

COVID-19 Guidance December 20

Updated Government guidance has been published titled **COVID-19: guidance for the safe use of places of worship from 2 December**. There is not a lot of new information but it is helpful to keep in mind the underlying guidance as we consider measures to keep ourselves and our congregations safe: -

***Wash hands**-keep washing your hands regularly*

***Cover face**-wear a face covering in enclosed spaces*

***Make space**-stay at least 2 metres apart - or 1 metre with a face covering or other precautions*

Appendix 1 includes elements from the guidance requiring of greater emphasis and which may be helpful together with a number of best practice statements from the Bishops' Conference and our H&S Committee

When interpreting the guidance and regulations our approach should not be how can we maximise the number of parishioners according to the rules but alternatively what can we do safely. **If we cannot do it safely we should not do it.**

All our churches have risk assessments which have identified measures necessary to ensure that hygiene and social distancing can be maintained to enable our services to continue. Specifically, each church and any overflow facility must have a maximum COVID-19 capacity that caters for the social distancing regulations. This maximum must not be exceeded **in any circumstances** unless a revised maximum has been agreed following a further risk assessment. Should there be a need to use an overflow facility that should of itself require a further assessment in relation to the total numbers on site and how social distancing may be maintained across the site as a whole e.g. in car parks and communal areas.

Parishes are encouraged to frequently revisit their risk assessments (at least monthly) and to make changes where they feel that further measures are required to keep parishioners safe.

With Christmas coming the H&S Committee and Trustees have considered additional measures that will be necessary in the event of higher mass attendance, particularly at Christmas Vigil Masses and at Midnight Mass. We need to manage this risk through the presence of stewards and guidance to Parishes and stewards is provided at **Appendix 2**

We have received updated guidance from Bishops' Conference regarding the conditions necessary for reopening Churches which are currently closed. Further detail is provided at **Appendix 3**

Please be aware that our actions are subject to public scrutiny and local residents may complain to the Police should they perceive that appropriate social distancing is not being observed. This may be because large numbers of parishioners arrive at services at the same time or because of groups congregating in our car parks at the end of a service. By focusing on both what is and what appears to be safe as opposed to what may be defensible we should ensure that we satisfy our obligations to our parishioners and our local community.

Similarly, parishes streaming their services should take extra care to emphasise the COVID-19 measures in place. This is particularly the case if there is any concern that the broadcast may lead the watcher to speculate whether or not you are complying with regulations. An appropriately worded reference to the measures being taken just before or at the beginning of Mass may be helpful in that respect

Can I remind you that COVID-19 is a Health and Safety issue and should you wish to discuss any specific H&S matters, you have access to professional support with our providers Mentor which can be accessed on 0800 634 7000

Appendix 1

Latest guidance from Government, Bishops Conference and our H&S Committee

The latest Government guidance, **COVID-19: guidance for the safe use of places of worship from 2 December** can be found at: -

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship-during-the-pandemic-from-4-july/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship-from-2-december>

- 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 car parks, 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 or hall.
- Whilst engaging in an activity in the place of worship or surrounding grounds, all parties should adhere to social distancing guidelines at all times, even within a group of six or where a specific activity-based exemption is applicable. This means people should be 2 metres apart or more than 1 metre apart as well as taking extra steps to stay safe (such as wearing face coverings) to reduce the risk of transmission. In Tier 2 and Tier 3 areas, people must not mingle indoors with anyone they do not live with or have formed a support bubble with.
- Limits for communal worship, prayer and study groups should be decided on the basis of the capacity of the place of worship following an assessment of risk – this is the maximum permitted number irrespective of the configuration of family groups in attendance
- Venue managers (*Parish Priest*) of places of worship will have discretion over when they consider it safe to open and should decide to remain closed if they are not able to safely adhere to the guidelines
- Venue managers (Parish Priest) are strongly advised to take action to minimise the potential for spreading of COVID-19 among worshippers, and those working or volunteering within the building and surrounding grounds. To help decide which actions to take a COVID-19 risk assessment must be completed by each place of worship.
- Specific measures required will depend on local circumstances and may change according to the nature and timing of the service. Measures could include:
 - Ensuring that gathering limits are adhered to via additional stewarding or providing reminders from the Parish Priest
 - Lowering of the maximum capacity where a particular service represents a particular risk (e.g. services specifically targeted at children when family groupings and attendance may be higher)
 - Staggering entry times
 - Establishing pre-booking arrangements
 - Reconfiguring spaces to enable worshippers to be seated rather than standing which reduces the risk of contact.
 - Improving ventilation
 - Managing queues to ensure the flow of groups in and out of the churches can be carefully controlled in a socially distanced way

