

10th December 2021

You can read a summary of this letter in bullet points on page 3.

Dear family member,

I am writing this letter just two weeks before Christmas, and although we are still not out of the pandemic and the emergence of the new Omicron coronavirus variant is causing a lot of concern, I sincerely hope that your festive season will be easier and happier than last year's when we were just days away from another full lockdown.

I know a lot of family members have questions about our current rules regarding visits, given the emergence of the new variant and the government's announcement that it is moving to 'Plan B'. I am writing to you now to provide clear guidance on what our current rules are for visits.

Attached to this letter is our full guidance on visiting, including a bullet point summary. However, the first thing to say is that **visits can still go ahead**. We want to facilitate visits by family members and friends to the people we support wherever possible, and the same goes for visits by the people we support to their families and friends. The government has not issued any guidance which restricts visiting at this time, and we understand that seeing loved ones especially over Christmas is good for everyone's health and wellbeing. Of course the situation is fluid and may change, but at this point we don't expect any major changes before Christmas.

The second thing to say is that we are trying to make our rules as consistent as possible across the country, which means that in almost every case the rules for Registered Care Homes and shared supported living services are the same. The big difference between current rules affecting Registered Care Homes and supported living services is that it is now illegal to work in, or visit, Registered Care Homes without being fully vaccinated – a rule which will be extended to all social care settings in England from next April. However, visiting family members and friends are exempt from this rule, so it does not concern our rules covering visits.

And the third thing to say – and it is really important – is that we are not letting up on any of our infection control measures, which I hope will reassure you that visits to and from our services can happen safely. We don't quite know what the next few weeks and months will bring, and the Omicron variant is certainly another curveball thrown our way, but our overriding concern at

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all times will continue to be keeping your loved one safe and well. So we are encouraging all our colleagues and people we support to have their booster vaccination when they become eligible, and you may have seen in the news that the minimum gap between a second vaccine dose and the booster has now been halved to three months.

Moving on, I'd also like to take this opportunity to remind you about our new Family Portal which launched last month and which I wrote about in my last letter to you. All family members of people we support who have their daily notes recorded on iplanit can use the Family Portal to see their loved one's calendar and find out what they're up to today, next week or next month. You can also use it to take a look at their latest photos, review their detailed daily records and explore the things they are working towards as part of their Activate outcomes – but only if they have consented to this. If a person lacks capacity to decide to consent, then a Best Interests meeting must be held and decisions can be made from there.

Full information about the Family Portal, including guides on how to use it, is available on our website (www.dimensions-uk.org). Simply click on 'Best practice' and then scroll down to the first item in the 'Features of our support' section. If you would like to have an account set up on the Family Portal, please speak to your loved one's locality manager who will be able to do this for you.

As I said in my last letter, not everyone will want to use the Family Portal and that's fine. This is a new way to help families have some extra information, but not a replacement for conversations with your loved one's Locality Manager and support team.

Finally, do remember that if you have any general queries about the support we provide, or if you want some help with using the Family Portal, you can contact our helpline for families from 9.30am to 1.30pm, Monday to Friday, on 0300 303 9161 or by email at family.helpline@dimensions-uk.org. If you have any specific concerns or questions about your loved one, then their Locality Manager will be pleased to help.

I wish you a very happy festive period and, if you celebrate Christmas, a fantastic Christmas Day. Let's all look forward to an improving picture in this pandemic in 2022.

Yours sincerely,



Steve Scown
Chief Executive

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Key points from the letter

- We **will** support visits to our services wherever possible this Christmas, as we know how valuable they are to family members and the people we support.
- We will also support visits from our services to the homes of family members and friends.
- Despite the new Omicron coronavirus variant, the government has not put any limit on visiting.
- Our rules on visits are the same across all our services in England.
- We are not letting up on any of our infection control measures, so visits over Christmas will be as safe as possible.
- We're encouraging everyone to have their booster vaccination, which can now be received from three months after a second dose.
- Our new Family Portal is now up and running and full information about it is available on our website: www.dimensions-uk.org/best-practice
- You can contact our helpline for families on 0300 303 9161 or by email at family.helpline@dimensions-uk.org for help with the Family Portal, or if you have a question about anything else.

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Current visiting rules in England

Version: 10th December 2021

A bullet point summary is on page 2

The rules in full

While there is separate government guidance for visits to and from Registered Care Homes and supported living settings in England, we have adopted the same rules across all our shared living services in the interests of consistency.

Our policy is always to try to accommodate visits to the people we support whenever possible, taking account of the needs of the people being visited and any potential risks to the other people who live in a service. However, please book any visit to or from a service in advance with the Locality Manager, and bear in mind that it may be necessary to restrict the number of visitors at any one time depending on the size of the service so that social distancing can be maintained.

Currently we ask all visiting family members and friends to wear surgical facemasks when visiting inside, and other PPE as necessary – we can provide this on arrival. We also ask all visitors to take a lateral flow test and return a negative result on the day of the visit itself and to present this on arrival (unless they have proof of a positive test result in the last 90 days, in which case they should present this).

All visitors to our services will need to have their temperature checked before entering, and this must be below 37.8 degrees Celsius. Visitors to Registered Care Homes also need to sign a visitors' book. We don't require visiting family members or friends to evidence their vaccination status.

Every overnight visit out of one of our services to the home of a family member or friend needs to be risk assessed by the locality manager or someone delegated to do so by the locality manager. We ask that sensible precautions are taken while the person is away but social distancing is not required.

If a person we support stays away for one or more nights, they should take a lateral flow test if possible and return a negative result within 24 hours of returning home. The risk assessment might identify the need for further measures when the person returns home, such as an additional PCR test if the person lives with others who are clinically extremely vulnerable or 14 days of self-isolation if the visit has been deemed as high risk.

If a person we support comes into contact with someone who subsequently tests positive for Covid-19, they do not need to self-isolate as long as they are fully vaccinated. They will need to take a PCR test immediately, and a lateral flow test between four and seven days after the contact. However, if they are identified by NHS Test and Trace as having been in contact with someone with the Omicron coronavirus variant, they will have to self-isolate for 10 days regardless of their vaccination status or any negative test result.

These arrangements are unlikely to change over the next few weeks and into the New Year, unless the infection rate from the Omicron coronavirus variant increases dramatically and the government's guidance changes.

Summary of the rules

- Book any visit to or from a service in advance with the Locality Manager.
- It may be necessary to restrict visitor numbers at any one time.
- All visitors must wear a facemask and possibly other PPE. This will be provided.
- All visitors must present a negative lateral flow test taken on the day of the visit, or proof of a positive result in the last 90 days.
- All visitors must have their temperature checked before entering.
- Visitors to Registered Care Homes must sign a visitors' book.
- Visiting family members and friends don't need to be vaccinated against Covid-19.
- All overnight visits out of our services must be risk-assessed.
- People we support who stay away overnight should take a lateral flow test before coming back.
- Fully vaccinated people who come into contact with someone who develops Covid-19 don't need to self-isolate, unless the contact had the Omicron variant.