

# More than just a visitor

## A guide to Essential Family Carers





As the UK's largest charity care provider, we enable people to live later life well. Through specialist care homes, thriving retirement living and vibrant community groups and befriending, we inspire the best care and wellbeing at every stage of later life. With over 75 years' experience we put people at the heart of everything we do in all our homes and schemes across Britain.

In all images national and local guidelines were adhered to and PPE was worn correctly at time of taking.

## Introduction

We recognise how complex relationships between our residents and their families and friends can be. Because of this bond we appreciate how difficult this time has been for you and your relative living in a care home. We really are thankful for how you, as a family member or friend, have supported our colleagues during the pandemic and we want to continue working positively with you over the coming months. We have been working with you to ensure that your connection with your relative has been maintained either through technology or more recently through outdoor visits. However, we also recognise that we need to go further in relation to visits, in particular for those residents who were receiving significant support from a loved one prior to lockdown and have struggled as a result of this.

With the release of the recent Government guidance in relation to visiting we have been able to introduce our Essential Family Carer scheme for residents who have been prioritised as needing essential support from a family member. There are still restrictions we need to adhere to, protecting our residents, our colleagues and the wider community from COVID-19. But, by following the advice and guidance from the local Director of Public Health we can work together to introduce visiting for those residents who desperately need it.

We hope that this document helps with this process by answering your questions, but if you want more information please contact the care home directly.

David Moore, MHA Dementia Lead

# What is an Essential Family Carer?

We are defining an Essential Family Carer (EFC) as,

*“A resident’s family member or friend whose care for a resident is an essential element of maintaining their mental or physical health. Without this input a resident is likely to experience significant distress or continued distress.”*

Although we have used the word Family, we recognise that you may be a resident’s friend and not a family member. Also, we acknowledge that you may not see yourself as a ‘carer’ but as a partner or a supporter of your relative. We chose the term after consultation with a group of resident’s family members and John’s Campaign.

To become an EFC and therefore an **essential element of maintaining your relative’s mental or physical health** the care home has had to consider a number of factors. Some of these include:

- The safety of all of the residents, the staff and visitors in relation to COVID-19.
- Who your relative wanted to be their EFC
- Could your relative’s distress be supported by our care team?
- Does your relative have a condition/specific needs related to culture, religion, sexuality or gender that means they rely heavily on you for support and/or advocacy?

- How were you involved in supporting your relative before the COVID-19 restrictions?
- Do you or/and your relative belong to clinically vulnerable group and have been advised to shield?
- Does your relative have a condition that means they can’t access outdoor visits or use technology to maintain relationships?

In relation to the last point, we can work with the care home to adapt your visit. Your visit will probably occur indoors either in a designated meeting room in the care home or in your relative’s bedroom if they are unable to leave their room.



## What does being an EFC involve?

To be an EFC the care home will ask you to **share evidence that you have been tested for COVID-19** either through drive in testing or postal testing (<https://www.gov.uk/apply-coronavirus-test-essential-workers>). This needs to be a negative result within the last week.

You will also be asked to confirm that you will;

- Follow our infection control measures including wearing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). This term covers items such as face masks, face visors, gloves and aprons.
- Allow the care home to keep a record of your name, telephone number and address in case there is a need to share with the NHS track and trace system.
- Travel to and from the home without using public transport. (If you can't do this we are asking that you follow Government guidance in relation to COVID-19 and public transport).
- Agree not to visit if you have had or known anyone who has had the symptoms of COVID-19 over 14 days prior to the visit.
- Book your visit, you cannot turn up unannounced.
- Not travel to the home if you are coming from an area that has been placed in local lockdown.

Even with you agreeing to the above each MHA care home will still need to follow the Government guidance in relation to allowing visits to occur. For you to be able to visit we need to:

- Adhere to the decision of the Local Director of Public Health and Local Authorities in relation to allowing visiting.
- Be free from COVID-19 for at least 28 days.
- Have weekly testing for COVID-19 in place.

If the Local Director of Public Health determines that visiting is not safe then we will not be able to have visitors into the home. However, we will reassess on a regular basis to see if it safe for you to come into the home, if we can adapt the visiting and add extra precautions.



# Why are there still so many restrictions?

We recognise that many of these restrictions will mean that these visits may feel controlled and institutional. We wish they didn't have to be like this but at this moment in time we need these restrictions in place to continue to manage the risk of infection from COVID-19. We have lost many residents and three of our colleagues (information correct of August 2020) to the virus and because of this we are keeping stringent infection control measures in place. We are also aware of the Government's discussions about the possibility of a second wave and so we want to reduce the risk to our residents, our colleagues and the wider community. Currently we can't offer indoor visits to all residents and their families, and we have to prioritise visits for certain residents who need extra support. We understand that this may cause frustration amongst other residents and their families. We are working with all of our residents and their families to explain the decision process but please do make the care home manager aware if this becomes an issue.



## What might I be asked to do during visits?

As an EFC, you will probably be asked to support your relative in the way you did before COVID-19 restrictions were introduced. For instance you might help your relative with:

- Physical tasks such as eating or drinking
- Personal tasks such as cleaning their teeth
- Mental and physical stimulation
- Cultural or religious needs
- Needs related to sexuality or gender e.g., resident is a member of the LGBTQ+ community
- Communication needs - as an EFC you may be able to de-escalate behaviours that care staff are not able to.

