

Written Ministerial Statement

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Department of Health

COVID-19 VACCINE

Published at 3.00 pm on Wednesday 2 December 2020.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): This statement provides an update on the latest developments relating to a COVID-19 vaccine.

I'm sure by now Members will have heard that the Medicines & Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) has now provided an approval to supply the Pfizer/BioNTech coronavirus vaccine within the UK.

This is a very welcome development and a hugely significant day for Northern Ireland. As I have previously outlined my Department has plans and preparations in place to begin the roll-out of a COVID-19 vaccination programme.

The programme will begin initially with health and social care workers, including our care home staff and we will be setting up mass vaccination centres that will enable our frontline staff to be vaccinated quickly and safely. In keeping with the JCVI recognition for the need for flexibility in implementation given different vaccine characteristics we also expect other vaccines to become available shortly which will enable care home residents and the oldest members of our society to be vaccinated. Further groups will then be added to the programme throughout 2021 based on age and clinical vulnerability factors.

This is the news we were all hoping for before Christmas and my thanks go to all those who are working hard to make this possible. However it needs to be remembered that the vaccination process will be a major and long-running logistical exercise, with everyone requiring two doses of a vaccine. Our rate of progress will depend on available supplies that will be distributed as part of a UK-wide programme.

We will all need to be patient and allow the priority groups to receive their vaccination first. While this is not the end of the Coronavirus nightmare it should represent the beginning of the end. We need to think of vaccination as a long trek to freedom.

Unfortunately this does not mean that restrictions on our daily lives will be able to disappear anytime soon. There is still a very tough winter ahead for our health service and society and so we all need to continue to protect it and each other. However the news today is still a very positive development and offers us real hope this Christmas and into the New Year.