

Dear Colleagues,

## 2023 Covid-19 Programme for At-Risk Children 6 Months to 4 years of Age

We would like to begin by thanking you for your hard work in launching the spring 2023 COVID-19 booster vaccination programme.

We are now writing to provide you with information on a new COVID-19 vaccination programme that will commence during spring / summer 2023.

### Key Objectives:

1. To protect those infants and children who are most at risk of COVID-19 and prevent their severe illness, hospitalisation, and death.
2. To engage with parents, carers, paediatric clinicians, and child public health teams to inform them of the risks of COVID-19 infection for this group and the benefits of vaccination.

### Eligibility

3. In their [6 April 2023 statement](#) the Joint Committee on Vaccination & Immunisation (JCVI) advised that:
  - Children aged 6 months to 4 years in a clinical risk group (as defined in table 4 of the [Green Book Chapter](#)) should be offered two 3-microgram doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine (Comirnaty®)
  - That there should be an interval of at least 8 weeks between the first and second doses.
  - Further advice regarding a potential third 3-microgram dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine will be issued in due course (*for more information on boosters for this group, please refer to the Green Book Chapter*)
  - For children who are immunosuppressed and are eligible for a third primary dose, clinicians and vaccinators should refer to the Green Book for more details.

**From Chief Medical Officer  
Chief Nursing Officer  
Chief Pharmaceutical Officer**  
Professor Sir Gregor Smith  
Professor Alex McMahon  
Professor Alison Strath

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11 May 2023

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### Addresses

#### For action

Chief Executives, NHS Boards  
Medical Directors, NHS Boards  
Nurse Directors, NHS Boards  
Primary Care Leads, NHS Boards  
Directors of Nursing & Midwifery, NHS Boards  
Chief Officers of Integration Authorities  
Chief Executives, Local Authorities  
Directors of Pharmacy  
Directors of Public Health  
General Practitioners  
Practice Nurses  
School Nurses  
Immunisation Co-ordinators  
CPHMs  
Scottish Ambulance Service

#### For information

Chairs, NHS Boards  
Infectious Disease Consultants  
Consultant Physicians  
Public Health Scotland  
Chief Executive, Public Health Scotland, NHS 24

### Further Enquiries to:

#### Policy Issues

Covid Policy Team:  
[vaccineoperationaloversight@gov.scot](mailto:vaccineoperationaloversight@gov.scot)

#### Medical Issues

Dr Lorna Willocks  
Senior Medical Officer  
St Andrew's House  
[Lorna.Willocks@gov.scot](mailto:Lorna.Willocks@gov.scot)

#### PGD/Pharmaceutical

William Malcolm  
Public Health Scotland  
[William.Malcolm@nhs.scot](mailto:William.Malcolm@nhs.scot)

#### Vaccine Supply Issues

[nss.vaccineenquiries@nhs.scot](mailto:nss.vaccineenquiries@nhs.scot)

- The JCVI is not currently advising COVID-19 vaccination of children aged 6 months to 4 years who are not in a clinical risk group.

For most children, COVID-19 infection is associated with no, or mild, symptoms, but for a smaller proportion of children with pre-existing health conditions, the risk of severe illness is greater. The odds of admission to paediatric intensive care units with severe COVID-19 is over 7-fold greater for infants and young children with underlying medical conditions compared to those without underlying medical conditions.

Over 1 million COVID-19 vaccine doses (either Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna vaccines) have been administered to children aged 6 months to 5 years in the United States of America (US) since June 2022. Post-marketing surveillance in this population indicates that the most commonly reported adverse events are local and systemic reactions. There have been no new or unexpected concerns.

Further information for the public can be found on:

[www.nhsinform.scot/covid19vaccineunder5](http://www.nhsinform.scot/covid19vaccineunder5)

### **Inequalities and Access**

4. It is important to ensure accessibility to this group of children, many of whom will be profoundly disabled. Boards must make every effort to vaccinate them in the most suitable settings.
5. Boards should also note that some children, such as those with profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD) and severe learning disabilities, including children with Down's syndrome and cerebral palsy, are at higher risk of hospitalisation from COVID-19. Every attempt to ensure good uptake in this group should be made.

### **Age Limits**

6. This programme is available to all those at clinical risk who are 6 months of age as of 01 April 2023. The programme will be open to all those aged up to 4 years and 364 days as of 01 April 2023. As the programme commences from 29 May 2023, this cut off means that some of those 4 year olds identified as eligible will turn 5 during the programme, before receiving vaccination.

### **Planning and Delivery**

7. The programme will launch from 29 May 2023, although some Boards may not commence appointments until June.
8. Eligible infants will be identified via national data sources by the national clinical advisory team (clinical informatics, NSS and PHS) and files provided to Health Boards, who will then call them forward via local scheduling mechanisms, as opposed to the National Vaccination Scheduling Service.
9. Vaccination Teams will then re-book the infants in for their second dose with an interval of at least 8 weeks after the first dose.

## Clinical Referral Route

10. If a parent or carer believes that their child is eligible for vaccination as part of this group, but they have not been contacted about an appointment they can call the National Vaccination Helpline on 0800 030 8013, who will refer them to their local Health Board to ascertain eligibility and bring their child forward for vaccination if required. They can also contact their local immunisation team, or their GP or secondary care clinician who can assist them.
11. If a GP or secondary care clinician wishes to refer an infant for this programme, they can do so via their local referral pathways. If GP practices or clinicians are unsure of their local referral pathway, they should contact their local Immunisation Co-ordinator for more information.

