

COVID-19 GUIDANCE UPDATE (Step 4)

Introduction

This Guidance is offered as the country moves into Step 4 (19 July) of the Government Covid-19 Response Roadmap published in February 2021. This date has been delayed by 5 weeks as the Government wanted to ensure that a greater proportion of the public had received the vaccine before moving to this point.

It is important to reiterate that as Step 4 is reached, the general principles of continuing to create a safe environment in places of worship and their ancillary buildings are not abandoned. Indeed, the way forward must be a collective endeavour of all involved in the daily life of the Church. Recognition of the presence of the virus in the population means that certain preventative practices will still be required, and this is important to ensure that we as an Eparchy are seen to be discharging our Health and Safety duties.

The Health and Safety Executive have issued new guidance for employers and for organisations, and this makes clear that a duty to keep premises safe continues beyond the removal of any covid-19 legislation.¹ Indeed, the Government has stated that changes moving forward would be on a risk-based approach for all organisations with the responsibility to ensure appropriate measures to safeguard public health sitting with the management of the organisation.

Although any measures adopted locally will not have the “rule of law,” there is a strong emphasis on common sense and risk averse activities to continue to mitigate against the transmission of the virus which is still prevalent in society.

General Principles

This guidance has been prepared following discussions with officials from Public Health England and HM Government Places of Worship Task Force. Key to implementation of this guidance is the Government’s understanding of moving away from centralised detailed regulation to prudent local judgements adopting a continuing cautious approach to easements. The key watchwords for the future steps are discernment of local prevailing conditions and careful consideration of what mitigations are needed in the light of these.

The following general principles apply:

1. Prevailing Local Conditions

All places of worship should always consider the prevailing local conditions for the virus. Special consideration should be given to rates at which people are being vaccinated in the locality, the prevalence of new variants of the virus, the local rates of hospital admissions and any local public health advice. These data can be obtained from the Director of Public Health at the local authority or the local Environmental Health Department, and it is important to have knowledge of these figures.

¹ <https://www.hse.gov.uk/coronavirus/roadmap-further-guidance.htm>

2. Mitigations

It is important to mitigate against the risks of virus transmission. Although the vaccine rollout programme is very successful to date, over 85% of adults having had one dose and 64% two doses, the risk of transmission is still live and there are enough people not protected by vaccination to result in significant hospitalisations. However, HM Government has clearly stated that the progression from infection to hospitalisation and ultimately to deaths has been appreciably reduced through the vaccine programme. Most people admitted to hospital currently are only partially vaccinated or not vaccinated at all and communities should continue to encourage people to participate in the vaccination programme.

Churches should continue to provide hand sanitiser at entrances and exits and face coverings are strongly recommended to be worn by those in church. General cleaning to a good standard, using commonly available cleaning fluids and detergents, with attention to frequent touchpoints is the standard to continue. This is consistent with the advice from Public Health England. While the virus can land on surfaces and can infect people if they touch those surfaces and then touch their mouth, nose or eyes, this risk is significantly lower than the risk from aerosol or droplet spread which is mitigated against with good ventilation and a face covering.

There are key actions which churches and parishes have been doing, and should continue to do, even after 19 July which significantly reduce this risk. These are noted in Appendix 1.

3. Social Distancing and Capacity of Churches

From 19 July, there will be no legislation on social distancing in England, but regulations will continue in Wales and Scotland for now, and thus churches may increase their capacity where allowed but we must be aware that for the time being different rules apply across our Eparchy.

Care has to be taken to ensure that churches continue to be places where people feel safe to gather to worship. Each local community should examine the local conditions regarding the virus and adopt an attitude of care for the people who desire to attend Divine Liturgy. Suggestions to help this include (but are not limited to):

- a) In large churches, designating an area of the church where there will be set places, socially distant from each other, and where those seated there will be required to wear a face covering.
- b) In places which cannot do this, considering whether one Divine Liturgy over the weekend schedule would continue providing a reduced capacity with social distancing.
- c) Producing simple cards with a phrase such as “Please leave a Space” which people can pick up on entry to church and put beside them so that a space can be left to allow for distancing.

