

West Lothian Council backs plea for unpaid carers to qualify for Covid 19 booster jabs

West Lothian Council has backed a plea for unpaid carers to qualify for Covid 19 booster jabs this winter.

Those under 65 were excluded from the latest booster programme UK wide advice from clinicians who believed that the risk of illness had now fallen significantly.

Tabling a motion to write to the Scottish health minister the Depute Provost Peter Heggie asking him to reinstate booster jobs for unpaid carers he spoke of widespread fears among carers of falling ill and being unable to care for loved ones.

Councillor Heggie said some of the testimony he had heard speaking to constituents was upsetting: "They asked me 'what if I take ill, who is going to care for my partner. Who is going to care for my son?'"

He added: "People started to contact me when this decision was made. I've spoken to individuals who will not be offered the Covid 19 booster this winter and their only option is to pay for it. For many in these times that is not something they can do.

"A recent report in West Lothian showed that 26% of carers

really struggle with their own health and well-being in their role, who would step up.”

Raising an amendment against the Conservative motion the SNP group leader Councillor Janet Campbell said: “The Scottish Government has consistently followed the best and most up to date advice regarding all vaccination programmes including booster programmes for Covid. That is why both NHS Scotland and NHS England are following this advice as set out by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI).

The amendment added: “As currently available Covid-19 vaccines provide limited protection against mild and asymptomatic disease, the focus of the programme is on offering vaccination to those most likely to directly benefit from vaccination, particularly those with underlying health conditions that increase their risk of hospitalisation following infection.

“For autumn 2024, JCVI advises that a Covid-19 vaccine should be offered to:-

- adults aged 65 years and over
- residents in a care home for older adults
- those aged 6 months to 64 years in a clinical risk from Covid group.

“This information renders this motion baseless.”

The amendment said the council should: “ask for the epidemiological evidence which led to the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation making this decision and to further request that the Scottish Government considers providing the Covid vaccine to unpaid carers.”

Depute group leader Pauline Safford added: "It would have been much easier to get behind this motion if it had just stuck to the facts instead of politicising the health and well-being of our most vulnerable constituents and their carers.

"NHS Scotland has not gone out on a limb here with a rogue decision. NHS England have also followed the same advice. There's an implication that unpaid carers are worse off under the Scottish Government.

"An unpaid carer is £3,000 better off in Scotland than anywhere else. To suggest the Scottish Government is an outlier is not correct and not constructive."

Conservative group leader Damian Doran-Timson slammed SNP assertions of how much better the Scottish Government had responded to the Covid crisis, pointing to the number of care home deaths.

Independent councillor Andrew McGuire congratulated Councillor Heggie on his motion and expressed surprise that it had met with opposition. Describing unpaid carers as a very vulnerable group, he added: "We should be immunising as many people as possible."

Lib Dem Councillor Sally Pattie told the meeting she was confused as to why the motion was deemed controversial and added that she would support the motion. She said: "Unpaid carers are the backbone of our society."

The motion was passed by 18 votes to 15.

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter