

COVID-19 Opening and managing church buildings

Issue Date	Version Number	Issued by
25 th January 2022	2.4	The House of Bishops COVID-19 Recovery Group
Update on version 2.3: The additional restrictions that were brought in under the Government's Plan B are lifted from the 27 th January in England and this guidance has been updated to take this into account.		

The situation across England is that while coronavirus is present in most communities we have a population where previous infections and the national vaccination programme means the majority of people have some immunity. Levels of immunity do vary individually and for some people they will continue to be significantly vulnerable to the virus and its potential long-term effects.

The emergence of the omicron variant has highlighted the continued risk the virus poses but we are moving from a pandemic towards an endemic situation where emergency measures are not required. However, places of worship may decide to bring in optional precautions based on their own risk assessment to protect others and themselves.

Within the Church we believe that everyone is known and loved individually by God and that as many members within one body we are called to be responsible to and for one another, respecting the more vulnerable whose suffering is our suffering (1 Cor 12:12-27). Church leaders are navigating their local situations, conscious of their environment, their community and the vulnerable within it. Local feelings about activities and risk will vary, but referring to a risk assessment continues to provide a clear rationale why additional measures are needed.

Where there is an expectation around large gatherings, often involving many who would not visit places of worship regularly, there is a particular challenge and good communication is key to managing expectations.

In every situation there is likely to be a range of feeling about risk, both to ourselves and to others, that will need to be accommodated by our churches in a way appropriate to each of them. Online and hybrid worship services have opened up opportunities in this regard and local practice at services may differ to accommodate different groups of people.

We recognise the continuing difficulty deciding on the measures needed in some situations, but rural and area deans, archdeacons and Bishops can all be asked for help and advice. It is strongly urged that the approach to differences of opinion is above all pastoral and that the help and support of senior pastors is sought if and when that is helpful.

In this guidance we will try to highlight sensible measures that should apply to most church situations following the latest guidance we have from Government departments and public health bodies.

Current situation with Covid-19

At present, incidence of the virus is falling, though it remains high.

Omicron is the dominant variant throughout the UK and is more transmissible than variants in previous waves of the pandemic.

Largely due to the success of the vaccination programme which we strongly support, hospitalisations and deaths remain at a much lower level than at similar points during the pandemic, but the continuation of this is dependent upon a good uptake of booster vaccinations.

The current vaccines are very effective in limiting serious illness for those who are fully vaccinated (three doses of a vaccine), but less so for curtailing asymptomatic and milder illness. Unfortunately, no vaccine is 100% effective and evidence suggests that vaccine efficacy wanes with time.

The impact of long-Covid is an ongoing concern, even for those whose illness is initially mild, with estimates suggesting that somewhere between 10% and 20% of those infected experience enduring health problems for three months or longer.

Vaccination cannot be the sole means of containing the spread of the virus: good hand and respiratory hygiene, social distancing, face-coverings and good ventilation are also important factors in lessening the spread of the disease and should be recognised as such when planning public worship and other church activities.

Legal requirements

What can we legally do now?

The legal limits on the numbers of people allowed to meet indoors and outdoors have been removed, including all capacity limits in churches and other venues, as well as removal of the 1 metre+ social distancing rules.

Face coverings

Face coverings are no longer mandatory in any setting but may be recommended in enclosed or crowded places, particularly where you come into contact with people you don't normally meet.

Coronavirus (COVID-19) can spread predominantly by droplets and perhaps aerosols (which can linger in the air) from coughs, sneezes and speaking. The best available scientific evidence is that, when used correctly, wearing a face covering can reduce the spread of coronavirus droplets and aerosols in certain circumstances, helping to protect others.

Because face coverings are mainly intended to protect others, not the wearer, from coronavirus (COVID-19) they are not a replacement for social distancing and regular hand washing.

Who makes the decision on what happens in church settings and at events held in church buildings?

The responsibility for making decisions about how to proceed lies with the incumbent. This applies to acts of worship, to events run by the PCC or church community, and to decisions on whether to hire out spaces or allow other events to proceed.

