

Spotlight Public Health

Evidence and policy briefings

Measles

2 February 2024

Purpose

Spotlight briefings summarise the key information that decision makers need to keep up to speed on important health issues. Each briefing puts the science, national policy and guidance into a local context to support local decisions.

Briefings are shared with a wide range of partners including South Gloucestershire Health & Wellbeing Board, Elected Members, Council staff, and members of the Locality Partnership. Please share with others who would find it helpful.

If you would like to be added to the mailing list for these briefings please email:
publichealthsouthgloucestershire@southglos.gov.uk

Spotlight: Measles

- Measles is an acute viral disease, which causes a fever, conjunctivitis, cough, and rash. It is highly contagious and is spread by breathing infected airborne droplets, coughs, and sneezes.
- Children who have measles can become very poorly, and may suffer serious complications including pneumonia, severe diarrhoea, and encephalitis (inflammation of the brain). There is no specific treatment for measles and care focuses on relieving symptoms and preventing complications.
- UKHSA have declared a national incident in Jan 2024 due to rising cases in England, with large outbreaks occurring in London and Birmingham. Following this measles and MMR rates have attracted considerable press interest.



The screenshot shows a BBC News article. The top navigation bar includes 'BBC', 'Sign in', 'LIVE', 'Home', 'News', 'Sport', and 'Weather'. Below this is a red 'NEWS' banner with a 'Health' sub-section. The main headline reads: 'Measles: Why are cases rising and what is the MMR vaccine?'. A sub-headline states: 'Surge in measles cases prompts UK to declare national health incident'. A secondary headline says: 'Parents advised to check vaccination status of children, with full uptake of MMR jab down to average of 85%'. The article text begins with: 'Another 70 suspected measles cases in UK as WHO warns of 'alarming rise' in spread of the disease across Europe'. A small text block below the headline states: 'There have been more than 140 suspected cases of measles reported so far in 2024 - after 1,603 suspected cases were recorded last year compared to 735 in 2022.' The date '© 23 January' is visible at the bottom left of the article content.

Evidence and guidance

- Community-wide vaccination is the most effective preventive measure we have against measles. A safe and effective vaccination is free and widely available, and all children should be vaccinated.
- MMR vaccine is offered to all children as part of the NHS childhood immunisations schedule and is usually given as two doses at 1y and around 3.5y. The vaccine can be given to older children and adults if needed.
- The World Health Organisation has a two-dose vaccination target of 95% for populations, because at this level of community immunisation there will be herd immunity. This would mean the few people who are unvaccinated (e.g. young babies under 1y) are protected from any circulating virus and outbreaks are prevented.

Why this an important public health issue in South Gloucestershire?

- Measles spreads very easily among those who are unvaccinated, especially in nurseries and schools. It can be a very unpleasant illness and, in some children, can be very serious, leading to hospitalisation and even death in rare cases. People in certain at-risk groups including babies and young children, pregnant women, and people with weakened immunity, are at increased risk of complications from measles.
- Whilst South Glos has reasonably high overall coverage of MMR, we still have small pockets of lower MMR coverage. These unvaccinated people and communities are susceptible to measles infection.
- We are a local authority neighbour to Bristol, which, as a large urban city has many more unvaccinated people and is at higher risk of more significant outbreaks. With many people mixing between Bristol and South Gloucestershire for work, school, and social activities, we want to do everything we can to ensure our populations are protected.
- So far, we have seen only sporadic cases in the South West and currently we have **0 cases in South Gloucestershire**. However, UKHSA have been alerting systems to the risk of significant outbreaks outside of London since summer 2023.
- In South Gloucestershire, our focus currently is on prevention and preparedness.

South Gloucestershire context

Our local rates of MMR uptake compare favourably to national and neighbouring areas

The latest published data show that around 90% of 5-year-olds in South Gloucestershire have received both doses of MMR. This is considerably higher than the England average of 84% and as a local authority area we are therefore less likely to see large and widespread measles outbreaks compared to urban areas.

However, we are still not meeting the WHO target of 95% of children to have two-doses of MMR vaccinations by age 5, which is the level required for “herd immunity” and to ensure protection of the most vulnerable.

For some months we have been supporting initiatives to increase MMR vaccination across BNSSG including catch-up clinics specifically for those aged 17-35y who may have missed their childhood MMR. These have been run in several practices across South Glos and on campus at the University of the West of England and an evaluation is currently underway.

