

Adjournment Debate on 'lateral flow tests in health care settings' – 28 March

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1. Key Points

- From April 1, people visiting loved ones in health and social care settings will be unable to get free lateral flow device (LFD) tests from the NHS. **Alzheimer's Society strongly opposes this proposed change.** This puts care home residents, the majority of whom have a form of dementia, at significant risk.
- At the beginning of the pandemic, thousands of hospital patients were discharged from into care homes without testing, leading to widespread infections and devastating death rates. This change to testing risks repeating that deadly mistake.
- The removal of free tests means that family carers of people with dementia could be forced to pay up to £73 per month for daily tests.
- **Polling has found that more than 70% of people oppose the scrapping of free lateral flow tests for care home visitors.** Over 11,000 Alzheimer's Society campaigners have written to their MP to share their stories and concerns about this proposed change in policy.

2. Background

There are an estimated 900,000 people living with dementia in the UK.¹ Dementia is a progressive, long-term health condition with huge care costs attached. It has been estimated that 70% of care home residents and over 60% of home care recipients are people with dementia.²

People with dementia have been worst-hit by the pandemic, accounting for over a quarter of all Covid-19 deaths, mostly in residential care settings.³ Moreover, the largest increase in excess non-Covid-19 deaths was in people with dementia. There were more than 5,000 excess deaths of people with dementia between 4 January and 10 July 2020, in addition to the deaths attributed directly to Covid-19.⁴

3. The importance of testing during the pandemic

Government support for care homes at the beginning of the pandemic fell short. Lack of testing when large numbers of people were discharged into care homes at the start of the pandemic resulted in tens of thousands of residents becoming infected with the virus, with many sadly dying. By scrapping free lateral flow device (LFD) tests for visitors, **the Government is in danger of repeating this same mistake.**

Receiving visits is vital for people with dementia residing in care settings; testing to ensure those visits are safe is crucial. Throughout the course of the pandemic, Alzheimer's Society has been regularly engaging with Government to ensure that people living in care homes can receive safe visits from their loved ones and maintain vital relationships.

Family and friends provide an essential element of care to people with dementia, promote physical and psychological wellbeing, help maintain cognitive function and stave the progression of the condition. Care

¹ Wittenberg, Raphael et al. Projections of older people with dementia and costs of dementia care in the United Kingdom, 2019-2040. 2019. Care Policy and Evaluation Centre, London School of Economics and Political Science. https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/sites/default/files/2019-11/cpec_report_november_2019.pdf.

² Alzheimer's Society. Dementia UK: Update. 2014. https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/sites/default/files/migrate/downloads/dementia_uk_update.pdf.

³ González, Livingston et al. Impact and mortality of COVID-19 on people living with dementia: cross-country report. 2020. International Long Term Care Policy Network, Care Policy and Evaluation Centre, London School of Economics. <https://itccovid.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/international-report-on-the-impact-of-COVID-19-on-people-living-with-dementia-19-August-2020.pdf>.

⁴ Dataset: Death registrations not involving coronavirus (COVID-19): England and Wales, 02 September 2020. [Online] 2020. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/datasets/deathregistrationsnotinvolvingcoronaviruscovid19englandandwales>.

home residents - and their loved ones, who are so keen to spend time with them - are eager recipients of their vaccinations.

Many have seen their dementia deteriorate at a faster rate during the pandemic than normal. This is due to a change in their usual routines, including many going months without seeing their loved ones through visits in or out of the care home. Too many have died without their loved ones by their side. Findings from Alzheimer's Society studies have shown the devastating impact the prevention of visits has had on residents with dementia. A study conducted by Alzheimer's Society in August 2020 found that 79% of care home managers reported lack of social contact was causing deterioration in the health and wellbeing of their residents with dementia.⁵

Throughout the pandemic, care home residents have been the first to face the risks of the virus and the last to feel the freedoms when restrictions are lifted. While the country returns to normal, care home residents and their families are still a long way from this, with many still struggling to see each other on a regular basis.

Additionally, for many people with dementia, Covid-19 symptoms do not present the same way as in the wider population, meaning symptomatic testing alone is insufficient.

4. The removal of free Lateral Flow Device tests

The Prime Minister's spokesperson recently confirmed⁶ that recently announced plans to scrap free Covid-19 tests for the wider public would also include those visiting loved ones in care settings. This forms part of the government's 'Living with Covid-19' plan, due to take effect from 1st April.

LFD tests are key to enabling safe visits, offering a vital reassurance for families seeking to protect care home residents when they visit. A major high street pharmacist announced they would be selling 5 LFD tests for £12. For an essential care giver, or other loved one, who is keen to keep their relative or friend safe, **this would amount to a potential cost of £73 per calendar month for daily visits.**

The Prime Minister has said that the focus must remain on protecting the most vulnerable in our society. Yet care home residents have had to bear the brunt of the pandemic. This decision risks the health and finances of people in care settings and their families and **imposes an additional cost-of-living pressure** on people at the worst time.

5. Public opinion on LFD tests in health and social care settings

Alzheimer's Society polling conducted at the end of February has found **that 70% of people surveyed disagree with scrapping free lateral flow testing for care home visitors.** Our campaigners are particularly concerned, with over 10,000 people also writing to their MP to highlight their concerns. They told us:

It is appalling that the government is prepared to make people choose between endangering those already vulnerable people in a care home setting or paying out significant extra costs like this to obtain LFDs.

Another person said: I work in a residential care home, and we are currently closed due to outbreak in the home of staff and residents again. Everyone has had all their jabs but are still poorly after contracting Covid... It is imperative we keep staff, residents and their loved ones safe... I feel the government have brushed this aside. We as health care professionals in all fields have to live with the deaths of these individuals, the government do not.

⁵ <https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-09/Worst-hit-Dementia-during-coronavirus-report.pdf>
⁶ <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/breaking-boris-johnson-scrap-free-26298602>