The adoption of methods such as these will build confidence in the people that the church remains a safe place to enter and worship.

Each church should continue to assess the local situation regarding the virus and adapt as necessary to the local conditions. This may mean that in areas of very high transmission, churches may have tighter measures than in areas of lower transmission.

4. Congregational Singing

Indoor congregational singing will be permitted from 19 July. The use of cantor groups and other choirs is now permitted. It is recommended that singing should be phased in gently as

part of worship over the summer period and that face coverings should be worn by members of the congregation whilst singing together, until infection levels reduce.

Acts of Worship

As the restrictions are lifted public acts of worship can return to normal practice, with some exceptions for the time being. All of the above mitigations in creating safe spaces should be considered by the local communities as means of promoting public confidence in the covid security of churches. In addition, the following are recommended as good practice.

1. Opening of Churches

Churches can be left open for individual prayer during times when there are no public acts of worship. QR codes (or other means of attendee identification) should be clearly signposted at entrances and those entering encouraged to use them for test, track and trace purposes. Hand sanitiser should still be made prominently available for people to use.

2. Test, Track and Trace

As long as the NHS Test, Track and Trace system is in operation, churches should continue to make available the means for people to sign in for acts of worship using the NHS app and the associated QR codes (or other means of attendee identification). If an online or telephone Booking system for Divine Liturgy attendance is in place, this too could be adapted to the new capacities of the churches and continue to be used so that attendees are known.

3. One-way systems and movement of people

It is no longer necessary to have one-way systems or other restrictions on movement in churches from this time onward. People should exercise good responsible behaviour especially when moving to receive Holy Communion during Divine Liturgy and should avoid getting too close to each other.

4. Stewards

The deployment of stewards will no longer be necessary to show people to designated seats etc (except when a community has decided to employ social distancing as part of a scheduled Divine Liturgy). However, a welcoming presence at the church door is a valuable sign of hospitality, and stewards can assist in the cleaning of frequently used touch points within the church building.

5. Anointings as part of the Liturgy

Moving forward, liturgies of the Church which involve anointing can be addressed in two ways. If there is a single subject (like a single child baptism or the anointing of a sick person) the thumb can be used providing it is cleaned and sanitised before and after each application (for example using an antiviral wipe). If there are multiple subjects (as in a confirmation) then a cotton bud for each candidate should be used. Again, local judgement has to be applied in each situation.

A. Celebration of Divine Liturgy

The following is recommended for the celebration of Divine Liturgy from the 19 July:

- At this time, it is not recommended that Holy Water stoups are refilled. Should people wish to receive holy water, it is recommended that a container with a tap is provided so that small bottles can be filled which can then be taken home.

- All usual ministers for the celebration of Divine Liturgy can be deployed such as servers, cantors, readers etc.
- The offertory collection can be resumed in church with baskets and pouches however, it is encouraged to promote online or contactless giving in the churches if possible
- Holy Communion will continue to be distributed according to current practice (individual spoons). Clergy will continue to sanitise their hands beforehand and wear a face covering whilst distributing. In the event of contamination, the priest should sanitise their hands before further distribution.
- Concelebration is permitted and Holy Communion by the concelebrants should be by intinction in a separate chalice for the clergy and the consumption of the remaining sacred species and cleansing of the chalices should be performed by the principal celebrant alone.

B. Celebration of Holy Baptism

Baptisms now have no restrictions on numbers attending.

C. Celebration of the Sacrament of the Sick

If this takes place in a hospital or care home, then the priest should take advice regarding the level of PPE required from the institution. The laying on of hands should be by extension over the sick person and the anointing can be done as indicated in (no. 5) above. The Sign of Peace should be a gesture without touch.

