

**From:** Dr Lourda Geoghegan

**Date:** 27 July 2020

**To:** 1. Dr Michael McBride, CMO ✓ approved 27<sup>th</sup> July  
2. Robin Swann MLA, Minister

**SUB-1698-2020 – REGULAR PLANNED COVID-19 TESTING PROGRAMME IN CARE HOMES ACROSS NORTHERN IRELAND**

**SUMMARY**

**Issue:** Planned introduction of a regular COVID-19 testing programme in care homes across Northern Ireland.

**Timing:** Immediate.

**Presentational Issues:** This issue continues to attract significant media attention. Press Office will monitor any developments and liaise with officials over lines if approached for comment. Cleared with Press Office 27/7/20 (TS).

**FOI Implications:** Any requests will be considered in line with the provisions of the Act and any relevant exemptions.

**Executive Referral:** Referral to the Executive is not required.

**Financial Implications:** Care Homes will not experience any additional costs for the swabbing/testing process. Costs for the regular testing programme will be met by DHSC as this will be undertaken through the National Testing Programme. Testing of care homes with a suspected or confirmed COVID-19 outbreak will be undertaken through the HSC/Consortium laboratory process. Staff who may be off sick or required to self-isolate following a positive COVID-19 test result may experience a loss of earnings. Minister's £11.7m financial package of support for care homes announced on 2 June 2020 will enable care homes to pay 80% of salary costs for affected staff. This funding package is currently due to run until the end of August 2020.

**Equality Implications:** Not applicable.

**Legislation Implications:  
Special Adviser's Views:**

Not applicable.

**Recommendation:**

It is recommended that you note the content of this briefing and:

- i. Note the early results from the initial phase of the care home testing programme which completed on 30 June 2020;
- ii. Note the current care home outbreak position in Northern Ireland;
- iii. Confirm your agreement for the introduction of regular planned programme of COVID-19 testing in all care homes across Northern Ireland from Monday 3 August 2020. This will involve testing all staff on a fortnightly basis and all residents on a monthly basis;
- iv. Confirm your agreement to the enhanced testing arrangements for care homes experiencing a COVID-19 outbreak; and
- v. Note that the Department will continue to keep the position on the frequency of care home testing under active review. Decisions to amend the frequency of testing will be informed by emerging scientific evidence and other contributory factors, including community transmission rates in Northern Ireland. We will seek your agreement in advance of making any changes to the overall approach for the COVID-19 care home testing programme.

## Introduction

1. As part of the work to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 in the care home sector, Health Silver implemented a Care Home Surge Plan in early May. In addition, you announced on 18 May 2020 your intention that the COVID-19 testing programme would be extended to all care home residents and staff. This included testing in care homes which did not experience a COVID-19 outbreak during the first pandemic wave. Prior to your announcement, the policy position had been to test all residents and staff in any care home identified as having a potential outbreak or cluster of infection.
2. On 9 July 2020, we provided you with an update on the overall status of the care home testing programme; this update confirmed that as of 30 June 2020, staff and residents in all care homes across Northern Ireland had been offered COVID-19 testing. The successful completion of that first phase of the care home testing programme was made possible through a collaborative and robust multi-agency working partnership between your Department, PHA, HSC Trusts, the NI Ambulance Service and the care homes themselves. Within that submission we also set out an early assessment of proposals for the next phase of the testing programme (SUB-1630-2020). In response to the submission you asked about: the frequency of testing in line with relevant SAGE advice and also about an option to test care homes where there had been an outbreak more frequently initially than monthly.
3. The purpose of the current submission is to provide you with some early results emerging from the first phase of the care home testing programme, and an update on the current care home outbreak position in Northern Ireland (data accurate to 22 July 2020). This submission also seeks your agreement for the Department to implement a regular COVID-19 testing programme across all care homes in Northern Ireland, with effect from **Monday 3 August 2020**.

