

Pilot for family members to get regular testing for safer care home visits



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Care homes across Hampshire, Cornwall and Devon will pioneer the new system which will see a designated visitor given access to tests

Around 20 care homes will be included in the trial before a wider roll-out in December

Family members or friends of those living in care homes will be given regular testing to reunite them with their loved ones in care homes as a new pilot launches on Monday (16 November 2020).

The pilot is taking place in around 20 care homes across Hampshire, Cornwall and Devon from Monday and will be rolled out more widely in December in time for Christmas.

Regular testing will be offered to one family member or friend per resident, which – when combined with other infection-control measures such as PPE – will support meaningful visits. These will enable, where possible, indoor visits without a screen to take place while reducing the risk to care home residents, staff and visitors.

Visitors will be offered either PCR tests which they can do at home, or the new 30-minute rapid lateral flow tests (LFTs), which can be administered in person at care homes before a visit.

Health and Social Care Secretary Matt Hancock said:

I know how heart-breaking restricting visits to care homes has been, not only for residents, many of whom will feel disoriented and confused by the situation, but also their loved

ones who aren't able to simply hug each other to support them in this difficult time.

Thanks to the expanding testing capacity we have in place we can now begin to trial a new way to allow safer visits to take place and prevent the spread of COVID-19. I must stress this is only possible if the public takes the right actions now to bring the transmission rate under control while national restrictions are in place.

By respecting social distancing and staying at home as much as possible we will help reunite families and friends with loved ones in care homes as quickly as possible.

We will be encouraging and supporting care homes to facilitate visits to go ahead in a COVID-secure way wherever possible.

Minister for Care Helen Whately said:

The pandemic has torn many lives apart but few have been more affected than people living in care homes and their families. I know visits from loved ones are what makes life worth living for many care home residents, yet these have been few and far between over the last few months. Visits with a screen or window are better than nothing for many, but they are too confusing or simply impossible for people with advanced dementia.

That's why on Monday we are starting visitor testing, firstly in around 20 care homes across Hampshire, Cornwall and Devon. Each resident will be able to have one relative or friend who can be their 'key visitor' who will take a COVID test, and then be able to come for an indoor visit without a screen.

COVID is a cruel disease that takes those who are most vulnerable, particularly older people, and it's hard to stop it spreading in people's homes, whether that's a family home or even in a care home. That's why there have had to be restrictions on visiting, but also why we are putting care home visitors front of the queue as we bring more tests on stream.

As Christmas approaches, I want to bring an end to the pain of

separation and help care homes bring families and loved ones together. The launch of visitor testing is a crucial step to making that happen.

The pilot, which forms part of plans to roll out mass testing technology across the country, has been made possible thanks to a huge expansion in the country's testing capacity, which currently stands at over 500,000 per day.

Each care home receiving LFTs will receive a box of 675 initially and will be given access to more as required.

It will take place in local authorities with lower transmission rates to ensure it can be done as safely as possible and care staff are being trained to ensure tests are administered safely and accurately.

It will further develop the evidence base for how testing with fast, reliable COVID-19 tests can be delivered at scale.

If successful, care home testing will be rolled out in a phased way across the country.

Any decision on a national roll-out will be taken in light of the latest available data on transmission rates as a result of national COVID-19 restrictions.

Exact details of the national roll-out will be published in due course and will be guided by the pilot. It is anticipated the LFTs will be used across the country to support rapid access. If these faster tests work in this setting we will ring-fence supply to open up more chances for visiting.

Background information

Protecting staff and residents has been a priority throughout the pandemic and we ring-fence 120,000 tests every day solely for the care sector.

We have introduced guidance: Visiting arrangements in care homes for the period of national restrictions. This is intended to enable and encourage providers – supported by local professionals, families and the wider community – to provide

appropriate visiting opportunities that balance these important benefits against the continued priority of preventing infections to protect staff and residents.

We want care homes to use this guidance and make visiting possible. We want them to follow the example of those who have done this successfully.

Providers can already access free PPE. We announced in Adult social care: our COVID-19 winter plan 2020 to 2021 that care providers would be able to access free PPE until March through our government portal.

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