

FROM THE MINISTER OF HEALTH



Mr Les Allamby
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Your Ref:
Our Ref: CORR-1572-2020
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Dear Les,

The role and practice of the Regulator – RQIA

Thank you for your joint letter of 11 May 2020 in which you are seeking assurances that there are alternative measures in place that will ensure that the standards of care and treatment expected in care home settings is being provided in the absence of physical inspections.

Let me first clarify that RQIA statutory inspections have not been suspended. I can confirm that on 20 March 2020 my Department gave direction to the RQIA to reduce the frequency of its statutory inspection activity as set out in the Regulation and Improvement Authority (Fees and Frequency of Inspections) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005 and cease its non-statutory inspection activity and review programme with immediate effect until otherwise directed.

You will appreciate that these are fast moving and challenging times we are all currently working within. The Direction to reduce statutory inspections was to allow RQIA to manage its operations, to manage risk effectively and also to help regulated services manage systems pressures in the current situation. I can assure you that this decision was not taken lightly and was made in the face of the challenges presented by the outbreak of COVID 19 and in the unprecedented circumstances we all find ourselves.

Whilst there is some risk in this approach I am confident that the risk is being managed by RQIA focusing their activity where it is needed most to ensure safe care and act flexibly and proportionately. RQIA have been taking a pragmatic and flexible approach to how and when they inspect, prioritising inspections on an evidence, intelligence led and risk-assessed basis. I believe this measure is a proportionate response to the challenges faced in respect of COVID-19.

I can advise that RQIA have carried out a number of inspections in recent weeks and have issued enforcement action on the basis of identified risks to staff and service users. I can also advise that RQIA are currently working to develop new approaches to how inspections can be carried out to gain assurance about the safety and quality of services in both services currently unaffected by COVID 19 and those where there is, or has been a recent outbreak.

RQIA also continue to operate its service desk and have also implemented and set up a service support team (SST) so that providers can avail of immediate advice and support on any issue. This has proved invaluable in identifying any problems in care provision which need to be quickly or immediately acted upon. The RQIA SST is providing expert advice and support to the sector on matters such as Infection Prevention Control, Personal Protective Equipment, testing and staffing.

I can also assure you that HSC Trust safeguarding teams continue to operate and that adult protection activity is continuing during the COVID-19 pandemic and remains an absolute priority for the Department, HSCB and Trusts.

On 13 May I announced a wide range of measures being deployed in Northern Ireland to protect care home residents during the Covid-19 pandemic including expansion of testing; intensive support for care homes; and investment and reform in social care.

My statement is available in full on the Department's website.

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/news/minister-underlines-extensive-programme-support-care-homes>

On 18 May I announced that Covid-19 testing will be made available to all care home residents and staff across Northern Ireland.

The safety of services and responding to need has been at the heart of these decisions, especially the need of the most vulnerable and elderly.

I trust you find this response helpful.

Yours sincerely

Personal Data

Robin Swann MLA
Minister of Health