

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

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7 th August 2020	3	The House of Bishops Covid-19 Recovery Group
Updates from version 2: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This document has been updated to reflect the change in the law requiring face coverings be worn in places of worship from 8th August. • The section on Test and Trace has been updated to link to Parish Buying resources. • The section on building hygiene has been updated to include a link to new Historic England advice on cleaning and disinfecting historic surfaces. 		

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 replaces 'Using church buildings for individual private prayer and funerals' v.2 issued 12th June 2020. 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.

Please note that this advice is currently issued in draft form, awaiting confirmation of the exact wording of government guidance for places of worship on the use of face coverings. It will be issued in final form only after this guidance is issued.

The Government announced that from 4th July public worship could resume in church buildings, though with some important restrictions. Since then a number of local lockdowns have been imposed – although none so far requiring the closure of places of worship - 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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Face coverings

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

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

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

Opening church buildings: issues to consider

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

The government advised that our church buildings can be opened for public worship from July 4th as long as this can be done safely. Some activities in churches are limited to 30 people, for others the capacity is determined by the capacity of the building while maintaining social distancing. Some general activities and businesses are still not allowed under the Coronavirus Regulations (see the list [here](#)) and there are others for which special guidance applies, such as singing by more than one person or using a wind instruments (this does not include pipe organs), which are not allowed under the government guidance for the safe use of places of worship.

There is no requirement to open and you should only do so if you are comfortable that you can do so safely. 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.

2. 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](#).
- For churches and cathedrals who 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](#).

- 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](#).

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](#)

3. What advice has the Church of England issued?

In addition to this document the [following advice has been issued by the Church of England](#) to help support parishes and cathedrals with managing church buildings in specific situations as lockdown restrictions change:

- Advice on conducting public worship. ***This document contains information on numbers allowed for services and how to calculate capacity for worship.***
- Advice on conducting other types of services, including weddings and funerals
- Advice on outdoor worship and use of churchyards
- Advice on complying with NHS Test and Trace
- Advice on face coverings
- Advice on the legal options around provision of services
- Advice on cleaning church buildings
- Advice on access for professional contractors and construction workers
- Guidance on permissions for temporary building works in churches and cathedrals to prevent the spread of COVID-19

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

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. The availability of clergy, staff and/or volunteers will also be a big consideration. 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?

5. 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.

6. What are the wider security issues of re-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](#)

7. 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 72 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?

Opening for visitors, tourists, and other purposes

8. Can I now open to visitors and tourists?

Yes, if you have read the relevant guidance, carried out a risk assessment, and put appropriate measures in place to ensure it is safe to do so. Specific government advice on [opening heritage sites](#) applies if your church is listed, and you should ensure you are familiar with it. Please note that for the purposes of health and safety, volunteers are considered as employees and so all references in the guidance to ‘employers’ or ‘employees’ should also be read as applying to anyone in a voluntary role.

If you are subject to a local lockdown, or other local restrictions, you will need to confirm what this means for your building. Your local authority will have more information.

The government guidance recognises that all heritage sites are different in how they are run. Nevertheless the following paragraph should be carefully considered:

“The key to successful site opening and managing is to ensure that there are sufficient staff and volunteers on site, working in appropriate conditions, to ensure the visitors and workers have a positive and safe experience. This may mean different staffing levels than normal, and will certainly mean different working practices for everyone on site. It could also be worth amending your usual booking procedures, for example by introducing a pre-booking system.”*

*For churches, ‘sufficient staff’ may mean no staff in some contexts, especially in areas with very low footfall. The advice is about ensuring you have carefully considered what is sufficient for your church.

9. 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.

10. 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](#).

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

Along with other venues where people spend time churches are strongly encouraged to keep a record of those who have attended to facilitate [NHS Test and Trace](#) in the event of an outbreak of coronavirus.

More detail on what you need to record, and template privacy notices and consent forms, can be found on the [CofE coronavirus pages](#).

Access by people for the purpose of working in the building should be recorded. This should include names and contact details and be in writing in an accessible place and should be the individual’s responsibility on entering.

In many cases existing systems of information gathering – including paper-based systems – will be adequate for Test and Trace. For those churches that wish it, Parish Buying has collaborated with tracking specialists Promotigo to offer parishes a specially discounted digital service that will keep a register of visitors. The service is quick and simple to set up, and takes away all the hassle of managing the personal data, including the requirement to delete it after 21 days, and following up on Covid positive cases, by acting as data controller. More details of this can be found on the [Parish Buying website](#).

12. 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. They can also create a list of who visits, which may help with the suggestion that visitors' details be recorded for Test and Trace. However a booking system is not required if you can manage entry and numbers in other ways such as a clear queuing system.

13. 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.

14. 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.

15. How can I encourage tourist visitors to return in a safe way?

It is essential that visitors can find out as much information as possible before they set off. For this we recommend updating your website and/or A Church Near You entry, as well as posting on social media, so it is easy for people to understand the hours you are open, what sort of measures they will

be expected to take to stay safe, what facilities such as toilets, accessible changing places, cafés etc. are open.

