

## Flu vaccinations during the pandemic

### Why NHS England needs to act now to help protect patients this winter

#### Introduction and summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally changed the UK's health and care system. Work to protect the vulnerable from coronavirus will remain a critical priority this winter. At the time of writing, there had been nearly 43,000 deaths in the UK due to COVID-19. To protect the population a new COVID vaccine, as well as an antibody test, may need to be given to millions of people, if and when they become available.

Alongside this, the NHS faces its annual challenge of preventing and treating seasonal flu. Each winter, hundreds of thousands of people see their GP, and tens of thousands are hospitalised, because of flu. Deaths attributable to flu are estimated to range from around 4,000 to 14,000 per year, with an average of around 8,000 per year.<sup>i</sup> The NHS therefore now faces the double challenge of protecting at-risk groups from both COVID-19 and flu, both of which target the respiratory system.

This paper focuses on the community pharmacy flu vaccine programme in England. Appendix One provides more details on the approach of the Scottish and Welsh governments.

The flu vaccination is one of the most effective interventions the NHS has to reduce pressure on the health and social care system this winter<sup>ii</sup>. For every extra 1,000 people vaccinated, hospitalisations will be reduced by one flu related admission.<sup>iii</sup> An economic analysis of the cost-benefit of the flu vaccination estimates that the averted cost for hospitals could be more than £40 million.<sup>iv</sup>

Community pharmacies have administered the NHS flu vaccine in England for many years, and as part of a nationally contracted NHS scheme since 2015. They have contributed to a

considerable increased uptake in NHS flu vaccinations during that time. This year, the CCA and its members are building on the changes that the COVID-19 pandemic has made to the provision of primary care sector services and are working in partnership with the NHS, GPs and other relevant organisations to support national efforts to increase flu vaccination rates.

#### Our call for action

This policy paper sets out the context for the flu vaccination programme, examines the potential role of community pharmacy in delivering the vaccine this year and concludes with our recommendations for next steps, which are for:

- **Changes to enable more flexibility in where and how the flu vaccine is administered**
- **A national public health campaign to ensure the public understand what to expect this year, and**
- **Sufficient flu vaccinations and PPE to be made available to all providers to ensure that everyone in an 'at-risk' group can receive the vaccine.**

#### Flu vaccine: why it is needed, and how the programme works

For most healthy people, flu is an unpleasant but usually self-limiting disease with recovery generally within a week. However, for older people, or those with underlying health conditions, it can be life threatening. The following groups were eligible for the 2019 flu vaccine in England:

- All those aged two to ten on 31 August 2019
- People aged six months to under 65 years in clinical risk groups
- All pregnant women
- People aged 65 years and over

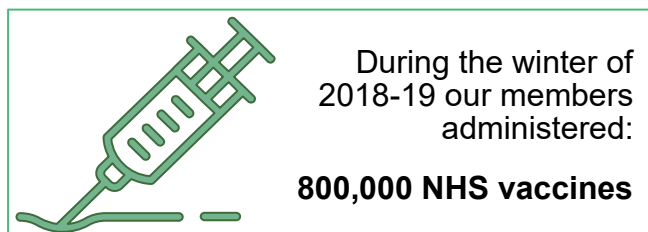
- People living in long-stay residential care homes or other long-stay care facilities
- Carers
- Household contacts of immunocompromised people

It is expected that the eligible groups in 2020/21 will include the above groups and will also be expanded. Additional groups may include those most at risk of COVID-19 and healthcare staff.

### Community pharmacy's track record in delivering the flu vaccination

Patients eligible for an NHS vaccine have the choice of receiving it from their GP or at a community pharmacy. Traditionally, GPs have identified patients and invited them to have a vaccination at the surgery. Since 2015, community pharmacy has provided the NHS vaccine nationally, and many also offer a private service for those not eligible through the NHS.

The ease of access to pharmacies and the ability to receive the flu vaccination without an appointment have proved particularly effective at capturing 'hard to reach' patients who would not otherwise take up the offer of the vaccine.



The CCA's members have a unique ability to operate at a national scale and size in administering the flu vaccine.

