



Keeping connected: Open and transparent communications in the time of COVID-19

This is a joint statement from the Relatives & Residents Association and the National Care Forum, endorsed by the Care Provider Alliance, the Care Quality Commission and Skills for Care. It sets out shared expectations and good practice relating to the importance of clear, open, transparent and regular communications during the COVID-19 crisis between care providers* and the families** of their residents.

As the country comes together to fight our most challenging crisis in generations, our social care system continues to be on the frontline. Coronavirus presents an unprecedented challenge to us all.

We recognise that this is an exceptionally difficult time for care providers, with staff working incredibly hard under extremely challenging circumstances to ensure residents' safety and well-being and to deliver quality care during this crisis. It is also a very difficult time for residents and their families as visits are restricted. Family members are, understandably, anxious about the well-being of their relatives.

It is also clear that without adequate testing, many providers are unable to confidently state whether there are confirmed cases of COVID-19 within their care settings and that this is a rapidly changing situation. However, this makes it more important than ever that there is a culture of clear, open, transparent and regular communications during the COVID-19 crisis between care providers and the families of their residents.

Consideration should be given to the most appropriate form of communication depending on the sensitivity and nature of the update that needs to be shared, and family members' preferred methods of communication.

* Whilst this statement is primarily aimed at providers of residential care in response to concerns about the COVID-19 status of homes, we hope it will also be helpful across other care settings, including domiciliary care.

** The term 'family members' is used to encapsulate the people who should be kept informed about the resident's care and wellbeing. This information should have been established by the care provider as part of their normal care planning. It must ensure the wishes of residents are central to communications with family members, encouraging residents to make their own choices about what information is passed on and respecting those decisions. Where a resident does not have capacity to decide what information is shared and with whom, providers' duties under the Mental Capacity Act continue to apply. Care providers should ensure that the information about who should be kept informed is up-to-date. It may include people the resident is not related to, such as close friends. Care providers should be mindful of residents with large families, or with divided families to ensure family members estranged from other relatives, but not from the resident, are kept updated. Email contact may be helpful in such instances.

Communication asks of social care providers

1: Keeping family members informed about their own relative's COVID-19 status (suspected or confirmed)

Care providers should be keeping family members updated on their relative's health and well-being as a matter of course. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this is more important than ever. In the event that someone living in the care home has suspected or confirmed COVID-19, this should be communicated to their family members as promptly and sensitively as possible via their preferred method of communication, taking into account the considerations set out above. This will help to protect the resident's and family member's right to private and family life (protected by Article 8 of the Human Rights Act) by ensuring the family member is informed about the resident's well-being and can participate in discussions about their care. This is particularly important where the resident has an appointed power of attorney, relevant person's representative or another formal role.

2: Being as open and transparent as possible with family members about the situation in the home

As many care settings remain in lockdown due to the pandemic, family members are, understandably, contacting providers for news and information about the current situation in their relative's care setting. This includes updates on whether COVID-19 has been suspected or detected amongst staff or residents.

It is clear that there is a delicate balance to strike in terms of openness and transparency about sharing the latest information about COVID-19 in a care setting and not creating fear and panic amongst residents' families. However, it is also clear that there is a critical need for as much up-to-date information and transparency as possible at such a challenging time for those residing in care and their families.

Care providers should keep residents and their family members as informed as possible about the situation in relation to the COVID-19 status of the home. This includes whether there are any suspected or confirmed cases amongst residents and staff, what steps are being taken as a result of this, how the care home is working to keep residents and staff safe, and how they will keep residents and family members informed on an ongoing basis. This will help to ensure an information gap doesn't create unnecessary fear or anxiety and will help relatives to feel connected to the reality of the situation in the care setting.

Whilst data protection rules must continue to be observed and personal details of individual cases may not be shared, providing a general update about the COVID-19 status of the care home, and the steps being taken to deal with any cases and mitigate the risk to others, will help to allay fears. As stated above, this will also help to protect the resident's and family member's right to private and family life (protected by Article 8 of the Human Rights Act). As the care home is the resident's home and its COVID-19 status is a factor which may put the resident at risk, keeping residents and family members informed allows them to weigh up any steps they may need to take to mitigate this risk, and to participate in care decisions. This is, as already stressed, particularly important where the resident has an appointed power of attorney, relevant person's representative or another formal role.

Examples of good practice from care providers

Proactive calls to families

We have been maintaining high levels of telephone communication with relatives regardless of whether a home has COVID-19 cases or not.

Every relative receives a proactive call from the home manager or deputy home manager to have a general catch up about their loved one and provide them with reassurance every week. This communication is tracked so we know every family has been contacted.

