

# WELSH HEALTH CIRCULAR



Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government

Issue Date: 17 August 2023

**STATUS: ACTION**

**CATEGORY: PUBLIC HEALTH**

**Title:** Winter Respiratory Vaccination Programme: Autumn and Winter 2023 to 2024

**Date of Expiry / Review:** **Not applicable**

**For Action by:**

<p><b>For Action by:</b>                  Chief Executives, Health Boards/Trusts                  Immunisation Leads, Health Boards/Trusts                  Immunisation Coordinators, Health Boards                  Vaccination Operational Leads, Health Boards/Trusts                  Medical Directors, Health Boards/Trusts                  Directors of Primary Care, Health Boards/Trusts                  Nurse Executive Directors, Health Boards/Trusts                  Chief Pharmacists, Health Boards/Trusts                  Directors of Public Health, Health Boards/Trusts                  Directors of Maternity Services, Health Boards                  Directors of Workforce and Organisational Development, Health Boards/Trusts                  Executive Director of Public Health, Public Health Wales</p>	<p><b>For information to:</b>                  Welsh NHS Partnership Forum                  General Practitioner Council, Wales                  Royal College of GPs                  Royal College of Nursing                  Royal College of Midwives                  British Dental Association                  Royal Pharmaceutical Society                  Community Pharmacy Wales                  Care Inspectorate Wales                  Chief Executive, Welsh Local Government Association for onward issue to:                  Directors of Social Services, Local authorities                  Directors of Public Protection, Local authorities                  Directors of Education, Local authorities                  Social Care Wales                  Health Education and Improvement Wales</p>
--	---

Nurse Director, Public Health Wales Head of Vaccine Preventable Disease Programme, Public Health Wales Director of Planning, Vaccination Programme Wales General practitioners Community pharmacists Digital Health and Care Wales	
--	--

**Sender:** Dr Frank Atherton, Chief Medical Officer / Medical Director NHS  
Wales

**HSSG Welsh Government Contact(s):**

Vaccination Division, Welsh Government, Cathays Park, Cardiff CF10 3NQ  
Email: [wg.vaccinationsprogrammeteam@gov.wales](mailto:wg.vaccinationsprogrammeteam@gov.wales)

**Enclosure(s):** Annex A – COVID-19 vaccine programme information.

Dear Colleagues

## **Winter Respiratory Vaccination Programme: Autumn-Winter 2023/24**

We are all aware of the continual pressures faced by our health and social care services. As we head into the autumn and winter, it is vital we all do everything possible to lower the risk of respiratory infections overwhelming the system.

Respiratory illnesses thrive in winter putting the health and care system under significant stress every year. This impact is seen both in terms of staffing absence and in the volume of people who need to access NHS services during the season. Vaccination is a vital tool which helps to mitigate the effects of respiratory viruses circulating in the community, protect the vulnerable and supports the resilience of the NHS and care system at a time of great pressure.

Last autumn the first Winter Respiratory Vaccination Programme for Wales was delivered by bringing together the COVID-19 and influenza (flu) vaccination programmes. This enabled health boards to coordinate the planning of both programmes and, where possible, to streamline delivery. It also enabled an improved experience for patients. Over 1.1 million people received a COVID-19 booster and over one million flu vaccines were administered over the course of the programme.

To build on that success, in 2023/24 the National Influenza Immunisation Programme and the COVID-19 Vaccination Programme will again be brought together to form a single Winter Respiratory Vaccination Programme (WRVP 2023/24). This programme will be underpinned by the key principles:

- Protecting those at greatest risk
- Protecting children and young people
- Protecting frontline health and social care workers
- Protecting the NHS

To implement the WRVP 2023/24 effectively, health boards should develop plans for a single, coordinated and coherent programme for both vaccines. Wherever possible, delivery models should be aligned to allow for co-administration, to help maximise efficiencies and reduce vaccination inequity.

NHS oversight and assurance of vaccination programme planning and delivery will be carried out by Vaccination Programme Wales. Public Health Wales will continue to provide expert vaccination and vaccine preventable disease advice and guidance, system leadership, epidemiology and surveillance.

Health boards will be expected to share their Winter Respiratory Vaccination Programme plans, stating how they will achieve the uptake and performance targets set out below (including relevant equality impact assessments) through the governance of Vaccination Programme Wales.