Incumbents should feel empowered to make locally appropriate decisions, including taking different approaches to different types of services and events where the risks may vary. Your archdeacon may be able to help if you would appreciate support with this.

Is previously issued Church of England guidance still relevant?

The relevant parts of the Church of England guidance for most situations have been gathered in this single document. Where further measures may be considered by local churches we will link to appropriate additional guidance.

If issues covered in previous guidance are not included here it is because they are no longer a specific consideration under current government regulations and guidance.

If you have a query or concern, do contact your archdeacon or Bishop who may be able to help, or refer to the national team.

Can we open as a visitor attraction?

Yes. As government guidance relates to the function being performed, rather than to a type of building, you should check the most up to date [Events and Attractions guidance](#) and also guidance provided by organisations such as the [Association of Large Visitor Attractions](#).

Can we sing and perform music in church?

Yes, [singing and musical performances](#) of all kinds are allowed in churches, including congregational singing, and choirs and worship groups can perform without legal limitations.

However, some activities can also increase the risk of catching or passing on coronavirus. This happens where people are doing activities which generate more particles as they breathe heavily, such as singing or raising their voices. The risk is greatest where these activities take place when people are in close contact with others indoors, particularly in poorly ventilated spaces. In these situations where there is a higher risk of catching or passing on the virus, we advise additional precautions should be considered.

Precautions to reduce transmission of the virus can include improving ventilation, using a larger space, reducing the number of participants, shortening the duration of activity and wearing face coverings.

Singing (and generally meeting) outdoors is a safer way of gathering, and where this is possible it could be a good alternative to meeting indoors.

Bellringing is no longer restricted by social distancing rules, although sensible precautions such as good ventilation and using hand sanitiser, are still recommended. [The Central Council of Church Bell Ringers](#) has more information on how to think about this.

Government guidance no longer makes a distinction between professional and non-professional activities. There are no limits on the number of people, including choirs or any other amateur performance groups, who can gather indoors or outdoors.

The RSCM has further support guidance for music making in church here, including revised FAQs: [COVID-19 resources for churches | RSCM](#)

Do we still need to do a risk assessment?

This is part of keeping yourself, volunteers, staff and visitors safe. You can use the template and guidance provided in the government's [Events and Attractions guidance](#), or you can use the Church of England's own template, whichever works best for your context. You can also create your own assessment or re-use a previous template so long as you ensure the assessment is up to date and regularly reviewed.

Welcoming people into church

Is a COVID pass required

The NHS COVID pass is no longer mandatory for any event.

What is the advice for Clinically Extremely Vulnerable people?

If you are clinically extremely vulnerable (CEV) you are no longer advised to shield. However, you should continue to follow the government [guidance for people who are clinically extremely vulnerable](#) and are advised to continue taking extra precautions to protect yourself, such as limiting close contacts, shopping or travelling at quieter times of the day, keeping rooms ventilated and washing your hands regularly. Churches should consider how they can provide for the needs of CEV people, which may include clergy, lay leaders and PCC members, as well as members of congregations and visitors.

CEV clergy may wish to discuss with their bishop or archdeacon the best way to proceed given their specific circumstances.

What can we do to ensure everyone feels safe coming into our churches?

Everyone has a different set of criteria by which they judge whether they feel safe in different situations. For many people, the relaxation of restrictions is a source of significant anxiety. This could include members of clergy, lay leaders, PCC members, members of congregations and of our wider communities, and care should be taken not to make assumptions about how someone else is feeling about the current situation.

Clergy and lay leaders with specific needs or anxieties which may mean they are unable fully to exercise their ministry should speak to their bishop or archdeacon.

The NHS has provided some [tips on coping with anxiety about coming out of lockdown](#).

