

COVID-19: opening cathedral and church buildings to the public

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Updates from version 5: Following the announcement of a new national lockdown on the 4 th January the contents of this document have been reviewed and edited to bring the advice in line with Government guidance.		

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](#).

This document should be read in conjunction with the Church of England’s guidance on conducting public worship and relevant government guidance as detailed below.

The Government announced that from 2 December 2020, measures to limit the transmission of COVID-19 in England would be subject to a regionally-differentiated approach, where different tiers of restrictions apply in different parts of the country. Public worship is allowed in church buildings, though with some important restrictions depending on which tier the church is in. Other activities are also allowed, also with certain restrictions. Some special local restrictions apply, so it is important for parishes to check their local situation. This note provides general guidance on matters related to buildings management which will help PCCs ensure that buildings are ready to be opened safely and in line with government guidance.

In using all this advice, Government guidance on social distancing and other relevant public health measures must be taken into account. Each church building is different, and a proportionate response will be necessary according to local circumstances.

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Lockdown and church buildings

1. How many people can churches allow into their buildings?

- The number of people able to attend a place of worship is determined by the number of people the space can safely contain while all attendees adhere to social distancing of 2m between households, or 1m with additional safeguards.
- There are also specific exemptions for funerals and small weddings (see section 2 below).
- It is essential that PCCs and managers of church buildings carry out a [risk assessment](#), or update their existing risk assessment, and put in place measures to ensure they are Covid-19 secure. It should not be assumed that any activity is permitted in a church – activities where close physical contact will be hard to avoid, such as coffee after a service, are unlikely to be safe to hold and may easily lead to illegal behaviour where groups mingle with one another.
- The intention of the current rules is to limit the spread of the virus by minimising close physical contact as much as possible. When deciding whether to proceed with an activity, depending on local circumstances, please bear this principle in mind.
- Where group members are from different households, they should maintain social distancing of 2m, or 1m with additional safeguards even within their group of six.
- Seating, visitor routes and entrance/exit arrangements should enable everyone to practise physical distancing from those they don't live with (or share a bubble or exempt grouping with).
- People should only enter and leave the venue together, and socially interact, within a household group (or support bubble or exempt grouping).

2. What activities are permitted in churches?

- Communal worship is allowed in any church, as long as it can safely be held within the restrictions set out above.
- Funerals are permitted for up to 30 people in attendance and linked services, such as the burial of ashes, for up to 6 people.
- Under exceptional circumstances, such as one of the couple being very ill and not expected to recover, weddings with up to 6 people in attendance can go ahead.
- Support groups such as bereavement groups or support for victims of crime, will still be able to take place subject to a limit of 15 people, provided that they can socially distance. The list of support groups identified by the government is [here](#).

3. Do I need to arrange my seating in a particular way?

- Yes. The total number of people attending worship is limited by how many people can socially distance within the venue. Seating should enable everyone to practise social distancing from those they don't live with (or share a bubble or exempt grouping with). If you have unfixed seating, you can arrange it with 2m gaps between seats to demonstrate the required distancing, even though household groups may place their seats together. If you have fixed seating, you can mark off rows or places to demonstrate the required distancing.

4. Can groups socialise with one another after worship or as part of a visit or activity in a church building?

- No. People should be encouraged to move on promptly afterwards, to minimise the risk of contact and spread of infection.
- Everyone, at all times, needs to limit close physical contact with people not in their household or support bubble as much as possible.

5. **Does the exemption for Places of Worship cover faith groups hiring other venues (or outside spaces) for communal worship?**
 - Yes, it is the activity of communal worship that is exempt from the law against groups of people gathering.
 - A faith group can host a prayer service or communal worship at a hired venue that is Covid-19 secure, with the same restrictions as a place of worship.
6. **Does the exemption cover faith groups gathering in outdoor public spaces for communal worship?**
 - Only where the outdoor space is managed by the church, such as a churchyard.
 - You can find a template risk assessment for outdoor worship [here](#).
7. **Does the exemption cover faith groups gathering in outdoor private spaces, such as gardens, for communal worship?**

No.
8. **Are prayer groups/study groups for adults meeting in church buildings permitted?**

No.
9. **Are activities for children and young people, such as youth groups, allowed?**
 - Only where the activity supports vulnerable young people. More details on how to identify these can be found [here](#).
10. **Can life cycle events have receptions/wakes after?**

No.
11. **Are choirs and musicians permitted to lead and take part in worship or performances in churches?**
 - Yes. See *Music and performance* (paras 23-26) below.