## **Initial Care Home Testing Programme in Northern Ireland**

4. As you are aware, the first phase of testing in care homes across Northern Ireland was delivered through two distinct pathways: testing in care homes with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 outbreaks and testing in care homes without outbreaks. HSC Trusts administered and supported the testing programme for care homes that had an outbreak, this continues to be the case for care homes that currently have an outbreak. The National Testing Programme (NTP) supported the independent sector and HSC Trusts to test all residents and staff in 'green homes', these are care homes which had not experienced a COVID-19 outbreak.
5. PHA colleagues in conjunction with HSC Trusts are continuing to work at pace to collate the significant volume of data relating to the first round of testing and to complete an in-depth quality assurance exercise prior to issuing the findings to the Department. The Department understands this is a very complicated exercise in view of the numbers of staff and residents tested.
6. In addition, the PHA has now also extended its analysis of the findings from the first round of care home testing. The analysis will now also consider the prevalence of COVID-19 across the different care home settings by Programme of Care, to include Elderly, Learning Disability and Physical and Sensory Disability. This is an important addition to the overall analysis and in particular will help to inform further consideration of care management arrangements for individuals with a learning disability. To date, information for this group has been somewhat limited and we are aware of growing concerns amongst families about the impact of the first wave of the pandemic on care homes residents with a learning disability who have been unable to receive visits from family members, or return to their family home for visits. The CMO, CSA and nursing colleagues representing CNO recently participated in a meeting with families facilitated by PCC and agreed to co-produce a framework to support residents, families and care providers. Work is underway with policy colleagues and others to ensure that this is completed before the 31<sup>st</sup> July and the pause in "shielding."

7. The PHA has confirmed that the datasets relating to their analyses of the first round of COVID-19 testing in care homes will be submitted to the Department during week commencing 3 August 2020. On receipt of this information, officials will undertake a detailed examination and analysis of the learning associated with the testing undertaken to date and will arrange to provide you with comprehensive briefing on this matter.
8. In the meantime, the Department has received some early results from the first phase of the care home testing programme. The PHA data reveals that in excess of 13,000 care home residents and 17,000 care home staff were tested. Provisional data shared by PHA indicates overall positivity rate among care home residents is around 5.9% and for care homes staff is around 3.2%. It is important to note that this data is provisional and PHA colleagues have advised caution with interpretation pending completion of their full analyses of the data relating to the first round of testing. It appears that higher positivity rates were recorded among staff and residents early in the course of the testing, this would appear to align with higher levels of community transmission at the height of the first wave of this pandemic. The introduction of a number of actions and policy decisions aimed at supporting homes that had an outbreak and keeping all other homes free of COVID-19 including a comprehensive testing programme, the implementation of robust infection prevention control measures, guidance to discourage the movement of staff between care homes, and changes to visiting arrangements, had a cumulative positive effect in significantly reducing the numbers of staff and residents who test positive for COVID-19.

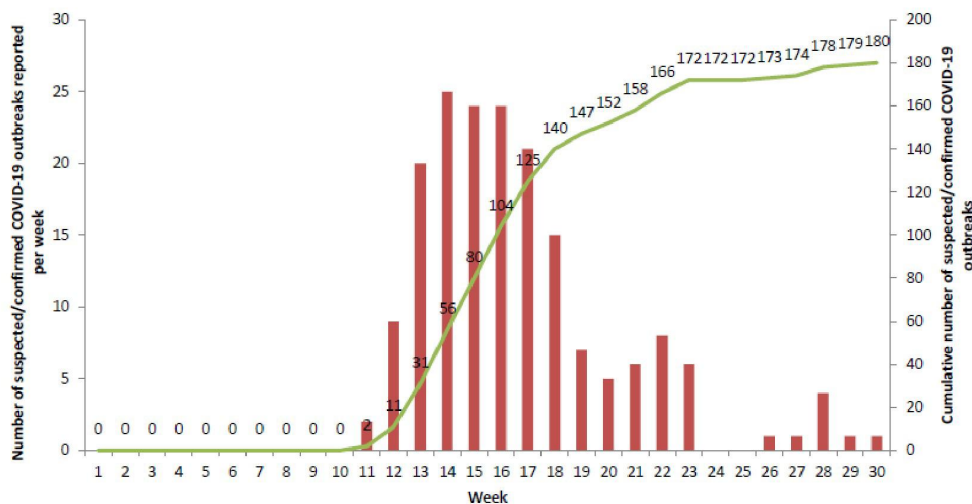
### **Reporting of Care Home Outbreaks in Northern Ireland to Date**

9. The PHA has been capturing data on COVID-19 outbreaks in care homes notified to the Health Protection Duty Room since the disease was first reported in mid-March. The PHA, through the Duty Room service, has longstanding arrangements to capture and report data on outbreaks of any type occurring in care homes across Northern Ireland, including those occurring due to influenza, norovirus (winter vomiting virus) and/or clostridium difficile. These

arrangements for monitoring outbreaks of COVID-19 are based on the previously well-established system through which care homes notify the Duty Room in PHA when/if they suspect they have residents or staff exhibiting symptoms of infection.

