

## Executive Summary: SPI-B Insights on Celebrations and Observances during COVID-19

Restrictions put in place during the COVID-19 pandemic have impacted celebrations and observances including Good Friday, Easter, Eid ul Adha, Rosh Hashana, and more. COVID-19 will continue to be a challenge for many months. In light of this, it is important to rethink the nature of celebration and observance during the pandemic to protect and enable the elements of secular and religious celebrations and observances that the UK population holds dear.

The behaviours that combine to form celebrations and observances hold emotional value and significance. They also present, individually and collectively, varying levels of risk. This paper explores the possible behaviours of interest, potential alternative behaviours and messaging around celebrations and observances during the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK.

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### Key Findings

- **Interventions that are based on assumptions about the value assigned to different celebratory practices are highly likely to be less effective than those based on collaboration and co-design with communities and religious groups.** Additional qualitative and quantitative work is needed, to identify the value of behaviours associated with celebrations and observances to members of the public, community, and religious groups.
- Identifying the behaviours that are of concern in their own right, or in combination, will require a multi-disciplinary approach. This should bring together SPI-M insights about the combined traditional behaviours and risks associated with these, EMG insight into the risk of infection in settings in which events are likely to take place and SPI-B expertise in individual and group behaviour. A scenario-based approach would help target this work.
- It is important to recognise that some celebration behaviours can still take place during the Covid-19 pandemic and **alternative behaviours can take place alongside traditional behaviours.** Promoting and supporting positive alternative behaviours may help to reduce the negative emotions and undesirable replacement behaviours that some experience and develop when forced to stop or suppress a behaviour that they value.
- **Promoting outdoor activities provides an important opportunity for celebrations and observances to take place,** given the lower risk of transmission during socially distanced outdoor activities.
- Any messaging/decisions around Christmas needs to be sensitive to and acknowledge what happened earlier in the pandemic when some celebrations were the focus of targeted guidance in advance, while others such as Eid ul Adha were disrupted at short notice due to rising local infections<sup>1</sup>.
- **Irrespective of their belief system, a significant proportion of the UK population stands to be impacted by COVID-19 restrictions on their secular and religious celebrations and observances.** Polling evidence indicates that people are already making alterations to their Christmas plans and behaviours and forming views about freedoms and restrictions during the Christmas holidays<sup>2</sup>.
- Families and groups **must be made aware of the risk of infection** when they are considering temporary exceptions to public health guidance around social distancing, hand washing, and reduced contact over the holidays. This messaging should be accompanied by information about the **risks of traditional behaviours**, opportunities to create and engage in **alternative forms of celebration and make environmental changes to enable safer household visits, and the effectiveness of decreasing infection risks by changing behaviour.**

- Enabling celebrations within pre-existing groups, such as classroom bubbles, nursing home bubbles, and offices may decrease the need to take celebrations out into the community. **An extension of existing social bubble rules, at present only for forms of emergency care, is likely to create high legitimacy for government interventions as the government will be seen to care about what people most value during celebrations: their connection to friends and family.**

## Communication recommendations

- **Communicate likely scenarios in advance** as individuals and groups **are more likely to follow plans** if they plan ahead, and are more likely to have the **ability to adapt their plans** if they know that changes will be needed in advance.
- **Transparency is a basic principle of effective risk communication.** It is important to **acknowledge past abrupt cancellations** and the anger that resulted from this. What was the context in which these decisions were made (e.g. infection rate, testing capability, existing rules in place, knowledge of the virus and modes of transmission, NHS capability) and how has this changed?
- **Acknowledge and communicate variations in rules clearly for all celebrations and observances.** Multiple guidelines (local vs national) are leading to some confusion. This will be **exacerbated if there are short-term exceptions in place for celebrations** which could lead to confusion about when they are applicable or not and where in terms of **regional variations**.
- **Communicate the Do's as well as the Don'ts<sup>18</sup>:** It may be that, at the moment, many things that people will be doing are 'out of bounds', BUT if there is something that people CAN do, we should identify that and produce 'can do' guidance.
- Messaging should **promote the shared values** that have been retained, even in the face of change. Messages highlighting what celebrations are designed to achieve while co-producing alternative behaviours that will help to manage risk and 'protecting' things or people that are important to them.
- **Co-design** enables identification and development of approaches to realise shared values.
- **Co-production** that is **embedded at a local level** and is fit for purpose, supportive of procedural justice, equity-generating, and evaluated for effectiveness will go a long way to **preventing the development of interventions and substitution behaviours that lack relevance or public acceptability<sup>16</sup>.**
- Messaging about celebrations will need to be **tailored to increase reach and accessibility for different communities.**
- There are **shared practices across different celebrations** and many of the values associated with these are similar. There is an opportunity to draw on these similarities when sharing messages about enabling celebrations.
- **Women carry the burden of creating and maintaining family traditions and activities at Christmas.** "Messaging should be supportive of women adapting traditions and encouraging those around them to share the burden and to be supportive of any alterations to adapt for Covid-19 restrictions"<sup>3</sup>.

