

September 2022

To: Directors of Public Health, Directors of Adult Social Care, 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. You may recall we wrote to you in January to highlight our concerns about isolation in care settings during coronavirus outbreaks. We explained that this situation was unnecessarily causing great harm and distress to residents and their loved ones.

It is with great sadness and disappointment that, almost 9 months on from our last letter, we feel the need to write to you again to highlight the serious challenges people living in care continue to face during outbreaks in accessing vital support from loved ones. This is also frustrating for relatives/friends and providers.

As you will be aware, in March 2022 all government restrictions on visiting within care settings were removed (with the exception of infection prevention and control measures during an active outbreak). The 'Essential Care Giver' (ECG) role was removed and instead, during an outbreak, residents can have one visitor. In July the guidance was further updated to clarify that this meant 'one visitor at a time' (with no limit on the number of different visitors).

One consideration behind this decision was the pressure put on families when only one nominated individual could visit to provide support during outbreaks (which could often last weeks at a time). Individuals were often trying to balance the ECG role with work/other caring responsibilities, or travelling long distances, and the 'carer burnout' that resulted was in many cases seriously affecting their ability to provide the level of support needed by their loved one.

"The pressure is so immense and distressing. It is ruining my life and relationships. I can't sleep, it overshadows everything I do. I feel permanently guilty when I am not by my mother's side. I get home after a 4 hour round trip and know I cannot continue like this. But I do. The worry is constant and there is no end in sight." Daughter and essential caregiver, February 2022

It is of huge concern that despite these changes to the guidance, many relatives still report they are being denied access to loved ones during outbreaks and the current 'one at a time' guidance is not being followed. Many care settings are informing relatives that the additional restrictions are coming from their local health protection teams.

While the guidance is not statutory, we know you will understand **your role and statutory responsibilities in ensuring that all aspects of the health and wellbeing of residents are protected, and their rights respected, at all times**. For example, your duty to protect residents' rights to private and family life in Article 8 of the Human Rights Act (which includes wellbeing and autonomy). In our letter in January, we reminded you of the detrimental and often severe effects of isolation from loved ones on the physical and mental health of residents.

Another important consideration are the significant safeguarding risks that can arise if relatives/friends are not permitted access to loved ones living in care settings, particularly in a time of ongoing unprecedented staff shortages, when services are so stretched.

With all this in mind, **we are writing to request that:**

- **All health protection, public health and social care teams involved in outbreak management ensure your advice to care settings fully reflects current guidance** i.e. with the 'one at a time' visitor rule during outbreaks implemented as an absolute minimum and with no other restrictions on numbers of visitors in place.
- **For people at the end of life, there should be no restrictions**; the guidance is clear that contact "should always be supported".
- Your teams work together with care providers and families to **ensure visiting happens now and in the months ahead, in line with guidance and respect for legal rights, for the overall health and wellbeing of the residents involved.**

By doing this, 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 essential to their physical and mental health.

Yours sincerely,

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Jenny Morrison & Diane Mayhew, Co-founders of the Rights for Residents Campaign Group

Dr Caroline Emmer De Albuquerque Green, NIHR ARC South London, King's College London

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