# NHS vaccination booking issues expose communication gaps amid increased flu and COVID demand



The NHS COVID-19 vaccination booking system has encountered notable issues shortly after reopening, causing confusion and frustration among patients and pharmacy staff. Alastair Buxton, director of NHS services at Community Pharmacy England (CPE), revealed that within an hour of the system going live last week, it became apparent that many people were missing key information about eligibility criteria. Consequently, individuals who presumed they were still eligible for the COVID-19 vaccine booked appointments only to find, upon arrival at pharmacies, that they were only able to receive a flu jab.

This mismatch between patient expectations and eligibility has led to understandable upset, concern, and in some cases anger among patients. Buxton acknowledged that pharmacy staff have faced challenges, including instances of patients becoming abusive, highlighting the pressures on frontline workers managing these situations.

Henry Gregg, head of the National Pharmacy Association (NPA), which represents independent pharmacists, described the situation as deeply frustrating for both patients and pharmacy teams. The NPA has formally raised the issue with NHS England and the Department of Health, emphasising the importance of patients treating pharmacy staff with respect as the sector adapts to the tighter eligibility rules introduced this year. Both the CPE and NPA concur that more should have been done to communicate these changes clearly in advance, especially given the considerable overlap between last year’s flu and COVID-19 vaccination programmes.

In response to the concerns, NHS England has amended the NHS website’s wording to make the tightened eligibility criteria more explicit. A spokesperson urged the public to "double check you are still eligible to receive a COVID-19 vaccine before booking," noting that the NHS website outlines eligibility based on age, health conditions, or medication, and that GP practices or pharmacists confirm eligibility prior to vaccination.

Community Pharmacy South Central (CPSC) also reported similar issues, calling on pharmacy teams to collect and share data on ineligible vaccination bookings to help identify and resolve the root cause. This collaborative data-driven approach is intended to prevent future mismatches and ensure vaccines are administered to those who meet established NHS criteria.

The NHS National Booking Service (NBS) now allows pharmacies to post appointments for both flu and COVID-19 vaccinations, a system operating from 1 October 2025. While the use of NBS is optional for flu jab appointments, pharmacies can link to their own booking platforms within their NHS profiles to increase accessibility. This system aims to streamline the vaccination process and improve patient experience, but the recent issues underline the challenges of managing public understanding and eligibility in an overlapping vaccination environment.

Data from NHS England shows a surge in vaccine bookings this season, spurred by warnings of a "tidal wave" of flu and other seasonal viruses. The number of booked flu and COVID-19 appointments more than doubled recently, with an average booking every four seconds, underscoring the importance of ensuring clear communication and effective system management to avoid patient disappointment or confusion.

