

9th December 2020

Dear family member,

Since I last wrote to you, I'm very pleased to say there's been a lot of good news. Three different vaccines have been shown to be highly effective in protecting people against coronavirus, and one of them has now been approved for use in the UK. Now the biggest vaccination programme in NHS history is underway. Coupled with that, we now have access to rapid 'lateral flow' coronavirus test kits which are going to make a massive difference to our ability to facilitate safe meet-ups between you and your loved one over Christmas. In fact, I believe that for the first time I am now able to say that I think we are at the beginning of the end of this dreadful pandemic and the light at the end of the tunnel, while still some way off, is brighter than ever.

I understand that many of you will have been making plans for Christmas, and I'm sorry that we haven't been quicker in confirming our guidance and policies for visits over the festive period. This was due to slow guidance from the government and the need to make sure that we could source enough rapid coronavirus testing kits. I'm delighted to let you know that now we are in a position to share with you our guidance (attached to this letter) and I want to make it clear that we want to facilitate as many of you as possible seeing your loved one over the five-day Christmas window from 23rd to 27th December when the restrictions across all parts of England and Wales (as things stand at the moment) will be temporarily eased.

The guidance covers visits by your loved one to your home, and visits by you to your loved one's home. In each case, the use of the rapid testing kits are key and we have purchased thousands of these. I ask you to read the guidance carefully, and check with the helpline for families on 0300 303 9161 if you're not clear about anything, but I'll briefly summarise it here. If your loved one is visiting you, we ask that you self-isolate as much as possible over the next two weeks to minimise risk. Your loved one can then come and visit or stay with you over Christmas. When they return home, they will be given a rapid test and, depending on the result, they can get back to normal or self-isolate for 10 days. During their stay with you, we ask that only one other household visits (and no other household if your loved one lives in a Registered Care Home, in line with government guidelines). I know this might be hard, but it's to keep people safe. Remember that someone can have coronavirus and pass it on without experiencing any symptoms themselves.

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If you wish instead to visit your loved one in their home, this needs to be carefully planned in advance with your Locality Manager. Only one person can visit at a time (this is the government's guidance for all care homes, and so we're applying this across our services to make sure we're sticking as closely as possible to the official advice) and we will give you a rapid test to take before you come in. If this is negative, you can come in and, while wearing PPE, won't have to practise social distancing. I'm sure this will be very welcome news to many of you.

Of course our first priority must remain keeping everyone as safe as possible. With our guidance we are managing and minimising the risks, but I must be honest and say that we cannot eliminate the risks altogether. The rapid coronavirus tests will be extremely helpful, but they are not 100% reliable. We have to balance the risk of facilitating visits with the risk of spreading the virus. In certain instances, after assessing risk and consulting you, we may agree a visit is too risky. I don't think this will happen very often, but I hope you agree that keeping everyone's loved one safe and healthy has to be our shared priority. I know I'm probably coming across as very risk adverse, but please bear with us and understand that we are doing our best to balance all the risks involved.

As I said at the outset, 2021 is looking brighter and there is every reason to believe that all of the infection control measures we've had to put in place this year can be relaxed over the course of the next year thanks to the roll-out of vaccines.

Talking of the vaccines, I would like to reassure you of two things. The first is that we are lobbying at the highest levels of government to ensure that the people we support and our frontline support colleagues are prioritised for vaccinations. I myself recently appeared before the Health and Social Care select committee at parliament to make this point, and I was pleased to see the following day that the committee's chairman, Jeremy Hunt, had raised this with the Health Secretary in the House of Commons.

The second, having spent a lot of time reading about the clinical trials and how we have been able to accelerate them due to the level of financial investment so that the three test phases have run in parallel with each other, is that we should have confidence in the safety of the approved vaccines. I know some people will still have concerns and indeed questions and it is important we respect everyone's perspective. However, it is important that everyone is given the facts about the vaccines and we will do our best to do this clearly and objectively over the coming weeks and months.

If you have any questions about our guidance for visiting over Christmas, or have any other

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questions about how we are supporting your loved one, please liaise with your Locality Manager or contact our helpline for families (open from 9.30am to 1.30pm, Monday to Friday) on 0300 303 9161 or email the team at [family.helpline@dimensions-uk.org](mailto:family.helpline@dimensions-uk.org).

