

Robin Swann MLA
Minister for Health
Department of Health

Correspondence to:
craig.harrison@carersni.org

Via email

23 May 2022

Dear Minister,

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

I am 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 autumn. ^[1] Along with our colleagues across the UK, Carers NI is 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 Northern Ireland was £6.93bn. ^[2] Had that care not been available, the consequences for an HSC system that was already under severe pressure would have been devastating.

It was also understood that vaccinating unpaid carers 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. As neither 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 is, arguably, a recognition that they, and the people they care for, remain at heightened risk. It is again difficult to understand why the same logic would not be applied to booster vaccinations.

While it is encouraging that life has returned to a version of normality for many people in Northern Ireland, 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.

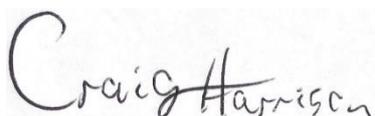
¹ UK Health Security Agency. JCVI interim advice on an autumn Covid-19 booster programme.

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

Access to Covid-19 vaccinations provides vital protection and peace of mind for unpaid carers. Our HSC 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 Department of Health 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.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Craig Harrison". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'C'.

Craig Harrison
Policy and Public Affairs Manager
Carers Northern Ireland