#### Priorities for the WRVP 2023/24

Our vaccination programmes, and in particular vaccine eligibility, are always guided by the latest clinical and scientific evidence. They are also designed in accordance with the latest advice from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) and by direction from myself, as the Chief Medical Officer for Wales.

Our priority, as always, is to **maximise uptake** of both flu and COVID-19 vaccines for all those who are eligible.

Evidence shows that uptake is maximised when vaccines are delivered as close as possible to communities, when robust call and reminder systems are in place, and when eligibility and the benefits of vaccination are effectively communicated. To this end, health boards are expected to redouble their efforts to ensure vaccines are easily accessible and to develop plans to reduce barriers which cause inequity.

#### Ambitions and Expectations:

- A COVID-19 vaccine should be offered to all those who are eligible by 30 November 2023
- The flu vaccine should be offered to all those who are eligible, at the earliest possible opportunity.

Our expectations for health boards and trusts are set out in the table below:

	<u>Flu</u>	<u>COVID-19</u>
<b>Frontline health and care workers</b>	75% uptake	All frontline staff to be offered a vaccine at earliest opportunity
<b>Other eligible adults and clinically vulnerable children</b>	75% uptake	75% uptake

- Health boards are expected to reduce the gap in uptake rates between the least and most deprived communities within their health board area (against uptake levels achieved during the WRVP 2022/23 programme).
- In the childhood flu programme, uptake has fallen year-on-year in recent seasons. This trend must be reversed, and plans developed to increase uptake over the coming seasons. There is an expectation that health boards will develop plans to reach 75% uptake for 2-and-3-year-olds and in the school-based programme, by the end of the 2025/26 season. Each health board is expected to be able to demonstrate the commencement of this improvement during the 2023/24 season.

Particular attention should be paid to the following groups:

- **2-and 3-year-olds** (children born between 1 September 2019 and 31 August 2021) are being prioritised for flu vaccination this season. As well as protecting these very young children from serious illness, vaccination of this age group also helps to protect those who care for them including parents, grandparents, and the wider community by reducing general levels of transmission.
- **Pregnant Women** are being encouraged to get vaccinated to help protect themselves and their babies. Evidence shows pregnant women have a higher chance of developing complications if they get flu or COVID-19, particularly in the later stages of pregnancy. Where clinically appropriate, women should also be encouraged to receive the pertussis vaccine. Although this is a year-round vaccination programme, pertussis infection can pose a significant burden during winter months, especially in infants too young to have received their own primary vaccinations.
- **Health and social care workers** are encouraged to take up the offer of the flu vaccine as early as possible. The protection offered by vaccinations will help prevent frontline workers becoming ill and will also protect the resilience of the health and social care system from becoming overwhelmed.
- **COPD patients** should be offered both vaccines at the earliest opportunity owing to the severe impact respiratory illnesses can have on these patients.

#### Programme Information

Programme specific information for the influenza vaccination programme was published in a separate Welsh Health Circular on 22 June 2023 and can be found [here](#).

Programme specific information for the COVID-19 vaccination programme can be found in the annex to this letter.

We encourage you to share this guidance with all those involved in delivering the programme in your area.

#### National Immunisation Framework

While implementing the programmes described in this circular, NHS organisations will also be implementing the ambitions outlined in the [National Immunisation Framework](#) (NIF) for Wales. The principles described in the NIF should be applied to arrangements put in place to roll out the changes to the influenza and COVID-19 programmes wherever possible, including vaccine equity and publicly available information materials. Organisations should look

ahead to improvements that will flow from implementation of the NIF over the coming years when designing their programmes.

To ensure equity is at the heart of the vaccination system in Wales everyone who is eligible must be offered a vaccination in an accessible way. Citizens must also be supported by being provided with the information they need to make informed decisions based on reliable sources. This will often require tailored support to enable and encourage those who otherwise may not take up the offer of a vaccination to come forward.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to everyone involved in delivering the WRVP 2023/24. The implementation of this campaign provides us with an opportunity to engage the public on the importance of vaccination. It also enables us to offer protection to our citizens, our communities and our NHS and care system this winter. I would like to thank you in advance for the part you'll play in that.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Frank Atherton', with a horizontal line extending to the right.

