

## FROM THE MINISTER OF HEALTH



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Dear Geraldine

Thank you for your correspondence of 27 April 2020 regarding the rights and welfare of disabled people during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thank you too for your kind words. I commend all the staff working in my Department and all our tremendous staff working right across Health and Social Care and all sectors, at every level, for their steadfast commitment and unrelenting hard work in these most difficult of times.

Firstly, I understand fully the impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable people living in our society, including people living with a disability, and not least their concerns and the challenges they face every day in these unprecedented and worrying times.

In response to correspondence received from Disability Action I recently endorsed a set of guiding principles concerning COVID-19 and the Rights of Disabled People which were developed by Disability Rights UK. These principles, which are also supported by NHS England, the BMA and a host of community and voluntary organisations can be viewed at the organisation's website;

<https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/news/2020/april/covid-19-and-rights-disabled-people>

As part of the Northern Ireland Executive's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, my Department is working closely with colleagues in the RQIA, Public Health Agency, HSC Board and HSC Trusts to identify and help support those most vulnerable in our society.

This includes, for example, the work of the COVID-19 HSC Ethics Forum, established by my Department to help resolve ethical dilemmas in clinical decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic. This forum is bringing forward guidance for clinicians.

Membership has been drawn from all HSC Trusts, the HSC Board and PHA on a multi-professional basis, representing different specialties, with strong representation from all HSC Trust clinical ethics committees including lay and faith representatives. A range of

interested parties including the Patient and Client Council and Disability Action have been engaged directly by the Forum in the development of the Framework.

The guidance and framework will take human rights and equality legislation into account and reflect the key principles of respect; fairness; minimising harm; working together; flexibility; keeping things in proportion; reciprocity and good decision-making. The draft guidance is at an advanced stage and is progressing through the final approval process.

In respect of data collection being used to inform decision-making, RQIA is providing the Department with regular briefing which includes trend data. These reports highlight key themes from independent sector providers including Domiciliary Care Agencies (including Supported Living), Nursing Homes and Residential Care Homes.

RQIA will also supply my Department with exception reports where there are new serious issues or concerns, which require escalation. RQIA will produce any reports, as necessary, for my Department, HSC Trusts, the PHA and the HSC Board.

My Department published Guidance for Nursing and Residential Care Homes in Northern Ireland on 26 April 2020. This guidance, states that;

*“Care homes should ensure good communication with families and friends on these restrictions and ensure ongoing communication to assure families and friends about the ongoing quality of care and wellbeing of residents. Homes should continue to seek to facilitate other forms of contact as far as possible – for instance, telephone calls or video calls (ensuring e.g. tablets etc. are thoroughly disinfected between residents). Where these forms of contact cannot be used homes should agree a single family member for each resident and provide regular updates to them.”*

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/covid-19-guidance-nursing-and-residential-care-homes-northern-ireland>

Furthermore, my Department published Guidance for Domiciliary Care Providers in Northern Ireland on 9 April 2020 which sets out the financial support and other measures taken by my Department in order to ensure the continuation of this vital service during the ongoing pandemic. The guidance can be viewed here;

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/covid-19-guidance-domiciliary-care-providers-northern-ireland>

This guidance was further revised to ensure that providers who are contracted to HSC Trusts continue to receive an income comparable to an average of the three month periods prior to the pandemic. Our Domiciliary Care Providers continue to provide a vital service in our community in helping to empower people to live independently in their own homes.

You will be aware that my Department, in partnership with colleagues from the Independent Living Fund Scotland (ILFS), and in the spirit of co-design and co-production were about to launch a number of public engagement events on the potential to re-open the Independent Living Fund to new applicants in Northern Ireland when the pandemic began. The four planned events were postponed.

In the meantime, to maintain momentum and as an alternative to those events ILFS, on behalf of my Department, launched an online consultation that will run until 17 June 2020. Thereafter, the responses received will be analysed and will help inform further policy development in respect of this important matter.

I trust you find this response helpful.

Yours sincerely

**Personal Data**

**Robin Swann MLA**  
**Minister of Health**