We are not asking you to 'jump straight back' into providing the support you did prior to the introduction of restrictions. The first couple of visits will be limited in terms of time (max 30 minutes between 10am – 4pm) Monday to Friday. This is to help the care home staff support you and your relative to take small steps back to rebuilding this relationship after such a long time apart. After a review of the visits between your relative, yourself and the care home manager any changes to the frequency, dates and times can be discussed. This will be then documented in your relative's 'visiting plan'.

# Do I have to be an EFC?

It is understandable to feel anxious about seeing your relative again and undertaking the responsibility an EFC entails. Becoming an EFC is voluntary, please do not feel pressured to accept this role. It is important to reflect on and discuss what this role could involve with the care home, your relative and the rest of your family. If you decide that you are not able to become your relative's EFC, another member of the resident's family or friend could be asked to take this role. The staff at the home will continue to care for your relative and they will respect your decision. We will also work with you to ensure different ways of maintaining your relationship with your family member or friend continues. We will still be using technology to assist with this and we will share regular updates about how your relative is doing. We will still facilitate outdoor visiting if this is a possibility for your relative.

## Things to consider before becoming an EFC

Before COVID-19, support for your relative may have been shared by a number of people who could visit the home. Now, with the restrictions, there is pressure being placed on one person, before considering becoming an EFC, you might want to consider the following:

- Although only one EFC can visit think about how you can still involve the rest of your relative's family and friends. Can you take a tablet with photos or video messages from the family to share? Can you bring any gifts from other family members for your relative? Make sure that you check with the care home first about what you can gifts you can bring in.
- Your family will probably be keen to hear how the visit went. How are you going to share information about the visit with other family members/friends?



## What to expect from the first visit

There will be a number of changes since your last visit:

- You are being asked to visit on your own
- You are being asked to call the home when you arrive and wait before you enter the building
- The staff will be wearing PPE
- You probably won't see as many residents as usual as some may be staying in their bedrooms
- You won't be able to walk around the home by yourself. A member of staff will escort you to and from the designated meeting area

A member of staff (the EFC champion) will come outside to greet you. Their role is to support you and your relative during the first few visits. The EFC champion will take you to an area where you can safely leave any items that you can't take into the room (items such as your coat, handbag, mobile etc). You will be shown where you can wash and dry your hands. If this is not possible hand sanitiser will be provided. The EFC Champion will make sure you are wearing your PPE correctly. Any PPE needed will be provided by the home.

The EFC champion will escort you to either your relative's room or the agreed designated meeting room. The EFC champion will ask you not to touch any items during the walk to the room, unless necessary (e.g. if you need to use the handrail to walk). The EFC champion will open doors for you, press lift buttons etc. You will also be reminded to maintain a physical distance from other staff and residents. Do feel free to say hello, but a staff member will explain to any residents that you can't stop and chat.

Once you get to the room the EFC champion will enter first. You will be asked to wait outside while the champion checks with your relative that they are okay and ready to see you. You will then be invited in.

When in the room it is likely that you will need to continue to wear your PPE, including your face mask. However, if your relative is distressed by this (because they don't recognise you) or they don't understand you (e.g. because they have hearing problems are rely on reading your lips) then we can reassess and look at using both a face visor and perspex dividing screen. The perspex screen will not be used if it is not practical for what you have to do to support your relative.

## The first reunion

You will probably have been through a rollercoaster of emotions while waiting to see your relative; feelings of anger, guilt, and a sense of loss are all understandable emotions to have over these challenging times.

It is highly likely that this will be a very emotional reunion for both of you. The emotional impact of this reunion will be different for everyone and because of this we are strongly recommending that the EFC champion stays with you during the first couple of visits. Despite this we recognise your authority in caring for your relative and if agreed their presence may not be required. In this case the EFC will show you how to use the call bell and remind you not to leave the room until a member of staff has come to collect you.

# Preparing for changes in your relative

It is possible that there may have been changes in your relative's abilities since the last time you saw them face-to-face. It is best practice to try and prepare yourself for this before your first visit. You may notice their memory is not as good as before or their disability may have worsened. Preparing yourself for this is not an easy task and no one in the care home will judge you if you change your mind about visiting.

However, it is important to stress that although there have been changes it doesn't mean that this is a permanent change. It is possible, with time, that your relative will regain their lost skills and abilities. Your extra support could help with this.



## After the visit

It is really worth talking with someone of your choice after the visit. Remember that the chaplain at the home is available for both you and your relative if you need to talk. If they are not on site at the time of the visit, a member of staff will be able to pass on your contact details to get in touch with you.

Also, it is likely that you will have lots of questions to ask the care home staff after the visit. We are asking that you wait until you are outside of the home before asking these questions. The EFC champion might have to go and prepare for the next visit so please don't be offended if they have to go. If possible please call or email the home with your questions.

## An ongoing situation

The reality is that it is unknown how long the COVID-19 pandemic will be impacting our homes. This means that we will have to continually adapt how we work together to support your relative or friend. The best way to do this is if we ensure that we regularly communicate with each other.

Thank you for your support.



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