



DIOCESE OF Hexham & Newcastle

Rt Rev Robert Byrne CO
Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle

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Protecting the Health of Our Clergy and Congregations

Local Prevailing Conditions

COVID infection rates in the North East have fallen from a seven day average peak of 978 cases per 100,000 of adult population on the 17th July to 277 per 100,000 on the 12th August. The last few weeks have seen an increase again to 371 cases per 100,000 on the 10th September as the effects of the relaxations have allowed COVID to spread more easily.

Health officials in the region have advised that maintaining COVID control measures such as social distancing and face coverings throughout the autumn/winter period will be vital to controlling COVID infections. Infections are likely to rise as students return to schools and universities and as the virus becomes more active in the cooler weather when we tend to spend more time indoors.

The vaccination programme has progressed well in the North East with 75% of adults (16's and over) fully vaccinated compared to 63% in July (18's and over). 83% (16's and over) have received one dose of vaccine compared to 81% in July (18's and over) but vaccine uptake has been slowing in the last few months with adults in the 18 -30 age range being the most reluctant to receive a vaccination.

Recent research has shown that the efficacy of both the Pfizer and Astra Zeneca vaccines reduces from around 90% to about 70% protection after six months hence the need for an autumn booster programme for those people aged over 50 and those in the more vulnerable groups.

The seven day average for daily hospital admissions in the North East has risen from 124 in July to 160 as of 2nd September and the seven day average number of daily COVID deaths has risen from 4 to 6.

Current research suggests that the virus is less likely to be transmitted by touch and that the main transmission route is via exhaled breath. This has allowed us to review some of our existing controls.





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Diocesan COVID Controls

Once again I have taken both clergy and lay advice in reaching these decisions whilst also giving consideration to the latest guidance published by the Government on 16th July and the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales on 15th July, links for which are included below.

[CBCEW-COVID-Step-4-Guidance-150721b.pdf](#)

[COVID-19: guidance for the safe use of places of worship - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

With effect from the weekend of 18/19 September I confirm our Diocesan position on the most pertinent points to be:

- **Hand sanitiser** - use of hand sanitiser on entering and leaving church and before liturgies should continue.
- **Face coverings** - all those attending church are recommended to wear a face covering unless they are exempt from doing so. Priests in the sanctuary, providing they are sufficiently distant (2m or more) from the congregation, do not need to wear a face covering except when distributing Holy Communion.
- **Social Distancing and Capacity of Churches** - reduced church capacities based on a minimum of 1M spacing between households should continue.
- **Cleaning** - to follow the CBCEW Guidance which states, "General cleaning to a good standard, using commonly available cleaning fluids and detergents, with attention to frequent touchpoints is the standard to continue. Maintaining a good general standard of routine cleaning using usual cleaning detergents is sufficient for regular use:
 - a) Cleaning high frequency touch points in buildings after each act of worship.
 - b) Thoroughly cleaning the church once a week"
- **Congregational Singing** - to follow the CBCEW Guidance which states, "Indoor congregational singing will be permitted from 19th July. The use of cantor groups and other choirs is now permitted. It is recommended that singing should be phased in gently as part of worship over the summer period and that face coverings should be worn by members of the congregation whilst singing together, until infection levels reduce."
- **Hymn books and Mass cards** - can be reintroduced



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- **Test, Track and Trace** - NHS Test, Track and Trace system is no longer in operation and as such the use of QR codes is no longer necessary. Mass booking systems to continue where numbers wishing to attend are likely to exceed the COVID secure capacity of the church.
- **One-way systems and movement of people** - to follow the CBCEW Guidance which states, "It is no longer necessary to have one-way systems or other restrictions on movement in churches from this time onward."
- **Celebration of Holy Mass** - to follow the CBCEW Guidance which states, "At this time, it is not recommended that Holy Water stoups are refilled."

"All usual ministers for the celebration of Holy Mass can be deployed such as servers, cantors, readers and Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion."

"The offertory collection can be resumed in church with baskets and pouches."

"It is recommended that the physical Sign of Peace remain suspended..., and its omission will help to reduce physical contact between people during the celebration."

"Holy Communion will continue to be under one kind and the ministers will continue to sanitise their hands beforehand and wear a face covering whilst distributing. Communion is recommended to be distributed in the hand but those who wish to receive on the tongue may do so. There should be care on the part of the minister to avoid physical contact with the hand or the tongue of the communicant when distributing Holy Communion. In the event of contamination the minister should sanitise their hands before further distribution."

"Concelebration is permitted and Holy Communion by the concelebrants should be by intinction (including the principal celebrant), and the consumption of the remaining sacred species and cleansing of the chalice should be performed by the principal celebrant alone."

Holy Communion should be given at the normal place in the Mass.



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- **Celebration of Holy Baptism** - Baptisms can take place up to the COVID secure capacity of the church based on a minimum of 1M spacing between households. However, it is recommended that single families should have children baptised at any one celebration. Baptisms involving multiple families and children should be avoided for now.
- **Celebration of Confirmation** - to follow CBCEW Guidance which states, "Confirmations can be celebrated as usual with the caveat that the laying on of hands should be by the celebrant extending the hands over the confirmandi and the Sign of Peace be a gesture without any physical contact."
- **Celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation** - to follow CBCEW Guidance which states, "A physical barrier, such as a Perspex sheet or heavy curtain, should cover the grille between the confessor and the penitent. Good ventilation of the penitent's side of the confessional should be deployed to prevent stagnation of air."

The decisions outlined above are made having given consideration to the following points:

- the increasing local infection rate
- the increasing number of hospital admissions
- the reducing efficacy of the vaccine
- the slowing uptake of the vaccine in the 18-30 age range
- Health officials in the region have advised that maintaining COVID control measures such as social distancing and face coverings throughout the autumn/winter period will be vital to controlling COVID infections

At your discretion you may wish to adopt a more cautious approach should you consider your individual parish circumstances warrant this. However, I would request that there are no further relaxations of the controls outlined above at this time.

The current arrangements will be reviewed again at the beginning of November against the data and guidance available at that time.



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An update of the Diocesan Risk Assessment, Handbook, FAQ's and Cleaning Protocol are currently being prepared to reflect these changes and will be issued in due course.

Parish Halls and Meeting Spaces

As previously advised to use our church halls and meeting spaces we must first undertake a COVID secure Risk Assessment in a similar way as we have done for our church buildings. The risk assessment must be carried out professionally using one of the two Diocesan approved consultants. Michael McElroy, the Diocesan H&S Adviser can be contacted at michael.mcelroy@diocesehn.org.uk to explain this in more detail.