

Revision date 28 January 2022

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 the changes in Government regulations/guidance on 24 and 28 January 2022 as the Omicron variant is judged to be less significant from a public health perspective so restrictions are being eased.

Please still take extra care: the pandemic is still with us even as Omicron seems to be less influential. 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/>.

This present set of FAQs presents the latest guidance from the Advisory Group on navigating the relaxed regulations as of 28 January and the wider set of ‘good practice’ guidance. This is changed from the FAQs issued earlier for 17 December 2021 as a result of the regulation and guidance tightening 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 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 **1m** distance or a partition is maintained between that unmasked person and others.
- Church choirs and worship bands when they are "performing" (again provided there is **1m** distance or a partition between each unmasked performer and others).
- While eating or drinking.
- 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 **1m** distancing (or partitions) between them.

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

A: There are no legal restrictions regarding physical distancing and limits on the size of congregations. The Government's Places of Worship Guidance indicates that "*physical distancing is recommended during worship wherever possible, unless it interferes with a fundamental aspect of faith specific practice*". The Advisory Group suggests that congregations make a local judgement on the basis of risk assessment. The Group is also aware that some church members may anyway be keen to maintain a degree of social distancing. Some churches are leaving areas with spacing still in place for people who may be anxious about the loss of distancing. Online or hybrid worship is also being offered.

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: 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. However, we are still in a pandemic and shiny-surfaced materials (such as hard copy liturgy books, pew bibles etc.) are more prone to retaining virus so the risk of using them is still greater than other options. The longer the “quarantine time” between each use of such materials the better, or if they are to be reused in quick succession, they should be wiped down to disinfect. This can be judged for each local context—but a return to pre-pandemic practice is now possible.

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

A: Yes. Clergy, servers and people bringing up elements (or anything similar) should of course 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: Yes: Refreshments can be served before or after a service. The temporary suspension in 2021 could now be lifted and this does not need to be on a seated “table-service” basis only. We can return to refreshments being served from a hatch/table or equivalent and for church members to drink tea and coffee without a face mask, whether standing or seated. However, when not actually eating or drinking, face coverings should be worn (as is the case in hospitality establishments).

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. 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: Yes. There are no restrictions on meetings in private homes. In church buildings face coverings should be worn unless 1m distancing is maintained ('worker or volunteer' rules) or when eating or drinking. Care should be taken with hygiene and ventilation.

Q: Can a Church Annual Meeting take place?

A: Yes. Care should be taken with face coverings, hygiene, ventilation etc. Some churches may prefer to remain with virtual or hybrid meetings.

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. 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. Face coverings must be worn (with the usual exceptions – and the 1m distancing requirement for unmasked singers/musicians) and good hand hygiene should be followed.