

24 May 2022



Humza Yousaf
Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care
Scottish Government
St. Andrew's House
Regent Road
Edinburgh
EH1 3DG

Dear Cabinet Secretary

Re: Unpaid carers and the Covid-19 autumn vaccination booster programme

We are writing in regard to the interim advice published by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) on 19 May on Covid-19 booster doses this autumn¹.

Along with many organisations across the UK, the National Carer Organisations are deeply concerned that unpaid carers have not been included in the list of groups to be offered a booster vaccination in this interim advice.

During the vaccination rollout earlier in the pandemic, it was recognised that the vital care provided by unpaid carers could not be easily replaced should they become ill with Covid-19. We estimate that the value of this care during a full year of the pandemic in Scotland was £10.9 billion², equating to £43 million each and every day. Had that care not been available, the consequences for our health and social care system would have been devastating.

This has been especially true of the most recent Winter, where many hours of social care have been unmet and large waiting lists for social care assessments have built up. Without carers picking up the pieces, the challenges of hospital discharge would have been even greater and care at home would have been virtually impossible to provide.

We were pleased that the Scottish Government immediately understood that vaccinating unpaid carers was important. It reduced the risk from coronavirus not only to the carer themselves, but also to the person they were caring for – many of whom fall into the at-risk groups identified by the JCVI in its interim advice.

It also ensured that carers were protected as vital unpaid members of the health and social care workforce to continue to care. As none of these facts have changed, the decision to exclude unpaid carers from the pending Autumn booster programme is difficult to understand.

The fact that unpaid carers are still eligible for free Covid-19 tests and PPE is, arguably, a recognition that they, and the people they care for, remain at heightened risk and that their health and safety is critical to support them in their caring role. Therefore, it is again difficult to understand why the same logic would not be applied to booster vaccinations.

¹ UK Health Security Agency. JCVI interim advice on an autumn Covid-19 booster programme.

² Carers UK (2020). Unseen and undervalued: The value of unpaid care provided to date during the Covid-19 pandemic.

While it is encouraging that life has returned to a version of normality for many people in Scotland, this is not the case for much of our carer population. Many carers live in a state of constant worry because the person they are caring for remains at risk from the virus. Some continue to shield for this reason.

Access to Covid-19 vaccinations provides vital protection and peace of mind for unpaid carers. Our health and social care system would collapse without them and they should be prioritised for vaccination in the same way that paid frontline staff are.

We would therefore urge the Scottish Government to make representations to the JCVI on the importance of including unpaid carers as a priority group in the Covid-19 Autumn vaccination booster programme.

Moreover, in line with the Scottish Government's commitment to carers, should the JCVI choose not to include unpaid carers, we would seek the Scottish Government to commit to including them as part of the health and care workforce, procuring vaccinations separately if necessary and delivering a nationally agreed programme of Autumn boosters for carers.

Your predecessor, Jeanne Freeman MSP, speaking in the Scottish Parliament before the JCVI had released its very first piece of advice on vaccination, was clear that the Scottish Government would include and prioritise unpaid carers:

"The support provided by unpaid carers is hugely valuable. I know they are under greater pressure than usual as a result of the pandemic, and we owe them our sincere thanks for the important work they do."

"It is crucial that all unpaid carers are offered a vaccination, so they are protected whilst they care for others."

This recognition of the role of carers and commitment to ensuring that they were prioritised for vaccination must remain the case for the autumn boosters.

We recognise that final advice is yet unknown but as the national carer organisations, we can and must advocate for carers, who are expressing anger and fear that they are overlooked. They need recognition of their role *and certainty*, provided as early as possible, that they will be protected and supported with ongoing access to vaccination, testing and PPE. Without which it is difficult to provide any surety that they can safely live with COVID. Their invaluable contribution deserves nothing less.

We would be happy to meet with you to discuss further and to arrange discussions directly with carers.

Yours faithfully

Fiona Collie
Head of Policy & Public Affairs: Scotland and NI
Carers Scotland

On behalf of the National Carer Organisations:

- Coalition of Carers in Scotland
- Carers Trust Scotland
- MECOPP
- Shared Care Scotland
- Scottish Young Carers Services Alliance
- Carers Scotland