There are steps churches may consider to ensure they provide a safe and accessible space:

- Continuing with online worship provision, in addition to in person services, either livestreaming worship from church buildings or providing a bespoke online provision, depending on resources. Please see [here](#) for additional help with this from the Church of England Digital Labs team.
- Providing alternative means of accessing things like orders of service and prayer cards for people who may still feel unsure about using shared materials. For example, many churches have made their orders of service available as a download from their websites, or emailed it to regular congregants.
- ‘Zoning’ spaces if your building is big enough, to allow those who wish to continue to socially distance to do so. In doing this it will be important to consider how people enter and leave your building, as well as ensuring that different areas have equal access to the service or events they are attending, and especially that people are not disadvantaged by their desire to continue to show caution.
- Providing some services which retain aspects of previous guidance such as no congregational singing; full social distancing; no shared materials and so on.
- Continuing to provide hand sanitiser at entrances and key points such as toilets and near catering facilities.
- Providing people with cards to put next to them when sat down, asking people to leave the seats next to them free.
- Providing stickers (red/amber/green or similar) or other visual indicators for people to select, indicating their preferences when it comes to social contact as part of services and events.

Do we still need to ask people to register for Test and Trace?

Places of worship are not legally required to display or ask people to register for NHS Test and Trace. You may still choose to display the QR code to offer people the chance to check in but you do not have to, and you cannot insist on people registering.

The government is asking that venues do continue to ask people to register for venue check in (the QR code) as it will continue to form one of the main ways of them identifying people who may have been exposed to coronavirus. Testing, contact tracing and self-isolation are currently in place as key protections against the virus. Details about when to self-isolate can be found [here](#).

Can/should we ask people if they have been vaccinated?

It is not a requirement, nor is it appropriate, to ask people if they have been vaccinated. Whilst emerging evidence suggests vaccines are having an impact on transmission, we do not know by how much the vaccine stops coronavirus from spreading. Even if you have been vaccinated, you could still spread coronavirus to others, even if you do not display symptoms.

Vaccines have been shown to reduce the likelihood of severe illness in most people. Like all medicines, no vaccine is completely effective, so those who have received the vaccine should continue to take recommended precautions to avoid infection.

Public worship

What is the guidance around Holy Communion?

This advice note seeks to support the celebration of Holy Communion in a safe and appropriate way as we move into this new step. It is important to highlight that this is guidance, not instruction; those directly responsible for activities in churches and other buildings are advised to make decisions in the light of this and guidance from the Government in accordance with their specific circumstances.

Where either ministers or members of congregations have concerns about participating in a service of Holy Communion, it is important that no pressure is placed on priests to preside at Holy Communion or on parishioners to receive the Sacrament.

The common cup may now be shared, but the Bishops wish to make clear that, given continued potential risks to health, it remains permissible for the president to be the only person who receives Holy Communion in the form of wine. Whilst variations in forms of service are at the discretion of the minister who is to conduct the service, it is recommended that a consistent policy is worked out in a parish and carefully communicated.

Before the service

- The president and other ministers should consider wearing face coverings, especially when working near other people in confined spaces such as the sacristy.
- Some suggestions for the use of face coverings by the congregation, especially around the time of receiving Communion, could be posted in the church.
- Use good hygiene when preparing the bread and wine. Consider how to handle the elements as little as possible, placing them in clean vessels, and keeping them covered.
- Consider the use of small wafers or pre-cut bread (rather than large priest's wafers or loaves for breaking) to minimise contact.
- Consider making hand sanitiser available for the congregation on entry and before receiving Holy Communion.

During the service

- The president and other ministers may choose to wear face coverings, especially when physical distance cannot be maintained and particularly at the distribution of Holy Communion.
- Consider a policy of how to share the Peace. Many congregations will now be familiar with offering a sign of peace without touching one another. In churches where the Peace is shared with touch, where you may want to consider providing badges for those who may not wish to do so, and whether the Peace might be shared only with those people in one's immediate vicinity.

