

**SUB/XXX/2020**

From: David Sales

Date: 02 July 2020

1. Moira Doherty (content 02/07/20)
2. Special Advisor
3. Minister

**END TO FOOD BOX DELIVERY FOR SHIELDED GROUP**

|                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Issue:</b>            | Delivery of food boxes to the shielded group will cease on the 31 <sup>st</sup> July. You are asked to approve a letter to be issued to recipients of the service and a further letter to MLAs.                                                        |
| <b>Timing:</b>           | Your approval of the content of the letter for recipients is required urgently to ensure they can be printed and inserted into boxes to provide notice ahead of the change in late July.                                                               |
| <b>Priority:</b>         | <b>2. Priority</b> (i.e. clearance required within <u>3 working days</u> )                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <b>FOI Implications:</b> | In the event of a request for disclosure of information contained in this submission under the FOI Act, the request would be considered in the context of the relevant provisions of the legislation, including any exemptions that may be applicable. |

**Presentational Issues:** At the start/peak of the COVID-19 crisis the food parcel service attracted significant media attention, however, the number of media enquiries has considerably reduced in recent weeks with no enquiries made in June. Cleared by press office. LF. 01/07/20

**Financial Implications:** The access to food strand continues to operate within its £10m funding envelope as detailed in SUB/1466/2020 (cleared finance 2/07).

**Legislation Implications:** N/A

**Equality implications:** None at present; any future plans seek to support those who are vulnerable to food insecurity and are aimed at improving equality outcomes.

**Recommendation:** Minister is asked to:

- Approve the letter to be issued to recipients of the service at Annex A (PDF attached).
- Approve the letter to inform MLAs of advice to the shielded group, as the food box service stops at Annex B.
- Note the lines to take provided at Annex C.

## **Detail**

1. When launched, the food box service was a crisis intervention aimed at supporting vulnerable citizens through the initial stages of the pandemic. Based on the information in relation to shielding available at the time, it was anticipated that this would last for 12 weeks until the end of June 2020.
2. As part of the review of the access to food programme, Minister Hargey agreed to extend the food box scheme until 31<sup>st</sup> July for those who were asked to shield, while deliveries for others who were receiving the service stopped on the

26<sup>th</sup> June. As such, the service for the shielding group will stop on the 31<sup>st</sup> July, aligning with the Department of Health's announcement to pause shielding.

3. To date, approximately 6% of the shielding group have been receiving a food box - this reflects the strong support available here via family, friends and community networks. A letter went out in food boxes, during the week commencing 22<sup>nd</sup> June, to make the shielded group aware that the service would stop on the 31<sup>st</sup> July. It is now proposed that a final letter will be issued to the group to reinforce the message and provide additional advice. The letter is attached at **Annex A**.

#### **Communication to the shielded group**

4. It is acknowledged that individuals who have been shielding may find the transition away from the food box service difficult. The Department of Health has issued a letter to the shielding group advising them that shielding will pause on 31<sup>st</sup> July but to continue to be vigilant due to their vulnerability.
5. By the same token, it is important that we now transition from an emergency response to a more sustainable approach for the shielded group. It is crucial at this point, that individuals who were shielding can be supported to make choices which are safe, whilst regaining a sense of self-efficacy.
6. Communication to the group will therefore suggest a number of alternative pathways to accessing food, including online shopping, deliveries from local convenience stores and support from the Community Helpline. Individuals who have been shielding can register for priority online shopping with the large supermarkets up until 31<sup>st</sup> July. The Covid-19 Community Helpline is also due to continue into mid-September.
7. Despite the fact that this group, in the main, haven't been classified as financially vulnerable, it is recognised that there may be some overlap with those experiencing food poverty and therefore additional signposting to advice services and the 'Make the Call' help line will be included in the letter.

## Wider communication

8. The messaging reflected above will also be communicated to key stakeholders and partners, ensuring that communication to those affected by the change is clear and consistent.
9. Correspondence to MLAs is attached at **Annex B** for your approval and a lines to take document has also been included at **Annex C**.
10. Press Office has advised that a press release and tweet will not form part of the communication for the end of the food box service, however relevant online channels such as NI Direct will provide updated advice.
11. In line with Press Office advice, we propose that the next press release to go out in relation to the access to food programme will focus on future steps, including the additional funding to Fareshare as a short-term intervention in the access to food work.

## Recommendation

14. Minister is asked to:

- Approve the letter to be issued to recipients of the service at Annex A.
- Approve the letter to inform MLAs of advice to the shielded group, as the food box service stops at Annex B.
- Note the lines to take provided at Annex C.

David Sales

Mob: Irrelevant & Sensitive

cc: Tracy Meharg  
Moirá Doherty  
Beverley Wall  
Colum Boyle

**NR**

Jackie Kerr

DfC Permanent Secretary Support

DfC Deputy Secretary Support ECG

Gavin Patrick

**NR**

Sharron Russell

**NR**

Karen Ward

## **Annex B**

XX JULY 2020

Dear Member,

I wrote to you recently to provide you with an update on the emergency access to food interventions facilitated by the Department for Communities in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

At that time I made you aware that the food box service (which has delivered some 178,599 food boxes to homes here up to 26 June) would be ending for the shielded group on the 31<sup>st</sup> July. This aligns with the Department of Health's announcement that shielding will be paused from this date.

