

COVID-19: guidance for the safe use of places of worship during the pandemic

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1. Introduction

Places of worship play an important role in providing spiritual leadership for many individuals, and in bringing communities and generations together.

However, their communal nature also makes them places that are particularly vulnerable to the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19).

Under the current law places of worship are permitted to open solely for the following purposes:

- funerals, in line with restrictions on those who can attend as per Regulation 7(2)(b)
- to broadcast an act of worship, whether over the internet or as part of a radio or television broadcast
- to provide essential voluntary services or urgent public support services, including the provision of food banks or other support for the homeless or vulnerable people, blood donation sessions, or support in an emergency
- for early years childcare provided by a person registered on the Early Years Register under Part 3 of the Childcare Act 2006

This law is enacted through the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) Regulations 2020

From 13 June 2020 places of worship will be permitted to open for the following additional purpose, depending on the most up to date scientific advice of the risk posed by the virus:

- individual prayer (see section 4)

The government will continue to consider how to allow places of worship to reopen for additional uses in Step 3 of its Roadmap, which is expected to be no earlier than 4 July, subject to further scientific advice.

Through its Places of Worship Taskforce, the government is continuing to work with faith leaders and representatives to develop a plan to enable the phased and safe reopening of places of worship.

This guidance for places of worship will be updated as and when further changes come into effect.

No place of worship will be able to reopen before a final decision by the government and the accompanying change to the legal position in the published regulations. Places of worship will be able to reopen at a slower pace if they wish.

The following activities are examples of what is not currently permitted (not an exhaustive list) within a place of worship. It is encouraged that services continue to take place online wherever possible.

Further information will be given in due course on these activities:

- communal or corporate worship (led devotions/worship/service/prayer by a Minister of Religion or lay person, e.g. Evensong, informal prayer meetings, Jummah, Mass or Kirtan)
- services other than funerals, e.g. baptisms or coming of age ceremonies
- study groups, and out of school settings, including faith supplementary schools such as Sunday schools, madrassas or yeshivas
- lifestyle and leisure/recreational groups such as craft groups or exercise groups
- meetings including practices such as choir practice or bell ringing
- tourism: buildings should remain closed for tourism purposes

2. Purpose of this guidance

This guidance is designed to assist places of worship to prepare to open for the additional permitted activity specified above, in accordance with the associated legislation which will come into effect on 13 June, in a manner that is safe and in line with social distancing guidelines so that all individuals attending the place of worship, including those who work there, have minimal risk of exposure to the infection.

Each individual place of worship is strongly advised to apply this guidance with reference to its own specific circumstances, including its size and type of activities, how it is organised, operated, managed and regulated.

Venue managers for places of worship will have discretion over when they consider it safe to open for the purpose above and as permitted by legislation, and should decide to remain closed at this stage if they are not able to safely adhere to the guidelines outlined below.

Many places of worship are also workplaces and should therefore be aware of their responsibilities as employers under health and safety law. Places of worship also have a duty of care to volunteers, to ensure that as far as reasonably practicable they are not exposed to risks to their health and safety.

To help decide which actions to take, a COVID-19 risk assessment should be completed by each place of worship. This will be in addition to any risk assessment already in place.

See guidance on completing a risk assessment. This risk assessment should be done in consultation with unions or workers (including volunteers and contractors) if relevant. It may also be beneficial to include worshippers or other stakeholders (e.g. neighbouring tenants) in the risk assessment to assist understanding among faith and local communities and improve reopening design and execution. Places of worship are encouraged to make their risk assessments available online where possible.

This guidance applies solely to places of worship. For the purposes of this guidance a place of worship refers to all confined or enclosed spaces, within buildings or outdoors, used for religious ceremonies, collective prayer and worship or similar gatherings by faith organisations, such as a church, gurdwara, mosque, temple, synagogue, or prayer/meeting hall.

Venue managers are defined as the person or persons responsible for the management of an individual place of worship, including assessment of compliance with the following guidelines. This may be a faith leader or lay person.

Worshippers are defined as those individuals or households entering the place of worship to engage in a permitted activity.

This guidance remains under review and may be updated in line with the changing situation.

3. Key principles for safely reopening places of worship for permitted activity

Venue managers are strongly advised to take action to minimise the potential for spreading of COVID-19 among worshippers, and those working/volunteering within the building and surrounding grounds.

There should be a particular focus on protecting people who are clinically vulnerable and more likely to develop severe illness.