When considering church capacity and social distancing the following are also important: -

- Guidance from Bishops' Conference strongly recommends that the priest celebrating the Mass wears a face covering for the distribution of Holy Communion but, providing he is at least 2m away from anyone else, he can refrain at other times. All other ministers/servers etc should wear a covering at all times unless they are proclaiming the Word. The absolute minimum number of participants required for the liturgy should be involved

- Should your congregation have a number of family groups (bubbles) with more than 6 members, thought should be given to reducing the number of families that can attend to ensure you stay within your COVID-19 safe maximum
- When organising services focussed on families and children, it should be recognised that many attendees may not be wearing masks due to their age. Given that such attendees may be asymptomatic consideration should be given to reducing numbers and/or ensuring vulnerable adults do not attend
- As a general principle no congregational singing or sung responses are permitted at services indoors. If choir singing takes place and/or music is played, additional steps should be taken to reduce the risk of transmission. Such measures may include:
 - limiting the number of performers as far as possible.
 - Avoid playing music at a volume that makes normal conversation difficult or that may encourage shouting when people will be trying to converse before or after worship.
 - Positioning performers in a way that avoids face-to-face performance, as far as possible.
 - Limiting the duration of any singing, as far as possible.
 - Improving ventilation whenever possible.
 - Ensuring there is a gap of at least 2m between any performers and the first row of worshippers
- Communal singing outdoors is permitted but in such circumstances, steps should be taken to reduce the risk of transmission. Such measures may include:
 - 2 metres distance between attendees and the area should be large enough to ensure this distance can be maintained at all times
 - All relevant rules on gatherings are to be followed
 - Very clear rules about non-attendance of those who are symptomatic, those who are isolating as close contacts of a case or who has been advised to do so by NHS Test and Trace and those quarantining
 - Consideration should be given to the vulnerability of some individuals
 - Any surrounding surfaces that are touched should be regularly cleaned
 - Consideration of the arrangements for transport to and from the venue in line with safer travel advice.

Appendix 2: Christmas 2020

The Diocesan H&S Committee and the Trustee Board met last week and considered, among other matters, what extra precautions may be required over the Christmas period in parishes and any overflow areas, e.g. Parish Halls.

There is a potential risk that parishes may encounter larger numbers of worshippers at the Christmas services and that numbers seeking to gain entry could exceed the COVID-19 capacity set out in local risk assessments.

It was felt that the key to the management of this matter lay with our stewards and that it was important to provide further guidance to stewards to support them with this potential additional complication. This guidance should be read in conjunction with the guidelines issued by the Bishops' Conference sent to you via the Ad Clerum.

As you know basic stewardship responsibilities consist of:

- Welcoming
- Recording names and contact no for Track & Trace purposes
- Invitation to use hand sanitiser

- Ensuring masks are being worn where an exemption does not exist
- Directing parishioners to available seats.
- At Communion, directional and other guidance to ensure parishioners maintain an appropriate social distance.
- After Mass, ensuring a safe, socially distanced exit from the Church

Traditionally, our Churches attract higher numbers at the Vigil and Midnight Masses and many attendees may not be familiar with the arrangements that have been put in place to make our Churches COVID-19 secure.

To prepare and manage such a situation the following is recommended:

- There should be at least 2 additional stewards on duty
- When the reduced COVID-19 capacity of the Church is reached, the doors should be closed and a note affixed stating that we have reached our legal maximum capacity and advising when the next Mass is available.
- If a person insists on entering the building politely tell them you are full

If an individual insists on entering the Church despite these measures then stewards should not take any unnecessary risks to their wellbeing or anyone else in the Church. If such problems arise at a significant level then consideration should be given to whether or not the service can continue with a congregation present and/or whether emergency services should be called.

Appendix 3- Reopening Churches

- Currently we have closed many of our churches where we have only one combined entrance and exit point and/or where we have no hot and cold water. Government guidance on places of worship require appropriate social distancing/cleaning arrangements as the main COVID-19 controls and that therefore a single point of entrance and exit may be acceptable if it can be managed such that it is only an entrance at the start of Mass and only an exit at the end- particularly if numbers of attendees are relatively low. Current guidance allows for sanitiser in environments where hand washing facilities are not available.
- Bishops' Conference has confirmed that Churches closed solely because they have a single entry/exit and no washing facilities could reopen subject to proper management of the process which mitigates against the risks set out above.
- Please contact Bishops' House should you wish to reopen a Church following this guidance.