



Ensuring safe visitor access to residential aged care

March 2022

The Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission recognises the known physical, psychosocial and nutritional impacts on older people if they are subject to sustained and successive social isolation.

The Commission also recognises the flow-on impact on immediate families and loved ones, who experience distress resulting from their separation and inability to provide usual care and social contact.

Residential care settings are the homes of residents, and residents must be able to maintain relationships and engage in social contact. Providers need to facilitate access to their premises to ensure that these critical needs can be met. The *Aged Care Act 1997*, the Charter of Aged Care Rights and the Aged Care Quality Standards include specific responsibilities that provide a legislative basis to this requirement.

COVID-19 has created challenges around visitor access for many providers. A public health order imposing specific restrictions on access to an aged care facility must be complied with, but cannot be used by a provider to justify tighter restrictions. In this regard, providers are expected to balance their responsibilities to reduce the risk of COVID-19 entering the site, with their responsibilities for meeting the physical, social and emotional needs of consumers by tailoring care and services as far as possible to their individual circumstances. Contemporary public health orders typically enable this.

Infection control procedures do not override the ongoing obligations of providers to facilitate safe visiting arrangements (within the terms of any public health order), including preparing for and supporting essential visitor access to residents during an outbreak at that facility.



The Commission is committed to the concept of ‘essential visitors’ and is looking for providers to engage proactively with consumers and their representatives (in advance of any COVID-19 exposure or outbreak) to identify these people for each consumer, and ensure that they continue to have access to a service unless a public health order or written public health advice prohibits this. Essential visitors are any of the following:

1. *Partner in care* – a person who has a close and continuing relationship with the care recipient and provides aspects of regular routine care and companionship
2. *Named visitor* – if a resident does not have a partner in care, they may nominate one person to be a named visitor
3. *Visitor at end of life* – visits to residents at or approaching the end of life should be facilitated for anyone and not be time limited.

The Commission may take regulatory action where access for essential visitors is not adequately supported.

More broadly, when monitoring provider responsibilities in relation to visitor access, the Commission seeks evidence of how a service is complying with any public health order while it is also assessing the current risks of both COVID-19 and the impact of any visitor restrictions on individual residents.

Factors considered by the Commission may include the nature of the measures in place, circumstances of individual residents, and the impact on the residents’ health and wellbeing. The Commission will also have regard to the participation of residents (or their representatives) in decision-making about visitor access arrangements in terms of how the arrangements affect their care and wellbeing.

Where providers implement or change arrangements at residential aged care services which affect visitor access, the Commission expects providers to clearly communicate with residents, representatives and advocates on the specific reasons and nature of the arrangements.

Support for Providers

Recently the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) released interim guidance regarding aged care visiting [Managing Public Health Restrictions on Residential Aged Care Facilities](#). The Guidance was [endorsed by National Cabinet](#) on 10 February 2022. The interim guidance also recognises ‘Essential Visitors’ as defined by the [Industry Code for Visiting in Aged Care](#).

In addition to the Industry Code for Visiting in Aged Care, providers can refer to:

[Visitor access fact sheet](#)

[Partners in care factsheet](#)

The Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission acknowledges the Traditional Owners of country throughout Australia, and their continuing connection to land, sea and community. We pay our respects to them and their cultures, and to Elders both past and present.



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