These actions should include:

- Religious leaders, lay people, family, volunteers, staff and members of the public, including children, staying at home and self-isolating if they have a new, continuous cough or a high temperature or loss of or change to sense of smell or taste. This is to minimise risk of spread of COVID-19 to friends, the wider community, and particularly the vulnerable.
- Individuals who are shielding should continue to follow the government's advice on shielding.
- If anyone becomes unwell with symptoms of COVID-19 in a place of worship they should be sent home and 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.

Test and trace

The government has launched an NHS Test and Trace service to manage the risk of the virus re-emerging. The service:

- provides testing for anyone who has symptoms of coronavirus to find out if they have the virus
- gets in touch with anyone who has had a positive test result to help them share information about any close recent contacts they have had
- alerts those contacts, where necessary, and notifies them they need to self-isolate to help stop the spread of the virus

Further information can be found online including for contacts of people with possible or confirmed COVID-19 infection who do not live with the person and for places of work.

Social distancing

Social distancing measures are actions to reduce social interaction between people in order to minimise the opportunity for transmission of COVID-19.

All managers and all visitors to a place of worship should follow the guidelines on social distancing including:

- Strict adherence to social distancing of at least 2 metres (3 steps) between individuals and households. For frequently used places mark areas using floor tape or paint to help people keep a 2m distance.
- Queue management is important so the flow of groups in and out of the premises can be carefully controlled, reducing the risk of congestion or contact. Considerations should be made for how to manage those waiting outside a place of worship, including the introduction of socially distanced queuing systems.

For example:

- Introduce a one-way flow in and out of the premises with appropriate floor markings or signage, with restrictions on accessing non-essential areas.
- Multiple entry points could be opened and clear signposting or assistance could be offered to guide worshippers and avoid congestion.
- Staggering arrival and departure times can also reduce the flow at exits and entrances as well as reduce any impacts on public transport. Venues could also consider introducing a booking system to help facilitate this.

- Consider using screens, barriers or alternative rooms and spaces to separate worshippers.
- Any changes to entrances, exits and queues should take into account reasonable adjustments to accommodate those who need them, such as worshippers with physical disabilities.
- Where social distancing cannot be maintained, extra attention needs to be paid to cleaning and hygiene to reduce the risk of transmission.
- Following the guidance on hand hygiene:
 - wash your hands more often than usual, for 20 seconds using soap and water or hand sanitiser, particularly after coughing, sneezing and blowing your nose, or after being in public areas
 - when you cough or sneeze, cover your mouth and nose with a tissue, or the crook of your sleeved arm (not your hands) if you don't have a tissue, and throw the tissue away hygienically immediately afterwards. Then wash your hands thoroughly for at least 20 seconds using soap and water or hand sanitiser if hand washing facilities are not available

Preparing a place of worship for reopening

It is permissible for employees, volunteers and contractors to enter a place of worship prior to reopening for the purpose of making preparations so that the building can be used safely. The place of worship must remain closed to the general public during this time.

Activities necessary to prepare the venue may include:

- essential maintenance
- essential repair
- cleaning
- reconfiguring the building to allow for social distancing, for example moving furniture, restricting access to parts of the building, preparing exits and entrances and installing signage and floor markings.
- other activities in line with suggestions in this guidance, such as making hand sanitiser and paper towels available, ensuring a waste management system is in place, and removing communal objects such as books and prayer mats from use.

All individuals involved with preparing the place of worship should follow all relevant public health advice, including social distancing guidelines and hand and respiratory hygiene measures.

Cleaning

It is permissible for essential maintenance, repair and cleaning to be undertaken in places of worship once re-opened.

All surfaces, especially those most frequently touched such as door handles and rails, should be cleaned regularly, using standard cleaning products. See guidance on cleaning and waste disposal.

Historic England has also produced guidance on cleaning historic surfaces, which might not be suitable for cleaning using standard cleaning products.

Sufficient time needs to be allowed for this cleaning to take place, particularly before reopening. Frequently used objects, surfaces or spaces, including for example doorways between outside and inside spaces should be given particular attention when cleaning.

Where possible, doors and windows should be opened to improve ventilation in the premises.

A decision should be made locally on how frequently cleaning should take place based on an assessment of risk and use of the building. Measures that will usually be needed are:

- signs and posters to build awareness of good handwashing technique, the need to increase handwashing frequency, avoid touching your face and to cough or sneeze into a tissue which is binned safely, or into your arm if a tissue is not available
- providing hand sanitiser in multiple locations in addition to toilet facilities
- providing hand drying facilities (preferably paper towels)

Hygiene

On entering and leaving a place of worship everyone, including staff, 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.

Face coverings

Evidence suggests that wearing a face covering does not protect you. However, if you are infected but have not yet developed symptoms, it may provide some protection for others you come into close contact with. Wearing a face covering is only a requirement in hospital and on public transport where wearing a face covering is mandatory from the 15th June.

