



Department of  
**Health**

An Roinn Sláinte

Mánnystrie O Poustie

[www.health-ni.gov.uk](http://www.health-ni.gov.uk)

**BY EMAIL**

Care Home Managers

COVID-19 Directorate  
Castle Buildings  
Stormont Estate  
BELFAST  
BT4 3SQ

Email:

[Covid19Directorate@health-ni.gov.uk](mailto:Covid19Directorate@health-ni.gov.uk)

Our Ref:

Date: 30 September 2022

Dear Care Home Manager

**PAUSE OF ASYMPTOMATIC TESTING FOR CARE HOME STAFF INCLUDING  
CARE PARTNER AND CARE HOME VISITOR TESTING**

**Introduction**

The Department of Health's COVID-19 Test, Trace and Protect Transition Plan published on 24 March 2022 set out the revised approach to test and trace for COVID-19 in Northern Ireland. The Plan explained how test and trace would change with arrangements becoming more proportionate, targeted and focused. The Plan also committed to keep all testing under review including routine asymptomatic testing (that is testing for those without symptoms) for those working in and visiting health and care settings.

The Department continues to monitor COVID-19 surveillance and epidemiological data very closely. While COVID-19 is still in circulation, levels of infection in the community are currently falling and the overall impact from serious illness remains low at this time. The COVID-19 UK alert level has reduced from Level 3 to Level 2 in recent weeks. Continued protection against the worst impacts of the SARS-CoV-2 virus is largely due to the success of our vaccination programme and the use of new COVID-19 treatments to protect those who are most at risk.

## **Purpose of letter**

Given the improving context and current assessment set out above, the purpose of this communication is to advise that **routine asymptomatic testing for care home staff (including agency staff and care partners)** using Lateral Flow Device (LFD) tests is to be **paused**.

The advice for those visiting care homes, including visiting professionals (HSC and non-HSC), to test using LFD tests is also being **paused**.

This updated advice will take effect from **Monday 3 October 2022**.

## **Rationale for Pausing Asymptomatic Testing**

Community prevalence is a key driver of risk of infection to staff working in health and care settings. At lower prevalence the likelihood that individuals entering these settings are infectious also reduces, and the relative risk of onward transmission in these settings is lower.

Immunity in the population is high due to our successful vaccination programme and natural immunity from prior infection. The winter vaccination programme, which includes the COVID-19 booster and Influenza vaccine, has now commenced (starting with care home residents and staff) and will be extended over the coming weeks and months. This will further boost immunity and further protect our most vulnerable.

At lower prevalence levels, the proportion of positive test results that may be false positives increases. The risk of false positives could lead to staff having to isolate unnecessarily.

## **Testing that should continue**

Staff (including agency staff) and care partners should remain vigilant for symptoms of [respiratory illness including COVID-19](#) and if they develop symptoms they should test immediately with an LFD test in line with the guidance detailed in the [Public Health Agency's letter](#) of 27 July 2022. Note this guidance is currently under review.

HSC visiting professionals should continue to LFD test if they develop symptoms in line with Circular HSS(MD) 17/2022. Note this guidance is also under review.

All positive tests should continue to be notified to the PHA Health Protection Duty Room.

The current testing protocol in place for care homes with a suspected or confirmed COVID-19 outbreak will continue to operate.

It is extremely important that care home staff continue to advise potential visitors (including visiting professionals HSC and non-HSC) to care home settings that if they are displaying symptoms of a respiratory infection including COVID-19 **they should not visit a care home**. Further guidance for the general public can be found at: [Symptoms of respiratory infections including COVID-19 | nidirect](#)

## Conclusion

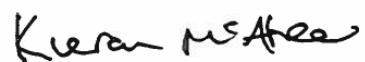
This updated guidance takes account of the current disease trajectory and public health risk assessment in relation to COVID-19. The Department will continue to monitor the situation closely as it is likely that case numbers will increase as we progress through the coming Autumn and Winter period.

All advice in relation to testing will continue to be kept under review and measures, including reintroduction of these asymptomatic testing arrangements, may be necessary into the future should the risk assessment change and in order to mitigate against severe harm for the most vulnerable.

Care homes should continue to use the LFD test kits that they have within expiry dates and retain a stock of LFD test kits to support the COVID-19 testing arrangements which continue to be advised. Care homes may also wish to hold some additional stock for use in the event that routine testing for asymptomatic health and social care workers is reintroduced.

Thank you for your continuing support.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kieran McAteer". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Kieran McAteer  
**COVID-19 Response Directorate**