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TODAY'S BIG QUESTION

'Vaccine refuseniks': why the hesitancy?

Bolton MP hits back at Tories who blame the eligible but unvaccinated for a potential delay to the end of lockdown

18 MAY 2021



An NHS worker explains the Covid vaccine process at a vaccination centre in Northumberland

Ian Forsyth/Getty Images

The government is stepping up its drive to ensure people across the country take up the offer of a coronavirus vaccine in a bid to contain the spread of the Indian variant.

Health Secretary Matt Hancock has pointed to the Covid hotspot of Bolton, where the majority of people hospitalised with the [B16172 mutation](#) had not had a jab despite

being eligible, as an example of why vaccination is so important.

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Local outbreaks of the disease could pose “serious disruption” to [lockdown easing in England on 21 June](#), Prime Minister [Boris Johnson has warned](#).

His caution prompted several Tory MPs to protest that June’s so-called “‘freedom day’ must not be sacrificed to protect vaccine refuseniks”, says the [Daily Mail](#). Simon Clarke, MP for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland, told the newspaper: “Our wider society should not be held back from recovering our freedoms by those who choose not to protect themselves and others.”

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But Yasmin Qureshi, the Labour MP for Bolton South East, has argued that it is not simply hesitancy that has prevented people from getting protection. She told [BBC Newsnight](#) on Monday that the vaccine rollout was initially “done in one place in the town centre with only about six vaccinators to cover a huge area and a huge population”.

“Some people had to use two or three buses to get into the town centre,” she said. “A lot of these people were on zero-hours contracts or living in multi-generational homes and they weren’t able to be contacted.”

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Qureshi pointed out that 6,200 people were vaccinated at a temporary site in south-west Bolton over the weekend, suggesting that better access was now helping to drive up numbers.

Her comments were backed by Kevin Fenton, London regional director for Public Health England, who told [BBC Radio 4's Today programme](#): “One thing we mustn’t do is lay the blame of low uptake at the feet of any particular community.”

He acknowledged that vaccine hesitancy was contributing to low rates of uptake in “some communities” in the capital, but said the reasons why people don’t get vaccinated vary. “It has to do with trust, it may be to do with access, it may be the time at which the vaccination centres are open that don’t facilitate access, for example, to key workers.”

Data from [YouGov](#) shows that the UK continues to have the highest “vaccination willingness” in the world, with 90% of those surveyed at the beginning of the month happy to have a jab.

But, for the sceptical 10%, months of media coverage focusing on collective responsibility “hasn’t cut through”, says Daniel Freeman, professor of clinical psychology at the University of Oxford.

After a year of research, Freeman and the Oxford Coronavirus Explanations, Attitudes and Narratives Surveys (OCEANS) team have found that the best way to counter concerns is to highlight the personal benefits of the vaccine.

The hesitant “don’t accept that taking a vaccine means we’re all better off” and they tend to believe that Covid is not a “big danger to their health”. They are concerned that vaccines may be “ineffective or downright harmful”, and “the rapid development of COVID-19 vaccines reinforces these concerns”, he writes on [The Conversation](#). Behind these ideas “often lies mistrust”.

“When it comes to persuading the vaccine hesitant, our research shows that we need to listen, understand concerns and address them seriously,” says Freeman. “No message will be truly effective if the messenger has not earned trust, nor if it doesn’t account for the desires and worries of those receiving it.”

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