

COVID-19 Advice on the Conduct of Public Worship

Issue Date	Version	Issued by
30 th June 2020	1	The House of Bishops Recovery Group

The Recovery Group has been set up to support the Church of England as government guidance changes through the COVID-19 pandemic. This document has been prepared with information available by the issue date. It will be kept under review and updated as the situation develops, with each update issued as a new version. The current version will always be available to download from the Church of England website via the [Coronavirus FAQs page](#).

“I was glad when they said unto me, “let us go to the house of the Lord.”” (Psalm 122 v1)

Re-opening our churches for public worship will inevitably be a time of mixed emotions – joy at being able to come together to worship in our church buildings; sadness for the loss or absence of some members of our church communities; uncertainty about what the future “new normal” may be.

This guidance is written to offer support in enabling church buildings to be opened safely for public worship. The same basic principles of physical distancing, hygiene and safety that were outlined in the guidance for opening church buildings for individual prayer still apply. This guidance should also be read in conjunction with advice on cleaning and on detailed guidance for conducting services such as Holy Communion, baptisms, weddings and funerals available [here](#).

The guidance below has been adapted from published [Government Guidance](#) for use by the Church of England.

For other denominations who use Church of England buildings to meet for worship we ask that adhere to the same advice (where relevant) including conducting their own risk assessment and ensuring compliance to physical (social) distancing, Public Health hygiene practices and guidance on music and singing for example.

It is lengthy, but as this is the core document for conducting public worship in our church buildings, chapels and cathedrals, we ask you to read it carefully.

Salient points

- An advisory ‘cap’ of 30 has been set for weddings and other ‘stand-alone’ services such as baptism and confirmation if not conducted during ‘routine communal worship’.
- There is no numerical ‘cap’ on other services, but social distancing and Public Health requirements must be met.
- The two-metre ‘rule’ applies for public worship except in situations where closer contact cannot be avoided; extra Public Health precautions must then be taken.

- Consideration should be given to keeping numbers below the maximum possible to further minimise risk.
- Wearing of face-coverings is voluntary.
- While those at extra risk and the ‘clinically extremely vulnerable’ should be advised of the risks of attending public worship, a *decision* to do so is theirs alone.
- Government guidance includes a request for names of attendees to be recorded and kept for 21 days to assist ‘track and trace’ if required (further details from the government are expected to help parishes and cathedrals who wish to do this).
- Singing, chanting and playing of brass or woodwind instruments are not recommended, but a further update will follow soon.
- Detailed instructions on ‘consumables’ suggest that services of Holy Communion can be held if specific guidance is followed, including the continued suspension of the Common Cup (see the guidance document on Holy Communion).
- Public worship guidance includes surrounding grounds (including churchyards, car parks and courtyards); meetings in other places should follow other guidance for people meeting in public spaces.
- Refreshments can only be served at tables if a café is included in the church or cathedral building.
- Further Government advice about use of churches and church halls for non-religious activity is expected.

Detailed Questions and Answers

Q. When can we open our churches for public worship?

A. The government has advised that our church buildings can be opened for public worship from July 4th as long as this can be done safely.

Q. Do we have to open our church building?

A. No, there is no requirement to open. You should only open if you consider it safe to do so.

All clergy are encouraged to consider continuing to stream worship or other events, both to avoid large gatherings and to continue to reach those individuals who are self-isolating or particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 as well as to those who have joined worship for the first time online during the lockdown period.

Whatever is decided, please consider how to communicate this to your congregation and community.

Q. How should I go about preparing the church?

A. You should undertake a risk assessment to look at your own situation, as each church building and the local practices there are different. A template can be found [here](#).

Q. How many people can attend services?

A. The government has advised the following:

- For **communal worship**, including led prayers and devotions, limits should be decided locally on the basis of the capacity of the place of worship, following a risk assessment.
- For **weddings** there should be no more than 30 people in attendance. For further guidance about weddings see [here](#).
- For **funerals** there should be no more than 30 people in attendance. For further guidance about funeral see [here](#).
- For **other life event ceremonies** (such as baptism, confirmation, ordination) there should be no more than 30 people in attendance unless this takes place during routine communal worship. For further guidance about other life events see [here](#).

Q. How can we assess the number of people who can attend communal worship or other services?

A. You should undertake a local risk assessment to gauge the capacity of the building, allowing for safe entry and exit points and communal areas. The number of people permitted to enter at any one time should be limited to ensure at least 2 metres (or 1 metre with risk mitigation where 2 metres is not possible) between households. The sorts of things to consider include:

- Size and layout of the building, including ventilation
- Total floor space, pinch points, busy areas, entrances and exits, and where possible alternative or one-way systems should be used.
- Travel to and from the church building – whilst it may be possible to safely seat a number of people in the building, it may not be safe for them all to travel to and from, or enter and exit, and so numbers may need to be reduced to allow for this.
- What other venues are open locally and whether to stagger entry times with other venues to avoid queues or congestion in surrounding areas.
- Travel routes and whether it may be necessary to consider one-way travel routes, including between transport hubs and churches.