MMR uptake highlights health inequalities

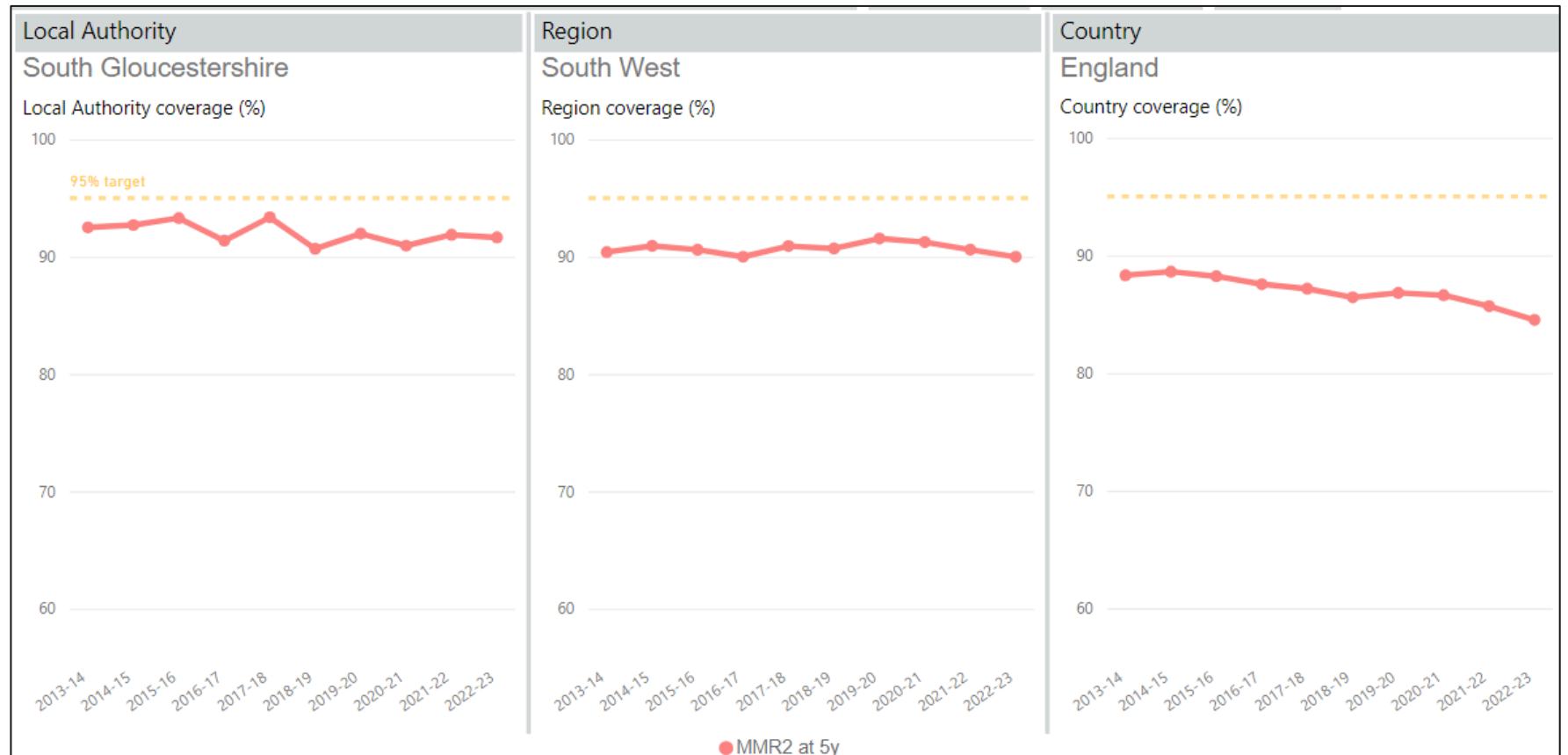
For some population groups, and in some communities, in South Glos the MMR uptake rate is considerably lower than 90%. People living in more deprived areas, and those from ethnic minorities, have lower rates of MMR.

We are working with colleagues from the NHS Vaccination and Screening Team to improve vaccination uptake and reduce this inequality in key target groups, and we will be working with our community engagement team and Trusted Voices to support this ambition.

South Gloucestershire context

The latest data show that MMR rates in England have been declining over the past decade.