It is also important to note that Government regulations have now been introduced requiring people who regularly visit care homes to be vaccinated in England. This will include sick visitors from parishes and clergy. The legislation is likely to come into force in October 2021. A separate note will be produced on this in due course.²

D. Celebration of Ordination

The Bishop should sanitise his hands before and after the action. Care should be observed to minimise the number of people handling the symbols of ministry which are given and received as part of the rite. The Sign of Peace should be a gesture without touching.

E. Celebration of Marriage

There is no restriction on the number of people that can attend marriages in the Church. If the Sacrament is celebrated with a Divine Liturgy, norms regarding Divine Liturgies apply.

F. Celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation

A physical barrier, such as a Perspex sheet or heavy curtain, should cover the grille between the confessor and the penitent. Good ventilation of the penitent's side of the confessional should be deployed to prevent stagnation of air.

Confessional boxes should be cleaned after the period of confessions has ended, and the doors left open to facilitate good ventilation.

However, we recommend continuing current practice.

² The Government has made a statement regarding this development at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/everyone-working-in-care-homes-to-be-fully-vaccinated-under-new-law-to-protect-residents>

G. Celebration of Funerals

There is no restriction on the number of people that can attend funerals in the Church however, good collaboration with Funeral Directors over the local conditions and regulations regarding the place of committal should continue. Funerals in the form of a Requiem Divine Liturgy should observe the recommendations for the Celebration of Divine Liturgy. Other funeral services should follow the ritual as published.

Home Visits

Home visits can now take place by priests, deacons and volunteers. Those visiting sick or housebound people must take care to ensure that a minimum number of visits takes place to different homes in a single session of visiting. There are three important steps to avoid possible spread of the virus, especially if someone is infected but asymptomatic:

- It is recommended (outside hospital and hospice chaplaincies who have infection control in place) that only one morning and one afternoon visit is made in a day to minimise risk of infection.
- The use of regular freely available covid-19 home test kits is recommended for those doing pastoral visits, to ensure they are not potential vectors of infection to those who are sick and medically vulnerable. These can be obtained through www.gov.uk/find-covid-19-lateral-flow-test-site
- Careful hand sanitisation and minimising of exposure times indoors are important considerations as well.

Social Activities

Parish social activities can be resumed from 19th July. It is strongly recommended that a risk assessment for both the activity and the space is completed for the gathering. Government guidance for the use of multi-purpose facilities is referenced (NB this has not been updated since 17 May).³

Catechetical Groups/Formation Groups/Prayer Groups

It is recommended that a blended mode of catechesis takes place moving forward, with a combination of both in-person meetings for those involved as well as online sessions. The requirements for covid security should be determined locally, following any Government guidance that becomes available.

Non-Church Buildings

CIS Ltd has provided a set of guidance for the safe use of parish halls and other ancillary spaces for church premises which sets out the obligations on both Church authorities and groups and hirers. This is appended to this document.

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-multi-purpose-community-facilities/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-multi-purpose-community-facilities>

Appendix 1

Recommended Key Mitigating Actions against Virus Transmission in Churches which should continue post 19 July 2021

1. Sanitising hands upon entry to churches and before liturgies as in current church guidance reduces risk.
2. Ensuring people wear face coverings properly will reduce aerosol or droplet spread.
3. Ventilating buildings well (especially during and between services) remains important.
4. Maintaining a good general standard of routine cleaning using usual cleaning detergents is sufficient for regular use:
 - a. Cleaning high frequency touch points in buildings after each act of worship.
 - b. Thoroughly cleaning the church once a week.
5. Clearing spillages of body fluids (faeces, blood, vomit etc) should always follow specific higher standards not just because of SARS-CoV-2 but because of other pathogens. This guidance is reproduced in Appendix 2, again for ease of reference. If your own cleaners have a specific protocol in existence for body fluid spillages, then follow that.
6. If someone has tested positive for COVID-19 who has used your building in the last 24 hours, and you are aware of this, then you should clean thoroughly using ordinary detergents. That does **not** mean a “deep clean”, which is not necessary. See footnote for a link for more detailed guidance.⁴
7. The risk of surface contamination while generally low is higher where there is long exposure time in the building, ventilation is poor, there is a high throughput of people, and where there is greater aerosol generation. Mitigating against these reduces risk.