10. Since the 15 March 2020, a total of 180 suspected or confirmed COVID-19 outbreaks in care homes across Northern Ireland have been reported to the PHA (data accurate as of 24 July 2020); this is an increase of 4 suspected or confirmed COVID-19 outbreaks since our last update of 9 July 2020 in which we reported a total of 176 outbreaks. The figure below shows the total number of care homes in Northern Ireland with a suspected or confirmed COVID-19 outbreak reported to the PHA Duty Room each week from the middle of March 2020.

#### **Weekly Number of Care Homes in Northern Ireland Reporting Outbreaks to the PHA Duty Room**



11. The PHA has confirmed that as of 24 July 2020, there are a total of 13 care homes with a suspected or confirmed COVID-19 outbreak. A total of 5 care homes have confirmed outbreaks and the remaining 8 care homes have suspected COVID-19; these 8 care homes have now been tested for COVID-19 and continue to be closely monitored by the PHA. The PHA has confirmed that the number of individuals with COVID-19 in those care homes with a

confirmed outbreak is very small (typically 2-3 confirmed cases in each home with an outbreak).

12. A care home outbreak can be considered concluded (closed) once the following criteria are met:
  - i. no new cases for 14 days (one full incubation period for COVID-19) after the symptom onset of the most recent case;
  - ii. a terminal clean of the care home has been fully completed; and
  - iii. the PHA Duty Room has received a completed outbreak closure form from the care home.

A total of 167 care home outbreaks have been concluded since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in care homes in mid-March.

### **Arrangements for a Regular Programme of Care Home Testing**

13. Since our last update, the Department has continued to actively monitor and assess the current and emerging science and evidence relating to COVID-19, to further inform our approach to testing in care homes. We have also continued to closely engage with HSC colleagues on appropriate arrangements for a regular programme of care home testing. Consequently, we are now in a position to provide you with the detail underpinning our final proposals for the next phase of testing in care homes, for your consideration and approval. We believe that the proposals set out below for the care home testing programme in Northern Ireland are both reasonable and proportionate in the context of not only the current transmission rates of the COVID-19 virus in Northern Ireland, but also our available testing capacity which we are continuing to expand.
14. As a COVID-19 test will only confirm whether someone has COVID-19 at the time the test takes place, the introduction of a regular programme of testing in care homes is necessary, and will play a significant role in helping to minimise the risk of COVID-19 in care homes and ensure the continued safety of residents and staff.

15. As we are approaching the Autumn and Winter months, it is important to acknowledge that additional respiratory illnesses such as influenza and other respiratory viruses are likely to have similar disease presentation as COVID-19. In view of this, and to facilitate effective reporting on COVID-19 prevalence, the PHA will be amending its definition of a COVID-19 outbreak to either record a 'confirmed' COVID-19 outbreak (where same has been confirmed through testing of staff and residents) or an outbreak caused by 'other respiratory illness' in circumstances where testing for COVID-19 has been completed but no laboratory confirmed cases of the infection have been identified.
16. It is also 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 SARS-CoV-2 virus.

#### Care Homes without a COVID-19 outbreak

17. A planned programme of regular COVID-19 testing for all residents and staff in 'green homes' which **do not have a confirmed outbreak of COVID-19** will commence on **Monday 3 August 2020**. The PHA will continue to support all care homes in the coming weeks and months as this programme of regular testing is robustly implemented.
18. In the previous submission dated 9 July 2020, we outlined a proposal to test both staff and residents on a monthly basis. However, current evidence, including findings from the Vivaldi study which suggests that staff are more likely to transmit infections to residents than vice versa, strengthens the evidence base for adopting a more frequent testing approach for care home staff. In view of this and informed through further discussions with our Chief Medical Officer and at our Strategic Intelligence Group (SIG), we have taken the decision that all care home staff will be tested for COVID-19 every **14 days**. Residents will be tested for COVID-19 every **28 days**.



