

2nd November 2020

Age UK Gloucestershire supports national campaign to maintain care home visits during lockdown

This morning we added [our support](#) as an organisation to the campaign being led by the National Care Forum concerning visiting to those in care homes.

The [call for action](#) asks the government as it is developing guidance for the impending lockdown to set a default position “that care homes are open for visiting. Care homes must be supported to enable visits by families and loved ones, now and in the future.”

This is a position we at Age UK Gloucestershire fully support.

It is a horrible dilemma.

The first wave of Coronavirus took an appalling toll on many of those in care homes. 30000 excess deaths in UK care homes in the first 4 months of the epidemic, 20000 directly attributed to Covid19.¹ As we face the second wave it is understandable that protecting those in care homes is a high priority.

Closing the doors to care homes and reducing the risk of bringing in the virus is an understandable response to protect residents as well as staff. It perhaps represents one form of the protective ring being thrown around care homes that was promised, if not delivered in the first wave.

But what about the cost to the wellbeing of residents of being denied contact with family, friends and the outside world if visits are suspended?

Enforced isolation and deprivation of social contact are well known to be detrimental to wellbeing. If we stop visits to people living in care homes we are reducing a risk of transmission of the virus, but we are also denying people the contact that boosts wellbeing and supports happier lives.

There is increasing evidence that care home residents experienced greater depression and loneliness and demonstrated more behavioural disturbance during the period that included visitor bans.²

So should we prioritise safety or social contact?

Of course we need to do everything that we can to avoid the virus getting into care home settings. But taking steps to prevent the virus spreading which also prevent social contact for residents should not be taken lightly.

National consultation with older people with high support needs and those living in care homes (prior to the pandemic) suggests that whilst people value feeling safe and secure, the ability to enjoy

¹ BBC News, 3rd July 2020 **Coronavirus: Almost 30,000 'excess' care homes deaths**
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-53280011>

² Comas-Herrera et al 1st November 2020 **Rapid review of the evidence on impacts of visiting policies in care homes during the COVID-19 pandemic** <https://ltccovid.org/2020/11/01/pre-print-rapid-review-of-the-evidence-on-impacts-of-visiting-policies-in-care-homes-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

meaningful relationships, to make a contribution to their communities and to get out and about if possible is at least as important, if not more so.³

Focussing solely on safety is therefore to ignore what makes for a good life.

In considering the issue of care home visiting, I keep returning to the words of Justice Munby, speaking in 2010, but with deep resonance for today:

“The emphasis must be on sensible risk appraisal, not striving to avoid all risk, whatever the price, but instead seeking a proper balance and being willing to tolerate manageable or acceptable risks is the price appropriately to be paid in order to achieve some other good – in particular to achieve the vital good of the elderly or vulnerable person’s happiness. **What good is it making someone safer if it merely makes them miserable?**”⁴

Assessing the risk from visitors to care homes, the evidence points to this not necessarily being a high risk.

SAGE, the scientific body that advises government, recognise that a Covid19 outbreak in a home can be devastating but also identify that prohibition of visitors has a low impact on transmission and severe infections. “Modelling studies have shown that allowing visiting has only a marginal impact on case load in a home.”⁵

Outbreaks are more likely to come via transmission from care staff.

Crucially the scientific advice also recognises that “isolation can however be harmful to residents, particularly where poor recognition or sensory deficit is present.” They report that work is underway to develop a ‘cost consequence model’ comparing the impact of disease spread by visitors and the impact of isolation from stopping visitors for an extended period.



Care home providers have already shown great creativity in how visiting can be supported safely with the use of designated visiting areas, timed appointments, clear screens, adhering to social distancing, masks and deep cleaning. Some do temperature testing before visits too.

Having a designated ‘essential’ visitor is a clear way of managing the risks.

(photo courtesy of @peppercot via Twitter)

³ Katz, J., Holland, C., Peace, S., Taylor, E. (Ed Blood, I.) (2011) **A Better Life: What older people with high support needs value**, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Also: Bowers, H., Clark, A., Crosby, G., Easterbrook, L., Macadam, A., MacDonald, R., Macfarlane, A., Maclean, M., Patel, M., Runnicles, D., Oshinaike, T. and Smith, C. (2009) **Older People’s Vision for Long-Term Care**, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation

⁴ Munby, Lord Justice (2010) ‘**What price dignity?**’, keynote address at LAG Community Care conference: Protecting liberties, London, 14 July.

⁵ Social Care Working Group: **COVID-19 and care homes - update paper**, 23 September 2020
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/925141/S0780_Social_Care_Working_Group_update_paper.pdf

In Lancashire, despite being under Tier 3 restrictions the Council are investing money in care providers specifically to enable them to maintain social contact for those in care homes.⁶

There is clearly a need for a risk assessment to be undertaken in each setting and by each resident and choices around visiting can then be made.

Capacity to make such a decision may be a factor for those with dementia, but many care home residents will be able to exercise their judgement on what matters to them. **We should be hearing more of the voices of people living in care homes in these debates.**

Indeed, one of the wider consequences of this pandemic is that the experience in care homes has entered the consciousness of more people in society.

Recognising how life behind the doors of a care home is rarely heard in our society, back in 2015 Age UK Gloucestershire published a report called **Care Home Whispers**⁷ that sought to raise the voice and experience of residents in homes across the county.

My concern is that the spotlight on care homes triggered by Covid19 is tending to focus on the negatives – the risks from the virus, the challenge for care staff and there has been an underlying presumption of residents as passive recipients of care, as lacking life, as less deserving of freedoms or able to make choices than others.

Older people who live in a residential setting are citizens, with hopes, with needs for social contact, with contributions to make to their families, friends and communities. Adopting a response to Covid19 that is too fixated on protection undermines the agency of older people and will consign people to miserable periods of lockdown both inside and outside the care homes.

So, faced with the challenge of a second lockdown, we believe we should be proactively promoting the exchange of good practice in safe visiting into care homes – not suspending visits outright.

We therefore await national guidance on care home visiting during the impending second lockdown and hope it rightly prioritises safe visiting continuing throughout. We will then look for the local response to recognise the importance of actively supporting safe visiting in Gloucestershire care homes.

Rob Fountain
CEO

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⁶ Lancashire Post 27th October 2020 <https://www.lep.co.uk/news/politics/lancashire-county-council-care-home-plan-help-you-visit-your-loved-ones-during-pandemic-3016967>

⁷ Age UK Glos (2015) **Care Home Whispers: Listening to the Voices of Older People living in Gloucestershire Care Homes** https://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/media/11328/care_home_whispers_project7c62.pdf