

From the Chief Medical Officer
Professor Sir Michael McBride



HSS(MD)24/2026

FOR ACTION

Chief Executives, Public Health Agency/HSC
Trusts/NIAS
Chief Operating Officer, SPPG
GP Medical Advisers, SPPG
All General Practitioners and GP Locums (*for onward
distribution to practice staff*)
Assistant Director of Pharmacy and Medicines
Management, SPPG (*for onward distribution
to SPPG Pharmacy and Medicines
Management Team and community
pharmacists*)
OOH Medical Managers (*for onward distribution to
staff*)
RQIA (*for onward circulation to independent sector
health and social care providers*)

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Your Ref:
Our Ref: HSS(MD)24/2026
Date: 26 June 2026

Dear Colleague

END OF THE INFLUENZA SEASON FOR 2025/2026.

1. The purpose of this letter is to draw your attention to the end of the influenza season for 2025/26.
2. The influenza vaccination programme ended on 31 March 2026. Providers should not therefore actively seek to vaccinate any of the cohorts from this point onwards and over the Summer of 2026.
3. We would like to extend a huge thank you to all contributing colleagues for your hard work delivering the influenza vaccination programme in 2025/26, particularly in the context of wider challenges. Delivery of this important public health programme has again been achieved, alongside continued delivery of the COVID-19 vaccination programme to which many of you have also contributed.
4. We want to specifically acknowledge all those involved in the planning and delivery of this complex programme, including Community Pharmacies,

General Practitioners and GMS staff, the Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts, the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS), the Public Health Agency (PHA), the Regional Pharmaceutical Procurement Service (RPhPS), and the Strategic Planning and Performance Group (SPPG). We also wish to convey our sincere thanks to the many clinical, managerial and other staff throughout the HSC, all of whom responded so admirably and professionally throughout the past Winter months and helped to minimise the potentially more significant impact of influenza on patients and service users/clients, and on our wider health and social care system.

Influenza Activity

5. According to our region-wide surveillance systems which PHA operates on behalf of HSC, the majority of influenza activity in this year's season was observed from late October 2025 to late January 2026, peaking in early December 2025. Influenza A (H3) was the predominant subtype in circulation.
6. Influenza activity has now decreased across all surveillance indicators and has now returned to pre-season levels.
7. In line with advice from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI), the seasonal influenza vaccination programme remains an important public health population-based intervention. A key priority for the coming 2026/27 season is to reduce morbidity, mortality and hospitalisation associated with influenza at a time when the HSC system will continue to manage significant pressures.
8. It is therefore essential that every effort is made to optimise uptake of Influenza vaccine by all eligible individuals during the forthcoming 2026/2027 programme.

Surveillance

9. The PHA's regular Respiratory Surveillance Report is the definitive source of population-based surveillance information on influenza activity for Northern Ireland throughout the season.¹
10. The surveillance of seasonal influenza depends on accurate, timely data produced by GP sentinel practices, secondary care services and laboratory services. Data are collated by the PHA's Influenza Surveillance Team to produce the bulletin which enables us to follow the course of influenza activity throughout each season and to respond accordingly. We would like to thank all those involved in the production of this information, population health data and intelligence.

¹ <https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/directorates/directorate-public-health/health-protection/surveillance-data/respiratory-infections-1>

Use of Antiviral Medicines

11. [HSS\(MD\) 19/2026](#) was published on 7 May 2026 and announced that the Department has put in place amendments to The Health and Personal Social Services (General Medical Services Contracts) (Prescription of Drugs Etc) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2004 (“the 2004 Regulations”), to allow Health and Social Care (HSC) prescribing and dispensing of Oseltamivir (Tamiflu®) and Zanamivir (Relenza®) by standard HSC prescription processes outside the Influenza season.
12. These amendments will improve efficiency of current processes by removing the current restrictions on influenza antiviral prescribing set out in Schedule 2 of the 2004 Regulations, including restrictions on prescribing outside the period where the Department has notified GPs that influenza is circulating in the community. These amendments came into force on 1 May 2026.