Relatives are staying in touch in other ways in between by using the Relatives' Gateway, video calls, and socially distanced garden or window visits. However, regardless of this type of contact, we're making sure a weekly proactive call is happening for everyone.

We have structured communications for when COVID-19 is confirmed in hospital or in a home (written by our communications manager) and this is used as the starting point for personal communication delivered via the phone by a member of the home's management team to relatives. This varies as to whether the person is in hospital or the home, however this communication takes priority and starts immediately. We're not doing any communication in writing.

Hotline for families

We have created a COVID-19 banner on our website which takes people to our COVID-19 page which has a full set FAQs for families. These are updated on a regular basis to ensure the information is always correct.

We have also created a dedicated Facebook page for each of our care homes, to help families and friends stay connected during lockdown and keep up to date with the daily life in the homes. The pages are updated regularly to show all the activities that are happening in each home, seeking to bridge the gap in terms of face-to-face visits, providing a virtual connection instead.

And we have created a dedicated 24/7 telephone hotline for relatives and families to use if they have any concerns at all. This is run by a highly skilled and experienced internal team who work closely with all our care homes. We always notify the families of people living in our care homes where COVID-19 is suspected or confirmed.

Guidance: [the Coronavirus: Admission and care of people in care home](#) – Annex H; Communications – sets out more detail about the communications expected during this time.

Communication asks of family members

Family members need to play their part in helping to achieve open, honest and effective communications at this difficult time by:

- Ensuring the care home has their up to date contact details
- Informing the care home promptly of any changes to their contact details
- It may be helpful to agree a 'lead contact' for the care home, particularly where a resident has a large family. In the case of a resident having a divided family, there may be more than one lead contact.
- Letting the care home know about their preferred means of communication and any restrictions on when to get in contact
- Recognising this is a time of mutual pressure and anxiety, for care staff as well as for residents and their family and friends

Jane's story

Mum and dad, married 63 years, had never spent more than a night apart. When dad entered a care home, after suffering pneumonia and losing his mobility, mum had visited him every day. During lockdown, we went four weeks with no contact with him or the care home - as a family we were extremely worried about his mental and physical wellbeing. We understood the staff were challenged and many were off, due to their own symptoms or family illness, and it was difficult to put pressure on a situation they were firefighting. Whilst we suspected there were cases of COVID-19, we were not told this.

Having no information at all and knowing dad was vulnerable to chest infections and had diabetes was extremely worrying and frustrating. With a combination of great advice from the Relatives & Residents Association, and local MPs, we were able to help persuade the care home to set up twice a week communications with dad and mum via FaceTime, and also for the home to produce a regular newsletter for relatives. We thought this was a good idea to show us, despite the difficulties, what measures they were bringing in.

The weekly newsletter gave us an idea of how the team were coping with the crisis and it was actually helpful to know that there were cases of Coronavirus in the home. It was scary, of course, but they were able to tell us, for example, that agency staff they employed only worked at their care home and didn't move around to others. And a couple of weeks ago two members of staff who had been hospitalised, had returned to work. Today's newsletter told us there was just one case of COVID-19 so it is comforting to know they are on top of things.

Anonymous caller to the [Relatives & Residents Association Helpline](#)
(The name has been changed)

From the Care Quality Commission

Clear, transparent and regular communications between care providers and the families of the people that they provide care for have never been more important. It is also vital that wherever possible, people using services are actively involved in discussion about who is told what, and when, and their wishes are respected. The communication asks outlined in this statement provide helpful prompts, and we hope they will facilitate open, honest conversations with people using services and their families. This transparency is important whether the service is for older people or for people under 65, including people with a learning disability, autistic people, people with mental health conditions or other disabled people.

In our own conversations with providers, we look at how a service [enables and encourages accessible, open communication](#) and [how they show honesty and transparency, including when something goes wrong](#). The principles set out here speak to how caring and well-led a service is and are worth reflecting in ongoing conversations with our inspectors. The [Making It Real statements from TLAP](#) are also a useful resource to help guide conversations. These have been recently updated to help us through COVID-19.

Care providers should also enable people using services and their families to feedback on their care. There are a number of ways in which to do this, including through CQC's online [Give feedback on care](#) service or via the [Residents & Relatives Association Helpline](#).

We have seen incredible dedication and commitment from those working in social care, and they have never had a more challenging or crucial role to play. Through fostering open cultures, maintaining transparency and by working together, we will continue to keep people safe and protect those most at risk during this global emergency and beyond.