

**From the Chief Medical Officer
Dr Michael McBride**



Department of
Health

An Roinn Sláinte

Mánnystrie O Poustie

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BY EMAIL

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Dear Colleagues

COVID-19: IMPLEMENTATION OF PLANNED REGULAR PROGRAMME OF COVID-19 TESTING IN RESIDENTIAL AND NURSING HOMES

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic presents an unprecedented challenge for all of us seeking to provide health and social care in healthy working environments. The virus is still present in our community and it is important to be aware that we all continue to face an uncertain time ahead. Protecting residents and staff in our care homes therefore remains a key priority throughout all phases of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The initial phase of the COVID-19 care home testing programme completed in all care homes across Northern Ireland at the end of June 2020. Care home staff responded very effectively to facilitate testing in their care homes and we want to extend our sincere thanks to you all for your tremendous commitment and support in this regard.

As we have highlighted over recent months, the introduction of a regular programme of testing in our care homes is necessary. Regular testing will play a significant role in helping to minimise the risk of COVID-19 and in ensuring the continued safety of residents and staff across our care homes.

We are therefore now moving to implement a planned programme of **regular COVID-19 testing for all residents and staff in care homes in Northern Ireland**. As part of this testing programme we recommend that all staff are tested for COVID-19 every **14 days**, and all residents are tested for COVID-19 every **28 days**. The programme will come into operation across Northern Ireland with effect from **Monday 3 August 2020**.

The PHA will continue to support all homes in the coming weeks and months as this programme of regular testing is implemented. Testing will be undertaken through

the National Testing Programme and care homes will be able to book and access testing kits through the care homes booking portal on the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) website.

It is important that staff and resident details are entered correctly on the care homes booking portal so that results can be linked back to individual care homes. We would ask that, as a priority, all care homes now arrange to enter the required details on the booking portal.

Detailed information on this regular testing programme for care home residents and staff, including the link to the booking portal, is available on the PHA website at the following address: <https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/covid-19-coronavirus/testing-and-tracing-covid-19/testing-covid-19/regular-testing-care-home>

If you have any difficulty with entering the details on the booking portal, please **e-mail** the PHA at: carehometesting@hscni.net for assistance.

The testing kits to be used for this regular care home testing programme are throat and nose swab tests. These will test for whether someone has COVID-19 at the time the test took place, but cannot tell a person if they have had COVID-19 in the past. An information booklet and a one page checklist document to support the testing process will be emailed to all care homes in advance of the testing being undertaken. As outlined above, this information will also be made available on the PHA website at:

<https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/covid-19-coronavirus/testing-and-tracing-covid-19/testing-covid-19/regular-testing-care-home>

On receipt of the test kits, care homes should aim to have each round of testing completed within a 48 to 72 hour period. A courier will collect your used testing kits and these will then be taken to a laboratory for processing. You should arrange to book your courier collection by 7pm, at least a day before carrying out the testing.

The current testing protocol in place for care homes with a suspected or confirmed COVID-19 outbreak will continue to operate. It is important to identify both single cases and potential clusters of cases. Early identification allows immediate steps to be taken to prevent spread. If a care home has a single case or potential clusters of cases in residents and/or staff, the person in charge of the facility should:

- contact the GP of each affected individual case to arrange clinical assessment.
- contact the Public Health Agency (PHA) Duty Room on 0300 555 0119 or by email to: PHA.DutyRoom@hscni.net to complete a clinical risk assessment.

Whether an outbreak is declared or not, the PHA duty officer will advise you of what further action to take. If testing is required as part of this risk assessment, HSC Trusts will support care homes in their area to undertake and complete a full round of testing of staff and residents. Further information on the arrangements and frequency of testing for care homes with a COVID-19 outbreak will be issued separately.

During this period, it is vitally important that care homes continue to closely communicate with the friends and families of residents who will understandably continue to be concerned and remain anxious about the welfare of their loved ones.

We are grateful for the commitment and dedication of all care home staff who have worked tirelessly over these last few months to provide care to residents under such challenging circumstances. Your ongoing and continued support in implementing this programme of regular COVID-19 testing in care homes is greatly appreciated. Thank you in advance for your work to keep all residents and staff in our care homes safe and well.

Yours sincerely



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Chief Medical Officer



PROFESSOR CHARLOTTE McARDLE
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