I wanted to provide you with a further update, to make you aware that we will be placing a final letter in food boxes in late July, to provide a reminder to the shielded group that food boxes will stop and to suggest alternative pathways to accessing food if required. At present approximately 6000 individuals in the shielding group are receiving food boxes, which represents about 6% of the overall shielding group. This is testament to the presence of strong support networks in the North.

It is important that we now transition from an emergency response to a more sustainable approach for the shielded group, but is likely that individuals who have been shielding may find the transition away from the food box service difficult. Indeed, advice from the Department of Health advises them to continue to be vigilant due to their vulnerability. It is therefore crucial at this point, that individuals who were shielding can be supported to make choices which are safe, whilst regaining a sense of self-efficacy. The letter reflects this and I have provided a copy of it as an attachment for your information.

In addition to the advice provided within the letter, those who may continue to need any help or advice can contact the COVID 19 Community Helpline where an advisor will match individuals with other local help and support.

COVID 19 Community Helpline 0808 802 0020, text ACTION to 81025, or email [covid19@adviceni.net](mailto:covid19@adviceni.net) or visit [www.adviceni.net/coronavirus](http://www.adviceni.net/coronavirus). This service is planned to continue to September and will now reduce to 5 days (Monday to Friday) given the reduced demand.

While this group, in the main, have received a food box based on the requirement for them to shield, I recognise there may be some overlap with those experiencing food poverty. Those in the shielded group will of course be able to avail of any future support that my Department provides to the financially vulnerable.

As outlined in my last letter, we will continue to work with Councils, Health Trusts and the Voluntary and Community sector to inform approaches in the longer term and our work with Fareshare, a national network of charitable food redistributors, will help to deliver an increased supply of food to community food providers.

I trust this information is helpful and I will continue to keep you informed.

Yours sincerely,

## **Lines to Take**

### **Why is the food box scheme ending on 31 July?**

The food box initiative was set up as a short term emergency response to support the most vulnerable and was extended to 31 July for those shielding who received a letter from their GP and who did not have a network of family and friends to help them access food during the emergency and were in critical need of food.

We are now moving into a recovery phase as the restrictions that were in place begin to ease including the Department of Health's announcement that shielding advice would be paused from 31 July.

I acknowledge that people who have been shielding may find the transition away from the food box service difficult and the Department's aim is to support and enhance a more sustainable approach to help those who need help to access food.

### **How successful was the food box scheme?**

Nearly 180,000 food boxes up to 26 June have been delivered to those most in need since the Department launched its COVID-19 Food Parcel Service in April. Food box delivery will continue to those shielding and in critical need of support until 31 July.

The emergency service, provided in partnership with local councils, health trusts, local voluntary and community organisations and the private sector has proved to be a great example of cooperation and partnership working and we will take the learning from this experience to enable future collaborations to be even better.

### **What options are available to those shielding to access food after 31 July?**

I recognise that many people will still need help accessing food/supermarket essentials. These people may be unable (due to illness or impairment) to access food from shops, because they are continuing to self-isolate, or because they are not able to afford food. It is crucial at this point, that they are supported to make choices which are safe, whilst regaining a sense of independence, choice and self-efficacy.



The Department in conjunction with its statutory and community partners will signpost people to other ways in which they can access food including:

- Online shopping deliveries with the large supermarkets
- Delivery services from a range of local shops
- Local support through voluntary and community sector organisations and food charities.

### **Will the priority online shopping delivery slots still be available from the big supermarkets?**

If anyone shielding has already registered for priority online shopping from one of the large supermarkets, they will be able to continue using this service after 31 July however the supermarkets will no longer be taking new registrations after 31 July. Interest can be registered before 31 July at:

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/services/register-priority-online-food-delivery>.

Supermarkets' online delivery can still be accessed through the usual routes depending on availability.

Many local stores will also continue a delivery service and information on this can also be found online.

### **What about those people who were shielding but are also financially vulnerable?**

I recognise that there may be some overlap with those experiencing food poverty and those shielding, therefore in the letter advising those shielding that the food box scheme is coming to an end, we have provided signposting to a range of advice services. Whilst food may be at the forefront of need, it will be important to link in other supports including advice (benefits, money support, and debt advice).

Anyone who is vulnerable and in need can contact the freephone COVID-19 Community Helpline number on 0808 802 0020 or email: [covid19@adviceni.net](mailto:covid19@adviceni.net) or text: ACTION to 81025 to discuss their needs and to access support.

### **What about longer term assistance with access to food?**

My Department will be providing an additional investment of up to £875,000 to Fareshare, a national network of charitable food redistributors, to deliver an increased supply of food to community food providers.

In addition the pilot programme with Social Supermarkets has shown positive outcomes to date and has been extended to allow consideration for a full programme to be rolled out. This reflects the value of wraparound supports alongside access to food as well as offering a possible platform for pathways to employment. The Department is currently developing a supporting business case with the aim of having the appropriate network established by October.

In the longer term I am keen to factor in the findings from this emergency programme into the development of the overarching Anti-Poverty Strategy to include a clear set of actions on food poverty/insecurity.