- If it is customary for the bread and wine to be brought to the table in an offertory procession, consider how this should be done with minimal risk.
- When words are spoken over the bread and wine at the offertory, during the Eucharistic Prayer, or at other times in the service, consider whether the portion for the congregation should remain covered.
- If it is customary to uncover the bread and wine (by removing a pall or ciborium lid), consider whether this can be done without potential risk of contamination, or whether the elements to be consumed by the congregation should remain covered during the Eucharistic Prayer. Breathing and speaking over the elements can involve aerosol and droplet spread which a covering would help mitigate.
- At the fraction (breaking of the bread) consider whether the president's portion alone should be broken with the rest remaining covered.
- If the consecrated bread and wine are shown to the people, consider using the president's portion alone for this purpose.
- At the giving of Communion, it may be helpful to provide sanitiser for communicants to use. Consider whether the words of administration can be spoken to each communicant (face coverings may be helpful), or whether the words of distribution (for instance, 'The body and blood of Christ') might be spoken once to all.
- Depending on the layout and features of the church, consider arrangements for where and how Holy Communion should be distributed, and in what posture.

Administration of Holy Communion

- Careful consideration needs to be given to the question of whether the sacrament should be administered in one kind or in both kinds, given the continued potential for risks to health posed by the common cup.
- Consideration should also be given to if and when the minister(s) and communicants sanitize their hands, and when they remove and replace face coverings.
- There are three ways currently for the administration of Communion: 1) the communicant can receive the bread alone; 2) the president may dip the bread in the wine before giving to the communicant; 3) the communicant can receive wine from the common cup in the way they did so before the pandemic. The order of these three ways reflects possible greater risk from infection from 1 to 3.
- It is important that no pressure is placed on members of the congregation to receive the sacrament if they feel unable to do so. Because of ongoing potential risks to health, an individual communicant may choose to receive only in the form of bread even if consecrated wine is being distributed.
- *Common Worship* (following the Book of Common Prayer) indicates that 'Any consecrated bread and wine which is not required for purposes of communion is consumed at the end of the distribution or after the service' by one of the ministers leading the service, or by another person. Consider whether any surplus consecrated bread and wine will be reserved (if this is customary) or consumed during the ablutions or at the end of the service.
- Reservation of Holy Communion in churches is regulated by law. If you wish to reserve the sacrament for reasons of safety (for instance until a minister who is not CEV is available to consume left-over consecrated bread or wine) please speak to your archdeacon.

After the service

- Arrangements for the cleaning of communion plate, linen, and shared surfaces should be made. Linen can be washed in the normal way, and plate should, after any ceremonial cleansing, be washed in warm water, being careful not to use damaging detergents or solvents.
- Plan how any consecrated bread which has been reserved will be conveyed to and distributed at subsequent celebrations or home communions.

Can we have different Covid protection measures for different services?

This is certainly an option, especially if your pattern of worship means you regularly hold multiple services on a Sunday.

If you have multiple services one after the other (for example a 9am mass followed by a 10.30am sung service) bear in mind that because coronavirus particles can remain in the air you should have services with more measures before those with fewer, to minimise the chances of infection and give greater security to those who are continuing to act cautiously.

Outdoor worship continues to be safer with regards to the virus spreading than indoor situations and where conditions and circumstances permit is a helpful option.

Children and Youth Activities

Children and Youth activities continue to be able to meet. From 20th January, face coverings are no longer compulsory in the youth sector for any ages, in any setting. They can still be worn by choice and all practice should remain Covid secure.

Venues need to be kept clean and ventilated wherever possible. Social distancing is advised in poorly ventilated spaces. The use of handwashing, hand sanitiser and wiping down frequently touched surfaces continues to be important.

Version 9 of the [National Youth Association's Guidance](#) offers additional advice on managing children and youth activities.

Making our buildings safe

What can we do to make our church building as safe as possible?

It is still recommended to keep buildings well ventilated, ideally by opening doors and windows. Do not prop fire doors open, and always be mindful of building security.

In general church buildings, especially in rural areas, can be left safely unlocked during the day. [Advice from Ecclesiastical Insurance](#) confirms that assuming the right precautions have been taken, there is no additional risk to a building by keeping it unlocked and it does not affect insurance premiums.

