

**From the Chief Medical Officer
Dr Michael McBride**



BY EMAIL

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Dear Colleagues

**IMPLEMENTATION OF A REGULAR PROGRAMME OF COVID-19 TESTING IN
RESIDENTIAL AND NURSING CARE HOMES**

Thank you for participating on the teleconference meeting yesterday morning where I outlined the introduction of a planned regular programme of COVID-19 testing for all staff and all residents in care homes across Northern Ireland. This letter sets out the detail of this testing programme which will commence on Monday 3 August 2020.

You will be aware that on 18 May 2020, the Minister for Health announced that COVID-19 testing was to be made available to all care home residents and staff, including care homes which did not, and had not, experienced a COVID-19 outbreak. This initial phase of the COVID-19 care home testing programme completed in all care homes across Northern Ireland at the end of June 2020. In view of the logistical challenges associated with undertaking such an extensive programme of testing, across a significant number of facilities in a relatively short period of time, this is a positive outcome.

It was made possible through a collaborative and robust multi-agency working partnership between the Department, the Public Health Agency (PHA), Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts, the NI Ambulance Service and the care homes themselves, and I wish to extend my sincere thanks to everyone involved for their unwavering commitment and support in this regard. It is important to acknowledge the dedication of all care home staff who have worked tirelessly over these last few months to provide care to residents under such challenging circumstances.

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic continues to pose an unprecedented challenge for all of us seeking to provide health and social care in healthy working environments. The virus is still present in our community and it is vital that we do not underestimate the significant challenge we will experience in the coming months to

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cope with the normal winter pressures and possible further waves of the COVID-19 pandemic. Protecting residents and staff in our care homes therefore remains a key priority for the Department. A COVID-19 test will only confirm whether someone has COVID-19 at the time the test takes place. Therefore, the introduction of a regular programme of testing across all our care homes is necessary and will play an important role in helping to minimise the risk of COVID-19 and in ensuring the continued safety of all residents and staff.

There are two components to the COVID-19 care home testing programme in Northern Ireland; those care homes which do not have a COVID-19 outbreak, and care homes with a suspected or confirmed COVID-19 outbreak.

Care Homes without a COVID-19 outbreak

In care homes which do not have a COVID-19 outbreak, all staff are to be tested for COVID-19 every **14 days**, and all residents are to be tested for COVID-19 every **28 days**. The PHA will continue to support all care homes in the coming weeks and months, as this programme of regular testing is implemented.

This aspect of the care home testing programme will be undertaken through the National Testing Programme and arrangements to obtain samples on residents and staff will be managed by each care home. The Registered Manager in each care home will book and access testing kits through an online booking portal and once each round of testing has been completed, a courier will collect the used tests which will then be submitted to a laboratory.

Care Homes with a suspected or confirmed COVID-19 outbreak

It is important to identify both single cases and potential clusters of COVID-19 cases, as early identification will allow immediate steps to be taken to prevent spread. Therefore, the current testing protocol implemented across the PHA and HSC Trusts will be further enhanced to effectively support testing arrangements in care homes with a new suspected or confirmed COVID-19 outbreak. This aspect of the care home testing programme will be undertaken through the HSC/Consortium laboratory system.

If a care home has a single symptomatic resident and/or staff member, or a potential cluster of cases, the care home will be required to contact: the GP of each affected individual case to arrange clinical assessment; and the PHA Duty Room to complete a clinical risk assessment. The PHA Duty Officer will advise the care home on what further action is to be taken.

The number of testing rounds to be undertaken in a care home with a suspected or confirmed outbreak will be determined taking into account the specific circumstances of that care home.

By way of example, if a single individual (resident and/or staff member) is symptomatic, the individual will be tested for COVID-19. If the test is **positive**, a **programme of whole care home testing (all staff and residents) will be carried out immediately**. If the test result is **negative**, the PHA will not initiate whole care home testing at that stage, but will continue to closely monitor the situation in the care home and may need to initiate whole home testing at a later date.

Where **two or more people** among staff or residents are reporting respiratory symptoms at the same time, **whole care home testing for COVID-19 (for all staff and all residents) will be undertaken immediately**. In these circumstances, a second round of COVID-19 testing will be undertaken 4 to 7 days following the first round of testing. The purpose of this second round of testing is to help identify any false positive and/or false negative test results that may have occurred during the first round of testing and also to inform an assessment of whether the outbreak (that is the number of confirmed cases) is increasing, stabilizing or decreasing. For all care homes where whole home testing of all residents and all staff has been undertaken, a further (third) round of testing will be carried out 28 days following the symptom onset in the last known case (either among staff and residents) in the home.

Once any care home experiencing a COVID-19 outbreak has fully met the specified criteria for an outbreak to be successfully concluded, the care home will return to participate in the regular programme of care home testing supported by the National Testing Programme.

It is important to note that any individual who tests positive for COVID-19 will not be tested again for approximately 6 weeks. This is because any repeat test may result in a positive result due to the presence of residual (dead) virus within the individual's system, but does not represent active infection with the virus.

I would wish to assure you that the position on frequency of testing for staff and residents in care homes with no COVID-19 outbreak, and in care homes with a suspected or confirmed COVID-19 outbreak, will be kept under active review by the Department. Any requirement to vary the frequency of the testing undertaken in care homes will be clearly informed by emerging scientific evidence and other contributory factors, including local community transmission rates of the virus in Northern Ireland in the coming months.

If you have any further queries about the regular programme of COVID-19 testing in care homes, please do not hesitate to contact address **NR** [@health-ni.gov.uk](mailto:health-ni.gov.uk) **NR** at the following email

I sincerely appreciate and thank you for your ongoing and continued support in this matter.

Yours sincerely

PD

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