

5 January 2022

**To: Directors of Public Health, Directors of Adult Social Services, Local Authority Public Health Teams and UKHSA Health Protection Teams**

We are writing to you as a group of organisations working in the field of adult social care. We would like to start by thanking you and your teams for all you are doing to help protect those living in care settings during the Covid-19 pandemic. We know this continues to be an extremely challenging time, particularly with the emergence of the new Omicron variant.

We understand that when you support care settings in outbreak situations, you will be working extremely hard to ensure providers take the necessary steps to reduce infection risk and isolate the outbreak as far as possible. At the same time, you will also be very aware of the **detrimental and often severe effects of isolation from loved ones on the physical and mental health of residents**, particularly the distress and cognitive decline caused to people with dementia, learning disabilities and mental health issues, and where isolation periods continue for many weeks. You will also be mindful of **your duty to protect fundamental human rights under the Human Rights Act 1998**, including the right to family life, under which any restrictions must be proportionate to the risk posed and end as soon as this is no longer the case.

You will also be mindful of **the safeguarding risks that can arise if relatives/friends are not permitted access to loved ones living in care settings**, particularly in a time of unprecedented staff shortages. Relatives are a vital source of support to residents, as well as to care staff, and are well placed to flag up issues with health or well-being at an early stage, often preventing escalation to more serious situations and reducing the risk of avoidable hospitalisations or serious safeguarding issues.

Fortunately, current government guidance on care home visiting recognises the vital role loved ones play and provides the means to mitigate against these risks, in the form of the **'Essential Care Giver' (ECG) role**. You will be aware that current government guidance states that **every resident** should be supported to nominate an ECG who should be able to visit under all circumstances, including during periods of self-isolation and outbreak.

We appreciate that when an outbreak occurs, care providers are under a lot of pressure and it is likely to be a time of high stress. **We are also very aware that the ECG role is not well understood or known about by many relatives and indeed some care providers**. In some cases, we have had reports that advice given by public health teams in outbreak situations to 'close to all but essential visits' has been misinterpreted by providers to mean that ECGs cannot visit, which clearly contravenes the government guidance.

**To support your teams and care providers that you work with in managing outbreaks, we have produced a simple-to-use 'ECG Fact Sheet' that can be issued to care providers in an outbreak situation (see attached). We have also attached an 'ECG poster' document that can be sent to providers to display in their premises and/or sent out to families, to promote the ECG role.**

By using these documents as part of your outbreak management plan, you can mitigate the many risks that arise from visiting restrictions and support providers to ensure residents safely maintain contact with their loved ones, which is so essential to their physical and mental health and well-being.

Yours sincerely,

Helen Wildbore, Director, Relatives & Residents Association  
Jenny Morrison & Diane Mayhew, Co-founders of Rights for Residents  
Dr Caroline Emmer De Albuquerque Green, NIHR ARC South London, King's College London  
Chris McCann, Interim National Director, Healthwatch England  
Julia Jones & Nicci Gerrard, Co-founders of John's Campaign  
Vic Rayner, CEO, National Care Forum  
Professor Martin Green OBE, Chief Executive, Care England  
Clive Parry, Director, ARC England  
Adam Purnell, Director of Social Care, Institute of Health and Social Care Management  
Judy Scott, Healthwatch North Tyneside  
Rachel Barber, Director, Living 4 Moments  
Mervyn Eastman, Founder Member of Change AGENTS