Dear Colleagues

**Proposed Covid-19 Vaccination programme**

I am writing to provide you with information in relation to the proposed Covid-19 Vaccination programme. You will have seen media coverage about the progress of vaccine trials. If, and only if, one or more vaccines are approved and licensed as safe and effective the country will be relying on GPs, together with Trusts and others, to urgently commence a vaccination programme. Whilst clarity is still required on a number of issues including the date of approval and delivery of the vaccine, the exact storage requirements and priority groups, the situation is developing at pace and there is a need to plan for the earliest possible commencement of the vaccination programme.

We do however have enough information to be able to start to plan for a Covid-19 vaccination programme. I am therefore asking practices to assume the GP vaccination programme will begin from 4 January.

**Potential vaccines**

There are two vaccines that are most likely to be approved in the coming weeks, one from Pfizer/ BioNtech, the other from Astra Zeneca. Information from the manufacturers suggest that there will be very specific handling requirements to preserve stability.

Details about vaccination requirements will be based on advice from the UK Joint Committee for Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI), but our current expectation is:

- Both primary vaccine candidates come in multi-dose vials and will need reconstitution/drawing up and once removed from fridge or liquid is added to the vial they are likely to need to be used within a few hours.
- The Pfizer/ BioNtech vaccine once delivered may have a short “fridge life” of only 3-4 days.
- Vaccines will have to be used by the practice who orders them. Due to expected licencing requirements practices will not be allowed to share/redistribute vaccines.
• Patients will require 15 minutes of direct observation following vaccination. This will require space to allow observation by while ensuring social distancing. Space and medication for managing reactions including anaphylaxis will also be needed. It is expected that this will not be possible with patients in cars.
• Only registered healthcare professionals will be allowed to administer the vaccine. Health care assistants could be used for the patient observation or other support roles.
• There will need to be two doses of vaccine, given 28 days apart.

The Pfizer/BioNtech vaccine is delivered in batches of 195 vials, each vial having 5 doses. The whole batch of 975 doses may need to be used on the same site and within 4 days of delivery. Consideration is being given to the potential pack down of the Pfizer/BioNtech vaccine. The AstraZeneca vaccine may be delivered in smaller batches but will also be in multi dose vials. As soon as we have information about which vaccine(s) GPs will be allocated we will provide specific information.

The Department of Health is developing a specification for locations for vaccinations which they hope to issue shortly, the existing advice from RCGP distributed for influenza vaccination planning will also be helpful. Other logistical advice will also be available from teams involved in mass testing sites in England. Local Councils may be able to support the programme by providing locations for this work. Trusts are considering running the occupational health vaccination service on non HSC sites, such as leisure centres. Practices may want to work with local Trusts to co-locate the GP service with Trust occupational health vaccinations to make use of pharmacy support, carpark management etc.

Potential priority groups for vaccination

We expect the vaccination to be rolled out on phases. Phase 1 may begin in December 2020 and the current planning assumption is that the focus will be on the following groups:

1. Health and Social Care frontline workers. This will include GPs and practice staff. Vaccination will be provided through Trust occupational health services.
2. Residents and staff of care homes (nursing and residential homes). This will be provided by new mobile vaccination teams being developed.
3. Clinically vulnerable groups. This will be provided though GPs via an enhanced service. This will have to be phased in line with vaccine availability. The first GP cohort is expected to be people over 80 years old not living in a care home. GPs will also be asked to vaccinate people over 65 and clinically vulnerable group (similar to influenza groups)

What are we asking GPs to do now?

The Northern Ireland General Practitioners Committee (NIGPC) have agreed in principle with Department of Health and the Health and Social Care Board that GPs will provide the covid-19 vaccination programme in the initial phase for people over 80 years old not living in a care home. In the later phases GPs are expected to be the main system for those in clinical risk groups and people over a certain age.

1. Practices should make every effort to complete the flu vaccination programme before the end of December 2020
2. Practices should run a search to identify all patients 80 or over on 1\textsuperscript{st} January 2021, not residing in a care home. The exact search Date of Birth will be included in the enhanced service but this search will give you a reasonably accurate figure for planning purposes for the first cohort of patients.

3. Delivery constraints and vaccine requirements mean that limited locations will be preferable. Practices are encouraged to begin discussions through their Federations to consider practice grouping and potential locations for the vaccinations.

I am aware that this is a major undertaking by practices to help bring the pandemic under control. I am working with DoH to agree the fees and other support that can be offered to practices, and details of this will be included in the specification.

Yours sincerely

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Head of General Medical Services