

FROM: KAREN PEARSON
DATE: 1 DECEMBER 2020
TO: FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

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SUBJECT: CHRISTMAS ARRANGEMENTS

Issue: Executive consideration of proposed arrangements for the forthcoming Christmas period

Timescale: IMMEDIATE – for discussion at the Executive meeting on 3 December.

Press Office Advice: Significant media interest in the Executive's Christmas arrangements.

FOI Implications: Potentially disclosable

Financial Implications: None

Equality Implications: None at this stage

Legislative Implications: Will require amendments to the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Recommendation: It is recommended that the First Minister and deputy First Minister approve the draft Executive

paper attached at **Annex A** for discussion at the Executive on 3 December.

Background

1. A decision has been taken and announced that up to 3 households may form a *Christmas bubble* over the period 23 to 27 December. A key issue is whether existing *bubbles* count as part of a household.
2. The attached Executive paper provides details of:
 - Our existing bubble arrangements;
 - The position in other administrations;
 - Bubble options for 23-27 December, including the advice of CMO and CSA;
 - The need for clear communications with Care Homes; and
 - Communications more generally.
3. The paper asks the Executive to:
 - Discuss and agree the model for Christmas Bubbles;
 - Note the supports and advice for those who will be isolated and vulnerable;
 - Note that there will be Christmas guidance for care homes;
 - Note that the decision will need to be communicated, and engagement with the Assembly will be part of that (a draft WMS is attached for consideration); and
 - Note that advice and guidance will be uploaded onto NI Direct.

Recommendation

4. It is recommended that the First Minister and deputy First Minister approve the draft Executive paper attached for discussion at the Executive on 3 December. A draft WMS is also attached for consideration.

KAREN PEARSON

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Draft Written Ministerial Statement

First Minister and deputy First Minister: We are writing to inform members that the Executive has agreed additional measures to enable families and friends to meet over the Christmas period in domestic settings.

The Executive is mindful that everyone has had a very difficult year. The festive period is important to us and we are taking modest steps to enable people to meet in domestic settings, outdoors and in places of worship. The period is 23 to 27 December and we acknowledge the need for everyone to make their decisions and exercise their choices most carefully over those days.

It has already been announced that during those days, up to three households may meet. This is to enable families and friends to spend time together over the Christmas period. The Executive has today agreed [that the three households can consist of two households and one existing bubble.] This is in recognition of the importance that bubbles have played in providing support and tackling social isolation.

We will be asking everyone to take their decisions carefully, and to follow the public health guidance if families and friends decide to meet indoors. There will be guidance on NI Direct shortly.

We are acutely conscious that this is not a normal Christmas. Not everyone will choose to, or be able to, see everyone they would normally see and this will be difficult for many. We are also conscious that not everyone has support systems, and that there are some people and families for whom Christmas is a difficult time in the best of times. The Executive therefore discussed some of the support systems we have in place. We are making sure that the supports and advice are readily accessible and we encourage anyone who is lonely or vulnerable to make use of the help that's in place.

We are also focused on care homes and the position of providers, residents and their families and friends. There will be more and specific advice for the care home sector very soon.

And we noted that in this most difficult year, front line and operational staff including health workers and blue light services, public sector workers, and the voluntary and community sector will be at work over the Christmas period. The Executive extends our sincere thanks and appreciation.

DRAFT EXECUTIVE PAPER

MEMORANDUM E (20) xx (C)

FROM: FIRST MINISTER
DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

DATE: XX DECEMBER 2020

TO: EXECUTIVE COLLEAGUES

DRAFT EXECUTIVE PAPER –CHRISTMAS ARRANGEMENTS

Background

1. A decision has been taken and announced that up to 3 households may form a *Christmas bubble* over the period 23 to 27 December. This modest easement is intended to apply in domestic settings and in outside public spaces and places of worship.
2. The remaining key issue is whether existing *bubbles* count as part of a household. Each administration will be taking their own a view on this as different arrangements apply.

Our existing bubble arrangements

3. Our existing bubble arrangements are as follows:
 - You can form one bubble with one other household.
 - A bubble can be formed between two households of any size.
 - Indoor meetings between households in the bubble are limited to a maximum of 10 people, including children, at any one time.
 - To contain the risk of spreading the virus, a household cannot be part of more than one bubble. Therefore, members of the two households

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within a bubble will not be permitted to have close contact with visitors from a third household. They should maintain social distancing from people outside of their bubble.