19. The position on frequency of testing for both staff and residents will continue to be kept under close review and may need to be increased depending on emerging evidence, and on the community transmission rates of the virus in Northern Ireland in the coming months.
20. This aspect of the regular testing programme in care homes will be undertaken through the NTP (Pillar 2 of our testing programme) and arrangements to obtain samples on residents and staff will be managed by each care home, specifically the Registered Manager in each care home. Care homes will be required to access testing kits via the satellite service and will manage this process through a booking portal on the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) website, supported by Public Health Agency (PHA) staff.
21. Subject to your agreement of the testing approach for care homes which do not have a COVID-19 outbreak, a letter will be issued by CMO and CNO to all Registered Care Home Managers, to notify the new arrangements for the regular programme of care home testing. A copy of this letter is attached at **Annex A**.

Care Homes with a suspected or confirmed COVID-19 outbreak

22. The testing protocol which is currently implemented across the Public Health Agency and HSC Trusts will be further enhanced to effectively support the testing in care homes with a new suspected or confirmed outbreak.
23. It is important to identify both single cases and potential clusters of cases. Early identification allows immediate steps to be taken to prevent spread. If a care home has a single case or potential clusters of cases in residents and/or staff, 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.
24. Whether an outbreak is declared or not, the PHA duty officer will advise the care home of further action to be taken. If testing is required as part of this risk

assessment, HSC Trusts will provide support to the care home to undertake and complete a full round of testing of staff and residents. This aspect of the care home testing programme will be undertaken through the HSC/Consortium laboratory system (Pillar 1 of our testing programme)

#### Care homes with a single symptomatic individual

25. If a **single individual** in a care home is symptomatic, that person will be tested for COVID-19. If the test result is **positive**, then a programme of **whole care home testing (all staff and all residents) will be carried out immediately**. If the test result is **negative**, the PHA will not initiate whole care home testing, but will continue to closely monitor the situation in that particular home.
26. If a **second individual** in the same care home experiences respiratory symptoms within a **14 day period** from when the first individual was notified (but tested negative) ), that person will also be tested for COVID-19. If the COVID-19 test for the **second individual is positive, whole care home testing (for all staff and all residents) will be carried out immediately**. If the test result for the second individual is **negative**, the PHA will not initiate whole care home testing at that stage (as test results for two individuals are negative), but will continue to closely monitor the situation in that particular care home.
27. If, following the **two negative** test results, there are no further individuals reporting respiratory symptoms within the care home for 14 days following the symptom(s) onset in the last person, then that care home will return to the cohort of 'green homes' (without an outbreak) in which the regular programme of testing is supported by the NTP.

#### Care homes with two or more symptomatic individuals at the same time

28. If a care home notifies the PHA Duty Room of a potential outbreak, 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.**

29. 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.
30. 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.
31. Once the criteria have been fully met for care homes experiencing an outbreak to be successfully concluded (as outlined at paragraph 12), these care homes will return to participate in the regular programme of care home testing supported by the NTP.
32. The frequency of testing in care homes with a potential or confirmed outbreak will be kept under active review and will continue to be informed by emerging scientific evidence and other contributory factors including community transmission rates of the virus in Northern Ireland.

### **Recommendation**

33. It is recommended you note the content of this briefing and:
  - i. Note the first set of results from the initial phase of the care home testing programme which completed on 30 June 2020;
  - ii. Note the current care home outbreak position in Northern Ireland;
  - iii. Confirm your agreement for the introduction of regular planned programme of COVID-19 testing in all care homes across Northern Ireland from Monday

3 August 2020. This will involve testing all staff on a fortnightly basis and all residents on a monthly basis;

- iv. Confirm your agreement to the enhanced testing arrangements for care homes experiencing a COVID-19 outbreak; and
- v. Note that the Department will continue to keep the position on the frequency of COVID-19 care home testing under active review. Decisions to amend the frequency of testing will be informed by emerging scientific evidence and other contributory factors, including community transmission rates in Northern Ireland. We will seek your agreement in advance of making any changes to the overall approach for the COVID-19 care home testing programme.

