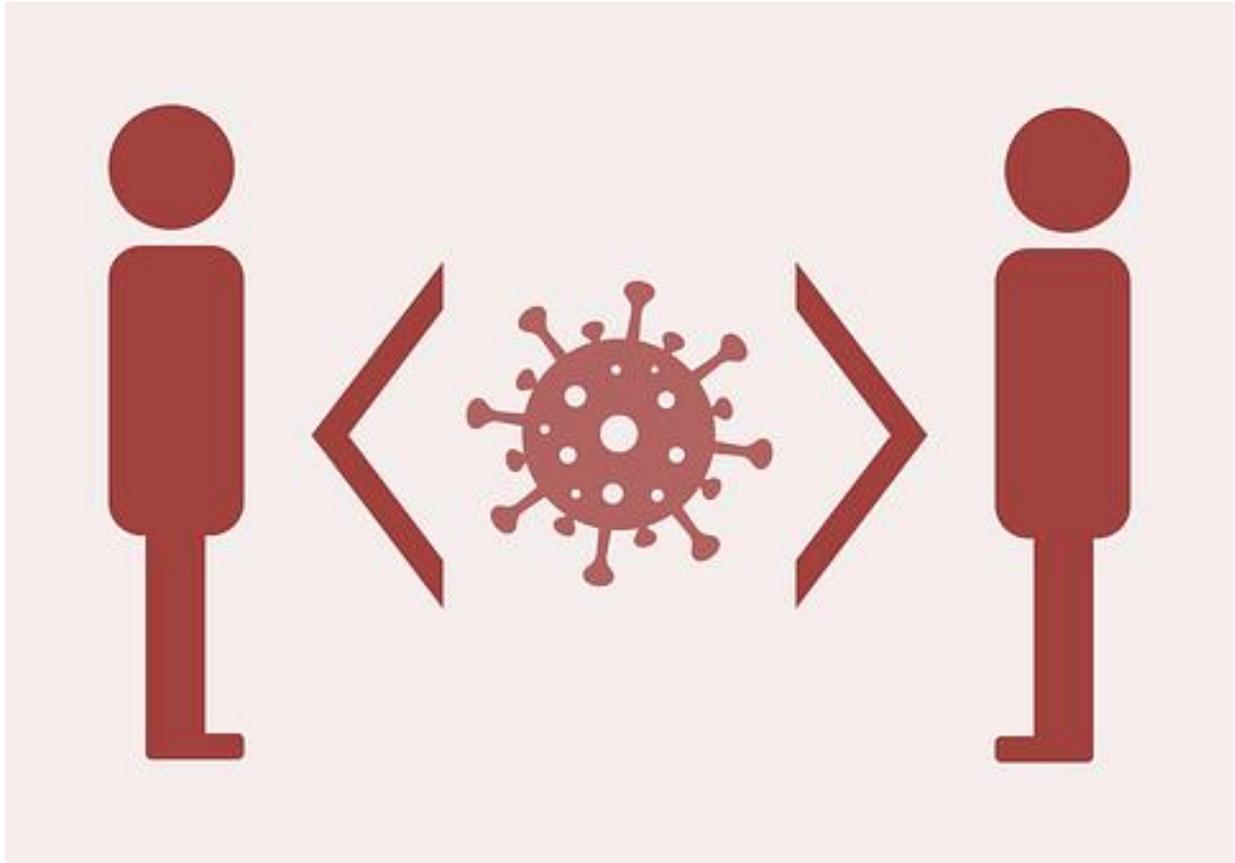




DIOCESE OF **Hexham & Newcastle**



Coronavirus disease (COVID-19)

HANDBOOK FOR THE RE-OPENING OF CHURCHES

Version 2 – June 2020

Introduction

The Diocese is committed to protecting the health, safety and wellbeing of all of its clergy, employees, volunteers and parishioners. HM Government has agreed that churches may reopen for individual prayer from the 15th June 2020 providing that a **COVID secure** environment can be created for worshippers to return. At present churches may not open for collective or communal prayer and regular services. This includes any minister of religion or lay person leading devotions or prayer. We will keep this situation under review and amend our plans accordingly.

To ensure your health and safety when you return to church, the church building has been made COVID secure. This has been achieved by carrying out a comprehensive **risk assessment** and implementing risk controls in line with HM Government advice. These controls ensure that social distancing and good hygiene can be practised to reduce the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

To ensure a safe working environment, we will work with everyone so that you understand and have confidence in the controls that have been put in place. You should **discuss** any concerns or anxieties with your Parish Priest in the first instance.