However worshippers, and staff at the venue, may wear face coverings to offer protection to others and it is important to use them properly and thoroughly wash hands before putting them on and taking them off.

Face coverings are not a replacement for the other ways of managing risk, including social distancing, minimising time spent in contact, and increasing hand and surface washing. If you have symptoms of COVID-19 (cough, and/or high temperature, and/or loss of, or change in, your normal sense of smell or taste - anosmia), you and your household must isolate at home: wearing a face covering does not change this. You should arrange to have a test to see if you have COVID-19. These measures remain the best ways of managing risk in a place of worship.

A face covering is not the same as the surgical masks or respirators used by healthcare and other workers as part of personal protective equipment. These should continue to be reserved for those who need them to protect against risks in their workplace, such as health and care workers, and those in industrial settings, like those exposed to dust hazards who already use these in their daily work.

Face coverings should not be used by children under the age of 2 or those who may find it difficult to manage them correctly. For example, primary age children unassisted, or those with respiratory conditions.

See guidance on making face coverings at home. The key thing is they should cover the mouth and nose and fit well around the face.

Children attending places of worship

Parents or guardians should ensure children maintain social distancing. Young people and children should stay at home if they develop coronavirus (COVID-19) symptoms to avoid spreading infection to others. If young people or children develop coronavirus (COVID-19) symptoms while in a place of worship they should be taken home without delay.

The general advice is that children and young people should ensure they clean their hands more often than usual and use a tissue to catch coughs and sneezes. Young children should be supervised by the parent or guardian. They should wash hands thoroughly for 20 seconds with running water and soap and dry them thoroughly or use alcohol hand rub or sanitiser ensuring that all parts of the hands are covered.

Places of worship can help remind children and young people, and their parents and guardians of the important actions they can take during the COVID-19 outbreak, to help prevent the spread of the virus. Posters on general hand hygiene can be found on the eBug website.

Any facilities for children (play corners, books, toys) should be removed, and any outdoor play equipment (climbing frames, slides) should remain closed. Particular attention should be paid to cleaning frequently touched surfaces which are at child height.

Individuals aged 70 years and over attending the place of worship

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 wish to inform these groups in particular of the symptoms of COVID-19 and current stay alert and social distancing guidance.

Protective security

In implementing this guidance places of worship should continue to take account of protective security considerations to maintain effective security of the premises, all staff and visitors, especially around entry / exit procedures and any queueing or crowding outside the building where people can be more exposed.

4. Guidance for individual prayer within a place of worship

From 13 June places of worship will be permitted to open for individual worship.

Permitted use

Individual prayer within a place of worship is defined as a person or household entering the venue to pray on their own and not as part of a group, led prayer or communal act. They should be socially distanced from other individuals or households. Collective or communal prayer and regular scheduled services are not permitted at this time as set out in Regulations. This includes a Minister of Religion or lay person leading devotions or prayer of any sort.

Those in charge of running a place of worship should engage and communicate with worshippers and the wider community to explain what activity is permitted and what is still prohibited.

Principles

Individuals or members of the same household may enter the building to make personal prayers and it is strongly advised that social distancing is maintained with other households. The fewer the people inside the building at any one time, the lower the risk of transmission.

Individual prayer should be carried out such that adherence to social distancing of 2 metres (3 steps) all round can be maintained between individuals or those from separate households. A household is a person or a group of people who live together in the same accommodation.

Individuals should stay alert at all times. They should not gather in groups, except with members of their own household, inside or outside the building. Steps should be taken to reduce the social interaction between people outside of an individual's household to reduce the transmission of the virus.

In addition to the key principles and guidelines set out in section 3, it is strongly advised that:

- Individuals should be prevented from touching or kissing devotional and other objects that are handled communally. Barriers and/or clear signage should be put in place where necessary.
- Individuals should also avoid touching property belonging to others such as shoes which, if removed, should be placed and collected by their owner while adhering to social distancing principles.
- Books, reusable and communal resources e.g. prayer mats, service sheets or devotional material should be removed from use. Single use alternatives can be provided as long as they are removed by the worshipper. Items owned by the individual to aid worship e.g. a prayer mat or religious text, may be brought in but must be removed again.
- No food or drink is made available.
- Activities such as singing and/or playing instruments should be avoided, with the exception of organists who are able to use buildings for practice with appropriate social distancing. The government is continuing to work on scientific and medical advice around how such activities can best be managed safely and further guidance will follow on this shortly.
- Any pre-requisite washing/ablution rituals should not be done at the place of worship and shared washing areas should be closed.
- Where possible faith leaders should discourage cash giving and continue to use online giving and resources where possible minimising contact around transactions. Regular cleaning and hygiene should be maintained, and gloves worn to handle cash offerings where giving continues.