While close working between pharmacies and GP practices happens in some areas, different requirements and specifications can make this challenging. This winter, some vulnerable patients who have been shielding for example, may struggle to attend their GP surgery. Care home residents will also need to receive the vaccine.

### Challenges to full uptake of the flu vaccine during the 2020 'flu season'

#### 1. The Patient perspective

### CASE STUDY

CCA members working in partnership with GPs



In Cardiff and Vale Health Board, a local surgery practice manager and a pharmacist working for a CCA member developed a collaborative approach in 2018 to meet the GP surgery's target of delivering vaccinations to all over 75s.

As the surgery was unable to unilaterally deliver the volume of jobs required, they agreed that the pharmacist would source an additional 500 jobs and administer them in a clinic.

This example of innovative working demonstrates how community pharmacies and GP surgeries can successfully come together to meet population health-based needs.

The barriers to individuals taking up the opportunity to receive the vaccine include:

- A lack of awareness that the vaccine can be provided through community pharmacy
- Patient confidence to attend GP surgery or pharmacy consultation room due to concerns about the transmission of COVID-19
  - In April 2020, a survey found that the public had fewer primary care interactions, likely to be because of fear of COVID-19 and media reporting of PPE shortages<sup>9</sup>. This could affect flu vaccine uptake.
- False assumptions about flu symptoms being a side effect of the vaccine
- Time pressures, particularly for healthcare professionals who are not able to receive the vaccine at work, and

- Concerns that the vaccine is of limited effectiveness against all forms of flu.

Such beliefs have been addressed in Public Health England messaging for the public and healthcare workers about the importance of receiving the flu jab. Research carried out in 2018 found that health practitioners who had not been vaccinated needed further evidence to address their concerns about the vaccine's effectiveness and their need to receive it.<sup>vi</sup>

The majority (74%) of frontline healthcare workers and people aged 65 or over (73%) received the flu jab last winter.<sup>vii</sup> Nevertheless, nearly four million people in the targeted 'at risk' groups did not receive the vaccine last winter.

This winter, it will be particularly important that there is co-ordinated, system-wide communication to the public that focuses on how to access the vaccination from either their GP or pharmacy. Patients, particularly those who have been shielding from the coronavirus, will need reassurance and clarity on the measures taken to ensure the vaccine is administered safely.

**2. System changes needed**

Ways of working introduced to tackle COVID-19 means that it is necessary to change how the flu vaccine is delivered in 2020/21. However, changes in the delivery model this year could have benefits for meeting targets for long-term delivery of flu vaccines and other programmes including COVID testing and vaccination.

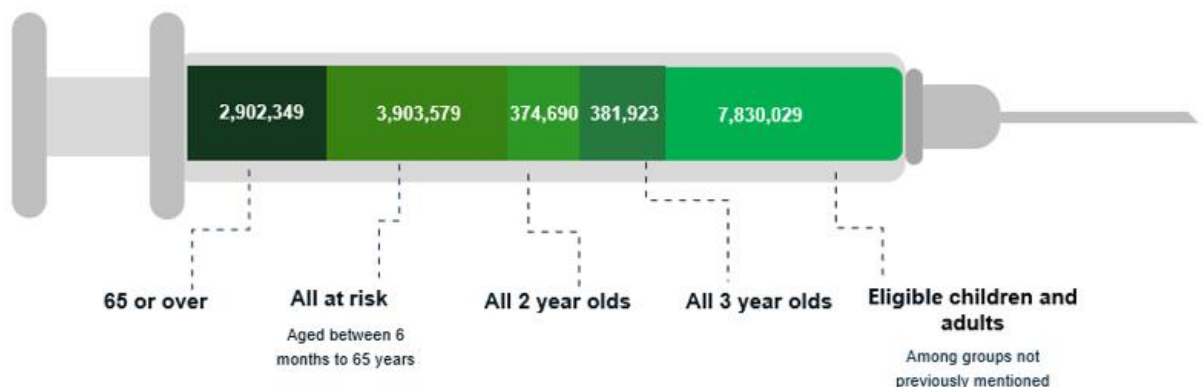
**The main challenges this winter are:**

- Covid-secure environments:** ensuring the necessary extra safety precautions, infection control, distancing and PPE are in place to protect the public and those administering the vaccine. This will increase the cost and time needed to deliver the vaccine.
- Flexible service provision:** changes are needed to the regulations so that the vaccine can be administered in different locations and in conjunction with other primary care providers, to ensure that uptake is as high as possible.
- Vaccine supply:** there are concerns that there may not be enough vaccines this year for everyone who is eligible for them
- Public engagement:** while take-up of the vaccine has increased, 7.8 million children and adults who were eligible for the flu jab last winter did not receive it.