Q. How can we maintain physical (social) distancing?

A. This needs to be addressed as part of the risk assessment. Things to consider include:

- For frequently used places, mark areas using floor tape to help people to maintain social distancing. If your floor surfaces are historic or delicate even so-called ‘temporary’ adhesive products can cause damage if they are left in place for an extended period. Advice is normally available from the manufacturer’s website.

- Consider additional mitigations such as: avoiding face to face seating, reducing the number of people in any one area, improving ventilation, using protective screens and face coverings as appropriate, closing non-essential social spaces, one way flow, staggering arrival and departure times to avoid congestion at entrances and exits including such things as exiting one row at a time, using alternative rooms to separate worshippers.
- Queue management to reduce congestion and contact.
- Clear signposting or assistance with sufficient “stewards” to help maintain compliance. Example posters to help with this can be found [here](#).
- Those leading worship reminding worshippers of the need for social distancing and hygiene.

Q. Should we ticket services?

A. It may be necessary for some parishes or cathedrals to introduce a booking system to help with managing numbers, particularly where demand will be high.

Q. Do we have to keep a register of who attends our church buildings?

A. This is not mandatory, but in line with other government guidance for other venues you are advised to keep an accurate temporary record of visitors for 21 days, in a way that is manageable for your church, and assist NHS Test and Trace with requests for that data if needed for contact tracing and the investigation of local outbreaks. The government is working with faith leaders to make the process for recording these details compliant with data protection legislation and as manageable as possible.

Q. What about hygiene?

A. On entering and leaving the church building everyone, including staff and volunteers, should be asked to wash their hands thoroughly for at least 20 seconds using soap and water or to use hand sanitiser if hand washing facilities are not available. There should be signs and posters on safe hygiene practices. You should provide hand sanitiser in multiple locations in addition to toilet facilities.

Q. Can we open our toilets?

A. Toilets should be kept open if at all possible and carefully managed to reduce the risk of transmission. Steps that will usually be needed to make the use of toilets as safe as possible:

- signs and posters about safe hygiene which can be downloaded for example [here](#).
- social distancing marking in areas where queues normally form, and the adoption of a limited entry approach, with one in, one out (whilst avoiding the creation of additional bottlenecks).
- If possible, make hand sanitisers available on entry to toilets where safe and practical, and ensure suitable handwashing facilities including running water and liquid soap and suitable options for drying (either paper towels or hand dryers) are available. Communal towels should be removed and replaced with single use paper towels.

- Agree clear use and cleaning guidance for toilets, with increased frequency of cleaning in line with usage. Use normal cleaning products, paying attention to frequently hand touched surfaces, and consider the use of disposable cloths or paper roll to clean all hard surfaces. Special care should be taken for cleaning of portable toilets and larger toilet blocks.
- Keep the facilities well ventilated, for example by fixing doors open where appropriate and safe to do so.
- Putting up a cleaning schedule that is kept up to date and visible.
- Providing more waste facilities and more frequent refuse collection.

Q. What about those worshippers who are over 70 or clinically vulnerable, those who may have symptoms, and those self-isolating?

A. Certain groups of people may be at increased risk of severe disease from COVID-19, including people who are aged 70 or older, regardless of medical conditions. Individuals who fall within this group are advised to stay at home as much as possible and, if they do go out, to take particular care to minimise contact with others outside of their household. You may want to consider whether, based on your local circumstance, you have set times when churches are open solely for those particularly vulnerable to COVID-19, such as those over 70 or clinically vulnerable.

Those who are considered to be extremely clinically vulnerable to COVID-19 will have been advised to shield and are currently advised not to meet more than one person from outside of their own household, and therefore not currently advised to attend places of worship. From Monday 6 July, those shielding individuals may choose to gather in groups of up to 6 people outdoors and form a support bubble with another household, they will therefore still be advised not to attend places of worship indoors.

Anyone showing symptoms of COVID-19 (a new continuous cough, a high temperature or a loss of, or change in, their normal sense of taste or smell) should not attend the place of worship due to the risk that they pose to others; they should self-isolate at home immediately with other members of their household. Remote participation should be considered, for example by live streaming. This applies equally to individuals who work at the place of worship.

Where individuals are self-isolating due to a possible or confirmed case of COVID-19 in the household, or because they have been requested to so by NHS Test & Trace, they should participate remotely. See stay at home [guidance for households with possible or confirmed COVID-19](#). Guidance is different for funerals, see [guidance on managing a funeral during the coronavirus pandemic](#).

