



Commissioner for Older People
for Northern Ireland

08 October 2020

Mr Robin Swann MLA
Minister of Health
Department of Health
Castle Buildings
Stormont
Belfast
Northern Ireland
BT4 3SQ

By email: private.office@health-ni.gov.uk

Dear Minister Swann,

RE: Recent Guidance on Visiting Care Homes; Testing and Learning from experience of the 1st Wave

I hope you are keeping well. I am writing to you to set out formally, in writing, my continued concerns with regard to a number of ongoing issues which are detrimentally affecting older people in Northern Ireland. I appreciate the weight and scale of priorities being tabled with you at the present time and I do continue to meet and talk with officials across your Department. I acknowledge these are very pressured times, but I must provide advice, under the statutory power provided to me under the COPNI (NI) Act 2011, to better safeguard the interests of older people.

Recent Guidance on Visiting Care Homes (23 September 2020)

I have already raised concerns with officials within your Department on the real feasibility of "on the ground" implementation of the revised guidance in the current context – in particular the frequency, safety and administration of the level of visits outlined therein.

I appreciate that officials have dedicated time and effort to updating the guidance and attempting to make it more person-centred and human rights compliant. My office has spent the past four weeks dealing with calls from families in distress and then angry, when care providers could not deliver the access to their loved one which they believe the new guidelines entitle them to.

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Home providers are stating that they are not able to safely facilitate the visiting arrangements outlined in the most recent Guidance. Families continue to be restricted from visiting their loved ones, depending on the capacity and control measures available in individual settings.

TESTING

Your officials have advised that the programme of testing (fortnightly for care home staff and monthly for residents) is adequate and has been effective in terms of identifying positive cases as early as possible. I was previously advised (in July) that should the levels of community transmission rise, then the testing regime would respond accordingly. Given the increase in community transmission, coupled with recent meetings I have held with virologists, I believe that we need to follow the regularity of testing that is currently in place in Scotland, where care home staff are tested weekly.

I am very concerned to see the rising number of care homes recording outbreaks in Covid19 infections, and while this may point to the testing system working, I believe we are now at a stage where the testing must be increased to weekly if we are to identify more positive cases before they have time to spread.

Care Home testing remains in Tier 2 of the testing arrangements and my office has received reports of test results being frequently delayed resulting in staffing problems for some homes. As a result, I would ask that consideration is given to moving care home testing into the Tier 1 category for testing.

I have also raised with you and officials on a number of occasions about the need for domiciliary care workers (home care workers) to be included in the regular programme of testing. It is not reasonable to expect these workers to go and arrange tests for themselves, in the same way as a member of the public does. I am also advised that this issue is directly affecting older people (in need of packages) and domiciliary care providers as demand has been affected.

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ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

The provision of extra support, including PPE, visiting "pods" or safe areas and the continuation of enhanced cleaning is all going to require increased human and financial resources. I would therefore be grateful if you can advise on how this will be supplied to care homes on a continued basis in the months ahead.

I would also be grateful if you advise whether the tariff will be reviewed in order to take account of the additional cost associated with providing safe and effective care to care home residents.

PLANNING

It is clear that a significant amount of planning has been undertaken by officials in recent months. My most recent meetings, however have confirmed to me that this has largely been undertaken by the HSC with limited engagement with relatives of older people or the staff providing care directly to older people in community-based settings.

If you wish to hear more about the experiences being brought to my office I would of course be happy to have a meeting with yourself to discuss in further detail. Finally, I have been asked to give evidence to the Health Committee's mini-inquiry in the near future and I will be raising these issues as part of their call for evidence.

I look forward to hearing from you shortly.

Yours sincerely,

Personal Data

Eddie Lynch
Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland

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