**How the CCA hopes to meet the challenge of delivering the flu vaccine differently**

The CCA's members have demonstrated their ability to innovate at speed in recent months. The creation of drive-through COVID-19 testing sites, many of which were administered by community

**Patients eligible for the free NHS flu vaccine who did not receive it during the 19/20 flu season**



Source: NHS England and gov.uk data<sup>1</sup>

pharmacy teams, shows how our members can adapt to deliver vital services.

We therefore wish to build on this work and explore the scope to deliver the flu vaccine differently. Within pharmacies, part of the branch could be sectioned off or the doors could be closed to walk in custom, to run a flu clinic in store. This would make social distancing and numbers of vaccines easier.

We would also like the scope to deliver the vaccine in new locations, such as town halls and places of worship (e.g. church halls, mosques, synagogues or temples). This would allow the vaccine to be administered at scale, while freeing up community pharmacies to focus on vital services and medicine provision. We would welcome the opportunity to work with the NHS, local councils and religious groups to explore the scope to do this.

### Next steps – the CCA's asks

Decisions need to be made in a matter of weeks to ensure that this year's flu vaccination programme delivers the results that patients, the public and the NHS will expect. Without the necessary changes, there is a risk that this crucial opportunity to reduce hospital admissions this winter will be lost.

We are calling for:

1. Changes to enable more flexibility in where and how the flu vaccine is administered
2. A national public health campaign to ensure the public understand what to expect this year and have confidence in getting their vaccine
3. Enough flu vaccinations and PPE to be made available to ensure that everyone in an at-risk group can receive the vaccine, and

<sup>i</sup> <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng103/resources/resource-impact-report-pdf-6532121197>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://psnc.org.uk/services-commissioning/advanced-services/flu-vaccination-service/flu-vaccination-introduction-and-background/>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng103/resources/resource-impact-report-pdf-6532121197>

4. The cost of vaccination is reviewed, taking into consideration the changes now required for safe delivery.

### Appendix One:

#### **Scotland flu vaccination programme**

In 2017, the Scottish Government and the Scottish General Practitioners Committee agreed vaccinations would move away from a model based on GP delivery to one based on NHS Board delivery through dedicated teams. The Vaccination Transformation Programme began on 1 April 2018.

During the 2019/20 flu season new service delivery models for flu vaccination across various Health Boards were developed, tested and implemented. Each of these has generated opportunities for learning about how the implementation of the flu vaccination could take place in a community pharmacy setting in Scotland.

#### **Flu vaccine and community pharmacy in Wales**

The community pharmacy NHS seasonal influenza vaccination service is a nationally agreed enhanced service commissioned by health boards from community pharmacies in Wales. The Welsh government advises health boards to make the flu vaccination available from any community pharmacies in their area that express an interest in providing this service and meet the service requirements.

Community pharmacies are asked to primarily support people under 65 years of age in clinical risk groups and those who are eligible but do not routinely get a flu vaccination. However, community pharmacies can immunise those 65 years or over if they consider they are unlikely to visit their GP surgery for vaccination.

<sup>iv</sup> <https://ilcuk.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/An-economic-analysis-of-flu-vaccination-ILC-UK.pdf>

<sup>v</sup> [Understanding Society](https://www.understandingsociety.co.uk/)

<sup>vi</sup> <https://evidence.nihr.ac.uk/alert/a-third-of-health-practitioners-do-not-get-vaccinated-against-flu/>

<sup>vii</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/seasonal-flu-vaccine-uptake-in-healthcare-workers-monthly-data-2019-to-2020>