Most churches, especially historic ones, are likely to have naturally good ventilation. If you are concerned that your building might not have adequate ventilation you can read through the Health and Safety Executive's [guidance on identifying poorly ventilated areas](#).

Continue to provide hand sanitiser at key points such as entrances, internal doors, toilets and candle stands, with signs encouraging people to use it.

Although social distancing and one-way routes are no longer mandated, you may wish to refer to the [guidance on Covid safe churches](#) to consider how you might adapt your layout to encourage people to share and move about the space as safely as possible.

What sort of cleaning should we be doing?

Government guidance continues to remind us that increased frequency of cleaning of general room surfaces reduces the presence of the virus and the risk of contact transmission.

However unless notified specifically by NHS Test and Trace, there is no need to quarantine a building or individual items between uses/opening periods, so long as some form of cleaning of touchable surfaces is able to take place. Asking people to use hand sanitiser gel on their way in and out of the building is also a helpful measure.

Frequently touched surfaces and well used areas such as entrances should still be regularly cleaned using appropriate materials, with particular care taken if surfaces are historic.

If historic fixtures and fittings have been restricted from access, they should not need to be cleaned more regularly. If they form part of the accessible areas that will be touched by the general public, for example pews, the following advice should be followed. Please also refer to the more detailed Historic England advice on cleaning historic features of buildings.

If a surface cannot be touched, it does not need to be disinfected.

For metal, wood, stone, glass, ceramic, and modern painted surfaces, these can be cleaned with a dilute solution of non-ionic conservation-grade detergent or sensitive washing up liquid and distilled water, rinsed with distilled water and dried immediately with white paper towel. Follow the manufacturer's instructions for dilution, application and contact times.

Getting hold of conservation grade materials may be difficult. If you can't get hold of conservation grade materials, try to use products with as few additives as possible but that will still clean a surface, such as detergents with no added perfumes and no harsh chemicals. The Ecover range, for example, has few harsh chemicals but will be effective if used correctly. Other examples include Boots Sensitive, and SurCare Sensitive Washing Up Liquid.

Distilled water is preferable. This is water that contains no salts, so that there are no residues or corrosives to interact with delicate surfaces. However, distilled water may be difficult to obtain, so in these circumstances tap water or filtered tap can be used instead. If there is no water source in the church, bringing in spray bottles filled up at home may be useful. Try not to spray surfaces directly. Spray the cloth with the detergent and not the object, to ensure the detergent goes exactly where it is meant to, and to prevent staining.

If none of the above options are possible, then cleaning wipes can be used instead, but be aware this is not a good solution for delicate surfaces, and wipes with alcohol in them should be avoided. Use of wipes is not recommended for long-term use on historic or varnished surfaces, but will work as a temporary measure to keep frequently-touched areas such as door handles clean. Metal surfaces can also be cleaned with industrial denatured alcohol (IDA), such as methylated spirits or isopropanol.

Do NOT use any household detergents or disinfectants containing chlorine (1000 ppm dilution) on any historic surface since these could cause permanent damage.

Cleaning materials should be disposed of appropriately, wrapped up and binned daily. Waste does not need to be wrapped separately unless an individual in the setting shows symptoms or tests positive for COVID-19.

Seek advice from [a conservator](#) before undertaking any cleaning to more fragile historic surfaces.

What should we do if someone who has been in our building contracts Covid?

If there is a known case of coronavirus then cleaning and disinfection will be necessary; or closing for **at least 48 hours**. Public Health England has [specific guidance](#) on this. Any objects handled by the person where cleaning is not possible should be quarantined for at least 3 days. The minimum PPE to be worn for cleaning an area after a person with symptoms of coronavirus, or confirmed with coronavirus, has left the setting, is disposable gloves and an apron. Wash hands with soap and water for 20 seconds after all PPE has been removed.

Given the damage that may be caused through the use of disinfectants on historic surfaces, closing for **at least 3 days** where there has been a suspected or confirmed case may also be a preferable course of action for historic church buildings.