**Sir Frank Atherton**  
**Chief Medical Officer / Medical Director NHS Wales**

## ANNEX A – COVID-19 Vaccination Programme Information

### Eligibility

The groups eligible for a COVID-19 booster vaccine dose in autumn 2023 are set out below alongside a comparison with eligibility for the flu vaccine:

Groups eligible for COVID-19 booster	Eligible for flu vaccine
All adults aged 65 years and over (age on 31 March 2024)	Yes
Frontline health and social care workers	Yes
People aged 16 to 64 years who are carers, as defined in the <a href="#">Green Book</a>	Yes <i>A carer of a person whose health or welfare may be at risk if the carer falls ill.</i>
Other staff working in care homes for older adults	Yes <i>If they have regular contact with residents / clients</i>
Residents in a care home for older adults	Yes
People aged 6 months to 64 years in a clinical risk group, as defined in tables 3 and 4 of the COVID-19 chapter of the <a href="#">Green Book</a>  <i>Eligibility due to clinical risk includes those who are pregnant and those who are experiencing homelessness</i>	Yes, as set out in <a href="#">WHC/2023/023</a> <sup>1</sup>
People aged 12 to 64 years who are household contacts, as defined in the Green Book, of people with immunosuppression	Yes <i>Household contacts of anyone who is immunocompromised, including those with immunosuppression</i>
Adults resident in Welsh prisons	Yes

<sup>1</sup> NB: There are some differences between the clinical risk groups for COVID-19 set out in the Green Book and those for flu set out WHC/2023/023. For example, in the case of flu, individuals are eligible if they have asthma requiring regular inhaled steroids whereas in the case of COVID-19, individuals are eligible if they have poorly controlled asthma (as defined in the Green Book).

### Individuals who have not yet had a primary course

The two-dose universal primary course offer ended on the 30 June 2023. From this date, only those who meet the eligibility criteria for a COVID-19 booster continue to be eligible for a primary course. For the Autumn 2023/24 campaign, the primary course consists of a **single dose** of COVID-19 vaccine. Further details regarding exceptions to this advice for single dose primary course vaccination, such as for those who are immunosuppressed, will be set out in chapter 14a of the [Green Book](#).

### Vaccination for travel

As the offer of a universal primary course ended in Wales on 30 June 2023, there is no longer any provision for those who require COVID-19 vaccination for travel purposes.

## **Deployment**

### Timescales

The Winter Respiratory Vaccination Programme will start on the **11 September 2023**.

The main campaign should run until 17 December 2023, and should then convert to the “nobody left behind” campaign until 31 March 2024.

### Vaccine products

The JCVI has not yet published its recommendations on the specific vaccine products for the COVID-19 autumn programme. An announcement is expected shortly. Until such time as the JCVI recommendations are received, NHS Wales draft planning assumptions provided by Vaccine Programme Wales should be followed.

An initial volume of vaccine supply and consumables will be made available at least 1 week before the commencement of the programme. The ordering process will be through Vaccination Programme Wales, adopting the updated COVID-19 vaccine Supply and Distribution Operating Guidance. Focus should be on stock management and minimising vaccine wastage.

### Call and recall

Welsh Government expects that all those who are eligible will be offered the opportunity to be vaccinated, and health boards should use a proactive approach, adopting robust call and reminder systems, aimed at maximising uptake and minimising inequity. Co-administration of the COVID-19 and the flu vaccines should occur where effective and efficient to do so, whilst avoiding any delay to the administration of either vaccine.

To align with outpatient guidance, three appointment offers should be made to an individual; an initial offer and then two more offers if an initial appointment is not taken up.



### Patient Group Directions (PGDs)

PGD links and supporting content will be available prior to the commencement of the programme, and should be reviewed, ratified, and authorised locally by the health board/trust for local use. National Protocols will be available before the start of the programme to support mixed workforce and flexible delivery models.

[Patient Group Directions \(PGD\) - Welsh Medicines Advice Service \(wales.nhs.uk\)](http://wales.nhs.uk)

### Training and resources

The COVID-19 [Green Book Chapter \(14a\)](#) contains detailed clinical guidance on COVID-19 and COVID-19 vaccination.

