

Robin Swann MLA  
Minister of Health  
Room 34  
Parliament Buildings  
Ballymiscaw  
Stormont  
Belfast  
BT4 3XX

The Fostering Network  
Unit 10  
40 Montgomery Road  
Belfast  
BT6 9HL

Tuesday 15 December 2020

Dear Minister

I hope this finds you and your family well at this challenging time and thank you for all you are doing to manage the impact of coronavirus here in Northern Ireland.

As Director of The Fostering Network in Northern Ireland, our charity acts as the voice of our members who are all approved foster and kinship foster carers. I am writing to ensure that they are prioritised in the roll out of the Covid-19 vaccination programme as a vital part of the social care workforce.

Throughout the pandemic, the needs of vulnerable families and children have been brought to the fore and we welcome the steps taken to ensure that foster families did not experience any hardship as a result, such as the £100 one-off payment and an increase in foster care allowances provided by the Health and Social Care Board. This payment was a clear acknowledgement that the needs of children and young people in foster care are a high priority, and of the vital work foster carers do in supporting them during these uncertain times.

We are concerned that, in common with all social services staff, foster carers are feeling the impact of the pandemic on their health. In order to ensure that foster carers are recognised as a vital part of the social welfare workforce, we would ask you to include them in the roll out of the vaccine in line with children's residential home workers and social workers.

There are three fundamental reasons why we wish you to consider this request as a matter of priority:

- Foster carers are required to meet social workers and other professionals as part of the care they offer to young people. Most fostered children also meet with birth families on a regular basis to ensure contact is maintained. As a result,



many foster carers and their families are exposed to multiple households in their fostering role which increases the risk of contracting the virus.

- The foster care workforce is an older population. The Ofsted data in England, shows that as of 31 March 2020, 65 per cent of foster carers were over 50 years old and 25 per cent were over 60. As the risk from coronavirus increases with age, foster carers are at a raised risk and should be protected as far as is possible to ensure it is safe for them to continue to foster.
- As part of the social care workforce, foster carers care for the vast majority of children in care. The numbers of children entering the care system has increased dramatically in the last few years. It is vital to recruit and retain foster carers across Northern Ireland to ensure we provide loving and stable homes for children and young people who can no longer live with their own families. We are very concerned about the many pressures that foster carers face. This has undoubtedly increased as a result of the pandemic and we cannot afford to see a further drop in the number of foster carers who are willing to provide a home for our most vulnerable children.

There is no doubt that prioritising foster carers for the coronavirus vaccine would ensure we protect the health of one of the most critical groups in society. Foster carers perform a vital role we simply cannot do without. Awarding priority status would also represent a huge morale boost to foster families across the country.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Best wishes

Kathleen Toner

Director of Northern Ireland

The Fostering Network

[Kathleen.Toner@fostering.net](mailto:Kathleen.Toner@fostering.net)