

COVID-19 Advice on the Conduct of Public Worship

Issue Date	Version	Issued by
17 th September 2020	2.4	The House of Bishops Recovery Group
Update on version 2.3: on the 14 th September the Government introduced ‘the rule of six’ limiting gatherings of people with some exemptions. The salient points, sections 5 and 17 have been updated to include this.		

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

- There is an exemption from the ‘rule of six’ that covers places of worship making it possible for more than six people to gather for acts of communal worship. However, it is not a blanket exemption and people must not mingle in groups of more than six unless they are from the same household or support bubble.
- Government guidance permits a maximum of 30 people to attend church premises for a ‘life cycle event’, such as a baptism or Confirmation, held outside of regular worship without

observing the 'rule of six'. This is subject to the church carrying out a risk assessment and taking all reasonable measures to limit the risk of transmission of coronavirus.

- There is no numerical limit on other services, subject to physical 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.
- People attending a gathering in church must not be part of a group of more than six unless they are from the same household or support bubble.
- Wearing of face coverings by all those attending a place of worship, including ministers and worshippers, where there may be other people present is **mandatory**. There are exemptions to this, including for those leading a service, detailed in our guidance on face coverings.
- 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 and music is only permitted for small groups of professional and non-professional performers in a physically distanced and safe way. **Congregations are not permitted to sing.**
- 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

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

From 4th July the government advised that our church buildings can be opened for public worship as long as this can be done safely.

2. Do we have to open our church building?

No, there is no requirement to open. You should only open if you consider it safe to do so. Canon law continues to require that the usual services should be held; but ministers and PCCs can resolve to dispense with those requirements for a short period, or for a longer period by agreement with the bishop (see Annex below for a note on this).

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.

3. What is considered as a place of worship?

The government has defined a place of worship as follows:

‘A place of worship refers to a building used for regular religious ceremonies, communal worship or similar gatherings by religious organisations. It includes the use of surrounding grounds, for example, adjoining carparks, courtyards or gardens for which the venue managers are also responsible.

The guidance also covers premises when being used for religious gatherings, even when their primary purpose is not for religious gatherings, such as a community centre. These premises will only be able to be used where they are permitted to be open and additional guidance may be applicable.

This guidance does not cover public parks, private homes, cultural sites or other open spaces, such as woodlands which may be used for religious purposes. If people do want to engage in worship in these spaces, then the guidance relevant to that place should be adhered to.’

4. How should I go about preparing the church?

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](#).

5. How many people can attend services?

- 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.
- Government guidance permits a maximum of 30 people to attend church premises for a ‘life cycle event’ (such as a funeral, wedding, baptism, Confirmation, and Ordination), held outside of routine communal worship without observing the ‘rule of six’. This is subject to the church carrying out a risk assessment and taking all reasonable measures to limit the risk of transmission of coronavirus.

- If the life event service is held within a routine act of communal worship then the physical restrictions of the building need to be assessed for how many it can hold safely with physical distancing. For further guidance about other life events see [here](#).

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

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.

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

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 physical 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 physical distancing and hygiene.

8. Should we ticket services?

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.

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

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.

Parish Buying have negotiated a deal for churches with a company that provides a technological solution to gathering and managing Test and Trace data, compliant with all GDPR requirements. You can [find more information here](#).

10. What about hygiene?

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.

11. Can we open our toilets?

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](#).
- physical 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.

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

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](#).

13. What about children and young people attending worship?

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.

Separate children's activities being organised by the place of worship alongside or within a service or at other times during the week should follow principles in the general guidance from the [Department for Education on Out of School Settings](#) .

In outline, these recommend that, to reduce the risk of transmission, children and young people who attend should be kept in small, consistent groups, and of no more than fifteen children and at least one staff member. Children should be assigned to a particular class or group and should then stay in those consistent groups for future sessions and avoid mixing with other groups in your setting.

If possible, those attending should practise physical distancing in line with the [government's current guidance](#). As the risk of transmission is considerably lower outdoors, providers who normally run sessions indoors should consider whether they are able to do so safely outside on their premises.

Particular attention should be paid to cleaning frequently touched surfaces by children and those that are at child height.

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.

Where young people or children are coming unaccompanied then we would advise consulting [Safer Environment and Activities](#) from the National Safeguarding Team and adding a safeguarding assessment as part of the overall risk assessment for opening, particularly sections 1.3 on risk assessment and 2.10 on young people who attend church activities without their parents.