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-decontamination-in-non-healthcare-settings/covid-19-decontamination-in-non-healthcare-settings>

Appendix 2

Cleaning spillages of body fluids in all situations

Spillages of body fluids such as blood, sputum, vomit, faeces, or urine can present an infection risk and should be cleaned up immediately. Cleaners should treat every spillage of body fluids or body waste as potentially infectious.

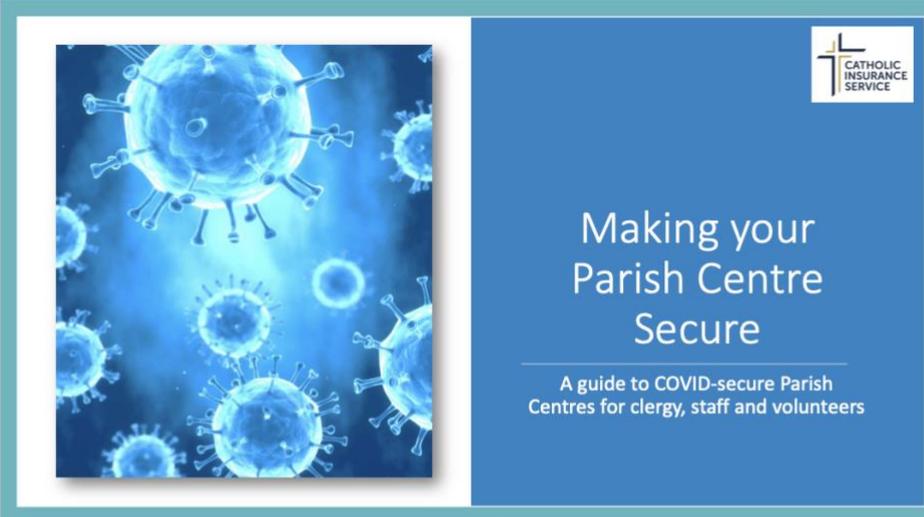
Cleaners should wear protective gloves and aprons and use disposable wipes wherever possible. Eye protection is advised if there is risk of splashing.

For a spillage of blood, a 10,000ppm hypochlorite solution (1:10 chlorine releasing e.g., bleach to water) should be used. Staff should follow the procedure below. Even better is to **use a body fluid disposal kit** which solidify the spillage.

1. Put on disposable gloves and apron (protective goggles should be used if there is danger of splashing) and ensure that the area of the spillage is well ventilated and clear of service users, other staff and visitors.
2. If using a hypochlorite solution, prepare it in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions — if using granules apply directly to the spill.
3. Cover the spillage with paper towels.
4. Carefully wipe up the spillage with more towels soaked in hypochlorite.
5. Dispose of the waste in a clinical waste bag.
6. Wash hands in soap and water.

Solid or semi-solid matter (e.g., faeces) in the spillage should be removed first as this can inhibit the disinfectant.

CIS Advice on Safe Operation of Ancillary Church Buildings





Making your Parish Centre Secure

A guide to COVID-secure Parish Centres for clergy, staff and volunteers

Our Objectives are to ensure that . . .

Parish Centres are safe to work in and to visit despite the continued prevalence of Covid-19.

All those who use Parish Centres know how to behave safely in an environment where Covid-19 remains endemic to help keep themselves and others safe.

