

P-05-0141 A clear policy and funding for hospital and care homes for virtual visiting

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 1 Rhagfyr 2020
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Reference: RS20/14409-2

Introduction

Petition number: [P-05-1041](#)

Petition title: A clear policy and funding for hospitals and care homes for virtual visiting

Text of petition: Sadly, were not alone being cut off from loved ones in hospital and care homes. My mum has alzheimers she isn't able to pick up a phone or use video chat to keep in touch. During the initial lockdown we didn't see what she looked like for 9 weeks, which was horrendous. Welsh Government guidelines are not clear enough and not all settings have the funds for equipment. This has to change. Everywhere should have a clear plan and ability to keep families in touch.

Whilst I understand the safety needs around keeping vulnerable people safe from covid I don't understand the disregard for people's overall mental health. I know many people in the same situation with a loved one and not one hospital or care home are doing the same thing. Surely facilities and hospitals should have funding available and clear guidance on keeping



families in touch as part of that person's holistic care. Welsh Government guidance states that people with learning disabilities or dementia should have visitors if not doing so would cause distress. You try proving that lack of contact is the cause of distress to someone who sometimes doesn't know who you are. Guidance states end of life is a reason for visits, but who decides at what point in that case you can visit? when the person isn't aware of you being there? It is not clear enough. Time is precious and we need clear guidance and funding so everywhere is following the same thing and families know there is hope in keeping in touch with their loved one.

Background

Care home visits

Many care homes took the decision to stop visitors entering the home in late February/early March to try to protect residents. The Welsh Government advised restricting visits from 23 March, but most did so earlier. Limited socially distanced visits have been permitted at certain points during the year.

In mid-June/July, some care homes began allowing outdoor visits to take place with restrictions, and at the end of August the [Welsh Government's guidance for care homes](#) was updated to allow for socially distanced indoor visits. However the guidance also said that if rates of coronavirus transmission rose in the community or at a national level, then visits may end .

This was the case in September when local lockdowns took place in some areas of Wales, followed by the national firebreak. Care home visits stopped again during these periods of restrictions (although end of life visits were permitted in certain circumstances). Visits were allowed to restart when the firebreak lifted on 9 November. The Welsh Government updated [its care home visiting guidance](#) on 10 November. However it says :

Visits to care homes may cease if local rates of transmission in the community exceed 5%. Visits to care homes may cease if rates of COVID-19 transmission rise at a national level. Restrictions on visits to care homes may be placed on homes within a certain area of the local authority, the entire local authority area or nationally depending on the rate of transmission.

Recently the Welsh Government says its working with partners across the UK on the development of new testing technologies, and hopes to have positive news soon about new rapid tests which could be available to care home visitors. The UK Government has just launched a [pilot for family members to get regular testing for safer care home visits](#) which allow physical contact.

Funding

On 14 April the [Welsh Government announced an extra £40m](#) to support adult social care services during the coronavirus pandemic. It has stated the funding was to help the sector with rising costs such as for PPE, but also for greater use of ICT to keep families in touch with their loved ones while they were not able to visit each other.

On [3 August the Welsh Government announced](#) a further £22.7m for local authorities to enable them to continue to assist adult social care providers with these on-going additional costs. This funding was available immediately through to the end of September, when the Welsh Government said it would review the situation again.

The [Welsh Government's Care Home Action Plan](#) includes an action 'to ensure care home residents are supported to maintain contact with their family. The [Welsh Government's update on progress on the plan](#) (published in October) states:

To support residents to connect with their loved ones in other ways we funded Digital Communities Wales (DWC) to purchase and distribute over a thousand digital devices to care homes across Wales

The Welsh Government says it will consider the effectiveness of the Digital Communities Wales project for care homes when the evaluation is completed (target date for this is December 2020).

The [Digital Communities Wales project website](#) says that thanks to additional funding from Welsh Government, it is loaning tablet devices to care homes, and delivering training to care home staff so that they can help their residents use the tablet devices.

The [Welsh Government has also just announced](#) (23 November) that temporary 'pods' are being provided to care homes to better facilitate visits over the winter.

The £3million pilot will cover the procurement, installation and lease of 100 units, with an initial 30 being installed and ready to use before Christmas. This also includes £1million for plans to support providers who prefer to make their own arrangements on a similar basis. The Welsh Government says:

Expanding capacity within care homes will help to better support risk-assessed visiting during the winter months as some care providers have found it difficult to support socially distanced visits due to a lack of internal visiting space.

Hospital visits

Hospital visits have been similarly restricted during the pandemic. The Welsh Government issued a written statement on 17 July which stated:

Face-to-face visiting needs to be agreed in advance and outdoor visits may be offered if appropriate. Virtual visiting should be encouraged and supported where possible. This guidance is being kept under review and will change as the pandemic status alters. The guidance can be found [here](#):

The Welsh Government [updated its detailed hospital visits guidance](#) on 6 October. It sets out the conditions in which visits are permitted and states:

We recognise the innovative ways our health boards and trusts have enabled patients to stay in touch with their families and friends.

Patients/service users can now connect with loved ones virtually via mobile phones and tablets in a safe way.

Virtual visiting should continue where possible. There is immense value in cards, phone calls, e-mails, social media as well as video calls.

NB: Specific funding for health boards to facilitate virtual visits is not mentioned.

Welsh Government response to the petition

The Minister for Health and Social Services said:

With regards to supporting people to stay in contact with their friends and families, I appreciate this continues to be an extremely difficult time for people living in care homes and their loved ones, who have faced

restrictions on visiting each other during the pandemic. Where visits in person are restricted we expect care home providers to make every effort to support people to stay in touch with their friends and family in other ways.

The Minister says the Welsh Government has supported care homes in this endeavour by providing additional funding to our Digital Communities Wales:

Digital Confidence, Health and Well-being (DCW) procured programme to purchase and distribute over 1000 digital devices (tablets) to care homes across Wales. Care Home staff were also provided with training and support to use them. I understand that some people, particularly those with dementia, may have difficulty holding a phone or using a tablet. We have commissioned an evaluation of this additional support provided by DCW which should highlight where reasonable adaptations could be made in this area, such as using a larger screen or headsets, for example.

The Minister goes on to say the Welsh Government is working with its sector stakeholder group and are keeping our approach to visits under review, and, “exploring how we can further support care home providers to enable visits safely”. The Minister also notes that ‘supporting the well-being of care home residents is a core theme in the Welsh Government’s Care Homes Action Plan.

In terms of funding, the Minister referred to the £40 million, and further £22.7 million made available to local authorities to enable them to assist care homes and others with the extra costs from the pandemic. He said these costs were predominantly in areas such as infection control and additional staffing, but funding could also be used to assist care homes in purchasing ICT to facilitate contact between residents and their families where visits were unable to take place.

He went on to say the additional £264 million recently announced for local authorities for Covid-19 related costs for the remainder of 2020-2021 includes funding for local authorities to assist adult social care providers for that period.

The Minister’s response does not mention hospital visits (other than referring to the title of the petition).