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Date: 13 December 2021

Dear residents and relatives

**Restrictions on visiting 14th – 23rd December 2021 inclusive**

We are writing to you following the recent information regarding the Omicron variant of Covid -19. As we're sure many of you will have read in the media, there is a lot still unknown about this variant, particularly with regard to how much protection the vaccinations will give, and how severe the illness will be. What is known, is that it is spreading very quickly, with Friday 10<sup>th</sup> December seeing the highest daily total of new cases since January 2021 and these numbers are doubling every 2 to 3 days. Dr Susan Hopkins described "a big wave coming straight at us " and Professor Chris Whitty informed us that there is a "reasonable chance that there will be vaccine escape from this variant", although there is encouraging news that the booster may give significant protection.

As some of you will know, we took pro-active action at the outset of the pandemic, which we believe helped reduce infection rates in our services, and with the most recent information being clear that Omicron is a very transmissible variant with Boris Johnson saying "I am afraid we are now facing an emergency in our battle with the new variant, Omicron" we need to do what we can to prevent, or slow such spread at this stage.

As you will know there is a huge push for everyone over the age of 18 years to get a booster vaccine by the end of the month, and we support this and are urging all of our staff and residents to ensure they have had theirs, and are doing all we can to support the process to enable them to do this.

Furthermore whilst the Government are still considering what further restrictions they may put in place, we have, ourselves, taken the difficult decision to implement further restrictions on visiting which we lay out in detail below. We very much hope this will be for a limited period of time – a firebreak if you will – until 23<sup>rd</sup> December 2021 so that we can, at that stage, take stock, listen to concerns, review the evidence and then take relevant steps, including we hope, the possibility of re-opening to more visiting over the key Christmas period, as we understand the importance of being able to see loved ones at this time. This is all to ensure the best possible safety of our vulnerable residents, whilst balancing the need to see loved ones, which is why we are limiting visiting but not stopping it totally.

The following outlines our protocols which will be in place as of Tuesday 14<sup>th</sup> December and until 23<sup>rd</sup> December:

1. Only those who are essential care givers are to visit inside our care home services and they must be fully vaccinated including the booster dose, and show proof of this.

2. End of life visits will continue, we will enable 2 visitors at any given time where the manager believes that this is appropriate. These visitors won't need to take a PCR test but will need an LFD test.
3. As the reason for restricting visiting is the need to reduce contact, we ask that residents do not voluntarily leave the home, and if they chose to, will need to go into isolation in their room for a minimum of 7 days and test daily for 14 days. Where residents leave the home for an essential hospital appointment, they will be permitted to return with the usual precautions.
4. For those who are not essential care givers, we are, in the majority of our homes, able to offer visiting in our visiting suites, which as many of you will know we invested in to ensure the best comfort, whilst being covid secure.
5. Visiting suite visits are available to individuals who are not fully vaccinated, and as always video calls will be supported to keep you in touch with loved ones virtually.

All visiting options should be booked via our visitor booking system on our website, which we know many of you are very familiar with. Sadly, if there are any recent cases of Covid-19, visiting may be further restricted in line with public health guidance, if that is the case the General Manager will let you know.

Essential care givers entering our care home services indoors will need to agree to a PCR test each week in the service, lateral flow testing and use of personal protective equipment (PPE) in line with our staff members. Please be assured that we will keep this decision under review during this time, and if new information comes to light we will relax the restrictions accordingly.

In order to show your vaccination status we ideally would like you to use the NHS App but appreciate that not everyone may have this. For those that don't there is an option to get a letter from the NHS via the following link: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/covid-pass/get-your-covid-pass-letter/>. If neither of these options are available to you please do call the General Manager and they will be able to help you.

There are a number of other precautionary measures that we are taking for this limited period of time, including cancelling all staff-only parties which is highly regrettable given how much our dedicated staff have done all year, but we know that they will wish to put resident safety first, as well as restricting entertainments involving multiple people.

However we also know how important this time of year is, and we are planning for lovely Christmas events and activities for residents to get into the spirit of Christmas, including two live virtual events next week with the English National Ballet dance performance from Nutcracker Delights, along with a virtual truffle making, and gingerbread biscuit decorating session supported by Unilever, and both events include the very popular Christmas singalongs.

Also separately there is the opportunity to tune into a live streamed Cinderella panto, to be watched live or watched over the Christmas period. There are also a variety of online virtual carol concerts, which our homes will be tuning into as well as planning for a whole host of activities, such as writing your own Christmas carols, baking your own Christmas pudding flapjack, making your own Christmas tree treats,



live dance sessions with Christmas hymns, crafting Christmas snow globes as well as the traditional Christmas movie night session. There is much to be enjoyed and keep everyone inspired this Christmas.

Finally we want to reassure you that we don't take decisions such as this lightly as we understand the importance of family and friends connections with their loved ones but for three main reasons of which are below we believe this is vitally important at this time:

1. The protection of vulnerable residents
2. The protection of Christmas visiting
3. The protection of the staff team with new isolation rules coming in.

We are hopeful that this is only for a limited period of time so that you can visit more freely at Christmas and we will be staying very close to the data regarding Omicron, and will be flexible in our approach depending on what that says, and of course will keep you updated.

If you do have any questions please don't hesitate to contact us with your queries and concerns, or your gratitude and thanks, and we will continue to do our best to respond as quickly as we can. You can do this through the General Manager, or through our team at [feedback@barchester.com](mailto:feedback@barchester.com). Our only ask is that you do this with kindness and courtesy to the teams that are doing their very best to help, and we know you will.

Sending our very best wishes to you and your families.



Dr Pete Calveley  
CEO Barchester Healthcare



Julia Atherton  
Director of Nursing

We are sending this with the best intentions and with the latest data we have. If this causes offence we are deeply sorry