

**Department of Health
Departmental Response
to recommendations in the Northern
Ireland Audit Office's Report
Pre-School Vaccinations in Northern
Ireland**

**Presented to the Northern Ireland Assembly
by the Department of Health**

29 June 2023



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Glossary of Abbreviations

CHIS Child Health Information System

DoH Department of Health

GP General Practice

HSC Health and Social Care

NI Northern Ireland

PHA Public Health Agency

VMS Vaccine Management System

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH DEPARTMENTAL RESPONSE TO NORTHERN IRELAND AUDIT OFFICE (NIAO) RECOMMENDATIONS IN THE NIAO'S REPORT OF 5 MAY 2023 ON "PRE-SCHOOL VACCINATIONS IN NORTHERN IRELAND"

Department of Health

Pre-School Vaccinations in Northern Ireland

Introduction

The responses within this Departmental Response have been made at official level. Where specific recommendations relate to issues of policy these will require Ministerial decisions.

NIAO Recommendation 1

Primary care settings require access to an available workforce (scaled-up as necessary to meet immunisation delivery targets) with appropriate clinical training, in order to maintain standards of patient safety.

The Department of Health (DoH) accepts this recommendation.

DoH recognises the need for an appropriately skilled workforce to meet immunisation delivery targets and deliver childhood immunisations as part of the provision of care in primary care settings.

Phase 7 of the Delivering Care Framework published in October 2021, noted the need to progress General Practice (GP) Nursing provision locally with the aim of aligning the wholetime equivalent nurse to patient ratio with a 1:222 UK average ratio. In line with this Framework, work has been underway to further invest in GP Nursing to expand this workforce which plays a fundamental role in the delivery of a range of primary care services including immunisations.

Funding has been provided to enable the recruitment and training of GP Nursing staff and to date 28 GP nurses have been recruited. The funding model put in place for the uplift to GP Nursing staffing also reflects the need to ensure that GPs are resourced for vaccination and immunisation delivery. A portion of the overall investment package for the uplift in GP Nursing is thus intended to support the delivery of vaccinations and immunisations in GP practices. However, it is up to individual GP practices in receipt of this funding to determine how best to utilise these investment monies to support the delivery of vaccinations and immunisations.

It is acknowledged that overall, the GP workforce, both medical and nursing, remains challenging and health visitor support to practices for pre-school vaccinations has reduced over recent years. It is worth highlighting that the Public Health Agency (PHA) recruited staff for the specific purpose of administering vaccinations only for pre-planned sessions to help support the roll-out of COVID-19 vaccinations. These were valued by GPs and a similar support mechanism for pre-school vaccinations is being considered.

With regards to immunisation delivery targets, the World Health Organization recommends that on a national basis at least 95% of children are immunised against vaccine-preventable diseases and these diseases are targeted for elimination or control. A multidisciplinary working group which was established by the PHA in 2022, to address the decline in pre-school vaccine uptake, has developed an action plan to ensure childhood vaccination uptake rates return to the target of 95 percent or over.

DoH is very mindful that patient safety is fundamental to delivering quality essential health services and would highlight that the cornerstone of the patient safety discipline is continuous improvement based on an ongoing learning culture across all areas of health care.

NIAO Recommendation 2

Clear, fact-based and consistently presented positive messaging is key to mitigating against genuine uncertainty around vaccination within the population and increasing rates of coverage.

DoH accepts this recommendation.

DoH agrees that clear, fact-based, and consistently presented positive messaging is key to mitigating against genuine uncertainty around vaccination within the population and increasing rates of coverage and there is already a substantial amount of work taken forward to promote Northern Ireland's (NI) vaccination programme.

The PHA positively promotes the vaccination programme throughout the year while utilising key dates such as World Immunization Week, celebrated in the last week of April, to further highlight the positive vaccination messages to the NI public.

Regular promotion includes press releases, newsletters, ongoing social media posts primarily on Facebook, twitter and Instagram as well as engagement with Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts, primary care, Local Councils, as well as groups from the Community and Voluntary Sector urging them to spread the message, and this work continues.

In addition, a toolkit of social media resources has been shared with the above key groups for sharing through their own communication channels and this is updated as and when new resources are developed. The toolkit can be found on the PHA website.

Recent campaigns include:

- World Immunisation Week – Check your Red Book Campaign – Social media, press releases and engagement with 13,000 children.
- Sure Starts – Vaccination pack to 38 Sure Start schemes.
- Balmoral Show – Promotion of vaccinations and attendance by PHA and HSC Trust teams.
- Webinar – Webinar developed for parents providing advice on vaccination, myth busters and helpful tips when getting their child vaccinated, this can be shared on social media, in GP/Hospital waiting areas.
- Pack for GPs and Trusts – Communications pack developed for GPs to help promote vaccinations.
- Specific outreach work with Roma community and Travellers groups to encourage uptake of vaccinations.
- Living Well Campaign – Childhood Vaccination campaign with 548 pharmacies (awaiting final sign off).

NIAO Recommendation 3

Given the concerns around the completeness and accuracy of vaccination records, the Department of Health should ensure that remedial action is taken in order that existing information systems supporting vaccination are fit for purpose. Over the longer-term, maintaining the integrity of immunisation data will be necessary for its seamless inclusion within an electronic patient record system for Northern Ireland which was announced in late 2020.

DoH accepts this recommendation.

DoH would highlight at the outset that the vast majority of vaccinations given are childhood vaccines, which are recorded on the Child Health Information System (CHIS). Vaccines given to older adults such as flu, COVID-19 (and in the near future the shingles vaccine) are recorded on the Vaccine Management System (VMS), which automatically feeds back to GP records.

A multi-disciplinary working group chaired by PHA was formed in June 2022 to address the decline in pre-school vaccine uptake in NI. The PHA has developed an action plan to support this work across five themes including data and information, and work is ongoing on a number of fronts to link systems to improve the accuracy and completeness of records and ensure they are fit for purpose.

Regarding the data and information for children's vaccinations, CHIS has been in use in NI since 1986-87 and remains a paper-based system. The PHA has been working closely with the HSC Trust CHIS teams, the CHIS Regional Co-ordinator and Senior Systems Analyst and discrepancies have been identified between GP practices and the information held on CHIS. The CHIS team is working with PHA to improve access to CHIS data (frequency and quality of data received). There is also ongoing development of the PHA vaccine data and how this is then shared with health professionals such as GPs to ensure they are fully aware of uptake rates within their Practice and how this compares to the average rate. In addition, consideration is underway by the PHA on how CHIS may be linked to the VMS to remove the need for data to be entered manually onto both systems. This would improve the accuracy of records and enable easier access to vaccination history during unplanned contacts

between the HSC system and children, which may allow vaccines to be offered should any unplanned opportunity arise.

PHA is also gathering information to fully understand the interaction between GP IT systems and CHIS. This includes understanding the multiple ways GP practices can choose to schedule vaccine appointments with CHIS and whether these could be streamlined or changed. In addition, the need to carry out a review of CHIS clinic forms to improve management for all stakeholders/service deliverers is also being considered. Further, PHA are developing materials for professionals involved in delivering vaccinations in NI and to improve data being sent back to CHIS. In addition, training pack webinars for professionals in collaboration with CHIS are being developed and are intended to be launched in September/October 2023.