If you are collecting data for NHS Test and Trace the details of the parent or guardian of an accompanied young person or child need only be collected.

For unaccompanied children or young people aged 13 years old or over, they can be asked to provide their details and sign the consent form, or make an individual booking where consent is required. You may need to explain to them what the data is being collected for so they understand what Test and Trace is about, rather than relying on them reading and understanding the privacy notice on their own.

14. What about cleaning the church building?

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](#).

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

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 physical 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.

16. Can the organ be played?

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

17. Can we sing?

It is now permissible for both professional and non-professional singers and musicians to perform in small groups to people inside and outside of buildings in line with the recommendations for physical distancing and hygiene set out by the Government in their [performing arts guidance](#).

This includes those who regularly volunteer to do music and singing, as part of a choir for example, to perform as a part of worship.

Congregations are still at this time not permitted to sing as part of worship.

Wherever possible people should continue to physically distance from those they do not live with, venues, performers and audiences should be matched to ensure 2m distancing applies. The number of performers should be limited and if there are more than 6 singers only rehearse and perform in separate sub-groups of no more than 6 people in a way that ensures that there is no mingling between sub-groups at any time. If a non-professional group is unable to ensure that mingling does not take place between these sub-groups (including when arriving at or leaving activity or in any breaks or socialising) then the activity should not take place.

Those assisting with worship through music or singing do not always need to wear a face covering, but face coverings or screens should be used if physical distancing cannot be maintained.

The Royal School of Church Music (RSCM) has produced more detailed resources on singing and music, which can be found [here](#).

18. Can our worship band play?

Yes, please see the guidance on singing above and the Government [guidance](#) on performing arts. Players need to be appropriately physically distanced and divided into sub-groups of no more than 6 where there are more than 6 performers. There should be no mingling between sub-groups and the music should not be so loud that it encourages people to shout above it.

19. Can we use microphones/PA systems?

Yes, if you have one then you should make use of it. Ideally individual lapel microphones or static (fixed) microphones should be used rather than hand-held, and those using them should not touch the microphone to reduce the risk of transmitting the virus, especially if it is a fixed microphone – for example on a lectern - that will be used by multiple people through a service. Lapel microphones should only be touched by the person using them and should be cleaned (for example with alcohol wipes) or left-untouched for 72 hours between uses.

If you are considering installing new or additional audio-visual equipment you can [find guidance here](#).

20. What about seating arrangements?

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

21. Should people wear face coverings?

Face coverings are currently mandatory on public transport and in a range of indoor venues including Places of Worship and church halls. While there are exemptions (please see our [guidance document on face coverings](#)) **this is a legal requirement.**

Those who are leading services or events in a place of worship, and those who assist them (for instance by reading, preaching, or leading prayer) do not always need to wear a face covering, although one should be worn especially if physical distancing cannot be maintained.

These exemptions are made to enable communication, particularly with those who rely on lip-reading, facial expressions or clear sound; they do not exempt clergy and other leaders from wearing face coverings in other situations or during other activities.

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

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.

23. Can we serve refreshments?

Hospitality spaces within a place of worship, such as cafes, are permitted to open but should be limited to table-service, physical 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).

24. Can we process in church?

Yes as long as physical distancing is maintained.

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

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.

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

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

Annex: Legal Questions and Answers Relating to the Restarting of Public Worship

Since 26th March, Government legislation has required all places of worship to be kept closed except for a small number of specified uses that do not include public worship. On the 4th July this legislation will be repealed and the normal requirements of Canon law will come back into force.¹

The normal requirement is that Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer and a celebration of Holy Communion are held in at least one church in each benefice on all Sundays and on certain feast days and holy days. Where benefices are held in plurality the requirement is to hold each of the services in at least one church in at least one of the benefices.²

The minister and/or churchwardens should not feel under pressure to open a church for public worship if it would, in the light of government guidance, be unsafe to do so. Where that means that it is not possible to meet the requirement to hold services in at least one church in the benefice, they will need to follow one of the two procedures set out below.

This annex sets out the legal position under the Canons of the Church of England. While this is law and must be respected as such, it is recognised that the procedures will take time for ministers and PCCs to implement and a reasonable delay will be expected.

If you have any concerns about how you should proceed do speak to your local Archdeacon.

Q. What if there are particular problems that mean a church is not ready for public worship?

A. If there are particular local circumstances which mean that it is not reasonably possible to comply with the Government guidance for the safe conduct of public worship in any of the churches in the benefices from the 4th July, there are two potential solutions.