We will need to be **flexible** in our approach as HM Government advice is likely to change in response to the situation with COVID-19. Should there be a second lockdown, we will adjust practices in line with Government advice.

This **handbook** has been written to supplement the conversations that you may already have had with your Parish Priest. It should be used to help you to familiarise yourself with the actions that you **MUST** take to remain safe whilst at church.

We all have a **duty** to protect our own health and safety, as well as that of others whom we come into contact with. It is essential therefore that everyone follows the controls described on the following pages.

This handbook also contains some guidance on **safeguarding and pastoral** considerations associated with the re-opening of churches.

Should I come to church?

If you have been confirmed as **extremely clinically vulnerable** you will have been advised by the NHS to shield at home because you are very susceptible to an adverse reaction to COVID-19. You MUST stay at home until you receive a communication from your health professional or HM Government's advice rescinds the requirement to shield. If you are living with someone who is extremely clinically vulnerable, we advise that you should not return to church at this time.

Some people, including those aged 70 and over, those with specific chronic pre-existing conditions and pregnant women, are **clinically vulnerable**, meaning they are at higher risk of severe illness from coronavirus. As we begin to ease restrictions, this group should continue to take particular care to minimise contact with others outside their household. If you fall into this group of people you should consider remaining at home but if you would like to return to church you should consult with your Parish Priest to explore if extra risk control measures can be put into place to allow you to return safely.

What if I have (or suspect) that I have COVID-19?

If you **suspect** that you have coronavirus, (high temperature, new persistent cough, lack of taste or smell) or if you are living with someone who has or is suspected of having coronavirus, you MUST self-isolate in accordance with HM Government guidance and contact the online 111 service to arrange for testing.

If you have returned from **overseas** you should review the latest guidance from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Depending on which country you have returned from, you may need to self-isolate, even if you do not show any symptoms. If you do start showing symptoms you MUST self-isolate in accordance with HM Government guidance and contact the online 111 service to arrange for testing.

If you test **positive** for coronavirus after having recently attended church, you MUST contact your Parish Priest who will, in conjunction with Diocesan H&S Adviser, determine if any further control measures in the church are appropriate.

If you are at church when you receive a positive test result you MUST inform your Parish Priest, go home immediately and contact 111 for advice on isolation.

Travelling to church

If possible you should avoid using public transport to come to church. If you do have to use public transport; try to **travel** at off-peak times. HM Government has said that you must wear a face covering to travel on public transport and you should also try to sit 2 metres away from other people if you can.

The safest way to travel to church is by walking, cycling or using your own vehicle. You **MUST** avoid car sharing with anyone outside of your household.

Keeping the congregation safe

If possible, a means of managing **numbers** attending church will be established which considers the reduced seating capacity available. This could be 20% or less of the original capacity to allow for social distancing.

The capacity will be displayed on **posters** at the entrance to church. During sessions of individual prayer, once capacity has been reached, parishioners will be asked to wait outside the main body of the church, either in a suitable narthex or outside the entrance door.

Your church will have established a process of **queuing** to maintain 2M distancing prior to parishioners processing into church. Marking tape has been placed on the floor to help you to maintain a 2M **social distance** from others. There may be occasions when you may not be able to maintain 2M but this presents an extremely low risk, if for example when someone is quickly passing you in a corridor or walkway.

If you would like to wear a **face covering** for reassurance whilst you are in church, you are welcome to do so and should not see it as disrespectful to prayer or the sacred space.

If possible, parishioners will be **informed** before the church opens as to how they must use the church to remain safe.

The entrance and exit **doors** (and windows where possible) will be left open for the duration of individual prayer and services. This allows air circulation which dilutes any viral particles in the air and avoids the need to touch the doors which could spread any virus which may be on hands.

The Holy Water stoops, confessionals and choir lofts will not be used and hymn books, Mass cards and all piety goods will be removed or covered. Printed newsletters may still be collected but must not be left in church.

If you are a **steward** welcoming parishioners attending church, you should inform them about the controls in place to keep them safe, and direct them to another steward who will lead them to a seat.

Keeping the congregation safe ... continued

Depending upon the size of the church, at least 2 stewards MUST be present at all times. i.e. 1 welcomer and 1 usher. If you are a **steward** you MUST wash your hands regularly and avoid eating or drinking unless you have washed your hands immediately beforehand. All cuts or grazes MUST be covered with a waterproof dressing.