Overall, while the NHS maintains that verifying eligibility at the point of vaccination is a critical safeguard, the experience has highlighted the difficulties faced by patients and frontline pharmacy teams during a complex vaccination rollout. Stakeholders agree that clearer messaging and comprehensive data monitoring are key to improving the system moving forward.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cm28q5gqvppo), [[4]](https://www.thepharmacist.co.uk/clinical/vaccinations-and-infections/pharmacy-owners-can-now-post-flu-and-covid-jab-appointments-on-nbs/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cm28q5gqvppo), [[2]](https://www.npa.co.uk/news/2025/october/npa-responds-to-covid-vaccine-nhs-booking-system-problems/), [[7]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/people-nhs-department-of-health-b2840210.html)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cm28q5gqvppo), [[2]](https://www.npa.co.uk/news/2025/october/npa-responds-to-covid-vaccine-nhs-booking-system-problems/), [[7]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/people-nhs-department-of-health-b2840210.html)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cm28q5gqvppo)
* Paragraph 5 – [[3]](https://cpsc.org.uk/news/latest-cpsc-news/covid-vaccination-service)
* Paragraph 6 – [[4]](https://www.thepharmacist.co.uk/clinical/vaccinations-and-infections/pharmacy-owners-can-now-post-flu-and-covid-jab-appointments-on-nbs/), [[5]](https://www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/pharmacies/book-flu-vaccination/)
* Paragraph 7 – [[6]](https://www.england.nhs.uk/2024/12/nhs-winter-vaccine-bookings-surge-following-flu-tidal-wave-warning/)
* Paragraph 8 – [[1]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cm28q5gqvppo), [[2]](https://www.npa.co.uk/news/2025/october/npa-responds-to-covid-vaccine-nhs-booking-system-problems/), [[3]](https://cpsc.org.uk/news/latest-cpsc-news/covid-vaccination-service), [[7]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/people-nhs-department-of-health-b2840210.html)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cm28q5gqvppo> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.npa.co.uk/news/2025/october/npa-responds-to-covid-vaccine-nhs-booking-system-problems/> - The National Pharmacy Association (NPA) has reported issues with the NHS booking system, where ineligible patients have been able to book COVID-19 vaccination appointments. This has led to frustration among both patients and pharmacy staff. The NPA has raised the issue with NHS England and the Department of Health, urging for a prompt resolution. They also emphasised the importance of patients treating pharmacy teams with respect during this challenging period. The NPA is working to address the problem and ensure that only eligible individuals receive the vaccine.
3. <https://cpsc.org.uk/news/latest-cpsc-news/covid-vaccination-service> - Community Pharmacy South Central (CPSC) has highlighted concerns regarding ineligible patients booking COVID-19 or flu vaccination appointments through the National Booking Service (NBS). The issue has been escalated to NHS England, with CPSC requesting data from Local Pharmaceutical Committees (LPCs) to identify the root cause. Pharmacy teams are advised to collect and share data on affected appointments, including the number of ineligible patients presenting for vaccinations. This collaborative effort aims to resolve the problem and ensure that vaccinations are administered to those who meet the eligibility criteria.
4. <https://www.thepharmacist.co.uk/clinical/vaccinations-and-infections/pharmacy-owners-can-now-post-flu-and-covid-jab-appointments-on-nbs/> - Pharmacy owners can now post appointments for flu and COVID-19 vaccinations on the National Booking Service (NBS), as announced by Community Pharmacy England (CPE). This functionality allows pharmacies to offer appointments for vaccinations starting from 1 October 2025. The use of NBS for booking flu vaccines is optional, and pharmacies can also add a link to their own flu vaccination booking system within their NHS website profile. This development aims to streamline the vaccination process and improve accessibility for patients.
5. <https://www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/pharmacies/book-flu-vaccination/> - The NHS provides a service to book, change, or cancel a free flu vaccination at a pharmacy. Appointments are available from 1 October, and patients can check if they need an appointment, book one, or manage existing appointments through the NHS website. Additionally, patients may be offered a COVID-19 vaccination in the same appointment if they are eligible. The service also offers assistance for those who have difficulties communicating or hearing, ensuring accessibility for all individuals seeking vaccination.
6. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/2024/12/nhs-winter-vaccine-bookings-surge-following-flu-tidal-wave-warning/> - NHS England reported a significant surge in winter vaccine bookings following warnings of a 'tidal wave' of flu and other seasonal viruses. The number of flu and COVID-19 jab appointments booked through the NHS’s national booking system more than doubled, with an average of one booking every four seconds. Eligible individuals are encouraged to get vaccinated to prevent severe illness and hospitalisation during the winter months. The NHS has plans in place to manage additional demand over the busy winter period.
7. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/people-nhs-department-of-health-b2840210.html> - The Independent reports that individuals who are not eligible for a COVID-19 jab have been able to book vaccination appointments through the NHS booking system. The National Pharmacy Association (NPA) expressed frustration over this issue, urging patients to treat pharmacy teams with respect as they manage the new NHS clinical criteria. The NPA has raised the issue with NHS England and the Department of Health, seeking a prompt resolution to ensure that only eligible individuals receive the vaccine.