



Women and Equalities Committee

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From the Chair

Nadhim Zahawi MP
Minister for COVID Vaccine Deployment
Department of Health and Social Care

cc. Kemi Badenoch MP
Minister for Equalities
Government Equalities Office

By e-mail

26 March 2021

Dear Nadhim,

Take up of COVID-19 vaccines in BAME communities and women

Thank you for appearing before the Committee on 10 March as part of our inquiry to examine the take up of COVID-19 vaccines in BAME communities and women. While the covid vaccination programme has been a success so far, data shows continued disparities in uptake rates and vaccine hesitancy in different groups in society. The disparities appear to be most prominent across minority ethnic and religious groups, adults in deprived areas, and young women.¹

While we appreciate and support the work you are currently doing to encourage vaccine take-up, including the Minister for Equalities' quarterly disparities report, the Committee has a number of concerns which we feel were not fully addressed during the evidence session. The constituting of the 'equalities board' in January, one month after the first vaccinations were given, is telling of the insufficient attention so far paid to the underlying issues causing low uptake of vaccines amongst BAME communities.² This is particularly concerning given the evidence we heard on the predictability of low uptake rates in certain groups, which may compound pre-existing health inequalities.³ The Government is at risk of repeating the same mistakes with other groups displaying early signs of vaccine hesitancy.

We welcome the weekly data published by the Department for Health and Social Care on the number of vaccines distributed across the UK. However, there remain crucial gaps in reporting. We are disappointed with the DHSC's failure to publish data on the vaccine rollout at local authority level, and there is also a notable lack of granular data on uptake among certain groups. Witnesses who appeared before the Committee on 4 March expressed the need to gather vaccination data by sex, age, faith and ethnicity.⁴ We believe this would allow for a much more

¹ ONS, [Coronavirus and vaccine hesitancy, Great Britain: 13 January to 7 February 2021](#)

² [Take-up of the Covid-19 vaccines in BAME communities and women](#), 10 March, Q39

³ [Take-up of the Covid-19 vaccines in BAME communities and women](#), 4 March, Q1

⁴ [Ibid.](#) Q23

nuanced and intersectional understanding of vaccine take up and lack thereof amongst different communities. We call on the Government to publish this information at the earliest opportunity.

We are also concerned that there is a lack of data collection around the numbers of those refusing the offer of a vaccine and the reasons for such refusal, particularly given your acceptance that this data skews 'heavily towards' certain BAME communities.⁵ A better understanding of the reasons around this would enable the Government to deliver more targeted solutions to counter vaccine hesitancy in certain groups and improve public health outcomes for all. The Government should seek to gather this information, particularly from groups displaying greater levels of vaccine hesitancy, as soon as possible.

During our session, Minister Badenoch acknowledged that vaccine concerns around fertility were 'false but proving to be sadly quite potent'.⁶ Despite this, we did not receive sufficient reassurance that the Government is developing a strategy to counter these concerns, and it was suggested that the Government is not overly concerned about the take up of vaccines by young women.⁷ This is not acceptable, we cannot adopt a 'wait and see' approach. The Government must develop targeted interventions to ensure young women take up the offer of a vaccine when it is their turn, for both their own protection and for the wider benefit to society.

We heard evidence from you and the Minister for Equalities regarding the "Community champions" scheme, in which over £23 million has been allocated to 60 councils and voluntary groups across England to expand work to support those most at risk from COVID-19 and boost vaccine take up. While we appreciate that the scheme was only set up in January, we are concerned that our witnesses, representatives from different faiths and communities across England, were unaware of this scheme.⁸ While we agree that there is a need for community engagement, we are concerned that community champions are not the best way to engage with individuals. We believe that a "bottom-up" rather than a "top-down" approach would be more effective and the Government must continue to engage with faith leaders and community leaders to encourage people to have the vaccine. We look forward to the Government publishing evidence on the effectiveness of the scheme in the future.

We discussed the use of vaccine passports. We are concerned that such a scheme would have a disproportionate impact on some members of the community. The Government must ensure that an equality impact assessment is undertaken to ensure that the impact of such a scheme on different groups is properly understood.

Witnesses highlighted the need to recognise that the BAME community is not a homogenous one.⁹ They expressed concern that the language used in mainstream content is very Eurocentric and often aimed at a middle-class Caucasian audience. While we congratulate the Government on its concerted efforts to publish information in a number of different languages during the current pandemic, we encourage the Government, going forward, to recognise the need to create mainstream content individualised to different BAME communities.

We will continue to monitor the situation. We wish you the best during such a crucial period in our fight against COVID-19.

⁵ [Take-up of the Covid-19 vaccines in BAME communities and women](#), 10 March, Q42

⁶ [Ibid.](#), Q38

⁷ [Ibid.](#), Q47

⁸ [Take-up of the Covid-19 vaccines in BAME communities and women](#), 4 March Q22

⁹ [Ibid.](#), Q1

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Caroline". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial 'C'.

Rt Hon Caroline Nokes MP
Chair, Women and Equalities Committee