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Our Reference: 202400427250  
Your Reference: COVID19 Vaccinations and Unpaid Carers

25 September 2024

Dear Fiona and care representatives,

Thank you for your letter of 14 August 2024 to Neil Gray the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, regarding COVID vaccine eligibility criteria for unpaid carers this winter. I am providing you with this response as responsibility for policy relating to COVID-19 vaccination lies within my portfolio as Minister for Public Health and Women's Health.

Firstly, I would like to begin by acknowledging the vital role that unpaid carers play in Scotland.

I understand that shortly after the receipt of this letter, representatives from your organisations met with Scottish Government officials including our Senior Medical Officer for Immunisations Dr Lorna Willocks, on 22 August, to discuss your concerns and to hear more about the JCVI advice and the clinical rationale for not including unpaid carers as an eligible group for the COVID-19 vaccine this winter.

I was advised that this meeting was productive and that officials agreed to provide you with Public Health Scotland communications assets that you will use to inform your stakeholders and support public messaging for the programme. We remain incredibly grateful for this support.

As discussed at the meeting on the 22 August, I thought it may be helpful to set out in writing the clinical rationale behind the decision.

The Scottish Government's decision-making throughout all COVID-19 vaccination programmes has been guided by the expert clinical advice of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI).

This winter, the JCVI have not advised COVID-19 vaccination for unpaid carers or the household contacts of those who are immunosuppressed. As you noted in your letter, frontline health and social care workers (HSCWs) and staff in care homes for older adults were also excluded, but that the JCVI statement then went on to say that *"health departments may choose to continue to extend an offer of vaccination to frontline health and social care workers and staff working in care homes for older"*

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adults in autumn 2024.” The JCVI did not suggest that any extension be made beyond these two groups.

The primary aim of the vaccination programme is the prevention of severe illness (hospitalisations and deaths) arising from COVID-19. There is also an absence of good scientific data on the level of protection against transmission of infection from one person, but the JCVI notes that any such protection would be extremely limited. The focus of the programme is therefore to offer COVID-19 vaccination to those most likely to directly benefit from vaccination, which is those in older age groups and those with underlying health conditions that increase their risk.

We understand that carers may wish to seek COVID-19 vaccination to prevent themselves from becoming ill and being unable to care for those they look after. However, evidence shows that the current vaccines do not prevent a person from catching COVID-19. In autumn 2024 we have good levels of population immunity and the current Omicron era has less disease severity compared with earlier variants. Those carers who are not in an eligible JCVI group, by virtue of age or clinical condition, should experience less severe symptoms than earlier in the pandemic, should they contract COVID-19, although we agree that this is a generalisation and that there will be cases where fit and healthy carers do experience a debilitating level of illness.

Unpaid carers aged 65 and over, or who are at risk due to health conditions, will be eligible for both vaccines and **all carers and household contact of the immunosuppressed remain eligible for free flu vaccines**. It is important that unpaid carers come forward for their flu vaccination, as we know that the flu vaccine will give carers the best possible protection against the viruses likely to be circulating this winter and it will help to reduce the risk of transmission to the people they care for.

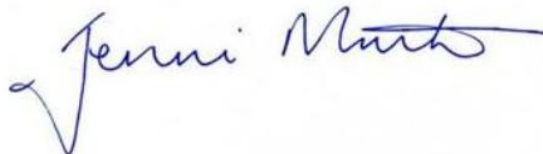
We have identified all those marked as carers in their GP records and they will be sent an invite or prompt to book. A lot of carers are not noted as such in their GP records, making them hard to identify. The order of the programme will be run by risk groups as follows:

- Care homes and housebound individuals
- 75+
- Immunosuppressed
- 65-75 years
- Under 65 clinical at risk

Unpaid carers who fall into one of these groups will shortly receive an invite and can use the online booking portal or national vaccination helpline (0800 030 8013) to find a sooner appointment if required. The delivery of this programme begins from 16 September 2024.

I understand that this is not the answer you will have hoped for, however I hope the above response clarifies the decision making of the Scottish Government, regarding the eligibility of the COVID-19 vaccine for unpaid carers this winter.

Yours sincerely



**JENNI MINTO**

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