In South Glos, our vaccination coverage is higher than the national and regional average, however we are still below the 95% threshold for herd immunity



Source: NHSE Childhood Vaccination Coverage Statistics-Local Authority Time Series

Local action

In South Glos we are working with colleagues across BNSSG and the council on the following workstreams:

1. Communication

- Amplifying communications messages produced by UKHSA and the NHS on our social media channels, to inform people of the national picture, how to recognise symptoms of measles, and how to obtain a vaccination
- Working with colleagues from our education team to share key messages with headteachers and early years settings
- Developing a targeted communications strategy to promote MMR in settings, areas, and communities with low MMR uptake rates

2. Vaccination

- Working with colleagues in BNSSG to set up additional, local, schools-based clinics to offer vaccines in schools and areas of low uptake
- Promoting the national catch-up campaign asking people to check their vaccination status and get vaccinated at their GP surgery (launching Feb 2024)

3. System preparedness

- Ensuring local providers have adequate surge capacity for large-scale vaccination which might be required in an outbreak
- Agreeing processes for delivering protective therapies such as immunoglobulin therapy for vulnerable people exposed to a case

How to support: what you can do to help

There are several ways in which you can help promote MMR and prevent measles cases and outbreaks in South Glos:

- Engage with people in your neighbourhoods and communities and service users in your settings to relay social media messages about the importance of MMR.
- Use opportunities to promote MMR as a safe, effective, and free vaccine and the best way to prevent measles outbreaks and to protect individuals.
- Encourage parents and guardians to check their child's personal child health record ("the red book") or to contact their GP practice to check their vaccination status.
- Signpost people to school-based catch-up clinics (for children) or for people of any age to go to their own GP to check their vaccination status and receive their MMR vaccine. It's never too late to catch up.

Appendices

Measles in South Glos – key messages

- UKHSA have made a national standard incident following a rise in cases of measles in London and the West Midlands (Birmingham and Coventry). Measles is highly infectious and can cause severe illness in young children. In response to the national incident, we are working alongside colleagues in UKHSA and the NHS to ensure our systems are prepared and our population as protected as possible, building on established programmes of work we have in place to address this risk.
- To date in the South West, we have had only sporadic cases and we have had no recent cases in South Glos.
- The single most effective preventive measure we have against measles is vaccination with MMR. The MMR vaccine is offered to all as part of the childhood immunisations schedule and is usually given as two doses at around 1y and 3.5y, however it can be given at any age if needed.
- In South Glos, our overall rates of MMR vaccination are amongst the highest in the region. Currently around 90% of 5-year-olds in South Gloucestershire have received both doses of MMR. Whilst this is below the WHO target of 95%, it is considerably higher than the England average of 84% and as a local authority area we are therefore less likely to see large and widespread measles outbreaks compared to urban areas. However for some groups, and in some communities, in South Glos the MMR uptake rate is lower than 90%, and we are actively working to improve vaccination uptake and reduce this inequality.
- There are several threads of activity ongoing that we are participating in:
 - UKHSA and the NHS are producing new communications materials to promote vaccination amongst all children and adults, and how to identify early symptoms of measles which will help control spread if cases occur. In South Glos we will be supporting these campaigns by sharing the materials with key stakeholders such as headteachers and early years settings and sharing public messages on our social media channels.
 - We have been working with colleagues across BNSSG to improve MMR uptake over the past few months. We are part of a BNSSG project to target 17–35-year-olds who do not have a record of MMR via GP practices. A catch-up clinic is being run at UWE for unvaccinated students to receive their MMR, and the school-aged immunisations team will be running community catch-up clinics across BNSSG.
 - We will also be targeting communications specifically to South Glos areas and communities where we know there are children or vulnerable adults who are not protected against measles, and we will be working with community leaders to promote vaccination amongst these groups.
- We are also involved in regional and BNSSG-wide incident response meetings to discuss how we mitigate any future pressures on the healthcare system that may arise from admissions and unvaccinated staff needing to isolate, and how we ensure testing and treatment pathways are in place to respond quickly and appropriately if we see cases and transmission in South Gloucestershire.

Further information

- [Measles - NHS \(www.nhs.uk\)](https://www.nhs.uk)
- [MMR \(measles, mumps and rubella\) vaccine - NHS \(www.nhs.uk\)](https://www.nhs.uk)
- [Protecting your children through vaccination - UK Health Security Agency \(blog.gov.uk\)](https://blog.gov.uk)
- [National measles guidelines January 2024 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)