Face coverings

12. Do we need to wear face coverings in church?

Yes. 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.

Opening church buildings: issues to consider

13. What does the law say about churches re-opening?

The government advised that our church buildings can be opened for public worship as long as this can be done safely. There is no requirement to open and you should only do so if you are comfortable that you can do so safely. Churches should take into account their local circumstances, including the vulnerability of their clergy, staff team and volunteers before making a decision how to use church buildings. Churches 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 those who have joined worship for the first time online during the lockdown period.

14. What government advice is there?

The government has issued three guidance notes of special relevance to churches and cathedrals, which should be read in addition to Church of England guidance:

- The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) has issued [guidance for the safe use of places of worship](#) (updated 2 December).
- For churches and cathedrals which welcome visitors or tourists in addition to worshippers, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has issued [guidance on working safely at heritage locations](#) (updated 6th January).
- For churches who run community facilities, whether these are in church buildings or in halls or other buildings, MHCLG has issued [guidance for the safe use of multi-purpose community facilities](#) (updated 5th January).

In addition the following government guidance notes may be useful for some churches and cathedrals, or contractors who work with them:

- [Guidance for people who work in or run restaurants, pubs, bars, cafes or takeaways.](#)
- [Guidance for food businesses](#)
- [Guidance for managing playgrounds and outdoor gyms](#)
- [Guidance on accessing green spaces safely](#)
- [Safer public places - urban centres and green spaces](#)

15. How can we decide if it's right to open?

You should carry out a risk assessment. This will help you decide whether it is right to open and how the building can be safely used. A [template designed for church use is available](#).

The risk assessment template can be adapted to help you make a decision on whether it is safe for you to re-open your church building. Consideration of the availability and vulnerability of clergy, volunteers and staff teams will be a big consideration in making this decision. You know your local context best, and what is appropriate in a heavily used or busy church will not be the same as in one where worshippers and visitors are few, but we hope the guidance and tools provided will help you to make this decision.

Many different businesses are now open again. If your church building is in a location shared with other public buildings or businesses it is worth reviewing the impact of re-openings and the risks of the area becoming busy. Whilst churches and most businesses serve very different purposes, if you are in an area where there are several churches, could community relations be strengthened by conversations between churches and faith leaders over proposed re-opening plans to avoid crowding where this is a possibility?

16. What are the implications under Canon Law if we cannot provide services or open the building?

You should not feel under pressure to open a church for public worship if it would, in the light of government guidance and your own risk assessment, be unsafe to do so. There are several options for managing the Canon Law requirements which you can find in the advice note on legal issues around resuming public worship on the main CofE Coronavirus pages.

17. What are the wider security issues of opening?

Although our attention is taken up with the response to Coronavirus, other security risks associated with a building being open to the public remain. If, prior to the lockdown, you had identified any security risks (including those related to terrorism) relevant to your building, the measures that you put in place to manage them should still be in place. If you introduce new ways of working to manage public health during Coronavirus, consider how they relate to your existing security measures. For example, if you introduce a queue outside your building to manage the number of people present, does this present a new risk to the public from road traffic, in particular hostile vehicles?

This is addressed in the [Protective Security](#) section of the government guidance.

Specific advice is available from the [Centre for the Protection of National Infrastructure](#).