- If anyone within your bubble develops symptoms, all members of the bubble should self-isolate. Particular care needs to be taken if any member is regarded as a vulnerable person in terms of the virus, which may include the elderly or those with other health conditions.
- If a household wishes to change the household that they bubble with, the household must wait 14 days from the last visit of the original linked household before starting a new bubble with another household.

The position in other administrations

4. Policy continues to be developed and the following are subject to confirmation:

- England have firmed up their arrangements. Their support bubbles are for two households, where one household is a single occupancy. They plan to allow bubbles to count as one household (ie meaning that there could be up to 6 houses within their Christmas bubble);
- Scotland's policy is developing but this may result in a Christmas bubble of 3 households, where one household can bring their existing support bubble with them. Under consideration, there may be an upper number limit of 8 people who could meet indoors at any one time from within the Christmas bubble (ie up to 4 houses involved with a number limit);
- Wales are likely to settle on a 3 household model where one household can bring their bubble into the Christmas arrangements (ie up to 4 houses involved); and
- The Irish Government announced their arrangements for December which starts with a longer timeframe over which people can meet in domestic settings, between 18 December and 2 January. There will be a 3 household model. The precise configuration for that has not been

announced. In discussions between officials, it is understood that a decision on this is likely to be made closer to the time.

Christmas bubble options for 23 – 27 December

5. There are a range of options for the Christmas period and a number of configurations could be explored. Examples include:
 - **Bubble plus 1 other household:** Building on the existing arrangements, add one more household to the mix to make 3. The two existing households would need to agree not to mix any further in the 5 day period. This would limit social contact more than any of the models outlined above;
 - **Bubbles are deemed to be part of one household:** The existing bubble would count as one household as, if the above guidelines are followed properly to date, there will have been no other mixing with households. However, this could result in up to 6 households meeting;
 - **One bubble and 2 other households:** In this scenario, 3 households may form a Christmas bubble, and one may bring their bubble household with them. This results in up to 4 households.
6. Ministers have been very clear that any solution is an *enabler* only and everyone involved would need to think very carefully about their choices especially concerning vulnerable people. In addition, Ministers want to give some hope and respite over the festive period, and it is understood that this raises the risk and there is very likely to be increased inter-generational transmission as a result.
7. Communications and messaging will be vital to support the Executive's decision on this. Some people will go further than the rules allow, some will continue to severely limit or totally avoid social interactions. In all cases, individual choice is in play and decisions will have to be made by families. Very few people will be able to see everyone in their circle of family and friends. In all of the above options, there is some room to support people who are socially isolated but the

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arrangements are unlikely to entirely solve that problem. Annex A sets out some of the supports and advice, and the Executive may wish to have a fuller discussion on this.

8. In the above options, it would also be possible to put a limit on the maximum number who can meet indoors at any given time from within the Christmas bubble. The current limit is 10 including children.

CMO and CSA advice

9. CMO and CSA have considered the options set out above. Their advice is that the third option (one bubble and two other households) is preferred. They do not advise that an upper limit needs to be placed on the number of people who can meet indoors at any one time. The current limit of 10 can be paused during the 5 day festive period.

Care homes

10. Care home providers, residents, families and friends will be provided with clear advice on arrangements for visiting over Christmas, and on arrangements for residents leaving the home to spend time with their families.

Communications

11. Clear communications will be vital and material has been developed for NI Direct.
12. First Minister and deputy First Minister would also intend to make a Written Ministerial Statement to the Assembly, as well as announcing the decision on Christmas bubbles at the afternoon press conference.

Recommendation

13. That the Executive:

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- Discuss and agree the configuration of the Christmas bubble;
- Note the supports and advice for those who will be isolated and vulnerable;
- Notes the advice for care homes, residents and families will be developed; and
- Notes the next steps of submitting a WMS to the Assembly and announcing the decisions at the press conference.

CHRISTMAS – SUPPORT FOR VULNERABLE PEOPLE

There are a range of support measures in place for vulnerable people. The following is not an exhaustive list, but it illustrates some of the key supports and the funding put in place by the Executive.