1. Where the problem is likely to last for no more than a few weeks

If it is likely to be only a matter of a few weeks before at least one church in a benefice may be able to hold the normally required public services then the matter can be dealt with by the minister and each of the PCCs without the need to consult the bishop. The minister and the PCC(s) should set out the arrangements in a formal resolution. This can be done by email using the Church Representation Rules.³

¹ Because the Canons give way to statute law, the canonical requirements for holding public worship have effectively been in abeyance. It is understood that the Government legislation requiring the closure of places of worship will be repealed with effect from 4th July. Once that happens, the canonical requirements in relation to the holding of public worship will come back into operation.

² See Canons B 11 and B 14, as recently amended by Amending Canon No. 39 which relaxed the former requirement that these services had to be held in every parish church.

³ The minister and the parochial church council of each parish in the benefice may jointly agree to dispense with the canonical requirements for public worship under paragraph 1(a) of Canon B 14A. The PCC(s) can be asked to deal with the matter under the correspondence procedure provided for in rule M29 of the Church Representation Rules (for which email can be used).

It is recommended that the resolution(s) of the PCC(s) take(s) the following form:

“The [rector] [vicar] [priest in charge] and the parochial church council of [*name of parish*] acting jointly authorise dispensing with the reading of Morning and Evening Prayer as required by Canon B 11 and the celebration of the Holy Communion as required by Canon B 14 on the following occasions:

Sunday 5th July 2020

Sunday 12th July 2020 *etc.*

The reason for the dispensation is that in the light of the Government’s guidance on preventing the spread of Coronavirus, there is no church in the benefice which can be used safely for public worship on those occasions.”

If some services can go ahead but others cannot, the resolution may be edited accordingly. For example, where Morning and Evening prayer will be possible and Holy Communion will not the reference to Morning and Evening prayer should be removed. Where Holy Communion may be possible on certain Sundays but not on others it can be edited in respect of this as well.

2. *Where the period will be longer than a few weeks*

If it will not be possible for at least one church in a benefice to hold the normally required public services for an extended period of time, the minister and PCC of each parish in the benefice should make a joint request to the bishop for dispensation.⁴ It is recommended that the resolution(s) of the PCC(s) take(s) the following form:

“The [rector] [vicar] [priest in charge] and the parochial church council of [*name of parish*] acting jointly request that the bishop authorise dispensing with the reading of Morning and Evening Prayer as required by Canon B 11 and the celebration of the Holy Communion as required by Canon B 14 on a regular basis [until *date*].

The reason for requesting the dispensation is that in the light of the Government’s guidance on preventing the spread of Coronavirus, there is no church in the benefice which can safely be used for public worship and there is no reasonable prospect of any church in the benefice being made safe for that purpose [until at least *date*] because

Again, the PCC(s) can be asked to deal with the matter under the correspondence procedure provided by the Church Representation Rules and the wording of the resolution can be changed to reflect what service patterns may be possible during this time.

There is no hard and fast rule as to whether a dispensation is needed on “an occasional basis” under paragraph 1(a) of Canon B 14A or on “a regular basis” under paragraph 1(b). Ministers and PCCs will need to exercise a degree of judgement. In cases of serious doubt, the archdeacon should be consulted.

If a benefice is vacant and no priest in charge has been appointed, the sequestrators (usually the rural dean and churchwardens) have responsibility for ensuring the performance of public worship.

⁴ Paragraph 1(b) of Canon B 14A

The sequestrators should therefore act jointly with the PCC in dispensing with public worship on an occasional basis or making a request to the bishop for dispensation on a regular basis.

Q. What if the incumbent/priest in charge is shielding or otherwise vulnerable and cannot officiate?

A. If the rector, vicar or priest in charge of the benefice is unable to undertake the normally required public services because they are sick, shielding or otherwise vulnerable they must use all reasonable endeavours to find a replacement person to take the services. This also applies to baptisms, weddings and funerals.

In the case of sickness, a common tenure office holder can, where appropriate, comply with the duty to use all reasonable endeavours by notifying a responsible person or authority of his or her absence from work.⁵ But where the minister with cure of souls is simply shielding and not actually sick, he or she should do all he or she reasonably can to ensure that a suitable person is deputed to officiate at the required services.

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⁵ See regulation 27(3), Ecclesiastical Offices (Terms of Service) Regulations 2009