18. What is the general advice on hygiene in buildings?

The government has published [five steps to working safely](#). These are:

1. Carry out a COVID-19 risk assessment (a template for churches is available on the CofE Coronavirus pages)
2. Develop cleaning, handwashing and hygiene procedures
3. Encourage people to work from home where possible
4. Maintain 2m social distancing, where possible
5. Where people cannot be 2m apart, manage transmission risk

The more detailed [advice on cleanliness in the workplace](#) can usefully be applied to church and cathedral buildings. This advice is relevant whether the people are paid to be there or are volunteers. Key points of this include:

- Tell people what you are doing to reduce risk of exposure to the virus
- Provide hand sanitiser at every entrance and encourage people to use it
- If you have them, provide places within the building to wash hands for 20 seconds with soap and water
- Provide disposable tissues and encourage people to use them

- Use signage to encourage social distancing
- Regulate places of access to the building
- Frequently clean surfaces that are touched regularly, with your standard cleaning products

For advice on cleaning church and cathedral buildings please see this [dedicated advice note](#). Historic England has also issued [updated guidance on cleaning and disinfecting historic surfaces](#).

We do not recommend use of fogging as a cleaning technique – not only can it damage historic surfaces, its efficacy at controlling the virus is unproven, whilst direct cleaning of surfaces is known to work.

If you know that someone with Coronavirus symptoms has been in the building in the past seven days, then [advice for cleaning a contaminated building](#) should be followed or the building closed for 48 hours.

Each building is different and presents different ways of managing risks. It may be helpful to consider how the building may lend itself to supporting social distancing. For example, even if you normally only use one door, could additional doors be used temporarily? Could a door that is normally left closed be propped open to save having to use the door handle, provided this does not compromise security or fire safety?

19. We've been advised to improve ventilation to reduce Covid-19 spread. As it gets colder, is it safe to turn on the heating?

Yes. It is safe to operate nearly all forms of church heating. You can find [detailed guidance here](#).

Types of heating that present a Covid-19 risk are those that take air from one occupied space in a building and move it into another occupied space. If your heating or ventilation system has this feature it must be turned off so that air is not moved from one space to another. The system can be used with the feature turned off. It is extremely unlikely that a traditional church building will have such a system, but if in doubt ask the company that services your heating. If you worship in a building that has little or no natural ventilation, the [guidance from the HSE](#) will assist you in assessing an appropriate heating and ventilation strategy.

No Covid-related concerns have been identified with the use of traditional hot water radiator systems, electric heating (including under pew), underfloor heating, or, in a ventilated space, fan convactor heaters. In a ventilated space fan convectors can assist with reducing pockets of stagnant air. They are not recommended in a space that does not have natural ventilation.

The cooler autumn and winter weather will promote some forms of natural ventilation, meaning that adequate ventilation will be achieved with a reduction in the number of windows open, and the amount they need to be open. If there is high level ventilation it will not usually be necessary to leave lower-level windows open.

If your current Covid-safe practice relies on leaving doors fixed open to promote good ventilation now would be a good time to consider how you would operate with fewer (or no) doors fixed open. For detailed guidance consult the [CIBSE website](#).

Music and performances

20. Can we have live music?

The Government has advised that:

- Where singing or chanting is essential to an act of worship, this should be limited to one person wherever possible. Exceptionally, where it is essential to the service, up to three individuals should be permitted to do so. Strict social distancing should be observed and the use of Plexiglass screens should be considered to protect worshippers, and each other.
- Communal (congregational) singing should not take place indoors or outdoors. This applies even if social distancing is being observed or face coverings are used.

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

21. Can choirs and orchestras rehearse and perform?

Under the Performing Arts guidance professional groups may continue to rehearse and train, and perform for broadcast or recording purposes. The numbers or people involved should be kept as small as possible to minimise risks and participants should follow social distancing guidance.

Please see [Government guidance on places of worship](#) and on [Performing Arts](#) for more information.

Amateur choirs and orchestras are not to rehearse or perform.

22. Can the congregation sing as part of a service?

At present the congregation is not allowed to sing except where the act of worship takes place outside.

23. Can I play the organ?

Yes. The organ can be played, including during public worship and for life-cycle events.

24. Can the organ humidifier and blower be serviced?

Yes. If your organ has a humidifier that has been turned off for an extended period of time please seek advice from the company that maintains it about bringing it back into use.

Opening for individual private prayer

25. How should we assess the number of people who can visit the church at any one time?

You should undertake a 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.

