

CLAS CIRCULAR 2020/19 (25 June 2020)

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It would be very helpful if members could let us know of anything that appears to indicate developments of policy or practice on the part of Government or other matters of general concern that should be pursued.

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FAITH & SOCIETY

COVID-19: update on reopening places of worship in England

For information

On 24 June, the Government issued somewhat ambivalent updated guidance, [Coronavirus outbreak FAQs: what you can and can't do after 4 July](#) (ie in England). The relevant extracts on places of worship are as follows:

'1.17 Can weddings go ahead

Yes, from 4 July, weddings and civil partnerships will be allowed to take place. You should only invite close friends and family, up to a maximum of 30 people. The wedding exception is for wedding ceremonies only. Large wedding receptions or parties should of course not be taking place. Wedding celebrations can only happen when people follow the guidance of six people outdoors, support bubbles, or two households indoors or outdoors. It is critical for these guidelines to be observed to keep you and your family and friends as safe as possible.

1.18 Can I pray in a place of worship?

Yes, from 4 July, places of worship can open for services and group prayer and strongly advised to follow COVID-19 Secure guidelines. You will be able to independently pray or hold a religious ceremony in a church, mosque, synagogue, temple or other places of worship.

We advise that you limit your close social interaction in these venues to your own household and up to one other, wherever possible. When attending a place of worship, for ceremonies or services, it is important to observe the social distancing guidelines.'

Whether that meant that *weddings* were limited to a maximum of 30 people or that *all acts of worship* were limited to 30 people was not exactly clear; however, the House of Bishops of the Church of England has issued its own [clarification](#) after a virtual meeting:

'The House welcomed clarification from the Government that **a limit of 30 people in total applied to weddings, and that numbers for worship would differ depending on the context**' [emphasis added].

[Source: HM Government, Church of England, 24 June]

Divorce, Dissolution and Separation Bill

For information

The [Divorce, Dissolution and Separation Bill \[Lords\]](#) has completed its passage through both Houses of Parliament and is awaiting Royal Assent. *Its provisions apply to England and Wales only.* The Justice Secretary told the Commons that the Government was working towards an indicative timetable for implementing its provisions in **autumn 2021**.

[Source: Parliament website, 21 June]

NORTHERN IRELAND

Places of worship to reopen on 29 June

For information

On 18 June, the First Minister and deputy First Minister [announced](#) that, *provided the COVID-19 virus remains under control*, places of worship in Northern Ireland will be able to reopen for religious services on 29 June. The Chief Medical Officer will meet the faith leaders group today, 25 June, to consider how funerals, weddings, christenings and other celebrations may be conducted.

A parallel [announcement](#) about the resumption of religious services on 29 June has been made by the Irish Government as Ireland enters Phase 3 of the Government's [Roadmap](#) for relaxing restrictions.

[Source: NI Executive, 18 June]

ODDS & ENDS

Danny Kruger MP to work on DCMS consultation on volunteers

For information

Danny Kruger, MP for Devizes, has been [asked](#) by the Prime Minister to work with Baroness Barran to consult on how to maximise the role of volunteers, community groups, faith groups, charities and social enterprises. With regard to faith groups, the consultation will specifically look at "the contribution of faith groups in strengthening social capital and community resilience". The deadline for the consultation is **Friday 24 July** – but with whom they are consulting, and whether there will be any scope for public submissions, we just do not know.

[Source: Twitter, 24 June]

PROPERTY & PLANNING

Ecclesiastical Insurance fundraising hub

For information

Members may be interested in the launch of Ecclesiastical Insurance's [fundraising hub](#). The resources are aimed at supporting churches, particularly when COVID-19 is bringing additional fundraising challenges. There is also a helpline (03456 019959) for parishes to request a callback for any specific queries and these will be directed to the respective Church Insurance Consultant for the diocese.

Ecclesiastical is also running a Church Fundraising Webinar on **Wednesday 1 July at 3 pm**: further details and registration [here](#).

[Source: Historic England, 25 June]

Reopening of tourism and visitor attractions

For information

DCMS has added further guidance to its collection on [working safely during coronavirus](#). Members may be particularly interested in the guidance for [heritage locations](#) and "[The Visitor Economy](#)".

There are also two accompanying press release on "[supporting reopening of tourism and visitor attractions](#)" and "[reopening of museums, galleries and the heritage sector](#)".

[Source: DCMS, 24 and 25 June]

SCOTLAND

Civil Partnership (Scotland) Bill passes Stage 3

For information

In the Scottish Parliament the [Civil Partnership \(Scotland\) Bill](#) passed Stage 3 on 23 June and will become law. The Bill allows opposite-sex couples to have the right to enter a civil partnership in Scotland.

Secondary legislation in the Scottish and UK Parliaments will be necessary for opposite-sex civil partnerships to take place in Scotland and this work will now be progressed.

[Source: Scottish Parliament, 23 June]

Scotland enters Phase 2 of lockdown exit

For information

On 18 June, the First Minister [announced](#) that Scotland would move towards Phase 2 of exiting the lockdown. Places of worship were permitted to reopen from Monday 22 June, though only for individual private prayer rather than for services. Registration offices are to reopen from 29 June, for essential business only. Marriages and civil partnerships will be permitted, but only outdoors at this stage and with limited numbers.

The next review of restrictions is expected to take place on 9 July.

On 24 June, she made a further [statement](#) in which she said that the changes planned under Phase 3 require further consideration and assessment:

‘They include communal worship ... and the lifting of restrictions on attendance at weddings and, unfortunately, funerals. I am not able to give indicative dates for those today, but my judgment is that those changes are unlikely to take effect before 23 July, although we will keep that under review’.

