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FROM: KAREN PEARSON
DATE: 23 NOVEMBER 2020
TO: FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER
SUBJECT: EXECUTIVE POSITION ON CHRISTMAS

Issue: Latest position on the decisions required around possible relaxations over Christmas.

Timescale: IMMEDIATE – For decision at tomorrow’s Executive meeting. UKG are working towards a COBR tomorrow afternoon.

Press Office Advice: Over recent days there has been a great deal of speculation over arrangements at Christmas.

FOI Implications: Potentially disclosable.

Financial Implications: None

Legislative Implications: This relates to amendments to the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020.

Executive Referral: This submission provides an update, and an Executive paper can be prepared if needed.

Recommendation: That First Minister and deputy First Minister note the latest position.

Background

Ministers, CMO and officials have been engaged in discussions across administrations over the past couple of weeks. The primary objective has been to explore possible alignment between administrations. There are discussions ongoing between Dublin and London.

2. 2. The proposals have been discussed between the CMOs this afternoon. The advice remains that any easing of restrictions will have an impact which would need to be understood and factored into the decision. SAGE had previously assessed that for every day restrictions are lifted, five days may be needed to manage the impact. There are indications also that adherence with current domestic restrictions would be mixed over the festive period. Some will not comply, some will not want to mix households. An approach which enables some flexibility also enables communications and guidance on how to mix in domestic settings.
3. 3. Based on officials' discussions, the key issues which could form part of an overall package across administrations are:
 - **composition of households.** The UKG proposal is for up to 3 households to mix in certain settings. This is an exclusive arrangement which means the 3 households should not then mix with other households. A complex issue arises in relation to existing support bubbles. UKG would wish to maintain their existing position in regulations that such a bubble constitutes a household. UKG's approach would therefore potentially involve up to 6 households if each of the 3 households is in a support bubble. If the households are managing the bubble arrangement properly, then there is very little increased risk of enabling the relevant households to mix. Obviously, it does not mean that all six households have to be in the same place at the same time. But it puts a boundary around how the members of the 3 households can mix. UKG note that the purpose of support bubbles was to support the vulnerable and isolated, who otherwise may be left on their own if their partner household can not visit with them because

they need to prioritise family and other close ties. Ministers should note please that SG and SW Ministers are unlikely to content with this arrangement. The proposal from UKG this evening is that administrations align on 3 households, that administrations decide how support bubbles would work in their jurisdictions, and that if people travel between jurisdictions then they must comply with the arrangements at the point of arrival. Ministers will be aware that there are variances between how support bubbles work in different administrations. For example, in England, a support bubble consists of a single-person household joining with another household. Whereas here, we have a two household model with a limit of 10 people including children who can meet at any one time;

- **duration.** It is proposed that the period for relaxations is limited to 23rd to 27th December;
- **travel.** It is recognized that it would be preferable for travel to be undertaken within the above period. However, in recognition of some journey lengths within the administrations, and in particular the connectivity and transport capacity issues we have here, some flexibility should be built in. This is likely to take the form of allowing travel the day before and the day after;
- **care homes.** UKG propose that arrangements in administrations for visiting within care homes will apply. In relation to residents leaving their care home to spend time with their family, UKG do not propose to prevent that. It would be a personal/family choice which would need great care and the heightened risk acknowledged. It would not be suitable for everyone and informed decisions would need to be made. In recognition of the increased risks, UKG propose that any household which enables this should not then mix with other households;
- **locations where households can meet.** UKG propose that this should be domestic settings, places of worship, essential retail, and outdoor public spaces. It is not proposed that the households could all meet up in hospitality as it is assessed that this would be difficult to control in practice. The proposal is that the existing arrangements in administrations for hospitality would apply. In practice, for example, Wales has a limit of 4 people and that would remain;

- there would be a mix of **regulations and guidance**; and
- **strong communications** would be essential. The core message would be that this is not a normal Christmas, any lifting of restrictions creates a risk and people must be aware of that, plan accordingly, take all steps to follow health advice, and all faiths have been impacted significantly by COVID-19 this year.

CMOs

4. CMOs had a further discussion this afternoon. A written read out is awaited.

Irish Government Position

5. Ministers and officials have raised the importance of discussions between London and Dublin, and there were further discussions today at official level and between the SoS and Minister Coveney. I understand that the Irish Government will consider winter plans tomorrow. I further understand that while the benefits of having similar arrangements were discussed, there is very little detail available tonight and Irish Government decisions are a few days away, potentially towards the end of this week.

Next steps

6. It is likely that a COBR will be arranged for tomorrow afternoon. SG and WG both have Cabinet meetings tomorrow. UKG will table a paper for COBR.

Recommendation

7. The key decisions and discussions needed are:
 - **The number of households which can meet together;**
 - **Whether support bubbles that form part of the existing household arrangements can be included;**

- The duration of the easements;
- Flexibility for travel;
- Visits to care homes;
- Whether care home residents should be permitted to spend time with their family, with a no further mixing limitation on that household;
- Where can households meet; and
- Impact on travel and gatherings on a North South and East West basis.

KAREN PEARSON

Ext: Irrelevant & Sensitive

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