Restrictions on capacity

Restrictions should be set locally to limit the number of people permitted to enter the place of worship for individual prayer at any one time, so that a safe distance of at least 2 metres (3 steps) can be maintained between individuals and households.

The size and circumstance of the premises will determine the maximum number of people that can be accommodated whilst also facilitating social distancing.

In defining the number of people that can reasonably follow 2 metres distancing, the total floorspace as well as likely pinch points and busy areas should be taken into account (e.g. entrances, exits) and where possible alternative or one-way routes introduced.

A risk assessment should be carried out to identify points of high risk in the building and mitigating action.

It is recommended that places of worship close to individual prayer during the time normal services would be taking place and continue to stream this regular worship or prayer services (which individuals are not currently permitted to attend) to avoid over-crowding.

Venue managers might want to consider advertising set days or times when places of worship are open for individual prayer solely for those particularly vulnerable to COVID-19, e.g. those over 70 or clinically vulnerable.

5. Travel to and from a place of worship

The above advice on social distancing also applies when travelling to and from a place of worship.

See guidance for passengers who need to travel during the coronavirus outbreak. This is being regularly reviewed and updated.

6. Guidance for early years and childcare use

Places of worship that serve as premises for early years childcare provided by a person registered on the Early Years Register under Part 3 of the Childcare Act 2006 can open for this purpose from 1 June.

Providers of these services in places of worship should follow the relevant government guidance that sets out which children can attend and the measures and approaches that should be put in place to keep children, staff, parents and carers, and any essential visitors safe.

- Planning guide for early years and childcare settings
- Actions for early years and childcare providers during the coronavirus outbreak
- Implementing protective measures in education and childcare settings

7. Should you visit if symptomatic?

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.

8. Individuals who are self-isolating due to a possible or confirmed case of COVID-19 in the household

Where individuals are self-isolating due to a possible or confirmed case of COVID-19 in the household they should participate remotely. See stay at home guidance for households with possible or confirmed COVID-19.

9. Individuals who are extremely clinically vulnerable/shielding

The NHS has written to around 2.2. million who are considered to be extremely clinically vulnerable to coronavirus, advising them to shield. See the guidance for this group.

Current guidance is that shielded patients may wish to go outside with members of their household, or to meet one person from another household if they live alone, maintaining any interactions outside and social distancing. Shielded patients are not advised to meet more than one person from outside of their own household, and therefore not currently advised to attend places of worship.

10. What leaders can do to help prevent the spread of infection

Faith leaders should consider and adopt the guidance above and seek to include changes that could be made to religious rituals that usually involve close contact between individuals. All use of shared objects and food items should be prevented to limit the spread of infection.

Many faiths have issued specific guidance to their faith communities about some of these issues.

Faith leaders should carry out a risk assessment of the place of worship and tailor this guidance as appropriate for the venue and practices being carried out.

Certain groups of people are at increased risk of severe disease from COVID-19, including people who are:

- aged 70 or older (regardless of medical conditions)

- under 70 with an underlying health condition listed below (that is, anyone instructed to get a flu jab each year on medical grounds):
- chronic (long-term) mild to moderate respiratory diseases, such as asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), emphysema or bronchitis
- chronic heart disease, such as heart failure
- chronic kidney disease
- chronic liver disease, such as hepatitis
- chronic neurological conditions, such as Parkinson's disease, motor neurone disease, multiple sclerosis (MS), or cerebral palsy
- diabetes
- a weakened immune system as the result of certain conditions, treatments like chemotherapy, or medicines such as steroid tablets
- being seriously overweight (a body mass index (BMI) of 40 or above)
- pregnant women

You may wish to inform these groups, in particular, of the symptoms of COVID-19 and current stay at home and social distancing guidance, and strongly discourage them from attending faith gatherings during this time or set aside a time for them to attend for individual prayer.

You may wish to make the government's information on COVID-19 available to your faith community and others, in order to challenge unhelpful misinformation.

11. How can places of worship communicate this guidance to visitors?

Each place of worship is strongly advised to implement the measures set out in this guidance to ensure that visitors comply with Regulations, and any risk assessments completed for the venue, for the safety of all those who visit and work there. The Government strongly advises each place of worship ensures that visitors comply with the social distancing guidelines.

Places of worship and faith leaders should consider how guidance can be communicated to visitors, including before they visit, in a way that is accessible and appropriate for the cultures, languages and reading levels of communities served by the place of worship.