26. 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 social 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 (perhaps by opening windows or propping open doors if they are not fire doors), closing non-essential social spaces, one way flow, staggering arrival and departure times to avoid congestion at entrances and exits.
- 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](#).

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

Churches are strongly encouraged to provide NHS Test & Trace posters to enable visitors to check in, and to provide an alternative system for those who cannot use the QR code system.

Where churches are open as tourist destinations or running events in community halls they are required by law to display a poster. Where churches are providing food or drink for consumption on the premises it is required to take details for Test & Trace and take all reasonable steps to refuse serve to someone who has not given their details. This more stringent requirement only applies to areas used for food service.

Please see detailed [guidance on test and trace](#).

28. Should we ask people to book in advance or buy tickets?

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. Systems such as Eventbrite can be set up very easily and cheaply. However a booking system is not required if you can manage entry and numbers in other ways such as a clear queuing system.

29. What about hygiene for visitors?

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 around the building.

[Parish Buying](#) can help with procurement of supplies of hand sanitiser and other useful materials to help with hygiene measures.

30. Can we open our toilets and Changing Places facilities?

Toilets, baby changes and accessible Changing Places facilities should be kept open if at all possible, 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](#).
- social 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.

31. Can we open our café or serve food and drinks to visitors?

Hospitality venues should close other than for takeaway or delivery.

32. What should we do about managing waste?

All bins should have liners so that emptying them is simpler and safer. If possible encourage recycling by providing separate bins.

33. What precautions should I take when using the building to ensure my own safety and the safety of anyone else accessing the building?

Ensure you have carried out a risk assessment, using the Church of England template if that is helpful but adapting it to your circumstances.

Other matters to consider include:

- Making it clear that parents or other responsible adults from their household are responsible for ensuring that children follow social distancing guidance.
- If you are using candles then take care not to light them immediately after using hand sanitiser gel, especially if this has alcohol in it. Wait a full minute after applying gel, then

wipe your hands with a disposable tissue. Candles and matches or lighters should be either removed from the building when you leave, or securely locked away – this is to reduce the risk of someone finding materials to start a fire if they were to break in.

- Remove holy water from stoups and do not make use of these at present.
- If you have any devotional objects that worshippers tend to touch, touching them must not take place. Signage and a cordon, or some similar access restriction, should be used to enforce this.
- Surfaces and door fixtures, light switches etc, that are frequently touched should be regularly cleaned. Detail is available in our guidance on [cleaning church buildings](#).

Opening for multiple community uses

34. Which other users can use our church and/or church hall?

There are a limited number of other groups that can use the church and church hall for non-worship related activities. These are principally those offering support to vulnerable group or providing registered childcare. For more detailed information please see the government guidance [here](#).

Bells and clocks

35. Can church bells be rung?

A single bell or a single household/support bubble ringing multiple bells is possible, provided that guidance agreed between the Central Council of Church Bell Ringers and the Church of England is followed. The advice is [here](#). Please ensure your ringers have read the guidance and undertaken the [ringing risk assessment](#).

36. Can I access the church for winding the clock and/or changing the time?

Yes, if a safe working practice can be established with clock winders.

If the clock is hand wound and has been left to run down completely, the weight lines should be checked before the clock is wound. When the weights reach the floor or other resting location, especially for the strike and chime trains, it is possible for the clock to run on a little and for the lines to then jump off the pulleys. Winding the clock without first checking the location of the line can end up with the weight hanging directly on the line rather than with the weight line running over the pulley. With very heavy weights it might not feel wrong to the winder. Caution is needed.

Bats

37. What should we do if our church has bats in it?

Ideally a church building with bats that affect worship areas will not be open to anyone until it has had a thorough clean, which will have to wait until multiple people are able to safely enter, and appropriate PPE has been sourced. Advice on cleaning up bat droppings is published by [the Bats in Churches project](#).

However, if you do wish to offer prayer from a building affected by bats then avoid spending prolonged amounts of time in areas with high concentrations of droppings. If you find a dead or grounded bat, please do not pick it up. The [National Bat Helpline](#) can provide advice on 0345 1300 228.

If you are involved in the Bats in Churches project or are planning bat mitigation surveys or works, you can find out how this has been affected [here](#).

END