Q. What about children and young people attending worship?

A. We warmly welcome all children and young people, they are part of the worshipping body of Christ. Young children should be supervised by the parent or guardian and appropriate hygiene precautions followed.

Any shared facilities for children, such as play corners, soft furnishings, soft toys and toys that are hard to clean, should be removed and/or put out of use.

Outdoor playgrounds are permitted to open where a risk assessment shows that it is safe to do so, see relevant government [guidance](#). Particular attention should be paid to cleaning frequently touched surfaces by children and those that are at child height.

Principles in general guidance from the Department for Education should also be followed for any separate children's activities being organised by the place of worship alongside or within a service. Some helpful guidance regarding youthwork can be found [here](#).

Q. What about cleaning the church building?

A. If you only have one service a day, then it would be sensible to clean the church after the service. If you are having more than one service cleaning the whole church may not be possible. In this case, we suggest wiping down those surfaces that are likely to have been touched, paying particular attention to those frequently touched surfaces. You will need to ensure you have identified people to undertake the cleaning. A decision should be made locally on how frequently cleaning should take place based on an assessment of risk and use of the building. If the church is not going to be used for 72 hours there is no need to clean it. For further guidance on cleaning see [here](#).

Q. Can we use communal service sheets and hymn books etc?

A. It is best not to use communal service sheets or books that can be touched repeatedly by different individuals, and which may be difficult to clean. Individual service sheets should not be handed out at the entrance as this is likely to breach social distancing. However, they may be placed on pews/seats before the service, and then taken home by worshippers.

Alternatively, people could print off their own service sheets and take them home afterwards. Similarly, people should be encouraged to bring their own bibles and take them home with them. In circumstances where worshippers cannot bring their own books, churches should keep a selection of clean books for individuals to use. Clean books should be quarantined for 48 hours since their previous use and should be quarantined for 48 hours again after use.

Q. Can the organ be played?

A. Yes. Organs can be played for services, practice and general maintenance, but should be appropriately cleaned before and after use.

Q. Can we sing?

A. No, other than where essential a single cantor appropriately socially distanced - the use of plexi-glass screens should be considered to protect worshippers from them, as this will further prevent transmission and the screen can be easily cleaned.

People should avoid singing, shouting, raising voices and/or playing music at a volume that makes normal conversation difficult or that may encourage shouting. This is because of the potential for increased risk of transmission from aerosol and droplet. Spoken responses during worship should also not be in a raised voice.

You may wish to consider the use of recordings as an alternative to live singing.

Q. Can our worship band play?

Yes, as long as there are no wind instruments or singing. Players need to be appropriately socially distanced, and the music should not be so loud that it encourages people to shout above it.

Q. What about seating arrangements?

A. People from the same household or “bubble” can sit together. Everyone else will need to observe appropriate social distancing at all times. It may be helpful to remind people as they enter, and to supervise this if needed.

Q. Should people wear face coverings?

A. At present there is no government requirement to wear face coverings in places where social distancing can be complied with. However, people may wish to do so, and this is a personal decision.

Q. Can we pass a collection plate during the service?

A. Where possible cash donations should be discouraged. Where this is not an option, cash should be collected in a receptacle that is set in one place and handled by one individual, as opposed to being passed around. Regular cleaning and hygiene should be maintained, and gloves worn to handle cash offerings where giving continues.

Q. Can we serve refreshments?

A. Hospitality spaces within a place of worship, such as cafes, are permitted to open but should be limited to table-service, social distancing should be observed, and with minimal staff and customer contact in line with government [hospitality guidance](#). Other mitigations should also be considered, for example, foodstuffs should be prewrapped, and a system should be in place to prevent individuals from coming into contact with consumables and any dishes and/ or cutlery other than their own (for example the use of shared bowls).

Q. Can we process in church?

A. yes as long as social distancing is maintained.

Q. What if someone becomes unwell whilst in a church building.

A. If anyone becomes unwell with symptoms of COVID-19 in a church building they should go home immediately and be advised to follow the stay at home guidance. If they need clinical advice, they should go online to NHS 111 (or call 111 if they don't have internet access). In an emergency, call

999 if they are seriously ill or injured or their life is at risk. They should not visit the GP, pharmacy, urgent care centre or a hospital.

Other people who may have been in contact with the person who has become unwell should wash their hands thoroughly after the interaction, but they do not need to take any other specific action unless they develop symptoms themselves or are advised to do so by NHS Test and Trace. If they do develop symptoms they should follow the stay at home guidance.

The church should be cleaned in line with Government [guidance](#) where a suspected case of COVID-19 has been recorded.

Q. What about other Christian groups that use the church building for worship?

A. Other groups must undertake to conduct their own risk assessment and observe physical distancing and Public Health guidance.

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