**DR LOURDA GEOGHEGAN**

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Press Office

Letter for issue to all Care Homes

BY EMAIL

Registered Manager - Nursing and Residential Homes  
HSC Trust Chief Executives  
PHA Chief Executive  
HSCB Chief Executive  
RQIA Chief Executive

Dear Colleagues

**COVID-19: IMPLEMENTATION OF PLANNED REGULAR PROGRAMME OF COVID-19 TESTING IN RESIDENTIAL AND NURSING HOMES**

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic presents 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 important to be aware that we all continue to face an uncertain time ahead. Protecting residents and staff in our care homes therefore remains a key priority throughout all phases of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The initial phase of the COVID-19 care home testing programme completed in all care homes across Northern Ireland at the end of June 2020. Care home staff responded very effectively to facilitate testing in their care homes and we want to extend our sincere thanks to you all for your tremendous commitment and support in this regard.

As we have highlighted over recent months, the introduction of a regular programme of testing in our care homes is necessary. Regular testing will play a significant role in helping to minimise the risk of COVID-19 and in ensuring the continued safety of residents and staff across our care homes.

We are therefore now moving to implement a planned programme of **regular COVID-19 testing for all residents and staff in care homes in Northern Ireland**. As part of this testing programme we recommend that all staff are tested for COVID-19 every **14 days**, and all residents are tested for COVID-19 every **28 days**. The programme will come into operation across Northern Ireland with effect from **Monday 3 August 2020**.

The PHA will continue to support all homes in the coming weeks and months as this programme of regular testing is implemented. Testing will be undertaken through the National Testing Programme and care homes will be able to book and access testing kits through the care homes booking portal on the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) website.

It is important that staff and resident details are entered correctly on the care homes booking portal so that results can be linked back to individual care homes. We would ask that, as a priority, all care homes now arrange to enter the required details on the booking portal. **Detailed information on this regular testing programme for care home residents and staff, including the link to the booking portal, is available on the PHA website at the following address: [DN: link to be provided]** If you have any difficulty with entering the details on the portal, please e-mail the PHA at **[DN: email address to be provided]** for assistance.

The testing kits to be used for this regular care home testing programme are throat and nose swab tests. These will test for whether someone has COVID-19 at the time the test took place, but cannot tell a person if they have had COVID-19 in the past. An information booklet and a one page checklist document to support the testing process will be emailed to all care homes in advance of the testing being undertaken. As outlined above, this information will also be made available on the PHA website at: **[DN: link to be provided]**.

On receipt of the test kits, care homes should aim to have each round of testing completed within a 48 to 72 hour period. A courier will collect your used testing kits and these will then be taken to a laboratory for processing. You should arrange to book your courier collection by 7pm, at least a day before carrying out the testing.

The current testing protocol in place for care homes with a suspected or confirmed COVID-19 outbreak will continue to operate. It is important to identify both single cases and potential clusters of cases. Early identification allows immediate steps to be taken to prevent spread. If a care home has a single case or potential clusters of cases in residents and/or staff, the person in charge of the facility should:

- contact the GP of each affected individual case to arrange clinical assessment.
- contact the Public Health Agency (PHA) Duty Room on 0300 555 0119 or by email to: PHA.DutyRoom@hscni.net to complete a clinical risk assessment.

Whether an outbreak is declared or not, the PHA duty officer will advise you of what further action to take. If testing is required as part of this risk assessment, HSC Trusts will support care homes in their area to undertake and complete a full round of testing of staff and residents. Further information on the arrangements and frequency of testing for care homes with a COVID-19 outbreak will be issued separately.

During this period, it is vitally important that care homes continue to closely communicate with the friends and families of residents who will understandably continue to be concerned and remain anxious about the welfare of their loved ones.

We are grateful for the commitment and dedication of all care home staff who have worked tirelessly over these last few months to provide care to residents under such challenging circumstances. Your ongoing and continued support in implementing this programme of regular COVID-19 testing in care homes is greatly appreciated. Thank you in advance for your work to keep all residents and staff in our care homes safe and well.

Yours sincerely

**DR MICHAEL McBRIDE**  
Chief Medical Officer

**PROFESSOR CHARLOTTE McARDLE**  
Chief Nursing Officer