Healthcare practitioner information and guidance to support the implementation of the COVID-19 programme, including training slide sets, are currently being updated and will be available on the COVID-19 information for health professionals webpage here:

[Resources for health and social care professionals - Public Health Wales \(nhs.wales\)](http://nhs.wales)

COVID-19 vaccine specific eLearning modules will be produced by UKHSA and will be available to access here:

[COVID-19 vaccination – Public Health Wales \(nhs.wales\)](http://nhs.wales)

Healthcare professional information and guidance for the COVID-19 vaccination programme produced by UKHSA is available at:

[COVID-19 vaccination: information for healthcare practitioners - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](http://www.gov.uk)

### Consent

Guidance on informed consent can be found in chapter 2 of the Green Book available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/consent-the-green-book-chapter-2>

### Reporting suspected adverse reactions

Health professionals and those vaccinated are asked to report suspected adverse reactions through the online Yellow Card scheme ([www.mhra.gov.uk/yellowcard](http://www.mhra.gov.uk/yellowcard)), by downloading the Yellow Card app or by

calling the Yellow Card scheme on 0800 731 6789 9am – 5pm Monday to Friday.

## **Planning and Commissioning**

Health boards and trusts are expected to share their Winter Respiratory Vaccination Programme plans with Vaccine Programme Wales, stating how they will achieve the uptake and performance targets (including relevant equality impact assessments). This should include plans to commission Primary Care Contractors utilising the relevant Primary Care (Contracted Services: Immunisations) Directions.

## **Public Information and Communications**

### Public information

Public information is currently being updated and will be available at:

[COVID-19 vaccination information - Public Health Wales \(nhs.wales\)](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/covid-19/vaccination)

Resources will be available to order from:

[Health Information Resources - Public Health Wales \(nhs.wales\)](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/covid-19/vaccination)

### Communications Campaign

Both the COVID-19 and flu vaccination public communications activity will run as a Winter Respiratory Vaccination Programme campaign.

Some of the key campaign messages for this season will be:

- Flu and coronavirus are respiratory illnesses that thrive in winter. Those most at risk of becoming seriously ill from these viruses are eligible for vaccination.
- Vaccination may not stop a person catching flu or coronavirus, but it guards against severe illness and hospitalisation in the case of infection.
- All those aged over 65 are eligible for both vaccines.
- By being vaccinated against flu and COVID-19 those who are eligible can help reduce preventable death and serious illness and protect themselves, their communities and our health and social care services.
- Citizens should come forward as soon as possible once they have been contacted to receive their vaccinations.

The campaign will highlight the main priorities for the winter respiratory vaccination programme are as follows:

- Protecting those at greatest risk
- Protecting children and young people
- Protecting frontline health and social care workers
- Protecting the NHS at a time of intense pressure

**Children's flu programme** There is a particular focus this year on improving uptake amongst the youngest eligible children, **2- and 3-year-olds**.

**Pregnant Women** should be vaccinated to help protect themselves and their babies.

**Health and social care workers** should be vaccinated at the earliest possible opportunity.

A communications strategy will be shared with organisations via the Vaccination Programme Wales governance structure ahead of the start of the programme.

## **Digital**

A clinical record of immunisation with a COVID-19 vaccine must be entered onto the Welsh Immunisation System (WIS). This includes appointments and stock management, with an expectation that WIS is updated in real time.

## **Surveillance**

Surveillance of vaccination programmes is carried out by the Public Health Wales Vaccine Preventable Disease Programme. Surveillance of the COVID-19 programme in those eligible due to age, clinical risk and NHS Staff will be carried out utilising data from WIS. Uptake in pregnant women will be estimated using a data linkage approach using data from WIS and centrally held maternity outcomes data.

Uptake will be reported on a weekly basis throughout the programme, with surveillance reports at national level, health board level, local authority level, primary care cluster level and GP level published on the VPDP Sharepoint site (access restricted to NHS):

[https://nhs.wales365.sharepoint.com/sites/PHW\\_VPDPCOMMS/SitePages/Surveillance.aspx?from=SendByEmail&e=Tey7WjvdxUmRkkSRgY3xOQ&at=9](https://nhs.wales365.sharepoint.com/sites/PHW_VPDPCOMMS/SitePages/Surveillance.aspx?from=SendByEmail&e=Tey7WjvdxUmRkkSRgY3xOQ&at=9)

Summary information at national level and health board level will be published through the Public Health Wales COVID-19 vaccination interactive report (publicly available):

<https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/public.health.wales.health.protection/viz/COVID-19vaccination-Public/Vaccination?publish=yes>

A mid-programme and end of programme analysis of equality of uptake in COVID-19 vaccination will be carried out by VPDP working with Swansea University SAIL team, to estimate uptake at levels of: sex, ethnic group, quintile of deprivation and rural/ urban classification.