

Dear First Minister,

We are writing to you to express our disappointment at the exclusion of unpaid carers in the list of eligible groups for the COVID-19 vaccine and to request your urgent intervention in this matter. We have already raised this with the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care and the Minister for Public Health, but we do not believe that the response we received fully addressed our concerns.

We appreciate that unpaid carers aged 65 and over, as well as unpaid carers with health conditions, will be offered the vaccine due to eligibility in other categories. However, many unpaid carers with significant caring roles will remain unprotected. This will potentially put unpaid carers at risk of being unable to provide care if they become unwell, while also exacerbating the poor health that many unpaid carers already experience.

We have heard from carers over the past week that they cannot risk becoming seriously ill with COVID-19 and, as a result, have been forced to pay for the vaccine themselves. Carers are already at a higher risk of poverty, and placing them in a situation where they must bear the cost of the COVID-19 vaccine as we head into winter is unacceptable.

It is particularly concerning that unpaid carers are excluded from vaccine eligibility, while the Scottish Government has extended the COVID-19 vaccination to frontline health and social care workers as part of an occupational health programme.

Unpaid carers represent Scotland's largest care workforce, providing an estimated £13.1 billion worth of care annually. Should even a fraction of these carers fall seriously ill with COVID-19, or contract long-COVID, the cost of replacing their care would be substantial. Beyond financial concerns, this exclusion reinforces the perception that unpaid carers are undervalued in our society and directly contradicts the Scottish Government's *Carers Strategy* which emphasises that unpaid carers should be recognised as equal and active participants in care planning and decision-making. This is further evidenced in the recent publication of the Scottish Government's *Winter Plan* which frequently references the importance and value of unpaid carers alongside the health and social care workforce.

Unpaid carers play an equal and vital role in supporting to keep people well at home and are increasingly providing high-intensity care due to reductions in statutory services and support. They deserve the same essential protection as the paid health and care workforce, and we urge the Scottish Government to extend eligibility for the Covid vaccine to unpaid carers, as they have done in Wales.

Unpaid carers play an essential role in preventing our health and social care systems from becoming overwhelmed, and the decision to exclude them from the eligible group

list places our stretched health and social care systems at greater risk over the winter months.

Protect Scotland's unpaid carers

Your intervention in this matter would send a powerful message – that unpaid carers deserve to be recognised, valued, and protected and therefore included in the eligible group list for the autumn COVID-19 vaccination programme.

Thank you for your attention to this vital issue. I look forward to your response and am hopeful that together we can ensure Scotland's unpaid carers are supported.

Yours sincerely,