

Revision date 20 December 2021 (changes marked in red)

Frequently Asked Questions for Scottish Episcopal Churches in the Covid Pandemic

The following questions and answers apply to the present phase and developing situation in the Covid pandemic. This update reflects changes in emphasis in government guidance in December 2021 as the new 'Omicron' variant is being monitored. **The change in Government regulations on 17th Dec 2021 has been reflected in these answers.**

Take extra care: the pandemic is still with us and the Omicron variant may impact in as yet unknown ways.: The Omicron variant is believed to be highly transmissible and extra care and attention should be taken in all aspects of personal and church life. Churches should continue to mitigate risks by maintaining good hygiene and ensuring good ventilation.

Status of existing guidance: The status of the majority of government and church Covid guidance has now changed and should be regarded as 'good practice' rather than regulations. 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 detailed requirements in this guidance are unchanged from previous issues but are under active review by the Scottish Government.

This present set of FAQs presents the latest guidance from the Advisory Group on navigating the current regulations and the wider set of 'good practice' guidance. This is changed from the FAQs issued earlier in December 2021 as a result of the regulation and guidance changes due to Omicron.

For more detailed technical/pastoral queries please contact your Diocesan Bishop/office or the Advisory Group via GSO.

The FAQs are presented in three sections:

1. Congregational worship
2. Non-Worship Activities
3. Weddings, Funerals, Ordinations etc.

Section 1: Congregational Worship

Q: Do we have to wear face coverings in church?

A: Everyone must wear face coverings in church buildings (as in other public buildings) with the following exceptions:

- Those leading worship, provided a **2m distance (changed from 17th December 2021)** or a partition is maintained between that unmasked person and others.
- Church choirs and worship bands when they are "performing" (again provided there is **2m distance (changed from 17th December 2021)** or a partition between each unmasked performer and others).
- While eating or drinking – **although unmasked socialising is discouraged at the present time.**
- Anyone with an exemption from wear face coverings

Congregational members are not regarded as "performers" and so must continue to wear face coverings when singing.

Q: What size of choir or music group are we allowed?

A: The size of any unmasked choir or music group will be defined by the space in which they are "performing" and the requirement for **2m distancing** (or partitions) between them. In practice, this should mean a choir or music group should, in most settings, be similar to pre-pandemic levels.

Q: Are there physical distancing requirements for people attending worship in church buildings?

A: As of 17th Dec 2021, churches are encouraged to re-introduce physical distancing between households – a suggested minimum of 1m – with appropriate measures to help, such as signage and screening off seating. Measures should taken to avoid crowding e.g. managing "pinch points" such as entrances, exits, queueing to receive Communion, queueing for church toilets etc.

Q: Should I take a lateral flow test before attending church?

A: The latest guidance from the government is to take a lateral flow test before meeting with people from outwith your household—so yes, it would be good practice to take a lateral flow test before each church service or activity.

Q: Should I attend congregational worship if I have not been vaccinated?

A: Vaccination using three doses in those who are not immunocompromised is the single most effective protection against personal infection (75% against infection with Omicron and even better against Delta) and reduces the likelihood of transmitting the infection to others. If you have not been vaccinated, you should carefully consider the implications that this has for your own risks and the enhanced risk that you pose to other members of your

congregation. The Advisory Group's position is unequivocal, that all those eligible for vaccination should receive it.

Q: Do we have to keep contact details for people attending church services, funerals or other church events?

A: This is not a regulation but it has been suggested by the government in their [guidance](#) that churches might consider supporting the Test and Protect systems by continuing to keep contact details for 21 days.

Q: Can we use hymn books, liturgy booklets, kneelers etc.?

A: Yes, but the latest government guidance says that such 'communal items' must be e.g. disinfected, or a church can ensure that other measures could be taken to minimise the risk from shiny-surfaced materials (such as hard copy liturgy books, pew bibles etc.) retaining virus. Practice from earlier in the pandemic could be re-adopted, e.g. single use booklets.

Q: Can we have servers, offertory processions and similar elements of worship?

A: Extra care should be taken if physical distancing is reintroduced into places of worship. If serving etc. is maintained, clergy, servers, people bringing up elements (or anything similar – anything that reduces distancing) should take extra care to wear face coverings and observe good hand sanitising practice.

Q: Can we reinstate the Common Cup?

A: Not yet. Government guidance continues to recommend against the use of communal vessels in worship for the time being. 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'. The College of Bishops has explored safe and appropriate options for distribution of wine at communion: contact your bishop if you wish to have a discussion.

Q: Can we offer post-service refreshments?

A: The Advisory Group suggests that congregations should consider temporarily discontinuing post-service refreshments since they are a mask-free opportunity for multiple households to mingle. This is a matter for a local risk assessment.

Q: What special cleaning is required between church services?

A: Churches should take extra care with the established practice of regular cleaning and disinfecting of "hand touch points", for example, between services on the same day or close together (Midnight Mass and Christmas morning, perhaps). There is no requirement for a minimum quarantine period between uses of buildings provided cleaning and disinfection of such "touch points" is carried out between such uses. Many churches have already established this pattern for hygiene.

Section 2: Non-Worship Activities

Q: Do we have to staff SEC churches when they are open for private prayer?

A: No. The Advisory Group suggests that a staffing presence for Covid safety reasons is not required provided there is adequate signage indicating the need for individuals to hand sanitise on entering or leaving the church.

Q: Can church meetings like vestries or small groups take place in church buildings or private homes?

A: **The government advice that no more than three households should meet in private or public buildings suggests that in-person vestry meeting may be best suspended or changed to online meeting only. For vestries who strongly wish to meet in person, face coverings, physical distancing and ventilation should be rigidly used.**

Q: **Can a Church Annual Meeting take place?**

A: **A virtual Annual Meeting could be held, as probably the safest option. As churches are open and worshippers can safely gather with face coverings and distancing, the same approach could be taken for an Annual Meeting. Each vestry should judge their own context and which approach will be most inclusive.**

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

A: **Yes, as long as they can follow their sector specific restrictions** for the specific activity, they should follow those restrictions at their own discretion. Face coverings should be worn in public spaces as appropriate.

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

A: **Yes, as long as not more than three households are meeting. Good hand and mask hygiene should be maintained. Lateral flow tests should be used regularly.**

Section 3: Weddings, Funerals etc.

Q. How many people can attend weddings or funerals?

A: There are no special limits on this, other than the size of the venue **and the impact of any reintroduction of distancing constraints**. Face coverings must be worn (with the usual exceptions – **and the 2m distancing requirement for unmasked singers/musicians**) and good hand hygiene should be followed.