be watching very closely to make sure this promise is kept.”

Cathie Russell of Care Home Relatives Scotland said: “We look forward to working with care home providers, public health and oversight teams to ensure that the new guidance allows residents to enjoy meaningful contact with their closest relatives and friends once more. It has been a very difficult year. The deepest ties of love are important and we can never thrive without them.”

Donald MacAskill, chief executive of Scottish Care, said: “The COVID pandemic has presented frontline care home staff and managers with many challenges but undoubtedly the hardest has been keeping residents apart from family and friends.

“We have now reached a very different place and with a range of COVID-19 protections in place, including vaccination and testing, combined with the use of PPE and IPC, we are at a stage where we can re-introduce safer indoor visiting to Scotland’s care homes. This day has been long-awaited and we

understand that it will be an emotional time for many.

“Scottish Care is committed to supporting staff and managers, residents and family, to make sure that these guidelines succeed in their aim of reconnecting individuals.”We commit to working together to overcome any challenges and difficulties we might face and to support those who may still be anxious and fearful, so that together we can ensure that a painful period of separation can be replaced by greater togetherness.”

Gabe Docherty, on behalf of Scottish Directors of Public Health, said:“There’s not been a day when these very human considerations haven’t weighed on the minds of my colleagues and I as we’ve endeavoured to safely negotiate all the challenges COVID has presented.

“It is always been the focus of Directors of Public Health to reinstate visiting as soon as there was evidence that the risks of doing so were greatly reduced. So I warmly welcome and wholeheartedly endorse the approach – and all that it means for care home residents, their families and Care Home staff.”

Cllr Stuart Currie, Health and Social Care Spokesman for the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, said: “Local Government welcomes the forthcoming guidance on resuming meaningful contact for care home residents and recognises the impact that restrictions have had on residents, their families and friends and care home staff.

“This guidance supports all parts of the system to ensure that meaningful contact is undertaken safely with a number of safety and protection measures in place.”