

Urgent Briefing: NHS Flu Vaccinations

Community pharmacies in England and their patients require an urgent intervention with regard to the start date of the NHS flu vaccination programme.

We believe the timely vaccination of around 1 million people in September is at stake, along with pharmacies' ability to manage workload this winter (which we anticipate may include implementing the Common Conditions Service which is currently being negotiated as part of the NHS Primary Care Access Recovery Plan), to ensure maximum vaccination rates, and to recoup the investment they have made sourcing vaccines in good faith.

We are calling for the flu vaccination service to start as normal this year on 1st September with any JCVI advice to instead be considered for the 2024/25 season.

Why do pharmacies and their patients need help?

The service specification for the Community Pharmacy Seasonal Influenza Vaccination Advanced Service was published last Friday following many weeks of delays. The publication of the document shared with pharmacy owners the news that the service may not this year commence on 1st September, as has always previously been the case.

We understand from NHS England that they are awaiting guidance from JCVI on the timing of the commencement of the COVID-19 and flu vaccination services, but it has been indicated that an October start date is likely to allow for co-administration of COVID and flu vaccines and potentially to maximise patients' protection at the peak of the winter virus season.

This potential delayed start comes as a shock to pharmacy owners who have been offering this service from 1st September for the last seven years, supported by NHS messaging to the public to get vaccinated as soon as possible in the autumn.

On that basis, many pharmacy businesses have already opened booking systems, many with tens of thousands of appointments booked, including one multiple group with one hundred thousand appointments booked in September already and around 8,000 people making new appointments each day. Based on the data from last year, we would expect England's pharmacies to administer around 1.1 million flu vaccines during September.

If the decision to delay the start date goes ahead, pharmacies will need to cancel those appointments with a number of knock-on effects:

- Affected patients will understandably be confused and angry, and pharmacy owners will have no choice but to explain that the reason for the cancellation is a short-notice policy change by NHS England and Government;
- This will result in unwelcome attention for the vaccination programme from the national media, which may negatively impact on the willingness of eligible patients to access vaccination;
- Pharmacy owners will have to try to re-book patients into appointments in October and November, having a negative impact on their cashflow and creating unnecessary workload for their teams, which will take them away from providing other NHS services. Additionally, subject to the satisfactory conclusion of our ongoing negotiations, this shift of activity may also have an adverse impact on the ability of pharmacy owners to start to implement the Common Conditions Service, which is a key part of the NHS Primary Care Recovery Plan and NHS winter preparedness;
- Pharmacy teams will have to try to squeeze more vaccinations into later months, at a time of the year when workload always significantly increases in the run up to Christmas. This may prove an impossible task. Pharmacy owners have already planned their September vaccination service offering, including engaging additional temporary staff and scheduling additional shifts for their employees to ensure staffing is prioritised towards this important service;
- If the start date is later in October, there will be further administrative chaos as October appointments will also have to be cancelled; and
- Pharmacies risk losing some of these patients altogether – potentially leaving fewer people receiving their vaccinations and pharmacies with leftover stock which they had purchased, at the request of NHS England, in good faith. We would expect NHS England to reimburse pharmacy owners for the cost of any leftover vaccine.

What is Community Pharmacy England calling for?

We believe it is irresponsible to issue the details of an entirely predictable service – including a substantive change to the start date – so late that pharmacies have to undo marketing and bookings already made; risk not having the capacity to deliver as many vaccinations as they have prepared to do; risk having leftover stock at the end of winter; and through no fault of their own, cause distress and frustration for many hundreds of thousands of patients expecting to be vaccinated in September.

As we understand it, NHS England, as the commissioner of the service, must consider the JCVI guidance, but we believe it should also consider the implications for its providers and the overall delivery and goals of the programme. Altering the start date for the service without giving sufficient notice to providers does not seem to us to be a responsible course of action.

We are calling for the flu vaccination service to start as normal this year on 1st September with any JCVI advice to instead be considered for the 2024/25 season.

We believe this would be a victory for common sense, as well as for pharmacies and the many hundreds of thousands of people who wish to receive their vaccinations in good time.

We also hope to commence and finalise discussions on the 2024/25 winter vaccination season well in advance of the time when plans are made and final orders for vaccine are placed, so that we can all deliver a truly efficient and effective service in future.

Vaccination Fees and Pharmacy Pressures

Community pharmacies in England are under ongoing extreme financial and operational pressures, and they and the services they offer remain under threat. This year the NHS has made the decision to keep the fee for the flu vaccination service the same as in previous years despite the impossible cost increases that community pharmacy owners are facing.

Pharmacies urgently need additional investment and support to manage the financial and capacity issues that they are facing.

How can MPs help?

1. Write to the Minister for Primary Care (with responsibility for community pharmacy), Neil O'Brien MP, to call for the timely commencement of the flu vaccination service from September 1st.
2. Write to the Minister for Women (with responsibility for vaccination) Maria Caulfield MP, to call for the timely commencement of the flu vaccination service from September 1st.
3. Write to NHS England to call for the timely commencement of the flu vaccination service from September 1st.
4. Continue to raise the wider financial and operational pressures facing community pharmacies in Parliament and with Ministers.

If you require any further information on how this decision could affect your constituents, please get in touch and we will be happy to help. Please contact Community Pharmacy England: comms.team@cpe.org.uk