

Summary of a Conservation on Covid Vaccines

- Held Via Zoom, 18 February 2021
- In partnership with Age UK Berkshire, the charity for older people
- Giving local residents and charity staff a chance to ask Healthwatch Reading staff about the coronavirus vaccination programme

Introduction

Healthwatch Reading (HWR) gave an overview about their role and the impact of the vaccination so far:

- HWR is the statutory health and care watchdog for Reading, gives free information and advice and also sits on various committees that plan healthcare
- Latest statistics show positive Covid cases for all of Berkshire have reduced by 60% in the last 2 weeks
- People getting seriously ill with Covid are also down: 5 people went into Royal Berkshire Hospital on 5 February compared with 40 on a day in early January
- 40% of people aged 80+ were showing Covid antibodies, according to a national study, which suggests the vaccines are really having an impact

Questions and Answers

1. A small number of older people have told Age UK Berkshire that they're concerned about having the vaccine. How would you address those concerns?

HWR: There is some vaccine hesitancy out there from people - some who have received social media messages that contain fake information on dangerous effects as well as some genuine concerns about having something they feel is untested or has been rushed.

Our approach has been to have a conversation with people rather than tell people what to do. For example, we explain that there was a lot of money thrown at vaccine development which untangled a lot of the time-consuming red tape usually involved but the safety tests were still done thoroughly. The Covid vaccine built on previous work carried out on vaccines generally and we also point to flu vaccinations, which many people take without question because of its role in protecting people.

We have noticed an increase in attendance of people thought to be more hesitant (from Black and other ethnic groups) at a central Reading vaccination hub, so it may also be that people are feeling more confident as they hear that their family and friends have had the vaccine without any problems.

We are also giving the public the opportunity to ask local health professionals questions about vaccines in another co-hosted meeting, with Reading’s race equality body ACRE. (You can read a report of this event [here](#))

We also advise people that if they change their mind at a later date and decide they do want it they can contact their GP surgery about getting it.

2. Should health or care staff be required to have the Covid vaccine?

HWR: We have heard that social care staff seem to be taking up the vaccine in lower numbers than the higher rates among NHS staff and we can understand that people being cared for, or their relatives, might want reassurance that staff have been vaccinated.

But the UK has historically never taken an approach to make vaccinations mandatory - such as flu or childhood immunisations - and we’ve heard lawyers advising that it would be a legal minefield. Care providers might try and introduce it into employment contracts but these could potentially be challenged, for example if you were a pregnant woman who didn’t want the vaccine.

If an older person directly employs a personal assistant, they might have a conversation with them about whether that person is doing regular community testing with lateral flow tests (which give results quickly). In Reading, there are two sites offering these twice weekly for a range of essential staff and volunteers who can’t access testing anywhere else (details [here](#)). But again, these aren’t mandatory.

3. What kind of side-effects does the Covid vaccination result in?

HWR: Lots of people have been describing a sore arm, or feeling like you’ve got flu or a bit horrid for a few days. These might be surprising for some people who haven’t had a vaccination before or for a long time, but they are all known and expected side-effects and can usually be treated with paracetamol and rest. Any serious side effects are reported to the medicines safety body (the MHRA) and they’ve been publishing regular data which we’ve seen and there is nothing alarming in those reports to date.

People with serious allergies to known substances are mostly able to have the vaccine, and even if you had an unexpected reaction, emergency kits are on site in every vaccine hub to deal with these.

4. How are people with hearing or sight impairments getting information about vaccines?

HWR: There has been a lot of excellent information produced by local and national charities. We have also noticed a lot of family or carers bringing their relatives to vaccine hubs to assist them while they’re there. (We’ve listed some useful sources of information in various formats on the next page).

- British Sign Language (BSL) videos on vaccination by SignHealth, the deaf health charity
- Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) vaccine information
- Easy Read Guide on coronavirus vaccines by Mencap, the national charity for people with learning disabilities
- Easy Read Information on vaccines by Public Health England
- Translated Vaccine guides for older adults, in 12 non-English languages by Public Health England
- Reading Borough Council also has a dedicated web page for coronavirus information in various formats.

5. How does someone give consent to vaccination if they have dementia and no relatives to speak up for them?

HWR: Our organisation also runs ‘Reading Voice’, a service providing statutory advocacy for people who have no-one else to speak up for them. Unfortunately, we have not been allowed into care homes and other settings during the pandemic to help people directly with this or other aspects of their care. However, the general principle is that health professionals will make a ‘best interests’ decision, as guided by the Mental Capacity Act. This involves considering the person’s past views or actions on vaccination, as well as considering the impact of vaccination on their current and future wellbeing. Relatives can’t stop a person without capacity getting vaccinated solely because of the relative’s personal beliefs against vaccination.

6. Many older people have volunteer befrienders that they would like to see again in their own homes eventually, but they won’t be due the vaccine for quite a while because they are younger. Can they access the community testing for Covid?

HWR: [answer added after session once we had clarified]. Yes, volunteer befrienders can access regular lateral flow tests once they are visiting people again, they can book online.

The government’s road map published on 22 February says people can meet one other person outside from 8 March socially, and not just for exercise. So, if an older person was able to get to an outside space like a local park, they could meet a befriender on a park bench (sitting socially distanced). Care home residents are also allowed one regular visitor from 8 March, subject to certain conditions.

Thank you to Age UK Berkshire and local people for taking part in this session.

For further information don’t hesitate to:

- Call our helpline for free, confidential advice: 07786 476 257 (remote working number while our office is closed) or email: info@healthwatchreading.co.uk

- You can also sign up to our monthly email newsletter here:
<http://eepurl.com/yVy>