The Church of England has signed up to the Visit Britain [Good to Go](#) standard for the tourism industry. The 'Good To Go' standard and supporting mark means businesses across the tourism sector can demonstrate that they are adhering to the respective Government and public health guidance, have carried out a COVID-19 risk assessment and checked they have the required processes in place. If you welcome a lot of tourist visitors we recommend completing the simple online questionnaire, selecting 'Church of England' as your industry body, and getting the accredited mark, meaning you can use the Good to Go logo on social media, your website and in other marketing. This is a free service being used across the UK by organisations both big and small.

16. Can we charge for entry or ask for donations, and open our shop?

Yes. Where possible the use of contactless card payments is being encouraged to reduce the need for handling cash. The [Parish Buying website](#) has advice on the set up and use of [contactless card payments](#) for donations or use in a parish shop or café.

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

Hospitality spaces within a place of worship, such as cafes, are permitted to open but should be limited to table-service, social distancing should be observed, and with minimal staff and customer contact in line with government [hospitality guidance](#). Other mitigations should also be considered, for example, foodstuffs should be prewrapped, and a system should be in place to prevent individuals from coming into contact with consumables and any dishes and/ or cutlery other than their own (for example the use of shared bowls).

18. What should we do about managing waste?

All bins should have liners so that emptying them is simpler and safer. With an increase in prepared food being sold to take away and eat there is an increase in food packaging and wrapping to be disposed of that would have been disposed of by the seller if the food was eaten on the premises. This may result in an increase in people who need to responsibly dispose of waste if your site is heavily used by the public. A review of the bins available may be necessary for both waste from any catering on your site and from off-site food brought into your grounds. If there is a clear source for most of this waste it would be appropriate to discuss its management with the source.

If possible encourage recycling by providing separate bins.

19. 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

20. Can multiple users now return to our church and/or church hall?

Yes, this is permitted for some purposes so long as it can be done safely. The government has [issued guidance on this](#) which all users should read.

If you are responsible for a community or church hall, guidance from [Action for Communities in Rural England](#) may also be of assistance.

Re-opening closed buildings: technical issues

21. What do I need to consider when re-entering a building that has been closed?

All buildings are different, and you will know your building best, but there are some general areas to be aware of:

- If a building has been closed completely for the lockdown period, then it is recommended to leave the doors and any easily opened windows open for at least an hour before spending any time in it. There is a risk of excessive dust and mould spores having gathered during closure, which could potentially be a health hazard. You will need to wait outside the church whilst airing it out, both for your own safety and to ensure that nobody else accesses it.
- If the electrical systems have been turned off and you did not close the church down yourself, ensure you know how to re-start these systems if they are needed.
- Water systems in the church building will have been dormant for some weeks. If you are going to use the water system or toilets, flush all toilets and run the water from all taps and other hot and cold water-outlets for at least five minutes to ensure the water system has been thoroughly flushed through to reduce the risk of Legionella and Weil's disease. If there are concerns, then it is recommended to not use water from the church building until a risk assessment of your systems has been carried out. Detailed guidance on this has been

provided by the [Health and Safety Executive](#). Your water supplier should be consulted, if you feel that your water system needs testing.

- Under the requirements of the 2005 Fire Safety legislation, where fire alarm systems and/or emergency lighting is fitted, such systems should undergo a comprehensive working check before the building is allowed back into use; even for staff/volunteers to prepare the building for more public use. These checks include:
 - Emergency lighting: Full 3 hour discharge test;
 - Fire Alarm systems: check every call point operates the alarm correctly.
- All fire extinguishers should be in their correct place and in working order

Bells, clocks and organs

22. Can church bells be rung?

Yes, 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](#).

23. 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.

24. Can I play the organ?

Yes. The organ can be played, including during public worship.

25. 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.

Maintenance, cleaning and administrative tasks

As church buildings are no longer closed by order of the government, access for maintenance, cleaning and administrative tasks can be resumed provided that COVID-safe working practices are followed. You should ensure any contractors have read the government advice relevant to their work, and you should complete the dedicated risk assessment before allowing access.

26. Should we tell people what is happening with the building?

Yes. It is good practice to advise neighbours when the church is open whether for general access, public worship or private prayer. Include details of any online activities you have, or direct them to central resources such as [Time to Pray](#) and the weekly services broadcast live on the [Church of England's Facebook page](#).

Encourage those living near your church to keep an eye on the building. Encourage local people to report suspicious activity and give them the details – on your website and on the church noticeboard – of how to do this. If they suspect an act of theft or vandalism is taking place, they should call the police.

Social media or the telephone are the safest ways to communicate. Written communication can be sent using the postal service, which carries the lowest risk of spreading infection. Please do not post leaflets through letterboxes yourself.

Bats

27. 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](#).

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