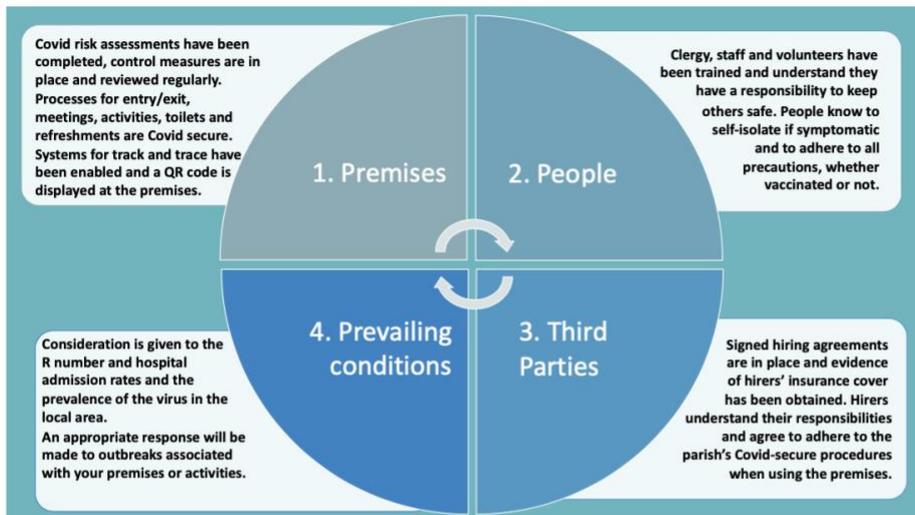
The Parish and Diocese discharge their duties under health and safety legislation to minimise the risks of incidents and claims.

Ensuring a Covid-secure Parish Centre

Please ensure you refer to the rules for your jurisdiction and local area, and only open your Parish Centre when you are permitted by law to do so.

Making and keeping a Parish Centre Covid-secure for the protection of all who participate in the life of the parish is everyone's mission, and there are four key areas to address.

These four areas are shown on the next page. Each area has several steps to complete and on the following pages those steps are explained, with links to further guidance and templates.



1. The Premises

Make your buildings safe to work in and visit

- ✓ **Full Covid risk assessments have been completed.**
 See attached: [Catholic Insurance Service template Covid risk assessment](#)
 TIP: Don't forget your usual risk assessments and building inspections, it's not just about Covid
- ✓ **Adequate measures are in place to address the risks identified in your assessments and they are reviewed regularly.**
- ✓ **Processes for entry/exit, meetings/activities, toilets and refreshments are Covid-secure.**
 See our [10 Tips on the next page](#)
- ✓ **An NHS QR code is displayed in the premises.**
 This should assist you to enable track and trace in compliance with data protection rules, see:
[Create a coronavirus NHS QR code for your venue - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)
[Maintaining records of staff, customers and visitors to support NHS Test and Trace - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)
- ✓ **Covid posters and signage are displayed.**
 Display this notice to show you are managing the risks: [Staying COVID-secure notice - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)
 Use signs to direct people around one-way systems & posters to remind them to socially distance

10 Tips to Help make your Buildings Safe

1. Calculate the maximum safe capacity with social distancing and advise all who need to know.
2. If you can, create a one-way system through the building, with separate entrances and exits.
3. Put sanitiser stations at all entrances, encourage people to sanitise regularly, and ensure adequate supplies of **liquid (not bar)** soap and paper towels in kitchens and toilets.
4. Have a plan and adequate supplies for regular cleaning, including cleaning high touch points (e.g. door handles) during activities and the wider area (including furniture) between activities or groups.
5. Ensure good ventilation by keeping windows and doors open (except fire doors).
6. Ensure confined spaces such as kitchens and toilets are used only by those visiting the premises for legitimate purposes, are included in your cleaning plan and that social distancing is maintained.
7. Consider how to maintain social distancing outside the premises if there may be queues to get in and consider a pre-booking system for popular events or activities.
8. Ensure your re-opening plans offer fair access to all members of the parish community.
9. Plan how to manage complaints from those who may disagree with your measures.
10. Have a plan for what to do if someone who has visited the premises tests positive for Covid-19.

