

14 August 2024

Sent by email

Dear Cabinet Secretary

Autumn 2024 COVID-19 vaccination programme

We are writing on behalf of the National Carer Organisations in Scotland to communicate our dismay (and that of unpaid carers) at the exclusion of most unpaid carers from this year's Autumn booster programme.

However, we appreciate that those unpaid carers aged 65 and over and unpaid carers in particular at risk groups will be offered the vaccination, however those with significant caring roles will be unprotected, putting at risk their ability to provide care and potentially further exacerbating the poor health that many unpaid carers experience.

This exclusion is particularly concerning, given that the Scottish Government has chosen to offer the COVID-19 vaccination to frontline health and social care workers. We note from the JCVI statement that:

“Health and social care service providers may wish to consider whether vaccination provided as an occupational health programme is appropriate... 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 adults in autumn 2024.”

This indicates that the Scottish Government has made a decision to include vaccination for COVID-19 as part of occupational health provision to paid frontline health and social care staff. Given the strain and staffing challenges across the health and social care, we welcome this provision.

However, we are extremely disappointed, that given the specific and significant challenges in the provision of social care (likely to be exacerbated over the winter period) the provision of occupational health support has not been made for unpaid carers.

The value of unpaid care to Scotland is £13.1 billion each year. To replace even a fraction of this care provided by unpaid carers should they become ill with COVID-19 would represent a significant cost.

Based on the Carers Census 2022/23, 55% of unpaid carers who were supported by local services spent an average of 50+ hours a week providing unpaid care. Many of these carers will be providing complex care, including health-related care, that is difficult and costly to replace. For example, one week of provision of a residential care home with nursing care is £948.59¹.

In addition, this level of care already affects carers' health. 65% of 'high intensity' carers and 31% of all carers included in the Carers Census experience health impacts from their caring role. Research from

¹ Care Information Scotland – Interim Standard Rates 2024/25

State of Caring 2023² reinforces these results with half (54%) of carers responding saying that their physical health had suffered because of their caring role. The same research found that 41% of carers responding had to put off health treatment because of a lack of social care support and nearly a third of carers (30%) have been waiting over a year for NHS specialist treatment.

“I have cancelled a hospital appointment twice as I had no one to assist me after an anaesthetic” (unpaid carer, State of Caring 2023)

“I have been told I may have a tumour and need operation, got no offer of any assistance from social work - have no idea what will happen if I am not able to manage.” (unpaid carer, State of Caring 2023)

Therefore, we are already asking people to provide significant levels of caring that affects their current (and long-term) health and wellbeing with little financial compensation. As “equal partners in the provision of care” access to similar occupational health support as paid staff should be provided.

Furthermore, given the staffing challenges facing our NHS and social care services, when unpaid carers become ill with COVID-19 we question whether contingency social care support would even be made available; instead leaving carers sick and struggling to care alone. What plans do the Scottish Government and local services have to ensure that emergency provision is made available to those carers who become ill with COVID-19 and for their recovery?

Whilst we recognise the current fiscal challenges the Scottish Government faces, we hope that you will consider not only the cost implications of providing the COVID-19 vaccination to all carers but the financial and human costs of **not** doing so and will reconsider the decision to exclude the majority of unpaid carers.

Finally, within the current restricted groups, it will be important to ensure that unpaid carers who qualify by age or health condition, are offered the vaccination at the earliest opportunity to protect their wellbeing and ability to provide care. As such we will be keen to work with the Scottish Government vaccination and Carers Policy officials to support communications to ensure that these unpaid carers are protected and supported.

Yours sincerely

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Claire Cairns, Coalition of Carers in Scotland
James Calder, MECOPP
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c.c. Maree Todd, Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport
Scottish Government, Carers Policy

² State of Caring 2023, Carers Scotland