**Please note that further detailed guidance on the programme can be found in Annex A.**

## Workforce Education

12. NHS Education for Scotland (NES) and Public Health Scotland (PHS) will facilitate a webinar on the 6 months to 4 years of age 2023 programme on 24 May, covering key features including CMO / JCVI guidance and the vaccines to be utilised. The webinar will be recorded and placed on the TURASLearn site. This webinar is open to all professionals involved in the care and treatment of this group, including paediatricians, midwives, health visitors etc.
13. NES and PHS have worked closely with stakeholders to develop a range of workforce education resources to support this programme. These will include vaccine specific resources. These will be available shortly on the NHS Education for Scotland TURAS Learn website.
14. To view the Covid-19 workforce education resources and the recording of the webinar, please visit [COVID-19 vaccination programme | Turas | Learn \(nhs.scot\)](#)

We would like to express our sincere gratitude for your professionalism and continuing support in planning and delivering this important vaccination programme.

Yours sincerely,

*Gregor Smith*

*Alex McMahon*

*Alison Strath*

Professor Sir Gregor Smith  
**Chief Medical Officer for  
Officer  
Scotland**

Professor Alex McMahon  
**Chief Nursing Officer**

Professor Alison Strath  
**Chief Pharmaceutical**

## Annex A: Technical Guidance for Vaccinators

### Data & Digital

- The online booking portal will not be available for this age group and programme.
- If a parent or carer wishes to cancel or reschedule an appointment, they should do so via the contact details of their local team provided in their appointment letter, in the first instance.
- If a parent or carer does not have access to their appointment letter, they can call the National Vaccination Helpline (0800 030 8013) who can take their details and refer their query to their local Health Board. The helpline is operating throughout the spring, with the following opening hours: Monday–Friday 9am–6pm and Saturday 9am–1pm.
- These Covid-19 vaccinations will be recorded by vaccinators on to the Vaccine Management Tool (VMT), so that the data will flow to the National Clinical Data Store (NCDS).
- As part of our strategy to tackle health inequalities and our duty under the Equality Act 2010, 'ethnicity' is a compulsory field in VMT. This has facilitated more accurate data collection, which has supported targeted interventions to improve vaccination equality within Scotland. We provide guidance for vaccinators completing this field, which can be found on [TARUS](#). Health Boards should ensure that their vaccinators are asking this question every time they are prompted to by VMT.

### Vaccine

- The vaccine in use for this programme will be Pfizer-BioNTech (Comirnaty) 3 microgram per dose mRNA vaccine.
- The dose interval is a minimum of 8 weeks between the first and second dose.
- The vaccine will be deployed via Patient Group Directions (PGDs).
- As mentioned in paragraph 6 in the 'Age Limits' section, some of those identified for this programme will turn 5 years of age prior to receiving vaccination. These children will be vaccinated in the same clinics as the 6 months to 4 year olds, with Pfizer-BioNTech (Comirnaty) 3 microgram per dose mRNA vaccine. This is covered under the PGD and the Green Book Chapter, where it states that children below six years of age, including those who commenced immunisation with the 3 microgram infant dose before turning five, may commence and complete primary vaccination with the 3 microgram infant dose of Pfizer BioNTech if that is the only vaccine readily available in the clinic.
- Pfizer-BioNTech (Comirnaty) 3 microgram per dose mRNA vaccine is approved by the MHRA as a three dose schedule. Most UK children have already been exposed to SARS-CoV-2 infection, and separating the first two doses is likely to make a better immune response than when delivered 3 weeks apart. Therefore JCVI has advised that eligible children aged 6 months to 4 years should be offered two doses at an interval of eight weeks. This is considered as off label use.

- **Observation Period:** As per the Covid-19 Green Book Chapter 14a, the advice to suspend the routine 15 minute observation period applies to all currently available COVID-19 vaccines in all age groups.
- **Infection interval:** As per the Green Book chapter guidance, there is no longer any need to defer immunisation in individuals after recovery from a recent episode of compatible symptoms, whether or not they are tested for COVID-19, although individuals with suspected COVID-19 infection should not attend vaccination sessions to avoid infecting others.

## **Resources and Communication materials**

- Communications assets and messaging have been provided to Health Board communications leads and shared with partners. We encourage you to share these through your channels and networks. This includes an updated 'Ready Reckoner' outlining eligibility that will be sent to Boards prior to programme launch. All these materials will be updated as required, reflecting any developments or issues.
- Invitation letter templates will be provided to Boards to support local scheduling (appointment and 'prompt to book' versions), as will tailored programme leaflets to support informed consent. Public Health Scotland has engaged with a range of parent/carer groups and health condition organisations to develop and test the resources.
- Supporting materials for clinicians, child public health specialists and relevant third sector organisations will be provided, so that they can advocate for the programme with parents and carers.
- The public should be signposted to NHS Inform for up to date information on the vaccination programme: [www.nhsinform.scot/covid19vaccineunder5](http://www.nhsinform.scot/covid19vaccineunder5)

## **Co-administration with other routine child immunisations**

- Where practicable, some Boards are choosing to co-administrate the Covid-19 with other routine child immunisations.
- Where children are being given Covid-19 vaccination only, vaccinators should take the opportunity to discuss other routine childhood vaccines and signpost to services where these can be accessed.