2. People

Key behaviours to keep everyone safe

- ✓ **Clergy, staff and volunteers have read your risk assessments and have been trained in your procedures.**
This should help everyone to feel safe and to understand they have a responsibility to keep others safe.
TIP: You could have a Zoom/Teams meeting to share your assessments and procedures with staff/volunteers and ask for feedback to ensure everyone feels safe.
- ✓ **Posters are displayed reinforcing key messages (e.g. Hands-Face-Space).**
Posters are available to download here: [Posters - Coronavirus Resource centre \(phe.gov.uk\)](#)
- ✓ **Provide clear communication to people before they visit the premises.**
This will help ensure everyone knows what they must do (e.g. wear a face mask) and what to expect (e.g. toilet facilities may be unavailable, wrap up warmly as windows will be open for ventilation).
- ✓ **People know to self-isolate if symptomatic and that they must follow all protocols, even if they have been vaccinated.**
- ✓ **Clergy, staff and volunteers know what to do if someone wants to enter the premises without a face mask.**

3. Third Parties

Requirements to which they must adhere

- TIP:** Consider re-opening for limited activities before hiring out your premises again to third parties or only allowing one group to use the premises per day at first to minimise and get used to managing the risks.
- ✓ **You have clearly set out to hirers what are their responsibilities and what are yours.**
(e.g. hirers must ensure their activities are permitted under Covid regulations and must undertake their own Covid risk assessment in respect of their activities).
 - ✓ **Signed hiring agreements incorporating indemnities are in place.**
See attached: [Catholic Insurance Service templates](#)
 - ✓ **Hirers understand and agree to adhere to your Covid-secure rules and to discharge their responsibilities when using the premises.**
See attached: [Catholic Insurance Service 'Covid-19: Special Conditions of Hire' template](#)
 - ✓ **Evidence of hirers' Public Liability insurance cover has been obtained.**
TIP: if you aren't sure what to ask for, contact [Catholic Insurance Service](#).
 - ✓ **If your premises are being used as a vaccination or testing centre, you have notified Catholic Insurance Service of the change in use of the premises. This is an insurance requirement.**

4. Prevailing Conditions

Be mindful of local epidemiology

- ✓ **You monitor the prevailing conditions.**
Before re-opening and regularly thereafter, you consider the R number, hospital admission rates and the prevalence of the virus in your local area and will close the premises if the risks increase too far or you are required to do so.
See: [Daily summary | Coronavirus in the UK \(data.gov.uk\)](#)
- ✓ **You have a plan in place for an appropriate response to be made to outbreaks associated with your premises or activities.**
(e.g. advice will be sought from H&S consultants and the local authority)
See: [Catholic Insurance Service Emergency Action Plan Template](#)
- ✓ **You treat your COVID risk assessment as a live document.**
Reflect on the prevailing conditions, the efficacy of your control measures, people's behaviours and up to date advice received, updating your risk assessment as necessary.

Further Guidance

Helpful sources of information

- ✓ For access to template documents, insurance and risk management advice, contact Catholic Insurance Service:

Tel: 01296 422030 or email: enquiries@catholicinsuranceservice.co.uk

- ✓ [Enter details of diocesan H&S contacts/external consultants or the HSE]
- ✓ The Bishops' Conferences have a range of advice for worshipping safely during the pandemic:
<https://www.cbcew.org.uk/home/our-work/health-social-care/coronavirus-guidelines/>
<https://www.bcos.org.uk/COVID19/tabid/127/Default.aspx>
- ✓ Visit the gov.uk websites for information and advice relevant to your jurisdiction:
<https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus>
<https://www.gov.scot/coronavirus-covid-19/>
<https://gov.wales/coronavirus>



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