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Frequently Asked Questions for Scottish Episcopal Churches in Scottish Government Pandemic Easing

The following questions and answers amplify and give examples of what is permissible in the present phase of the Scottish Government Covid pandemic easing. This is a complex time for all in Scottish society as well as for churches and there will inevitably be areas that are subjective and require local contexts to be judged.

Matters may also change quickly as regulations change—please check that this is the latest version of guidance and has not been superseded. For more detailed queries please contact your Diocesan Bishop/office or the Advisory Group via GSO.

The latest Scottish Government guidance for Places of Worship can be found at <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-phase-3-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship/>.

The latest SEC guidance can be found at <https://www.scotland.anglican.org/coronavirus-updates/>.

For clarity, the FAQs have been re-structured, with a new section summarising key recent changes to easily draw them to the readers' attention. This is followed by full FAQs arranged in four sections (which include the summary FAQs). These sections are:

1. Congregational worship
2. Non-Worship Activities in Churches & Church Premises
3. Pastoral Visiting & Housegroups – activities in private homes
4. Baptisms, Weddings, Funerals, Ordinations etc.

Summary of FAQs for recent key changes:

Singing in church:

Q: What singing or musical accompaniment is allowed in church?

A: The government guidance has changed to include to allow congregational signing at levels 0 and 1. It now says:

“Singing, chanting and/or the playing of instruments is permitted in small groups in level 2 - 0 areas. For example, a small choir and/or band would be permitted to perform. Congregational singing, both indoors and outdoors, is permitted in areas that are in levels 0 – 1 and is permitted for life events such as baptisms, christenings and coming of age ceremonies, where these take place as part of a wider congregational service. It is also permitted at marriage ceremonies and funeral services, for which there is separate guidance.”

Q: How many singers are ‘a small choir’ as defined by the guidance?

A: In levels 0-2 the ‘small group’ allowed to sing or play is not defined. The group size will be driven by 2m physical distancing and the size of the space. Each church should do its own risk mitigation assessment.

‘In-person’ church meetings:

Q: Can church meetings like vestries now take place in church buildings?

A: There are mixed messages in the Scottish Government guidance for this area <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-phase-3-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship/pages/other-permitted-uses/>. Committee meetings are permitted under the ‘recreational and social groups’ guidance but there are also statements that ‘management’ meetings still default to online.

The SEC has decided to take the same approach as the Church of Scotland <https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/resources/covid-19-coronavirus-advice/reshaping-church-life> and is advising that, in levels 0-2, in-person management meetings such as vestries CAN now resume in church buildings, with care taken on physical distancing, wearing of masks and hand hygiene. This is NOT a direction to resume in-person meetings, and some vestries and other meetings may prefer to continue to meet online.

Church users (including house groups etc.) — what is allowed to re-start:

Q. Can non-SEC hall/church tenants/users restart their activities in SEC church buildings or halls?

A: Yes. User groups/tenants who are permitted to restart under Scottish Government guidelines (e.g. nurseries, businesses, youth groups) may resume their activities with physical distancing and hygiene measures in place. A clear agreement must be made between the vestry and the tenant/user over who will manage hygiene/contacts etc. around the specific activities.

As of 11 June, the government guidance on recreational activities in church halls <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-phase-3-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship/pages/other-permitted-uses/> states: (continued)

(continued) “Recreational and social groups

“Organised adult indoor activities, such as those run by recognised charitable, not-for-profit and political organisations and properly constituted clubs can take place in Levels 2-0. This includes, for example, committee meetings which are not part of the usual work of a place of worship – where the default remains work from home. The organiser of the activity must take measures to ensure physical distancing is maintained during the activity. Our [physical distancing guidance](#) and any specific sectoral guidance must be taken into account.

This does not include ad hoc or informal social activities which should still follow the rules on gatherings appropriate to that setting (indoors or outdoors). One off social events such as birthday parties are still not permitted at these levels.”

Section 1: Congregational Worship

Q: Are SEC churches allowed to be open?

A: Churches have been able to open from 26th March but do not HAVE to. Each vestry will judge when to open, based on the nature of the building, the usual size of congregation, the age and health of the clergy and congregation and many other factors. The mitigations required for re-opening are the same as in 2020: [guidance here](#).

Q: Do clergy or people have to take a Covid test before attending church?

A: This is NOT a requirement for any clergy or lay people to attend church. Hand hygiene, spacing, face-coverings and other mitigations keep church safe.

Q: Should we ask for evidence of vaccination for people to attend church?

A: No. Vaccination is a key part of the population-wide programme to limit the virus but hand hygiene, spacing, face-coverings and other mitigations keep church safe for all people, whether vaccinated or not. All people should behave the same way, whether vaccinated or not.

Q: How many people are allowed in church buildings for Sunday or midweek worship?

A: The maximum number allowed for worship is based on calculating capacity with 2m spacing between households. There is [SEC guidance](#) on calculating the required 'Physical Distance Based Capacity' (PDBC) number. This is a theoretical maximum for the building, which must be displayed on a sign at the entrance of church. This is not the actual capacity, which will be lower and based on actual numbers and households attending.

Q: Can we offer post-service refreshments?

A: The Scottish Govt guidance for places of worship says that refreshments CAN now be offered, but the Scottish Government [rules for hospitality](#) must be followed.