Social isolation, vulnerable people and families

From an early stage in the management of Covid- 19, the Executive put in place measures to reduce social isolation by enabling a single household to form a bubble with one other household. This has developed into an arrangement where two households can form a bubble. Although those arrangements will be broadened over the Christmas period for a time limited period, there will be people and families experiencing social isolation. The following arrangements will be in place:

The Covid 19 Community Helpline is pivotal in ensuring access to a range of support services for people with both material and emotional wellbeing needs. Immediate connections will be made into food, fuel, and general wellbeing supports delivered by a wide range of community partners. Calls are triaged and individuals referred to the support which best meets their needs, including crisis support.

The Executive has made an additional allocation of £3m funding for a Warm Well & Connected Programme to help bolster existing services over the Christmas and New Year period. The Executive has also allocated a further £3.5m for support to access food over the Christmas and New Year period and this will be directly targeted at vulnerable people.

Homelessness and rough sleeping

The Executive put in place and funded a homeless surge plan led by the NIHE and aligned with the public health response. PHA resources were available to support the sector and the NIHE took steps to protect the homeless population and prepare for increases in homelessness due to the disruption of lockdown. Guidance was produced with Health for homeless providers. The Department of Health provided funding to ensure that all rough sleepers were brought inside. The NIHE extended its response work into recovery and renewal, aiming

to reset our homeless response to focus on prevention (see the NIHE Homelessness Reset Plan - The Way Home (nihe.gov.uk)). This Christmas the health focused work will continue, and DfC has also given £150k Goodwill Grant to the Council for Homeless NI (CHNI), via the NIHE to provide for gifts etc. to those using homeless services at Christmas time.

Supported living

Housing support services have been funded by the Housing Executive through the Supporting People (SP) Programme since 2003. The Programme provides funding to organisations to deliver housing support and assistance to those who need help to live more independently. It is a diverse portfolio of 850 services across four thematic groups: Disability & Mental Health, Homelessness, Older People and Young People. Services are provided through supported accommodation or floating support: both provide support within a person's home. Funding to the Programme in 2020/21 is £72.8 million. SP services can promote confidence and independence, and where someone is isolated more practical interventions can also be used for example, access to local transport. Positive relationships can also be supported in order to maintain links with friends and family, and support given to practical solutions like internet connectivity to maintain contact online.

Housing support services often signpost service users at risk of being lonely and/or socially isolated to other sources of support such as groups, clubs and activities etc. Support provided can also include befriending and the encouragement of social intercourse.

Aware of the impact COVID restrictions have had on loneliness and isolation, SP service providers have this year used non-face to face activities such as virtual classes, distant socialising, newsletters, befriending schemes and referrals to community support to help service users. Continuity of service in SP has been maintained, and will continue to be so, by the provision of additional funding from the Executive (£10m) and by ensuring all staff who provide housing support appropriately can access PPE.

Domestic violence

Domestic abuse in all its forms, both physical and non-physical abusive behaviour is fundamentally wrong. Unfortunately we know that domestic abuse can sometimes escalate during the Christmas period, and mindful that

for some, Christmas can mean spending more time with your abuser, and indeed increased risk of abuse, we have given consideration to a number of measures.

- The PSNI and DOJ will be running additional domestic abuse awareness campaigns to highlight public awareness and ensure that victims or potential victims are sighted on how and where to seek help. These will complement further activity being taken forward on this topic by Crimestoppers. Some people may be aware that a family member, friend or neighbour is a victim of domestic abuse, and Crimestoppers provides a safe confidential way to report any such suspicions.
- The PSNI led, multi-agency partner meetings which were set up at the start of the pandemic to ensure a joined up response to support those most vulnerable, will be held fortnightly in the run up to Christmas, and the PSNI will run a series of operational activity focused on perpetrators of domestic violence.
- The Minister of Justice intends to launch Domestic Homicide Reviews on the 10 December. DHRs are a multi-agency review of the way in which local professionals and organisations, which came into contact with someone who has died as a result of suspected domestic abuse, worked individually and together with the victim. The primary focus of the reviews is on learning lessons and highlighting best practice to seek to mitigate future risks to victims or potential victims of abuse.

Communications

It will be vital that people who need help can find the information and support as quickly and easily as possible. EIS are ensuring that NI Direct provides an accessible gateway to supports and advice.

The Executive will also be mindful that front line workers will be working over the Christmas period, delivering in hospitals and delivering blue light services, delivering other essential public services, volunteering, and involved in assisting people with the above issues. The Executive will want to consider a Christmas message to all those who are giving their time to public service and volunteering over the period.