Stewards should not be drawn from people who are extremely clinically vulnerable, ladies who are pregnant, people aged 70 or over, or those who are clinically vulnerable by virtue of a long standing chronic medical condition.

Stewards should not physically assist people unless absolutely necessary, for example in an emergency for **first aid**. In this case there are some basic considerations:

- Be aware of the risks to yourselves and others in helping someone
- Make sure you wash your hands using alcohol gel, before and after helping someone
- Ensure that you do not cough or sneeze over someone when you are helping them
- Wear disposable gloves when dealing with people and dispose of them securely
- Dispose of all waste from first aid safely in tied bags in bins
- Do not touch a wound with your bare hand
- Do not touch any part of a dressing that will come in contact with a wound

Hand sanitiser will be provided at the entrance and exit points and everyone will be required to use it upon entry and exit. If a suitable second exit is available in the church it will be used to help to avoid parishioners coming into close contact with others.

Anyone with **cold or flu-like symptoms** will be asked by the welcoming steward not to enter the church. Posters will be placed around the church to remind volunteers and parishioners about risk controls.

Moving around the church

Social distancing will be achieved by isolating sufficient rows of pews/seats to attain a 2M distance in all directions and parishioners will be required to sit 2M apart in the remaining pews/seats unless they are from the same household. Low-adhesive tape may be used to indicate seating positions within the pews.

Access of parishioners into the main body of the church will be managed by stewards acting as ushers. The pews/seats will be filled from the front of church, moving to the back.

Votive candles may still be lit, but shared matches, tapers or lighters must not be used. Candles must be lit from existing lit candles.

Statues and relics must not be touched or kissed. This instruction will be displayed on posters next to the statues.

Moving around the church ... continued

As parishioners leave the church they must do so whilst maintaining social distancing from other worshippers. Ushers will guide incoming parishioners to the spaces by a suitable route to maintain social distancing. Some main routes within the church will be defined by floor markings which indicate 2M distancing.

Toilets will not be available for use by parishioners. A single toilet or toilet block will be identified for volunteers who must sanitise their hands before entering the toilet and wash their hands thoroughly for at least 20 seconds afterwards. This area will be cleaned daily.

If the toilet has not been used for several weeks the cistern must be flushed and both hot and cold hand basin taps run for 2 minutes prior to first use.

Children must be closely supervised to reduce the likelihood of them touching surfaces and spreading the virus.

Before the first admission of parishioners, an extended cleaning regime will be instigated using appropriate cleaning materials and following the Diocesan cleaning protocol. Cleaning of the church will be carried out on a daily basis after use.

Celebration of Mass

Further guidance is awaited from the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales.

General comments

You MUST follow basic **infection controls** as recommended by HM Government:

- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue or your sleeve when you cough or sneeze
- Put used tissues into your pocket or bag and dispose of them at home
- Wash your hands with soap and water often – use hand sanitiser gel if soap and water are not available
- Try to avoid close contact with people who are unwell
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces
- Do not touch your eyes, nose or mouth if your hands are not clean

If you are worried about symptoms you should use the NHS 111 online service. Only call if you cannot get help online, and don't go to your GP or other healthcare centre.

Your Parish Priest will be talking to you regularly to provide reassurance but don't hesitate to contact him if you have any questions or concerns. Further advice can be obtained from the Diocesan Property Department by telephoning 0191 2433319.

Safeguarding Protocol – Reopening of Churches

With the reopening of churches during the Covid-19 global pandemic, we must support the process and ensure we continue to create safe and supportive environments for everyone. The following safeguarding protocols are to be managed and adopted in the current situation.

Safety plans

A decision has been made by the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales that those individuals currently on a safety plan and managed by the Diocesan Safeguarding Department will be unable to access any church for the purposes of individual prayer.

The Safeguarding Department manages and monitors a number of safety plans throughout the Diocese. The purpose of these safety plans is to ensure that any risk is managed and the wider Parish community is kept safe from potential harm. Parish Priests and Safeguarding Representatives should already be aware if there is an active safety plan in their Parish.

Every person who is currently on a safety plan will be contacted by the Safeguarding Coordinator/Advisor and informed that they are unable to attend any church at this time.

If an individual who is subject to a safety plan attempts to, or attends a church, they should not be allowed access and the Safeguarding Coordinator/Advisor should be made aware as soon as possible.

Safer Recruitment of Volunteers

Stewards and cleaners in particular will be required to maintain a safe environment. These roles do not require a DBS check to be completed but for those individuals who are new volunteers they must undergo a "safer recruitment process." These roles should not be filled by those individuals who are clinically extremely vulnerable as they must continue to shield or those who are considered to be in a higher risk group due to age or existing and underlying health conditions.