- 2m physical distancing must be applied.
- All people should be seated to receive refreshments which should be brought to them by 'serving staff' wearing face coverings.
- Guidance for the hospitality sector should be followed to determine how many people can sit together. This will vary depending on the level of pandemic restrictions operating in the local authority area. Guidance suggests that 2m distancing should be kept between the households.
- People should not mix between tables, and physical distancing should be maintained when moving from the service to where the hospitality is provided.

The congregation could remain seated as they were for worship and be served refreshments by a serving team (noting that post-service fellowship is hard to achieve at 2m distancing). Hygiene controls for food service including Covid care are required.

Q: Is travel to attend worship services across local authority boundaries permitted?

A: Yes: travel across local authority boundaries for attending a usual place of worship is permitted at any level. There are no limitations on travel for any reason between levels 0, 1 and 2.

Q: What singing or musical accompaniment is allowed in church?

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A: In levels 0-2 the ‘small group’ allowed to sing or play is not defined. The group size will be driven by 2m physical distancing and the size of the space. Each church should do its own risk mitigation assessment.

Q: When will we be able to receive the consecrated wine as well as the consecrated bread?

A: The Bishops’ guidance remains to only receive in one kind, i.e. the bread. The Government Guidance on this still says:

“the consumption of food and drink is avoided where it is not essential to the act of worship. Where it is essential to the act of worship, the use of communal vessels is avoided”

The College of Bishops is well aware of the breadth of theological and ecclesiological views that a broad church like the SEC holds and differing views on what might constitute ‘full communion’. Once the Scottish Government guidance removes the current mitigations, a return to a common cup may be possible.

Q: Can church children's and youth groups now meet?

A: Children's and Youth work is now permitted with restrictions, in Level 3. Guidance on safe operation can found at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-organised-activities-for-children/>

and

<https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/media/5974/youth-work-covid-19-guidance-framework.pdf>

Section 2: Non-Worship Activities in Churches & Church Premises

Q: Can church meetings like vestries now take place in church buildings?

A: There are mixed messages in the Scottish Government guidance for this area <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-phase-3-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship/pages/other-permitted-uses/>. Committee meetings are permitted under the 'recreational and social groups' guidance but there are also statements that 'management' meetings still default to online.

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example, committee meetings which are not part of the usual work of a place of worship – where the default remains work from home. The organiser of the activity must take measures to ensure physical distancing is maintained during the activity. Our [physical distancing guidance](#) and any specific sectoral guidance must be taken into account.

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Section 3: Pastoral Visiting & Housegroups – activities in private homes

Check the level in your local authority area and the permitting indoor and outdoor social interaction limits at <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-protection-levels/> This is a very complex system which we have also summarised in Annex of the latest SEC pastoral guidance at <https://www.scotland.anglican.org/wp-content/uploads/Version-6-4.6.21-Revised-Pastoral-Guidelines.pdf> .

Q: Can a cleric or lay pastoral visitor make pastoral visits or take home communion to church members?

A: Yes. Visits to vulnerable or isolated people, made by clergy or trained pastoral visitors and following strict hygiene and distancing protocols, are allowed by the Scottish Government regulations. These visits should follow the indoor social interaction limits linked to above in levels 0-2 and can also take place in levels 3 and 4 (classed as for ‘work purposes, or for the provision of voluntary or charitable services’). In levels 3 and 4 they must be judged as essential and no cleric or pastoral visitor should make any visit when they are concerned about their own health or wellbeing.

Q: How many pastoral visits per day can we make?

A: There is no government guidance on this. A cleric or pastoral visitor should use their discretion.

Q: Can housegroups or other small church meetings take place yet?

A: Yes, in church premises, as these fall under the ‘Recreational and social groups’ government guidance for places of worship <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-phase-3-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship/pages/other-permitted-uses/> . Any housegroup or small group taking place in private homes should follow the government guidance for meeting (indoors/outdoors & public/private spaces) as given in [the current Government guidance](#).

Section 4: Baptisms, Weddings, Funerals, Ordinations etc.

Q. How many people can attend weddings or funerals?

A: This varies by level and is based on 2m distancing. The lower of the capacity cap achievable with physical distancing or the following figure (revised in 2021) can attend:

Level 4:	20 people
Levels 3 and 2:	50 people
Level 1:	100 people
Level 0:	200 people

The officiant and other ‘staff’ at the venue (e.g. musicians, welcomers) are not included in the total. The same constraints on physical distancing and hygiene also apply. Specific guidance is given on this in the [Pastoral Guidelines](#).

Q: Can baptisms take place?

A: Yes: as long as they “form part of a wider congregational service”, with the appropriate limits on numbers and with distancing and hygiene. The [Government Guidance](#) states some specific issues to take into account with e.g. water in rituals and full immersion.

There also is specific guidance on hand hygiene for e.g. anointing candidates in the Bishops’ current [Pastoral Guidance](#).

Q: Can ordinations take place?

A: Again, yes: in the context of a church service, with the appropriate limits on numbers and with distancing and hygiene. The same specific guidance applies for e.g. anointing and laying hands on candidates. Theologically and canonically, the bishop is required to lay on hands for ordination. For priests or bishops, it will not be possible for all the priests or bishops present to lay on hands. Guidance is given in the Bishops’ current [Pastoral Guidance](#).

Q: Can we take photographs at such special occasions?

A: Physical distancing, face coverings and hand hygiene should be maintained at all times in a place of worship in accordance with the guidance/regulations. If less constrained photographs without these restrictions are wanted, they can be taken by congregation and/or participants gathering (still paying attention to physical distancing between households) outwith the church buildings.