

Care Home Visiting Restrictions in England, April-September 2022 Summary Report

A survey of friends and relatives of residents

Background

At the end of March 2022, all government-advised restrictions on visiting within care settings in England were lifted, with the exception of infection prevention and control measures during an active coronavirus outbreak. In the event of an outbreak, the guidance states that residents should be able to have one visitor at a time inside the care home, and this visitor does not need to be the same person throughout the outbreak.

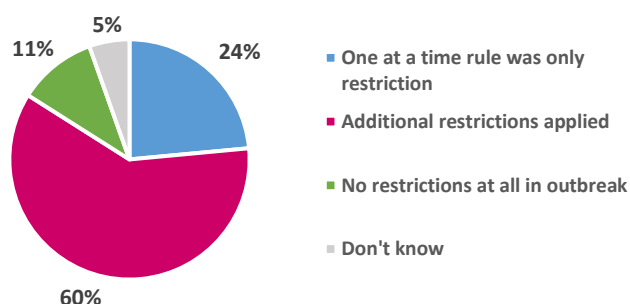
We carried out an online survey between 20th September and 26th September 2022, with people who had a friend or family member living in a care home in England. We asked about their experiences of visiting restrictions from April-September 2022. In particular we asked about additional restrictions (aside from the 'one visitor at a time rule') during outbreaks, and the reasons given by the care setting if additional visiting restrictions were imposed. We also asked whether care homes were still applying more general visiting restrictions outside of known outbreak situations.

Key Findings

There were **657** responses to our survey. Of the responses, over half (**59%**) reported that there had been at least one Covid outbreak at their loved one's care home since 1st April 2022.

1) Visiting restrictions during the majority of Coronavirus outbreaks were more restrictive than advised by current Government guidance

Fig. 1: Restrictions Applied During Outbreaks



Of responses about care homes where there had been a Covid outbreak, **60% said that there were additional visiting restrictions in place (aside from the 'one at a time' rule stipulated in the government guidance) during the outbreak (Fig. 1).**

The most common additional restriction reported was:

- In **32%** (around **1 in 3**) of outbreaks, **residents were limited to ‘one named visitor’ only**. This is different to current guidance, that clearly states that it can be a different person visiting each time

The other most common additional restrictions that were reported were:

- In **20%** (**1 in 5**) of outbreaks, residents were **isolated or confined to their rooms**
- In **15%** (around **1 in 7**) of outbreaks, residents were **not allowed to make visits out of the care home (or visits out were limited)**
- In **11%** (around **1 in 9**) of outbreaks, residents were **not allowed any visitors at all**

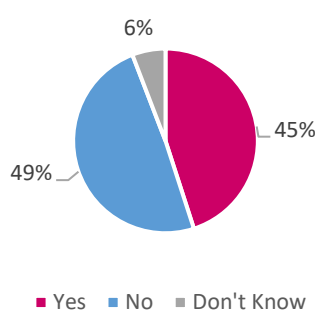
2) In a majority of cases, care homes told relatives they were applying additional restrictions on the advice of local Public Health and/or Local Authority teams

Families told us that care homes told them they were following advice from local Public Health teams and/or the Local Authority in:

- 78% of cases where visits out of the home were restricted
- 71% of cases where the ‘one named visitor only’ rule was applied
- 67% of cases where ‘no visitors at all’ were allowed

3) Care homes are still implementing blanket visiting restrictions outside of outbreak situations, contrary to current guidance.

Fig. 2: Responses Reporting Visiting Restrictions Outside of Outbreak Situations



All government restrictions on general visiting (outside of outbreaks) were lifted at the end of March. Despite this, for responses about care homes where there had not been a known Covid outbreak, **45% said there were visiting restrictions in place at some point since 1st Apr 2022 (Fig. 2).**

The most common visiting restrictions reported outside of outbreaks were:

- In **16%** (around **1 in 6**) of responses, the care home was **limiting the number of residents allowed visitors** at any one time.
- In **12%** (around **1 in 8**) of responses, the care home was **limiting the times of day** visits were allowed.
- In **11%** (around **1 in 9**) of responses, the care home was restricting residents to a **limited number of named visitors**.

