

Health Secretary statement on Vaccines as a Condition of Deployment

Mr Deputy Speaker, with permission, I'd like to make a statement on further steps we're taking to keep this country safe from Covid-19.

We head into the winter months in a much stronger position than last year.

Of all the reasons for this progress, the greatest is unquestionably our vaccination programme.

Across the UK, the overwhelming majority of us have made the positive choice to accept the offer of vaccines against Covid-19.

Almost 8 in every 10 people over the age of 12 have chosen to be double jabbed and over 10 million people have now received their boosters or third jabs.

I'm grateful to colleagues across this House for their steadfast support of our national vaccination programme.

Despite the fantastic rates of uptake, we must all keep doing our bit to encourage eligible people to top-up their defences and to protect themselves this winter.

I understand that vaccination can of course be an emotive issue.

Most of us have taken this step to protect ourselves, to protect our families and to protect our country.

We have all seen, sadly, how Covid can devastate lives.

But we've also seen how jabs save lives and keep people out of hospital.

Our collective efforts have built a vast wall of defence for the British people helping us to move towards the normal way of life we've all been longing for.

The efforts of the British public have been phenomenal and those working in health and social care have been the very best of us.

Not only have they saved lives and kept people safe through their incredible work but they've done the same by choosing to get vaccinated.

And I want to thank NHS Trusts and Primary Care Networks for all the support and the encouragement that they have given their staff to take up the vaccine.

The latest figures show that 90 percent of NHS Trust staff have received at least two doses of the Covid-19 vaccine although in some Trusts, the figure

sits closer to 80 percent.

But Mr Deputy Speaker, while our health and social care colleagues are a cross-section of the nation at large there's no denying that they carry a unique responsibility.

They have this responsibility because they are in close contact with some of the most vulnerable people in our society people that we know that are more likely to suffer serious health consequences if they get Covid-19.

So whether it's in our care homes, or in our hospitals – or any other health or care setting the first duty of everyone working in health and social care is to avoid preventable harm to the people that they care for.

And not only that, they have a responsibility to do all they can to keep each other safe.

These twin responsibilities – to patients, and to each other they underline, once again, why a job in health or care is a job like no other.

So it cannot be business as usual when it comes to vaccination.

It's why, from the very beginning of our national vaccination programme, we put health and care colleagues at the front of the line for Covid jobs.

And it's why we've run two consultations exploring some of the other things that we might need to do.

Mr Deputy Speaker, the first consultation looked at whether we should require people working in care homes to be vaccinated – what's called the "condition for deployment".

After careful consideration, we made vaccination against Covid-19 a condition for deployment in care homes from the 11th of November.

Since we announced this in parliament, the number of people working in care homes who have not had at least one dose has fallen from 88,000 to just 32,000 at the start of last month.

Our second consultation looked at whether we should extend this requirement to health and other social care settings including in NHS hospitals and independent healthcare providers.

Our six-week consultation received over 34,000 responses – and of course a broad range of views.

Support for making vaccination a condition for deployment was tempered with concerns that some people may choose to leave their posts if we went ahead with this.

I have carefully considered the responses and the evidence and I've concluded that the scales clearly tip on one side.

The weight of the data shows how our vaccinations have kept people safe and they have saved lives and this is especially true for vulnerable people in health and care settings.

And I'm mindful, not only of our need to protect human life but our imperative to protect the NHS and those services upon which we all rely.

Having considered the consultation responses the advice of my officials and NHS leaders – including the Chief Executive of the NHS – I have concluded that all those working in the NHS and social care will have to be vaccinated.

We must avoid preventable harm and protect patients in the NHS, protect colleagues in the NHS, and of course protect the NHS itself.

Only those colleagues who can show they're fully vaccinated against Covid-19 can be employed or engaged in those settings.

There will be two key exemptions:

1. for those who don't have face-to-face contact with patients and the second for those who are medically exempt.

These requirements will apply across health and the wider social care settings that are regulated by the Care Quality Commission.

Mr Deputy Speaker, we're not the only country taking such steps: there are similar policies for specific workers in other countries around the world including the United States, France and Italy.

We also consulted on flu vaccines, but having considered views that we should focus on Covid-19 we will not be introducing any requirements on flu jabs at this stage – but we will keep this under review.

Of course Mr Deputy Speaker, these decisions are not mine alone.

As with other nationally significant Covid legislation, Parliament will have its say and we intend to publish an Impact Assessment before any vote.

We plan to implement this policy through powers in the 2008 Health and Social Care Act which requires registered persons to ensure the provision of safe care and treatment.

I will shortly bring forward a draft statutory instrument amending these regulations before the House – just as we did with Care Homes.

Mr Deputy Speaker, this decision doesn't mean that I don't recognise concerns about workforce pressures this winter and indeed beyond as a result of some people perhaps choosing to leave their job because of the decision we've taken.

Of course I recognise that.

It's with this in mind that we've chosen for the condition not to come into

force until 12 weeks after parliamentary approval allowing time for remaining colleagues to make the positive choice to protect themselves and those around them and time for workforce planning.

Subject to parliamentary approval, we intend the enforcement of this condition to start on the 1st of April.

And we will continue to work closely across the NHS to manage workforce pressures.

More than that, Mr Deputy Speaker: we'll continue to support and encourage those yet to get the vaccines, to do so.

At every point in our programme, we've made jobs easily accessible and worked with all communities to build trust and boost uptake.

That vital work will continue including engagement with communities where uptake is the lowest and 1-2-1 conversations with all unvaccinated staff in the NHS and using the capacity of our national vaccination programme, like the walk-in centres and pop-up centres, all making it as easy as possible to get the jab.

And Mr Deputy Speaker, allow me to be clear: that no one, no one, in the NHS or care that is currently unvaccinated should be scapegoated, singled-out, or shamed.

That would be totally unacceptable.

This is about supporting them to make a positive choice to protect vulnerable people, to protect their colleagues and of course to protect themselves.

The Chief Executive of the NHS will write to all NHS Trusts today to underline just how vital these vaccination efforts are.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I'm sure that the whole House will join me in paying tribute to the heroic responses across health and care.

They have been the very best of us in the most difficult of days.

Care, compassion, and conscience continue to be their watchwords and I know that they will want to do the right thing.

Today's decision is about doing right by them and doing right by everyone that uses the NHS.

So we protect patients in the NHS.

We protect colleagues in the NHS.

And we protect the NHS itself.

I commend this statement to the House.