



Testing to be available to all care home residents and staff - Minister

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Health Minister Robin Swann has announced that Covid-19 testing will be made available to all care home residents and staff across Northern Ireland.

The Minister said it is intended to complete the roll-out of testing to all residents next month. In addition, a rolling testing programme for all staff will be put in place.



The Minister continued: “Testing right across the care home sector is easier to demand than to deliver. It has always been my intention to over-deliver rather than to over-promise.

“Following detailed planning and preparatory work, I can now confirm that testing will be available to all residents and staff.

“There are some important sensitivities to be addressed. There are human rights considerations where residents may not consent to be tested or may not be able to consent – for reasons such as dementia.

“The swab test for Covid-19 can be an unpleasant and intrusive process, so there are also issues in relation to subjecting frail older persons to swabbing, particularly in homes where there are no outbreaks.

“I am confident a way forward will be found on these issues, in close consultation with care home staff, residents and their family members.”

At present in Northern Ireland, care home staff and families have access to testing if they have symptoms. All staff and residents are also tested in homes when two or more people - staff or residents - have symptoms, as this is a possible outbreak scenario. Testing is underway for all residents and staff in homes where there have been previous outbreaks that have not been resolved.

The next phase will involve commencement of testing for all residents and staff in care homes which do not have and have not had an outbreak, with the aim of helping to keep these homes free of Covid-19.

This ongoing expansion of care home testing will involve:

- Testing kits made available for use in homes through satellite operations from the three national testing sites currently operating in NI.
- Mobile testing units which will operate as part of the national testing programme and will be deployed to support this important programme in care homes.
- Trust and PHA/HSCB teams supporting care homes, bolstered, as announced last week, by the deployment of testing capability from the NI Ambulance Service and up to 40 nurses from the HSC system.
- Scheduled completion of testing of all residents by next month. Provisional figures – based on returns from circa 95% of care homes – indicate 3,762 residents have been tested to date. That’s over 25% of the care home population.
- A rolling programme of testing for staff. Further details of staff testing provision will be confirmed in the near future.

The Minister added: “It has to be emphasised once again that testing is not a solution to the Covid-19 threat in care homes. It builds on the wider programme of support that has already been put in place, which includes staffing and financial support, PPE provision and robust infection prevention and control measures.”

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