- In **7% (1 in 14)** of responses, visits were permitted **by appointment only**.

The Story Behind the Findings

The respondents of this survey are, on the whole, likely to be relatively well informed about current government visiting restrictions, as this group will largely be made up of relatives that have engaged with the Rights for Residents campaign or Relatives and Residents Association charity (both of which provide ongoing and up-to-date information regarding visiting guidance). Therefore, the levels of visiting restrictions within the wider population of care home residents may be even higher than that reported here, with relatives in general likely to be less well informed than our survey group and therefore less empowered to challenge overly harsh restrictions when they occur.

It is of huge concern that despite changes to government guidance, so many residents are still having access to loved ones restricted. The detrimental and often severe effects of isolation from loved ones on the physical and mental health of residents has been well documented in research studies and in media reports (see references at end of this report). We continue to hear from relatives about the harm and distress that excessive restrictions are causing, and many of the individual survey responses we received also clearly highlight this:

- *“Only allowing one named person to visit, which was me, put a huge strain on me as I work full time”.*
- *“I’m angry that my son is kept like a prison again because a few staff had Covid. The rest of the staff could carry on with their lives but my son spent another 10 days stuck indoors affecting his mental health yet again... My son has lost so much weight through Covid times through anxiety. I’m so so angry that they continue to be treated so differently to the rest of the UK.”*
- *“No telephone calls were allowed [during outbreak] as they couldn't disinfect the phone!”*
- *“The isolation of my mum led to her becoming immobile”.*
- *“I cannot give quality time, comfort, support, or some refreshment to my loved one while our visits are spent this way. I am still forced to leave after our allotted time together and so I never even see my loved one being given meals or drinks now. It is all really worrying and I am totally powerless. For us the situation is still oppressively restrictive, systematically controlling and prison-like”.*

See Appendix for more comments from family members about the impact of visiting restrictions.

Excessively limiting contact between residents and their loved ones denies vulnerable care home residents the same rights as those in wider society; for example, the right to private and family life in Article 8 of the Human Rights Act (which includes wellbeing and autonomy). Another huge concern is the significant safeguarding risks that can arise if relatives/friends have restricted access to loved ones living in care settings, since they often act as the ‘eyes and ears on the ground’ on a daily basis. This is of particular concern during a time of ongoing unprecedented staff shortages, when services are so stretched. Some of the observations from our survey highlight this:

- *“Care has drastically reduced and is at a bare minimum. Residents who are less mobile are often put to bed straight after lunch. Staff morale is very low”.*
- *“We were told initially that we would have to make an appointment to see Mum. When I asked why I was told it was so the carers would know. I presume to make sure Mum was up and dressed?”*
- *“I sometimes notice when I visit Mum at a time I've made an appointment for that many other residents are not up and out of bed. I am concerned that the home is using the excuse of still needing to book appointments to visit relatives so that they only get those up that they need to. I understand there is a problem regarding being short staffed”.*
- *“We had to ring beforehand, be escorted to and from residents room, not allowed to assist at meal times, despite not enough staff to help with feeding = massive weight loss, malnutrition”*

What needs to happen?

While the government guidance relating to care home visiting is not statutory, care providers, Local Authorities and local Public Health teams, as well as the Care Quality Commission, have an important role and statutory responsibilities in ensuring that all aspects of residents’ health and wellbeing are protected, and their rights respected.

We therefore call on all of these organisations to act on our findings and work together to prevent a culture of overly-restrictive practices becoming the norm. Failing to do so is not only a neglect of legal duties but also allows the huge harm and distress that is caused by social isolation to continue.

Acknowledgements

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- Helen Wildbore, Director, Relatives & Residents Association: input on survey design and review of reports
- Nicky Sharma, Policy and Research Officer, Relatives & Residents Association: review of reports

We would also like to thank all those who responded to our survey and took the time to share their loved one’s stories with us.

