

19 December 2017

To:

Provider CEOs  
Provider CCIOs  
Provider CIOs

Dear Colleague

### **Maximising the stability of IT systems over the Christmas period**

As we enter the Christmas holiday season we want to draw your attention to the importance of taking steps to maximise the stability of IT systems for Health and Care, but also to let you know who to call if you do run into serious issues.

#### **Maximising Stability**

As you are all aware, even small interruptions in service can have significant impacts on our patients and staff when demand is high and staffing levels are lower than usual.

All changes to IT systems and infrastructure, however well planned, tested and managed, carry some risk of service disruption, which may include service interruption, degradation or failure.

In order to maximise stability, it is therefore important to impose a 'Change Freeze' over the Christmas period, to ensure that only critical system changes are introduced.

At NHS Digital, we have imposed a Change Freeze for national systems. This freeze runs from 17:00 on Friday 15 December 2017 to 23:59 on 3 January 2018. During this time, emergency changes to fix high severity service incidents can still go ahead, but only if approved through our emergency change management process, which will apply very high levels of scrutiny to requested changes. As always, change requests will be evaluated to ensure the appropriate level of both functional and especially non-functional testing has been conducted, back-out plans are in place and we have received the formal approval of key stakeholders, especially clinical sign-off. For more complex changes there will be formal processes in place to manage the change, including a go or no-go call, checkpoint calls to ensure activity is progressing as expected, a close-out call, and a stability call to ensure system behaviours are as expected following the change.

We know that most of you will already have robust arrangements in place, and this reminder is entirely unnecessary. However, at this busy time of year it is useful to pause to consider whether all appropriate actions are in hand.

### Where to get help in the case of serious issues

We at NHS Digital have been involved in supporting numerous Trusts over recent months where issues have arisen following system changes. Our work has been on a best-efforts basis, as we have not had a formal structure in place for this type of support. Lord O'Shaughnessy has asked us to build a more formal central support capability in Q1 2018 so that we can always provide support quickly when needed. However, you have our commitment that in the interim we will continue to do whatever we can to assist trusts in difficulty by deploying our own expertise and resources, and leveraging our supplier networks. Often, we are also able to simply act as an agency for connecting one part of the system to another in order to provide peer support.

Our national service desk is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, including throughout the Christmas period. The national service desk number is 0300 3035035 and should be used for the logging of routine incidents. In addition to the service desk we are making our service bridge available to support trusts with serious issues. **The service bridge number is 0113 397 3973.** Staff on the Service Bridge are able to escalate issues quickly to the appropriate teams and executive within NHS Digital.

Like you, we will be running on reduced staff numbers over Christmas, and our ability to respond will be somewhat constrained so we urge you to contact us only when you experience significant issues.

Avoiding difficulties is, of course, so much better than resolving difficulties, which is why we wanted to bring your attention to the importance of taking steps to maximise stability.

Wishing you a very Merry Christmas.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rob Shaw".

Rob Shaw  
Managing Director, Live Service, Platforms and Infrastructure & Deputy CEO  
NHS Digital