

Slough Borough Council

Report To:	Health & Wellbeing Board
Date:	18 th June 2024
Subject:	Prevention of Whooping Cough in Babies
Chief Officer:	Tessa Lindfield, Director of Public Health & Public Protection
Contact Officer:	Kelly Evans, Deputy Director of Public Health
Ward(s):	All

1. Summary and Recommendations

- 1.1 This report sets out the current situation on rising cases of whooping cough in England and opportunities for prevention of harm from the infection.

Recommendations:

The Health & Wellbeing Board :

1. Notes the picture of rising cases of whooping cough, the risk to babies and opportunities for prevention.
2. Encourage their staff working with families to take up training opportunities so they understand the reasons for and the value of vaccination and to demonstrate a positive attitude to vaccination programmes including those to prevent whooping cough.
3. Encourages communications partners to share and amplify NHS messaging on pertussis vaccination.

Reason: Childhood immunisations are a key component of the Starting Well priority for the Health & Wellbeing Board.

Briefing on whooping cough cases in babies and young children in England

Paper to Slough Health and Wellbeing Board

June 2024

Purpose of this paper

1. This document outlines:
 - 1.1 Background to whooping cough
 - 1.2 Current situation of whooping cough cases
 - 1.3 Pertussis vaccination in pregnancy and the Frimley picture
 - 1.4 Key messages
 - 1.5 Appendix A – Laboratory confirmed cases of pertussis by quarter in England: 2011-2024

2 Background

2.1 Whooping cough (*Pertussis*) is a bacterial infection of the lungs and airways. It spreads very easily through coughing and sneezing.

2.2 Whooping cough is distressing and can cause serious health problems, requiring hospital admission, especially in young babies.

2.3 Babies under 3 months old are at greatest risk of severe complications and death.

2.4 The first symptoms of whooping cough are similar to a common cold and after a week or two it can develop into uncontrollable bouts of coughing. The cough is typically worse at night and can cause a distinctive “whooping” sound in young babies.

2.5 Whooping cough can be prevented through vaccination. The routine childhood vaccination programme in the UK at 8, 12 and 16 weeks of age with a booster offered preschool includes pertussis.

2.6 Pregnant women are offered vaccination so they pass immunity to their babies to protect them in the first few months of life before they receive their childhood vaccinations.

3 Whooping cough cases in England

3.1 In England, rates of whooping cough have risen sharply in recent months. It is expected that this increase will continue for several months.

3.2 The rise in cases is thought to be due to a combination of factors;

- whooping cough is a cyclical disease that peaks every 3 to 5 years with the last increase seen in 2016.
- The impact of restrictions during the pandemic meant that cases of most infectious diseases fell to very low numbers which delayed the next, natural peak of whooping cough cases.
- Uptake of routine childhood vaccinations fell during the pandemic and has decreased in recent years, leading to reduced immunity in the population.

3.3 There have been 2793 reported cases of reported whooping cough cases since January 2024 in England, which is more than double the number of cases during 2023 (858 cases).

3.4 Of the 2793 cases reported since the start of 2024, about half of the cases are in those aged 15 years and older and about a third in children aged between 10 and 14 years old.

3.5 Sadly, there have been five reported infant deaths from pertussis across the country between January and March 2024.

2. Pertussis vaccination in pregnancy and the Frimley picture

4.1 Whooping cough vaccine has been used extensively in the pregnant women in the UK since October 2012 after an outbreak of whooping cough cases in 2012 which led to a fall in case numbers and deaths. Prior to the introduction of the maternal vaccination programme in 2012, there were 63 deaths from whooping cough and since 2013 to the end of March 2024, there have been 26 deaths in babies with confirmed pertussis, 21 of whom were too young to be fully protected by infant vaccination.

4.2 Pregnant women can help protect unborn babies from whooping cough by taking the vaccine. The whooping cough vaccination produces antibodies in the mother to pass on to the baby in the womb, giving them elevated levels of protection until the baby is old enough to have their own vaccination at 8 weeks old.

4.3 Pertussis vaccination in pregnancy is offered in antenatal care between 16 and 32 weeks of gestation. It is estimated that vaccination of pregnant women is about 92%

effective in preventing whooping cough cases, hospital admissions and deaths in young babies.

4.4 Uptake of pertussis vaccination in pregnancy has fallen in recent years across England, from 74.7% uptake in December 2017 to 59.5% In December 2023.

4.5 Latest data for Frimley shows that 62.3% of pregnant women are vaccinated (November 2023 data). Most of these vaccinations are delivered via GP practices in Frimley, with some being delivered by midwives.

**** Note that the data and figures presented are correct only as at the time of writing and subject to change as new data emerges****

Inequalities in vaccination coverage in pregnancy

4.6 Local data is not available but national data analysis tells us that women on their second (or higher) pregnancy have lower uptake of vaccines.

4.7 Maternal pertussis uptake is lowest in Black and Black Caribbean ethnic groups. Other low uptake groups are women younger than 20 years old, and women in more deprived groups.

5 Communications

5.1 Evidence from around the country tells us that pregnant women are nervous about being vaccinated but they do not always understand that the main purpose of pertussis vaccine in pregnancy is to protect the baby from harm in their first few weeks of life.

5.2 There are various assets to help promote vaccine uptake in pregnancy:

- UKHSA: [maternal vaccination stakeholder communications toolkit](#)
- NHSE pregnancy comms pack is available on [Future NHS](#).
- [NHS Choices: Whooping cough](#)
- [UKHSA Published Data on pertussis](#)

6 Local Action

6.1 Vaccines are offered locally during antenatal care at the hospital and in primary care. Maternity services are working hard to improve vaccination rates locally.

6.2 NHS communications will lead any campaign work with the support of partner organisations.

6.3 Public Health teams receive regular briefings from UKHSA on the national picture and any local outbreaks.

6.4 Information and training resources have been shared with primary care as part of the GP Bulletin.

6.5 BOB ICB are offering a [free 2.5 hour training session](#) to health, social care and voluntary sector staff working in the South East to help build confidence, skills and knowledge to open up discussions with patients about vaccination.

7. What can the Health & Wellbeing Board do to help?

7.1 Note the picture of rising cases of whooping cough, the risk to babies and opportunities for prevention.

7.2 Encourage their staff working with families to take up training opportunities so they understand the reasons for and the value of vaccination and to demonstrate a positive attitude to vaccination programmes including those to prevent whooping cough

7.3 Encourage communications partners to share and amplify NHS messaging on pertussis vaccination.

End

Appendix A: Laboratory confirmed cases of pertussis in England: 2011 - 2023

UKHSA data source: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pertussis-epidemiology-in-england-2024/confirmed-cases-of-pertussis-in-england-by-month#fn:1>