Continuing to ask people to register for NHS Test and Trace is one way of being able to know if those who come into your building have been exposed to the virus. Although it has never been possible to insist on registering, it is recommended you continue to ask people to provide details, either through the app or another means, to aid management of future infections.

You must also self-isolate if you are told to do so by NHS Test and Trace, for example if you have come into contact with someone who has tested positive. This remains [the law](#), regardless of your vaccination status.

If you have been fully vaccinated you will be exempt from the requirement to self-isolate if you are a contact of a positive case. You will instead be advised to take a PCR test as soon as possible. You will also be exempt from self-isolation if you are under 18 and a contact of a positive case.

However, if you have been in contact with someone who may have the Omicron variant of COVID-19, this does not apply and you'll still need to self-isolate. NHS Test and Trace will contact you if this is the case.

Life events

Life event services, such as weddings, baptisms and funerals, can be some of the most important pastoral encounters in a parish and in the life of a family, but also may pose particular challenges at this stage of the Government's roadmap. For practical ideas and resources that help families have a good experience, whatever the situation, see www.churchsupporthub.org. More information for families can be found at www.churchofengland/funerals or www.yourchurchwedding.org or www.churchofenglandchristenings.org

The numbers at these events are not mandated by law but potentially by the pre-pandemic capacity of the building. However, there is an expectation by Government that people act responsibly in indoor spaces, particularly where large numbers of people are involved.

A risk assessment for the service may help to identify what additional measures would be most helpful and provide a clear rationale for decisions taken. The incumbent may refuse to take those services they are not legally obliged to take, if they are not comfortable in taking them. They can also seek alternative ministerial cover for any service where they would feel put a risk by taking it

themselves. A conversation with your archdeacon may be helpful in looking at the options. In those cases where additional covid measures are requested a pastoral and collaborative approach would be strongly advised clearly stating the reasons why these are being asked for.

Additional measures may include:

- Restricting numbers
- Limiting or avoiding singing by the congregation
- Asking people to stay at home if they are unwell
- Considering individual risks for all those likely to attend, such as clinical vulnerabilities, illness and vaccination status

These measures should complement existing good practice for making our buildings safe above.

Government guidance on [weddings](#) and funerals has also been updated with further information.

Social events and building hire

What is the advice on holding social, community and fundraising events?

The government's [Events and Attractions guidance](#) applies to churches and should be taken into account by those managing church buildings, as well as anyone hiring or otherwise running events in church buildings.

Should people hiring our venue to provide a risk assessment?

Yes, this is an important requirement for all events and venue hires and should continue. They may wish to make use of the available [template and tips in the Events and Attractions guidance](#).

It is the activity being performed, rather than the building itself, which needs to be assessed for risk when running events. The incumbent should satisfy themselves that they have seen a competent risk assessment for events, and check that those completing it have referred to the relevant guidance for their event or organisation. For example, an event run by a school should pay attention to all relevant guidance on children and young people. The incumbent has the right to challenge aspects of events management if it conflicts with their own risk assessment for other activities.

What sort of events can we run?

All and any events are legally permissible, as are any number of people gathering (so long as it is within the usual health and safety and fire safety capacity of the venue). We would always recommend carrying out a specific risk assessment for any event, whether in a pandemic or not, to identify the sort of public safety measures you might need to take.

What guidance is there on running events safely?

The Churches Conservation Trust (CCT) has produced a useful suite of advice on running events. Although it is aimed at their churches it would be a useful starting point for any PCC and [can be accessed here](#). Please note it will be regularly revised and updated so it is worth checking the link as government guidance changes.

Catering

Can we provide food and drink?

Yes, there are no longer any restrictions on serving food and drink, and people no longer have to be seated in their households or bubbles to eat and drink. You should still consider ways to protect those doing the serving and washing up, such as providing gloves and appropriate cleaning materials. Government guidance on face coverings in these settings should be taken into account

Can cafes and restaurants re-open?

Yes, with no restrictions in place, although government guidance that face coverings are expected and recommended in crowded and close-contact settings should be taken into account.