



Monday 7 December 2020

Dear Approved Provider

Re: Visitor access in a COVID-normal world

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the aged care sector, both in Australia and around the world. The ongoing waves of major outbreaks of COVID-19 overseas are a constant reminder that there is no room for complacency and that for the foreseeable future, we will need to live and work in a COVID-normal world.

Making sure that people receiving aged care are safe from the COVID-19 virus as far as possible is vitally important. Best practice infection prevention and control measures including regular training and practice drills for staff should now be the norm for all aged care services. Of equal importance is supporting the physical, social and emotional wellbeing of residents in aged care facilities and ensuring that they have regular access to family and friends.

Residents, families and the wider community expect that approved providers of residential aged care services are addressing both of these imperatives. The Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission is looking for providers to demonstrate how they are doing this in their visitor arrangements.

Visitor Access Campaign

The Commission is delivering a campaign of activities commencing in December 2020 and continuing into 2021 to support the transition of the aged care sector into a COVID-normal operating environment. This campaign will provide resources and guidance for aged care consumers, their families and approved providers to safely manage visitor access. It will also feature targeted regulatory activities to ensure that the Commission maintains appropriate regulatory oversight of the aged care sector. The main activities of the campaign are:

- **Residential service visitor access survey-** this short survey will ask all residential aged care services to reflect on their current arrangements and inform the Commission of their planning and processes for safely managing visitor access in our COVID-19 normal world.
- **Visitor access case studies-** these case studies will provide real-life (de-identified) cases of common resident complaints related to visitor access and resident restrictions, and show how these may be resolved to the mutual satisfaction of residents, families and services. They also highlight the key considerations for all parties in ensuring balanced management of the COVID-19 risk, and the impacts of restrictions and isolation on aged care residents.
- **Focused regulatory activities-** the Commission's ongoing regulatory program will have a focus on visitor access issues. Where visitor access risks are identified, the Commission will undertake unannounced visitor access spot checks. Further regulatory action may be taken to ensure that the provider is meeting their obligations under the Aged Care Quality Standards.
- **Best practice resources-** the Commission will continue to update its website with information, resources and links about best practice visitor access. We value your feedback and suggestions on what more we can do to assist providers in managing safe access for visitors to residential aged care facilities.

The Commission's approach

We have all learned of the negative impact of visitor restrictions on residents in aged care facilities and the need to take individual circumstances into account when managing COVID-19-related risks.





When monitoring and assessing providers in relation to the Aged Care Quality Standards, the Commission will seek evidence of how a service assesses the current risks of both COVID-19 and the impact of visitor restrictions on individual residents.

The Commission expects that all approved providers will appreciate the risks to residents caused by isolation and ensure appropriate visitor access. All providers should allow visitors to have safe, ready physical access to residents except in circumstances where there is an active COVID-19 outbreak in a service.

To meet these expectations, all approved providers should, as a minimum, be familiar with and apply the following:

- **Public health directives** Approved providers must adhere to all public health directives applicable to the state or territory, including any current restrictions or conditions related to visitor access. Approved providers must continuously monitor public health directives, which may change regularly according to changes in the public transmission risk. It is essential that approved providers remain cognisant of the impacts of restrictions on elderly residents and not impose restrictions in excess of those mandated in current applicable public health directives.
- **[Industry Code for Visiting Residential Aged Care Homes during COVID-19](#)** Developed by aged care peak bodies and consumer advocacy organisations, the code has been established to ensure aged care residents may safely receive visitors in their residences in a manner that minimises the risk of COVID-19 transmission. The code compliments aged care legislation by clearly articulating the aged care industry expectations on the safe management of visitor access in residential services. The latest version of the code was released on 20 November 2020. In resolving complaints about visitor restrictions, and monitoring and assessing services against relevant Standards, the Commission will have regard to a service's use of the code.
- **[Visitation Guidelines for Residential Aged Care Facilities](#)** The Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) has released the national aged care visitation guidelines. These guidelines establish a three-tier escalation framework, based on community COVID-19 transmission risks and local/state public health advice. They provide detailed actions to ensure safe visitor access or restrictions that residential aged care providers should take in response to an escalating, or de-escalating, COVID-19 outbreak.
- **[Outbreak management planning in aged care](#)** The Commission has released guidance to assist residential aged care providers to support their workers, care recipients, families and visitors to prevent, prepare for and manage outbreaks of COVID-19. It provides detailed guidance on how services may appropriately apply restrictions on visitors while ensuring the maintenance of contact between residents and their loved ones in the event of a COVID-19 outbreak.
- **[Infection prevention and control leads](#)** The Australian Government requires residential aged care services to appoint an infection prevention and control (IPC) lead who has or is obtaining relevant qualifications. This role will ensure better practices to prevent and respond to infectious diseases, including COVID-19 and influenza. IPC leads have a vital role to play in enabling safe visitor access in residential services and should be integral to important actions including visitor screening, facilitating safe movement of visitors in services, and identifying safe visiting areas.



- **[Partners in Care Fact sheet](#)** Many residents rely on someone they trust to provide routine care and companionship in a residential aged care facility. A partner in care may be a family member, loved one, friend or representative who has a close and continuing relationship with a resident and visits frequently and regularly to provide aspects of regular routine care and companionship to that individual. The Commission has produced a fact sheet on Partners in Care which provides guidance to [providers on how to form partnerships in care with carer visitors in a COVID-19 safe manner](#). Introducing a Partners in Care program in residential services can benefit the health and well-being of individual residents by facilitating the safe visitation of a trusted person who has a deep understanding of the resident and knows what “works best” for them.

We have all gained insights and learned lessons during the pandemic. We now need to take these lessons into our new ‘COVID-normal’ world, to make aged care a better and safer place for older Australians.

Janet Anderson PSM
Commissioner

