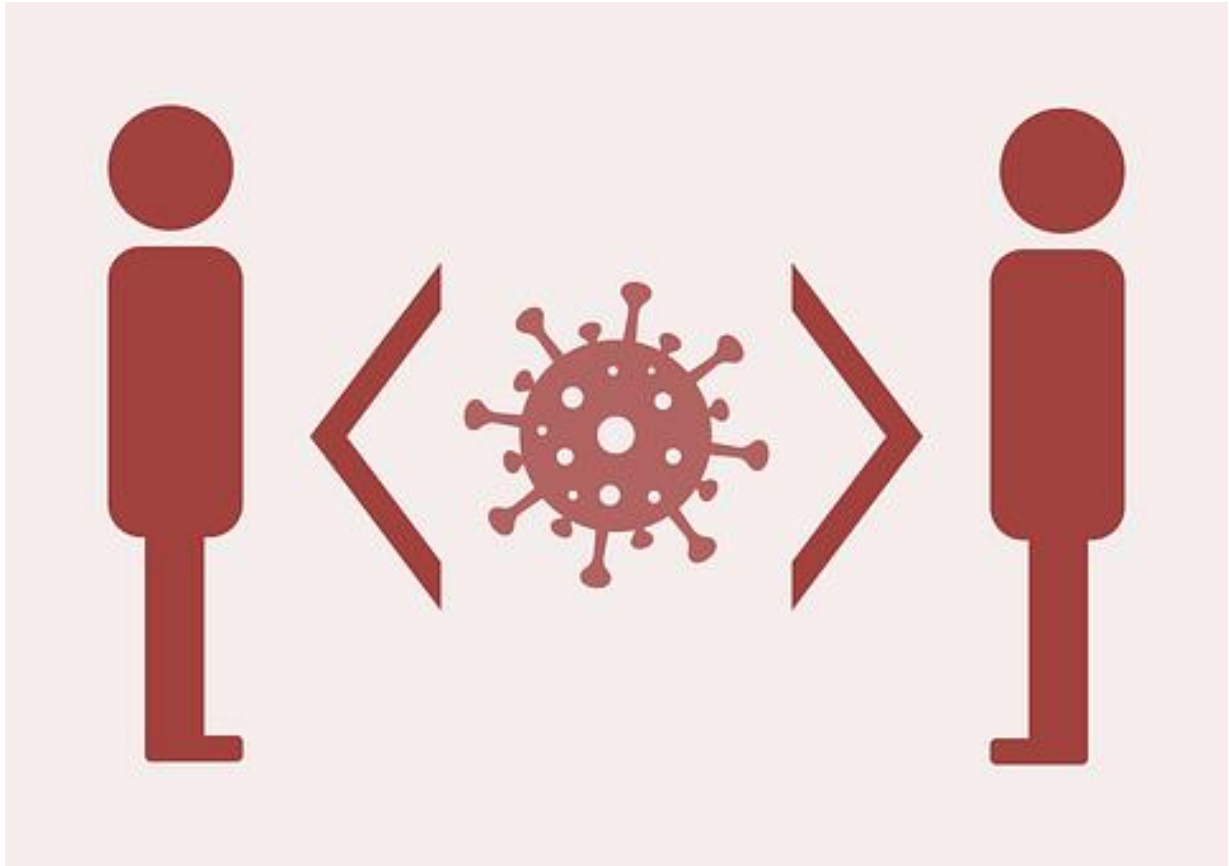




DIOCESE OF **Hexham & Newcastle**



Coronavirus (COVID-19)

HANDBOOK FOR THE RE-OPENING OF CHURCHES

Version 11 – June 2021

Introduction

The Diocese is committed to protecting the health, safety and wellbeing of all of its clergy, employees, volunteers and parishioners. HM Government has announced that from 4th July 2020, communal acts of worship will be allowed in our Catholic Churches providing that a **COVID secure** environment can be created for worshippers to return.