Finally, I would like to wish you a very happy Christmas and New Year. 2021 is a year full of promise and hope, and we will continue to work with a single-minded focus on keeping your loved one safe, fulfilled and happy.

Regards,



Steve Scown  
Chief Executive  
Dimensions

PS – I know that some family members prefer bullet points to letters, so attached to this is a simple rundown of the key points. I've also attached details of forthcoming Zoom sessions for families.

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## Key points from the letter

- There is now a coronavirus vaccine. We are asking the government to give the vaccine to people with learning disabilities and support colleagues as soon as possible.
- We have bought rapid coronavirus tests which makes it easier to have safe visits with your relative over Christmas.
- You can make a visit easier by staying home as much as possible between now and Christmas. If you can self-isolate completely it will help keep everyone safe.
- We will test your relative for coronavirus when they return from a visit to you.
- We will test you if you want to visit your relative in their home.
- Some people are at very high risk from coronavirus. There might be a small number of people who cannot safely see their relatives.
- We have guidance to make safe visits possible from 23rd to 27th December. The guidance is with this letter.
- You can talk to your locality manager for more information or phone the helpline for families on 0300 303 9161.
- There are better days ahead next year.

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## Families' Zoom sessions

| Date    | Time         | Title and joining information  |
|---------|--------------|--|
| 18/1/21 | 2pm – 3.30pm | Gather and chat – bring a drink and talk with other families.<br><br>Join Zoom Meeting<br><a href="https://zoom.us/j/96525529961">https://zoom.us/j/96525529961</a><br><br>Meeting ID: 965 2552 9961<br>Passcode: 016751   |
| 4/2/21  | 11 – 12.30   | Understanding capacity and decision making – what is a Best Interests meeting, what is 'supported decision making' and why some people can make unwise decisions.<br><br>Join Zoom Meeting<br><a href="https://zoom.us/j/98446228075">https://zoom.us/j/98446228075</a><br><br>Meeting ID: 984 4622 8075<br>Passcode: 255241 |
| 17/2/21 | 7 – 8.30pm   | Gather and chat – bring a drink and talk with other families.<br><br>Join Zoom Meeting<br><a href="https://zoom.us/j/96703796961">https://zoom.us/j/96703796961</a><br><br>Meeting ID: 967 0379 6961<br>Passcode: 490651   |

## Guidance on visits at Christmas

### Scope and context

This guidance applies to visits between people we support and families from 23<sup>rd</sup> to 27<sup>th</sup> December, during which time special rules will apply across both England and Wales. It must be applied alongside any additional local authority guidance that may be applicable to a specific area. At other times our regular guidance on visiting applies.

The guidance has been prepared using the principles from our [framework for making decisions about in-person contact](#) during the pandemic and is intended to complement it.

If the rules in England or Wales change before Christmas, we will update our guidance accordingly.

### Principles

This guidance starts from the clear position that we want to facilitate meetings between the people we support and their family members at Christmas after what has been a very difficult year. This is why we have invested in thousands of rapid 'lateral flow' coronavirus testing kits, which are a key element of this guidance. There is no charge to family members or people we support for these tests.

To download a handy one-page guide on how to use the rapid lateral flow coronavirus test kits, [please click here](#).

Our priority is to manage and minimise the risks of visits at Christmas, but we recognise that we cannot eliminate all risks. Therefore, capacity and informed consent are key factors.

We are committed to applying the following four principles to the decisions we make about in-person contact during the pandemic, including at Christmas:

- **Lawful** – we will follow the law and relevant regulatory frameworks.
- **Proportionate** – we will balance people's rights and risks relating to in-person contact.
- **Responsive** – we will involve people in decisions and keep our decisions under review.
- **Transparent** – we will record and explain our decisions in an accessible way.

## People we support visiting family

If a person we support is to visit their family for Christmas, the following guidelines apply.

