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The Independent Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE)

The Independent SAGE Report 24

Safer Winter Celebrations and Festivities

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Safer Winter Celebrations and Festivities

Summary

This document provides advice for making winter celebrations safer for oneself, one's family and the community. It provides practical suggestions for alternative ways of celebrating which do not involve indoor mixing of households. However, should the state of the pandemic allow indoor mixing, it also provides a number of proposals for guiding and supporting people to make their homes safer during the celebration period and beyond.

Introduction

Whether households will be able to mix indoors during the period of winter celebrations. And festivities is dependent upon the rate and level of infections at the time. Consequently, the most effective way of maximising the chances of such mixing is to take firm action now to bring overall rates of infections down by, in particular, developing a fully functional find, test trace and isolate system combined with the support necessary for isolation to be a practical possibility.

Yet irrespective of the question of whether indoor household mixing is possible or not, we must develop ways of celebrating that keep ourselves, our families and our community safer.

Transmission of infection is mainly a problem of enclosed spaces (such as the home), particularly those which are crowded, poorly ventilated, and have poor hygiene. That means that safety can be improved in two ways. The first, and most effective, way is to avoid indoor mixing – either by meeting virtually (online) or outdoors. The second is to mitigate the danger of indoor mixing by improving distancing, ventilation, and hygiene. We consider each in turn in what follows.

Alternative celebrations

1. There will inevitably be some restrictions on in-person celebrations within the home this winter. They should be accompanied by support for alternative celebrations. These could be online, or else involve communal outdoor celebrations, drawing on the long tradition of such events in this country. The Government should work with local communities (e.g. mutual aid groups, community organisations and leaders, religious organisations etc.) and the private sector (e.g. tech companies) to resource and support these alternative activities.
2. One advantage of developing communal celebrations is that these can involve those who are socially isolated and would otherwise have no opportunity to celebrate at home. In this way the celebrations can be made better for millions for whom this can be the worst period of the year (and not only elderly people – in fact millennials are twice as likely to be socially isolated).
3. These measures can form part of a wider campaign (“No-one left alone this winter”) which builds on the flowering of community organisation during the pandemic and the private sector (e.g. supermarkets). It would ensure that everyone has regular social contact in (and beyond) this celebration period and that no-one goes hungry. Such a positive reframing, and the improvement of social relations at a community level that it can lead to, is an enduring good in its own right. Additionally, the knowledge that

family members are supported in their own communities can help offset concern about not meeting up with them in person.

Safety at home

1. If and when household mixing becomes possible, this must be accompanied by a sustained focus on how to create safer households – not only during the celebration period but also beyond. This must stress the importance of applying general principles of mitigation (distancing, ventilation, hygiene) inside as well as outside the home. It should stress that this is not a matter of instructing people what to do in their own homes (which could produce resistance) but of providing them with the information and the tools to keep themselves safer.
2. Such domestic regulation needs to be accompanied by Government support (a general policy of ‘supported regulation’). Initiatives could include a fund to support adequate ventilation (akin to schemes to fund home insulation) and a pandemic fuel allowance (to allow people to open their windows and still keep warm).
3. These policies should be promoted through a major ‘safer homes’ public information campaign. This should be produced in conjunction with local community groups and communicated through them as well as through conventional channels. The campaign should explain what people should do to keep safe and where to get practical support in order to make our homes safer.
4. This information campaign should also provide people with the interactional skills to challenge the risky behaviour of others in ways that are effective and avoid offence or social conflict.
5. These campaigns need to include the needs of hard to reach groups and be implemented in a culturally appropriate manner.

Responsibilities

In order to implement the suggestions and proposals outlined above, the following actions are needed:

Central government should (a) provide a ‘community fund’, distributed through local authorities, for alternative celebrations; (b) work with providers and provide funding to support the ‘safer homes’ initiative (e.g. ventilation fund, pandemic fuel allowance); (c) develop a comprehensive information campaign about ‘safer homes’ for our diverse community; (d) provide clear guidelines/checklists for making homes safer.

Local authorities should (a) work with local community groups and distribute funds for local community celebrations; (b) provide advice and expertise to support the ‘safer homes’ initiative.

Local community groups should (a) develop plans for alternative community celebrations; (b) coordinate the ‘no-one left alone this winter’ initiative.

Household members should (a) draw up celebration plans which include contingencies for whether household mixing is possible or not; (b) as a key aspect of these plans, use the guidance/checklists and available support, to consider how best to improve safety in their own households.

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Following the science