

E-mail sent on behalf of Advisory Group to Clergy, Lay Readers, Vestry Secretaries and Diocesan Secretaries

16 December 2021

Following the announcement by the First Minister on Tuesday this week, we have been awaiting further clarity from the Government on exactly what new measures were being introduced which might affect congregational life.

Today, the Government has issued new legal regulations which come into force at midnight tonight and will therefore affect church services this weekend and beyond. It has also reissued its Places of Worship guidance, intended to reflect the new regulations. That guidance is available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-phase-3-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship/>.

One specific change in regulations applies to mask exemptions. The 'distancing' requirement for face covering exemption for service leaders or choirs/worship bands has been increased from 1m to 2m. The exemption still applies where screens or partitions are used. This is relevant where a group such as a choir or worship band are involved. Depending on numbers and the space available, the size of any such group may need to be reduced to comply with the increased 2m distancing requirement between members of the group and/or the congregation. We are advised by Government that the playing of instruments remains permissible but masks should be worn except where mask wearing is not possible owing to the nature of the instrument.

Church services can go ahead but the regulations require those responsible for a place of worship to have regard to the Government guidance about measures to minimise risk of exposure to coronavirus. They also include a duty to take such measures as are "reasonably practicable to minimise the incidence and spread" of the virus on church premises. This means that churches should consider the Government's new guidance.

The Advisory Group's general advice is that churches should revisit their risk assessments and revert back to some of the practices and procedures which they were accustomed to operating at earlier stages in the pandemic, as suggested below. Some churches may have continued to operate such restrictions anyway, notwithstanding the greater degree of relaxation over the

course of the last few months. However, if those earlier measures are no longer in place, the Advisory Group recommends as follows: –

- Church members should be strongly encouraged to take lateral flow tests before attending any act of worship.
- Measures should be taken to avoid crowding – managing "pinch points" such as entrances, exits, queueing to receive Communion, queueing for church toilets etc. Whilst the new regulations do not require social distancing as such between church members sitting in the congregation, the Advisory Group recommends that consideration be given to reintroducing social distancing (minimum 1m) between households. Signage/tape can be used and pews/seats marked as before. There is no need to define a capacity as such (as applied at an earlier stage) but thought will need to be given to how many can safely be accommodated given these reintroduced tighter restrictions.
- The general requirement to wear a face covering in churches remains in place, noting the change to exemption for service leaders/performers described above.
- Where communal items are used, such as prayer books, previous practice might be followed, such as disposable liturgy sheets or personal copies of books held by individuals, as an alternative to disinfecting/quarantining.
- As has been well publicised, the Government has been strongly encouraging work Christmas parties not to go ahead and also that social gatherings should be limited to a maximum of 3 households. Neither of these directly apply to churches but, applying these general principles, the Advisory Group recommends that congregations should consider discontinuing post-service refreshments (since they are a mask-free opportunity for multiple households to mingle) for the time being and also consider cancelling Christmas parties or similar social events involving multiple households. Decisions in relation to such matters should be based on local risk assessment.
- There should be continuing compliance with the general requirements of face coverings, good hand and respiratory hygiene, and ventilation.
- The above measures apply to weddings and funerals as well as other church services.

The Government has also reissued its former guidance on organised activities for children which is available at:

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-organised-activities-for-children/>

We appreciate that the introduction of new measures at this time and at very short notice is difficult for all concerned and the Group expresses its gratitude to clergy and congregations for their conscientiousness in taking all reasonably practicable measures to keep people safe.