## Christmas Case Study

- The shape of celebrations may change, but the public appetite for Christmas celebration is still high. High levels of intended Christmas celebration do not automatically translate to significant levels of travel or visits with family and friends. Members of the public are already changing their behaviour and plans for the Christmas season. Polling data indicates that Christmas celebrations may be characterised by decreased intention to travel, attend festive

activities, and mix with friends and family. In spite of these intended changes, a majority of respondents are looking forward to Christmas and believe that it will still be enjoyable<sup>4</sup>.

- It is important to note that members of the public experience and perceive Christmas in a range of positive and negative ways. The variety of experiences suggest that the implementation of COVID-19 restrictions over the Christmas holidays will produce mixed responses. For some, the stress traditionally associated with this time of year may be alleviated, while others may be negatively affected by disruption to traditions or experience loneliness irrespective of whether Christmas is celebrated in the usual way.
- The information vacuum around the imposing or lifting of COVID-19 restrictions over the Christmas holidays risks the creation of a Christmas paralysis in public planning, resulting in unsatisfactory, unexciting, and unfulfilling celebratory options if restrictions are needed.
- Planning and co creation can take place on an individual, family, community, and national level. Conscious decision-making about what adds value to individual family Christmas celebrations needs to occur before the festive period'. Conversations should focus on the activities that people can still do, or develop themselves, the importance of continuing with traditions, creating new traditions, spending time as a household, enjoying a slower pace of life. These have the potential to create positive feelings<sup>5</sup>.

In addition to the key points made above, Christmas brings a few unique challenges:

- **The importance of family engagement and religious experience during the Christmas holidays poses a particularly challenging problem.** Higher levels of happiness were reported when family and religious experiences were special, in contrast to lower levels of well-being when events focussed on money and receiving gifts<sup>6</sup>.
- **People who may be willing to accept restrictions, themselves, may be less willing to do things that would distress their children.** There are opportunities to involve children in the co-design process, enable their creativity, and inspire them to be agents of change for the alternatives they create. Supporting discussions and exercises in schools about creating safe Christmas rituals and enabling neighbourhood competitions for the best idea could be very powerful.
- **It is likely that the mental health burden of the holidays will be felt more acutely by many, especially those who have lost or been separated from loved ones during COVID-19.** Restrictions and alternative behaviours must be discussed with charitable organisations such as AGE UK, Samaritans, and MIND, among others.

### Potential Further Work

- A collaborative effort across discipline areas could provide greater insight into:
  - 1) What are the key behavioural risks of the forthcoming celebration season?
  - 2) What are the levels of risk associated with alternative behaviours?
  - 3) How much can alternative behaviours decrease the risk of infection?
- The ease or challenge of changing or maintaining well-defined behaviours during celebrations and observances can be better assessed when the value that they bring to the essence of the event is understood. Better understanding could be developed via a specific Task and Finish group on this topic.
- Modelling would help to develop insight into which behaviours traditionally associated with these celebrations could present more or less risk. Working with colleagues in the Environmental Modelling Group could provide insight into the risk of infection in the settings in which events are likely to take place.
- SPI-B can draw upon expertise in individual, group and collective behaviour, household transmission and communication to provide a more detailed, scenario-based analysis.

## References and Further SPI-B papers of relevance

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<sup>1</sup> Manchester Evening News. [How will Eid celebrations be impacted by the pandemic after coronavirus spikes in Greater Manchester?](#)

<sup>2</sup> Ipsos Mori – Omnibus Poll. [Public Perceptions of Holidays in 2020](#). September 2020.

<sup>3</sup> National Foresight and Intelligence Briefing, 2020, p. 18 (Official Sensitive).

<sup>4</sup> Ipsos Mori – Omnibus Poll: Public Perceptions of Holidays in 2020 (September 2020).

<sup>5</sup> National Foresight and Intelligence Briefing, 2020, p. 20 (Official Sensitive)

<sup>6</sup> National Foresight and Intelligence Briefing, 2020, p. 17 (Official Sensitive)

### SPI-B related works:

- SPI-B: Principles for the development of co-creation. Available from the SPI-B Secretariat.
- SPI-B: Positive strategies for sustaining adherence to infection control behaviours. Available from the SPI-B Secretariat.
- SPI-B: Increasing adherence to COVID-19 preventative behaviours among young people. Available from the SPI-B Secretariat.
- SPI-B: The role of Community champion networks to increase engagement in the context of COVID-19: Evidence and best practice. Available from the SPI-B Secretariat.
- SPI-B/EMG: COVID-19 Housing impacts. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/spi-bemg-covid-19-housing-impacts-10-september-2020>