



Why compulsory vaccination is not the way

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Making COVID19 vaccinations compulsory is a cop out by the Government. It is a simplistic 'solution' to a complicated problem.

GMB encourages all of our members to take up the offer of a vaccine, but we understand the reluctance of some people to do so. Government must tackle the underlying reasons why so many would choose to forgo the vaccine given its crucial role in getting our country back to any semblance of normality.

Our union's own discussions with members in care show divided opinions within the sector, but also some very clear barriers.

Vaccination team visits to care settings have not been every four weeks as promised, in some places they have been few and far between.

If you work a shift and have caring responsibilities or another job to go to then finding time for an appointment is not easy – especially if you rely on public transport. The government needs to follow through on its own guidance.

Fear of side-effects is also an issue. Workers cannot afford the loss of wages if they develop illnesses and need time off. Statutory Sick Pay is no substitute, and the work is often precarious as it is. It is 'safer' for many not to risk the job. Proper sick pay from day one is the answer, not making vaccinations mandatory.

It's not surprising to find that areas where zero-hours contracts are more prolific also

have lower vaccination rates. In London, over 40% of jobs in social care are zero-hours.

Where members have health worries, the approach taken by the government and employers has failed to address concerns.

A number of members have told us that they haven't seen a single national public health communication specific to social care; where communications come from the employer there can be an issue of trust; many care workers don't class their employers as 'experts' or without self-interest.

For some the concerns are cultural, and while some work has been done to reach communities where English is not a first language, the campaigns in general have been poor or hard to access.

Then there is the scepticism of the state. Windrush, Grenfell, stop and search, policing – if people mistrust the state, then the state seeking to impose its will in this way will be counterproductive, alienating and risk disproportionate impacts on Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities.

There are a number of concerns we have as a union.

Firstly, is this the thin end of the wedge? If vaccines are mandated in care, then employers in a whole range of other sectors will likely demand the same (security and utilities being obvious examples). There are fundamental human rights issues that this raises that will not disappear when care workers have been vaccinated – we are talking about the state legally requiring individuals to have what is essentially a medical procedure.

Secondly, there is a danger that vaccination status becomes a substitute for managing Covid risk.

We know that for some workers, the vaccine will not be fully effective (hence the 70-90% efficacy), so protection cannot be guaranteed. That means that Covid transmission is a live hazard at all times.?

And there are many 'known unknowns' with new strains, including the Indian and South African Covid variants. We know there is debate about another peak in Winter, despite expectations that the population will be vaccinated, which bears out this point.

Employers must therefore ensure that all measures are in place and maintained - especially ventilation, social distancing and PPE. If these mitigations are in place, and care residents are



vaccinated, then worker vaccination is not an issue.

Thirdly, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland all have better uptake of vaccination in care homes than England. The Department of Health and Social Care could usefully look at adopting best practice rather than jumping straight to this 'nuclear' option.?

In Wales, where vaccination rates for adult social care workers is over 90%, they have brought in measures to enhance sick pay and since 2017 set up national registration for the profession alongside curbing the use of zero-hours contracts. In Northern Ireland, 100% of care workers in older adult care homes have had the first and second vaccine jabs.

If the Westminster Government does a better job of engaging with workers and addressing their concerns, there is no need for compulsory vaccination.