- The family should inform the Locality Manager as soon as possible to discuss timings, arrangements for collecting the person we support and anything else that might be relevant, including an agreed course of action should the person test positive for coronavirus when they return home (see note below for more details).
- If the person we support has capacity to consent, he or she needs to signal agreement. If not, then a Best Interests Decision process needs to be undertaken by the Locality Manager in consultation with others (including the family). This will take into account the person's health situation, ability to take a rapid lateral flow coronavirus test and any factors that may affect the person's safety in the home they would be visiting – for example, the make-up of the households that would be mixing during the visit. The Best Interests Decision will also take account of others who share accommodation with the person going on a visit. This is particularly important if the person cannot tolerate a test or isolate on their return.
- We have a duty of care to all of the people we support. If the Best Interests Decision identifies that it would not be in the person's best interests to visit their family's home, and there is not a court appointed decision maker, or where this may compromise the best interests of other people the person shares a home with, we ask for understanding from the family and a joint approach to finding alternatives if possible. If there continues to be a disagreement, then we will seek support from Social Services who will make the final decision.
- If the person we support lives at a Registered Care Home, we are following government guidance which states that the visit can only go ahead if they are of working age (67 years or younger). Furthermore, the visit can only go ahead if only two households will be mixing indoors – i.e. the person we support and the members of the household they are visiting. This will mean that nobody else outside of the two households can make a visit indoors.
- If the person we support lives in supported living, then a maximum of three households can mix indoors. For example, this means that if a person we support in a supported living environment visits his or her parents, then one sibling and the other members of that sibling's household can also visit.
- If any member of the household being visited by the person we support is classed as extremely clinically vulnerable, we can try to limit contact for them before the visit (e.g. reduced community access) and/or provide a rapid lateral flow coronavirus test to the

person we support before they visit. The visit will only go ahead if the result is negative. In most cases, however, we do not believe a rapid lateral flow test is necessary at this stage.

- If the person cannot tolerate a test (either before leaving or when returning) we will need to make a Best Interests Decision to determine whether the risks of the person visiting their household are acceptable.
- Once it has been agreed that the person we support can visit safely, wherever possible we recommend that the family members should self-isolate for 10 days before their loved one comes for Christmas to minimise risk. The person we support will not need to self-isolate because support colleagues wear full PPE at all times.
- Support colleagues will talk to the person we support about the visit and help them to understand what this will mean for them when they return back home.
- When the person we support returns home, we will provide the person with a rapid lateral flow test. He or she should take the test while still outside with their family, ideally in the car, and stay with them until the result is known – maybe by going for a drive or a walk. If the result is negative, the person can come in and resume normal activities. However, if the result is positive, the person will have to return home with the family for the isolation period of 10 days and the family will also have to isolate for the 14 days (unless alternative arrangements for this scenario were agreed in advance with the Locality Manager).
- If the person we support cannot tolerate a rapid lateral flow test, or refuses to accept it, they will need to self-isolate for 10 days.

## **Family members visiting people we support**

Instead of a person we support visiting a family home at Christmas, it may be decided that a family member will visit a person we support at their home. This could be for a number of reasons, including that it is safer for the person we support or that more than the maximum number of households would be mixing if the person also visited.

- We ask that the family member let the Locality Manager know as soon as possible so that timings and any extra measures can be agreed in advance.



- We also ask that the family member self-isolate for at least two days before visiting (so that the result of the rapid lateral flow coronavirus test they will take on arrival is more reliable).
- Only one family member can visit a person we support at a time, with a maximum of two family members visiting over the Christmas period in total. This follows government guidance for Registered Care Homes which we are also applying to supported living to keep people safe.
- Others living with the person we support must consent, if they have capacity, and this must be in the best interests of all of the household in shared settings.
- The visiting family member will be given a rapid lateral flow coronavirus test when they arrive and they must use it outside. They will only be admitted if the result is negative.
- They should also have their temperature checked before entering the person's home. If their temperature is 37.8 degrees Celsius or above, they cannot enter.
- Once the family member comes in, they will be given full PPE which they should wear inside. However, they do not have to practise social distancing.
- For services where multiple people live, visits are limited to one hour and need to be planned in advance so that only one person is visiting at a time and there is sufficient time between any visits for infection control procedures to be followed.
- People we support can meet with up to six people from multiple households in a public open space, although social distancing needs to be maintained. So, if more than one family member wishes to see their loved one, a socially distanced walk in the park may be an option.

If family members have any queries about this guidance, they can call the helpline for families (open from 9.30am to 1.30pm, Monday to Friday) on 0300 303 9161 or email the team at [family.helpline@dimensions-uk.org](mailto:family.helpline@dimensions-uk.org).