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The Independent Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE)

The Independent SAGE Report 28

Rethinking Christmas: A three point plan to keep families and communities safe

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Submitted to The UK Government and the People of Great Britain
& Northern Ireland by Sir David King, former Chief Scientific Adviser,
UK Government, Chair of Independent SAGE

Rethinking Christmas: A three-point plan to keep families and communities safe

Background

The Four Governments of the UK have agreed a common policy which allows up to three households to meet up indoors between 23rd and 27th December. This gives every family a choice as to how to spend their Christmas break. While it is understandable that many will want to meet and celebrate together, such mixing inevitably brings with it the risk of infection transmission and the more who choose to mix, the greater the risk of overall infections running out of control in the New Year. Indeed, given the stalled decrease in infection rates at a national level and the surge of infections in some areas (notably London and the South-East) if a large proportion of the population were to choose to take advantage of the 3 household dispensation, there is a very real danger of a third wave of the pandemic.

In this context, we urge both Government and the public to rethink their approach to the Christmas break. The responsibility of the Government is to explain clearly the risks involved in different courses of action and to provide the support necessary for people to make the choices that will best protect themselves, their families and their community.

More specifically, we propose the following:

The three-point plan

1. 'Can' isn't 'should'

The fact that people are permitted to meet up indoors doesn't mean that it is safe or that it is the best option for most households. Government must urgently outline the risks of indoor mixing. It should be stressed that if everybody chooses to take advantage of the three-household rule, there is a very serious danger of a third wave of the pandemic. So, while some families may have special circumstances which make meeting up the right choice for them (e.g. relatives with limited life expectancy who may not have many more Christmases), for most the best option may be to delay and meet up next year when it is safe to do so. The Government may want to support such decisions by declaring extra public holidays in 2021 – say on midsummer's day – thus allowing people to start planning for their alternative celebrations now.

2. 'Outdoors not indoors'

Meeting up outdoors is far safer than meeting indoors and, if possible, people should arrange to meet up in the open air. The Government should encourage and support this through a fund for the organisation of outdoor events in which people can meet up with other family members. These events should draw on the numerous local support organisations which developed during the pandemic and seek to ensure that they reach out not only to families but especially to members of the community who are isolated and normally experience Christmas as a particularly lonely time.

3. 'Safe not sorry'

For those families who do decide that their specific circumstances mean that it makes sense to meet up during the Christmas period, it is critical to help them in planning how to keep their homes as safe as possible. Information is an important part of this, but it is not sufficient. Thus a 'pandemic fuel allowance' (akin to the winter fuel allowance) should be introduced so that people can keep their windows open and their homes ventilated while at the same time turning up the heating to keep warm. However, at the same time as supporting those who do decide to mix, the core of all the messaging should be asking people to reconsider very carefully whether, right now, in the midst of a pandemic, the best way of showing love and caring for one's family is to expose them to the risk of infection by meeting indoors.

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