The Safer Recruitment process will be managed by the Diocesan Safeguarding Department. A member of the Department will contact each Parish Priest in advance of each church opening to provide guidance on the recruitment of volunteers.

One of the stewards, which could be the priest, must be DBS checked.

National guidance on the use of Stewards states that they should already be existing volunteers who are known to the Parish Priest.

Creating Safer Environments

It is possible that those individuals returning to church may be vulnerable and could make disclosures or allegations following their time in isolation/lockdown. They may have experienced traumatic and difficult situations. This could include acts of criminality. It is important that those volunteers present have an understanding of safeguarding issues including domestic abuse and mental ill health. They should be prepared and able to respond to situations appropriately.

- Those churches that are open should ensure that they have an updated Safeguarding poster displayed with the appropriate contact details shown. If there isn't a poster displayed this will be provided by the Safeguarding Department.
- There should always be more than one volunteer present when the church is open. One of the volunteers must have a DBS. This safeguards those in attendance and also the volunteers.
- Any individual under the age of 16 years should not be allowed to attend unaccompanied.
- Consideration should be given for volunteers to wear tabards to identify them
- The Safeguarding Guidance Booklet will be provided to all volunteers as part of their induction into the role. This outlines the expected code of conduct for volunteers and basic information on how to respond to allegations. There are also contact numbers of support groups detailed in this booklet.
- A list of useful telephone numbers and signposting to support organisations should be available to worshippers if they request help. This will include details for the Safeguarding Department.

Pastoral considerations

“Am I my brother’s keeper?” From the very first pages of the bible we are told that we have responsibility for each other. The scriptures are full of the value of human life, and the need to preserve it is foundational to our Catholic faith. Your role in helping protect our community is greatly valued as we remember that we are Body, Mind and Spirit and all elements require our protection.

There has been an enormous surge in people accessing online Masses, statistically outweighing the numbers normally attending a weekend service. We, therefore, may find as we open our churches that people are coming to church for the first time. We know that in terms of faith development people need to feel a sense of trust with religion. Once trusting, they may perhaps move to a sense of curiosity and openness to conversion. The first experience they have, including the people they meet, is critical in whether they choose to continue in this journey.

Please be mindful that they may be afraid, they may not know our usual religious norms and rituals; they may need gentle encouragement and support, not judgement for this. They are vulnerable in a very different way. At this time you represent the Faith, please let them know that they are very welcome. If you must turn people away let them know when they might access the building or how they may seek a prayer community online.

The vast majority of people accessing the church will be those familiar to the Community. It may look and feel very different. Their favourite pew may not be available, the Holy Water, the music may be absent, the usual friendly faces may be masked or missing. This return to structure & routine which they craved and expected may be an unnerving disappointment. Your role, therefore, in helping to open the building is both practical and spiritual.

We are living in a time of great fear, and the Church needs you to be bringers of peace and trust whilst being respectful of the statutory requirements to preserve life. The bible tells us over 300 times ‘Do not be afraid’ or its equivalent. People coming to our churches need reassurance and peace in what has been a testing and turbulent time for so many. So please keep them safe but also try and keep them at peace. A friendly smile, (or nod if you are masked) your tone of voice, the words you use make all the difference.

Continued over:

Pope Francis' extraordinary Urbi et Orbi given on March 27th 2020

"Like the disciples in the Gospel we were caught off guard by an unexpected, turbulent storm. We have realised that we are on the same boat, all of us fragile and disoriented, but at the same time important and needed, all of us called to row together, each of us in need of comforting the other.

On this boat... are all of us. Just like those disciples, who spoke anxiously with one voice, saying "We are perishing" (v. 38), so we too have realised that we cannot go on thinking of ourselves, but only together can we do this....

In the midst of isolation when we are suffering from a lack of tenderness and chances to meet up, and we experience the loss of so many things, let us once again listen to the proclamation that saves us: he is risen and is living by our side...

Lord, may you bless the world, give health to our bodies and comfort our hearts. You ask us not to be afraid. Yet our faith is weak and we are fearful. But you, Lord, will not leave us at the mercy of the storm.

Tell us again: "Do not be afraid" (*Mt 28:5*). And we, together with Peter, "cast all our anxieties onto you, for you care about us" (*cf. 1 Pet 5:7*)"

Further site specific controls or considerations for my church

