

Covid Vaccination - an open letter from local GPs and patient representatives in the "A31 Primary Care Network"

Dear Patients of Alton and Surrounding Villages (The A31 PCN),

We have all lived with Covid for nearly a year now. We have all struggled with the impact of the virus – losing loved ones, losing jobs, losing education, losing contact with each other – the vaccination programme offers us all some much-needed hope that life will not always be like this.

We are doctors and patients who live and work locally, so are well aware of people's concerns in and around our town – namely, that there isn't a fixed vaccination centre in Alton. We would like to explain our thinking about our vaccination programme, and what comes next.

From the outset, the four A31 surgeries decided that the best overall approach was to concentrate our staffing and resources with all 15 GP surgeries across the whole of North Hampshire on a single site – The Hampshire Court Hotel in Basingstoke, managed and staffed by us all collectively. We believed (and still do) that it is the best way to vaccinate large numbers of people quickly, while also allowing our surgeries to keep providing all of the other services that patients need, and rightly expect on a daily basis.

We knew these plans wouldn't be perfect for everyone, and that some people would be challenged by our decision. We were also aware that we are asking people to travel further than they may wish to get vaccinated, but we also knew that the approach ultimately would mean us vaccinating more people, more quickly, whilst preserving routine services. We were also reassured by the fact that most of us travel to Basingstoke for out of hours GP services, hospital services and leisure, and that we were asking people to make just 2 visits. The Covid Winter Assessment Hub (where patients with proven or suspected covid are seen), is also located in Basingstoke, and is managed and staffed collectively by the staff of all 15 practices in North Hampshire, so we already have a precedent of working successfully in this way. To date, the response of people in the Alton area has been remarkable – practically everyone who has been invited to the main centre has been able to make the journey, difficult though it is for some.

We have always been very clear in our thinking that we would never just offer people a 'one size fits all, take it or leave it' service. We realise some people simply cannot make the journey to Chineham, and we would never allow them to miss out as a result. All local care home residents and staff have already been visited, to receive their vaccinations, and we are currently visiting the homes of people who are housebound.

Before the end of January, we expect there will be just a very small number of the over-80s group who have not been able to travel or have not been visited. Plans are in place to provide a local service in Alton for these people. They will be contacted directly, and vaccinated before the end of January. (As we move down through the age groups we will repeat that approach, making sure that nobody is left behind because they are unable to travel to the main centre.)

We know that some people dislike the decision not to have a permanent site in Alton, but we would never have made that decision if we felt it would leave Alton residents (our patients) more vulnerable. Your understanding and our planning mean that we are on track to vaccinate all of our over-80s and care home residents and staff ahead of the government target. We thank everyone for their help in delivering such a huge achievement.

Dated 25/01/2021

We are all very focused on Covid at the moment, but we never lose sight of the patients we see who have other needs, other problems. Running a central vaccination site in Chineham using staff and volunteers from across the whole of North Hampshire means that we don't stretch our teams even more thinly – working together means we are still able to see high numbers of suspected cancer patients, give huge numbers of flu jabs, run our women's health services, minor injury clinics, and everything else that people still need us to deliver. Please also remember we are only at the beginning of the programme. In 12 weeks time we will need to be vaccinating huge numbers of people as second injections become due.

We understand people's concerns but the plea we make – as GPs and practice patient representatives – is for you to trust our planning, and continue to support us in delivering this vital vaccination programme, the biggest in NHS history. The current model is working extremely well. We are succeeding in reaching people very quickly, whilst preserving day to day GP services in Alton and its surrounding villages. Our aim is to reach everyone who wants to be vaccinated, by whatever means necessary, no matter where they live, as quickly as possible.

Signed:

<i>Dr Natalie Smith</i>	<i>A31 Group of Practices Primary Care Network Clinical Director</i>
<i>Dr Andrew Fellows</i>	<i>Senior Partner, The Wilson Practice</i>
<i>Dr Jackie Over</i>	<i>Senior Partner, Chawton Park Surgery</i>
<i>Dr Philip West</i>	<i>Senior Partner, Boundaries Surgery</i>
<i>Dr Melanie Way</i>	<i>Senior Partner, Bentley Village Surgery</i>
<i>Councillor Pam Jones</i>	<i>Chawton Park Surgery Patient Participation Group Chair</i>
<i>Michelle Essenson</i>	<i>Bentley Village Surgery Patient Participation Group Chair</i>
<i>Derek Gurney</i>	<i>The Wilson Practice Patient Participation Group Chair, and North Hampshire CCG Patient Participation Group Chair</i>

We include a link here, to last week's 'Altonian' newsletter which includes information about local volunteer services who may be able to help with transport to Chineham, for people with no access to transport. <http://www.alton.gov.uk/UserFiles/Files/Altonian%20Newsletter/Week%20%20-%2014th%20Jan%202021.pdf>

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