[Source: Scottish Parliament, 18 & 24 June]

WALES

COVID-19: further update on reopening places of worship

For information

Gethin Rhys, Policy Officer of Cytûn, has circulated further updates COVID-19 and places of worship. Much of what follows is by Gethin, and we reproduce it with his permission.

On 19 June, the Welsh Government [announced](#) that places of worship that wish to reopen for local individuals and households to pray separately might do so from 22 June. Social distancing must be maintained and there must be no gatherings. It will be a matter for the appropriate authority at the denominational or local level to decide how (and whether) to do so. Reopening is dependent upon those responsible for the building undertaking a risk-assessment and making appropriate hygiene and cleaning arrangements, and until at least 6 July only local travel will be permitted in order to visit a place of worship for this purpose: the Welsh Government guidance suggests around 5 miles, but somewhat further in remoter areas.

The move is part of the easing of lockdown into the Red phase in the Welsh Government's programme, [Unlocking our economy and society: continuing the conversation](#). If the incidence of COVID-19 continues to subside in Wales, it is expected that further steps will be taken in forthcoming weeks. During the Red phase, places of worship will also still be able to hold funerals for a limited congregation (although most Christian denominations have chosen so far not to do so), to hold weddings with a limited congregation (but until the General Register Office permits general registration, only the Church in Wales is able to register marriages and it is doing so only in [exceptional circumstances](#)), and a worship leader may use the place of worship to record or broadcast a service.

Cemeteries and gardens around places of worship may be kept open and foodbanks and blood donor sessions may be held, provided that physical distancing can be maintained. Church and faith community authorities may also use the "Red phase" to prepare for further easing in the Amber phase, which is likely to begin gradually on 6 July, and some corporate activities may be permitted in places of worship later in July. Links to the guidance provided by the Welsh Government and (where appropriate) the UK Government and other official bodies are available on the Cytûn [website](#), last updated on 23 June.

On 22 June, the limitations on marriage and civil partnership ceremonies taking place in Wales were removed by the [The Health Protection \(Coronavirus Restrictions\) \(Wales\) \(Amendment\) \(No. 6\) Regulations 2020](#). The Explanatory Note states, *inter alia*:

'Regulation 2 of these Regulations amends the Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (Wales) Regulations 2020

The amendments consist of provision—

[...]

(c) removing limitations on marriage and civil partnership ceremonies taking place, subject to physical distancing requirements;

(d) permitting places of worship to open for private prayer;

(e) making it clear that a place of worship or community centre may open (at the request of the Welsh Ministers or a local authority) in order to provide any public service.

On 24 June, a meeting was held of the Task and Finish Group on Places of Worship convened by the Welsh Government, with a public Q&A on the current position regarding places of worship. The Welsh Government will provide a full set of FAQs derived from these sessions in due course. Following are Gethin's answers to the most pressing questions about the current "Red Phase" of re-opening. He notes that *what follows is not legal advice, and should not be relied upon as such*.

1. Where a place of worship or Community Centre (including a Community Centre attached to a place of worship) wishes to re-open for use by a registered childcare provider, the childcare provider should ask the Local Authority to testify that such the childcare provided is essential for the community. As far as I am aware, there is no official format for this, but some evidence that the Local Authority wishes the facility to open is essential in order for it to do so. (This condition does not apply to childcare providers who own their own premises or rent commercial premises, and Welsh Government have promised to attempt to address this inconsistency in the regulations).
2. The solemnization of marriage is now a permitted use for places of worship. However, for all denominations apart from the Church in Wales, this depends on the couple being able to give notice to the local registrar and arrange for the marriage to be registered. We understand that registrars' offices are gradually reopening for this purpose. Welsh Government is working with the Faith Communities Forum to draw up appropriate guidance for holding such services – in terms of numbers in the congregation, how to pass the rings safely, etc. – and guidelines on these will be available prior to the end of the notice period for the first marriage services. This also applies to civil partnerships, where churches are registered for that purpose. [In the meeting, a question was asked about those religious traditions which hold marriage services without registration, and Welsh Government are looking in to those situations].
3. In terms of using places of worship for private prayer, funerals or weddings, Public Health Wales officials who were present gave the following guidance regarding cleaning:
 - The most important step is that individuals wash their hands upon entering the building with soap and water or hand sanitiser.
 - In terms of cleaning the building, the whole building does not need to be cleaned between each person or use, but the following [advice](#) outlines the principal requirements: *The general principle is that you should not touch anything which members of another household have touched. Doorknobs, bells and light switches are all potential sources of infection. Touching surfaces should be avoided wherever possible, and anything you do need to touch should be cleaned thoroughly afterwards.*

4. The Welsh Government understands that people will need to enter the place of worship prior to reopening in order to put everything in place – such as safety information, directional signage, instructions on where to stand/sit, and so on. In the case of employees who do this as part of their paid work, this is unambiguously permitted by the regulations. In the case of volunteers, the regulations are currently ambiguous, and it was promised that this would be discussed with the legal team. In the mean time, volunteers who are assisting with maintenance or the preparation of places of worship should keep their numbers as small as possible, keep at least 2m apart at all times, and follow the cleaning advice above rigorously.
5. At the moment, it is not permissible to arrange open-air services, but this will be considered by the Task and Finish Group as part of the next stage (the Amber Phase), which is likely to begin on a phased basis **in July**.

The Welsh Government's guidance for places of worship can be read [here](#) – and it includes multiple links to more detailed guidance on specific matters.

[Source: Cytûn, 19-23 June]