Full Survey Report

A copy of the full survey report can be found at: <http://www.relres.org/survey-isolation/>

Appendix: The impact of visiting restrictions

Responders were invited at the end of the survey to leave any further comments relating to visiting restrictions in a free-text box. Some of the responses are included here to illustrate the impact that visiting restrictions has on residents and their families and friends:

Impact of visiting restrictions during outbreaks:

"No alternative visiting was allowed, I've questioned this on number of times and even called head office which I'm still waiting on response...It's our loved ones that are affected"

"They did not allow the one visitor to every resident rule said it was ECG [Essential Care Giver] only, yet hadn't given anybody ECG"

"There are still restrictions as of sept 20th have to meet my parent in a shed outside we have to wear a mask, gloves and apron, we are not allowed inside the home and if anyone else has booked the shed that we are not allowed to visit"

"... the unit that was affected involved all residents isolated in their room irrespective of testing negative and not allowed out of home."

"Not allowing Dad to go out had a negative impact on his mental health".

"An appointment has to be made and this meant sometimes I couldn't visit"

"My care home still appears to have a pod for visits...Basically, the manager does not want things to go back to normal".

"I would like to talk about my brother being restricted to his room and not being permitted to go outside during a coronavirus out breaks. Alongside having one daily visitor, residents must not be prevented from leaving their room or care home".

"Was told we couldn't take mum out because she could be a risk to the general public even though she didn't have covid"

"There was very little advice given by the care home on who could visit. I asked them to publish the latest government advice that allowed every resident at least one visitor even during outbreaks, but they failed to do so.... Some relatives and friends thought there was a blanket restriction on visiting".

"We are told that once they have two or more positive tests they lock down. We are never told whether its staff or residents that have tested positive. I believe that on some occasions it could be staff testing positive, they are then at home but the impact is on all the residents and their families/friends etc".

Impact of general visiting restrictions:

"Despite the government lifting restrictions the home continued to impose time restrictions, limiting the number of people visiting..."

"I have only been allowed to visit in the last week, in two years, in a garden, 2 meters apart".

"Was told that only one visitor at any one time in the care home. Visits were assigned to an hour. So if I wanted to visit my mum at 10am and another resident had a visit at that time I could not visit".

"No children under 12, unless outside".

"Pre covid I could take my dog into the home but dogs are not allowed in now".

"The amount of visitors at our care home has plummeted since COVID. I used to feel part of the care team and there was a warm, fun, friendly atmosphere. Now I feel as though I should be grateful I can visit".

"NH [Nursing Home] visiting hours 10am to 5pm. Visiting out of these times allowed only with named designated visitor. Visits need to be booked during the week".

"We still have to make appointments to visit my dad, limited to 1 hour at a time".

"The care home still operates an appointment system where each visit into the home is for half an hour....With a limited number of appointments in a week - and 50+ bedrooms, visiting is very restrictive".

"The home has said if there is an outbreak we will not be permitted to take them out have said it comes from the local public health".

"My mother moved from a virus free home to another in the council's care in February and though tested negative was confined to her room for 10/14 days. With restricted visits only me for absolutely no reason"

"We can visit without an appointment. But never get to have any discussions with carers / staff...We get escorted to and from his room and then just left. I want to be part of dads care plan. I feel excluded as dad is not able to talk to me about his care".

"They seem to make their own rules at this particular home. I do not feel comfortable reporting to cqc [Care Quality Commission] as worried about backlash inside the home."

"...the home still requires a telephone call ahead of visiting so no one can turn up unannounced.... if outbreaks in the home happen the home do not follow guidance set.Family members who have challenged the homes restrictions have been bypassed by management who have selectively dealt with more compliant family members".

"We were told it was the managers decision on restrictions imposed, even though complaints were made to head office".

"Only allowed to visit on a day they choose and only allowed 2 hours & 20 minutes phone call per week - so cruel"

"It seems visiting restrictions can be applied at will by the care home. Very difficult to challenge this as a carer of a resident".

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