Vaccine Uptake/Coverage

13. PHA published a provisional vaccination uptake report for 2025/26 on 1 April 2026, which can be viewed at: <https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/directorate-public-health/health-protection/vaccination-coverage>. A final vaccination uptake report for 2025/26 will be published in due course.
14. Data pertaining to seasonal influenza vaccine shows the following percentage uptake rates amongst eligible cohorts during the 2025/26 programme compared with the previous year:

Table 1 comparison of uptake rates achieved in 2025/26 and 2024/25

Cohort	2025/26 ²	2024/25 ³
65+ yrs old	74%	73.7%
Care Home Residents	79.8%	80%
50-64 yrs old	N/A as cohort not eligible.	25.9%
18-64 yrs old (at risk)	37.2%	28.6% (18-49 only)
2-4 yrs old	29.6%	30%
Primary school	59.4%	64.9%
Secondary (years 8-12)	55.0%	58.5%
HSCWs	30.5%	21.4%

15. By the end of March 2026, 74% of those aged over 65 years in Northern Ireland were recorded as vaccinated against influenza, compared to approximately 73.7% in this group in the 2024/25 Influenza season.

² Accurate to 29/03/26: <https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/directorate-public-health/health-protection/vaccination-coverage>

³ From 2024-25 End of Programme Report: <https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/seasonal-influenza-vaccination-surveillance-northern-ireland-autumnwinter-202425>

16. The data indicates that 79.8% of care home residents were vaccinated against Influenza in 2025/26, compared to 80% of residents in 2024/25.
17. In 2025/26, 3,835 women were recorded as pregnant at date of vaccination with influenza, compared to 3,267 women in 2024/25. Due to ongoing changes associated with the introduction of Encompass, it is not currently possible to report uptake as a percentage of pregnant women.
18. Uptake in 2025/26 for 2 to 4-year-olds was 29.6%, compared to 30% in 2024/25 while 59.4% of primary school children were vaccinated against influenza compared to 64.9% in 2024/25. For those in Years 8 to 12 in secondary schools, 55% were vaccinated by the end of March 2026 compared to 58.5% achieved in the previous year.
19. The VMS (Vaccine Management System) reports uptake among all Trust-employed health and social care workers (HSCWs) as 30.5% this year, compared to 21.4% achieved in 2024/25. The data indicates that 5.3% of care home staff were vaccinated in 2025/26 compared to 6.5% of these staff vaccinated in 2024/25.
20. While uptake rates in a number of groups have risen, the majority of groups saw a decrease in uptake rates from the previous year. This is regrettable, particularly as we are aware of the enormous efforts made by many to ensure uptake rates are maximized. , These highlight to us the the importance of ensuring that every contact counts. It is essential that all Health and Social Care professionals protect themselves, lead by example, and encourage all those eligible to take up the offer of vaccination.
21. I would urge all staff and healthcare providers to continue their commitment and resolve for the forthcoming vaccination programme during 2026/27, with the goal of increasing uptake rates across all eligible cohorts, particularly among pre-school children.
22. A high uptake of influenza vaccine among staff will help maintain service capacity during periods of high service demand. It is important to highlight that despite a notable improvement in the previous year, uptake among staff remained disappointing during the 2025/26 programme. We are very aware of the pressures facing the HSC system and therefore it is essential that we take all the steps we can to help reduce future pressures, some of which could be reduced or avoided, by maximizing uptake of Influenza vaccine among staff. Vaccination will provide direct protection to the staff themselves. In addition, vaccinated staff will help to reduce the risk of potentially passing Influenza on to their families or their patients.

Looking Ahead to the 2026/27 Influenza Season

23. Eligible cohorts for influenza vaccination are based on the advice of JCVI, provided to Minister and the Department. The programme works to provide direct protection to those who are considered at highest risk of influenza

associated morbidity and mortality and to reduce transmission across all age groups through the vaccination of children.

24. An HSS(MD) seasonal influenza policy letter for 2026/27 will be issued in due course and will include information on:

- the vaccination programme start date,
- eligible cohorts,
- vaccine supply and ordering details,
- detail on the Health and Social Care Workers offer, and
- recommended vaccines for use during 2026/27.

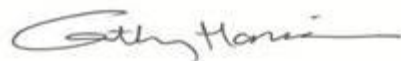
25. The annual influenza vaccination programme is a critical element of our system-wide approach for delivering robust and resilient health and care services during Autumn and Winter periods. High uptake rates will help to reduce GP/primary care consultations, unplanned hospital admissions, pressure on Emergency Departments, and importantly will also reduce sickness levels among staff.

26. It is more important than ever that the Department, PHA, HSC organisations, primary care teams, as well as Community Pharmacies and all other contributing partners build on the experiences gained from recent vaccination programmes and continue to deliver an effective high-quality vaccination programme, which will help protect the health of the population in Northern Ireland.

Yours sincerely



Professor Sir Michael McBride
Chief Medical Officer



Professor Cathy Harrison
Chief Pharmaceutical Officer