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 and Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales guidance. 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 continue to be **flexible** in our approach as HM Government advice changes in response to the situation with COVID-19.

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 with whom we come into contact. 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 **clinically extremely vulnerable** you are very susceptible to an adverse reaction to COVID-19 and you have been advised to take extra precautions during the pandemic in England. Please [click here](#) to see HM Government Guidance on COVID-19: Guidance on shielding and protecting people who are clinically extremely vulnerable from COVID-19.

Some people, including those aged 70 and over, are **clinically vulnerable**, meaning they are at higher risk of severe illness from coronavirus. Individuals who fall within this group are advised to keep social contacts low and maintain social distancing from those they do not live with. Please [click here](#) to see HM Government Guidance on Covid-19: guidance for the safe use of places of worship.

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

If you **suspect** that you have Covid-19, (high temperature, new persistent cough, lack of taste or smell) or if you are living with someone who has or is suspected of having Covid-19, 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 Covid-19 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 2M away from other people if you can.

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

Social Distancing

Where possible, adhere to social distancing of at least 2M or 1M with risk mitigation (where 2M is not viable) between households. This means you can space people more closely (with a minimum of 1M) providing a mitigation of risk is also applied. In the case of our churches, this would mean the compulsory wearing of a face covering for members of the congregation. If those on the sanctuary are sufficiently distant from the congregation, there is no need to wear face coverings.

When inside a place of worship visitors must not mingle with anyone outside of their household or support bubble. When outdoors, gatherings (including in private gardens) are limited to 6 people (the Rule of 6) or 2 households.

Face coverings

Face coverings are now mandatory in Places of Worship as of Saturday 8th August 2020. All those who are attending churches must wear a face covering unless they are exempt from doing so. This is for the good of all who gather in the church for Mass as it is an enclosed public space where there are people from differing households who do not normally meet. 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 (please see below). Other ministers in the sanctuary should wear face coverings and remain socially distant from the celebrant. Please [click here](#) to see HM Government Guidance on Face coverings: when to wear one and how to make your own.

Keeping the congregation safe

A means of controlling the **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. This could include the introduction of a booking system particularly for services where demand will be high.

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

The opening up of public places following the COVID-19 outbreak is being supported by the NHS Test and Trace service. Our churches are encouraged to assist this service by keeping an accurate temporary record of visitors for 21 days, in a way that is manageable, and assist NHS Test and Trace with requests for that data if needed for contact tracing and the investigation of local outbreaks.

When collecting the names and contact details of people attending your place of worship, you should ask for their consent. This is because of the potentially sensitive nature of the data collected in these circumstances, which is protected by law. Guidance on collecting visitor details for Test and Trace, including issues around consent, is provided by the Information Commissioner's Office. You should make clear that giving contact details is optional and is not a condition of attending your place of worship.

Parishes are also encouraged to register their church as a venue and display the QR code poster close to the entrance as part of the NHS COVID-19 app. This should supplement, but not replace, any existing arrangements for recording contact information of those attending church.

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

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 must not be used and hymn books, Mass cards and all piety goods will be removed. Printed newsletters may still be collected but must not be left in church. Choir lofts must not be used by the congregation, however can be used by the organist.

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.

The use of stewards must continue for liturgical celebrations where there is a possibility of the oversubscription of the stated capacity of the church e.g. Sunday Mass. However it is recommended that stewards continue to be used for all liturgical celebrations.

Depending upon the size of the church, at least 2 stewards MUST be present at for all Sunday worship or where there is likely to be an oversubscription of the COVID safe capacity of the church. 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 and cleaners must not be drawn from the clinically extremely vulnerable group. Those in the clinically vulnerable group, including people aged 70 or over, could be at a higher risk of severe illness from coronavirus. The clinically vulnerable group is advised to keep social contacts low and maintain social distancing from those they do not live with. Those from this group who still wish to volunteer will be asked to confirm that they have read and understood the Diocesan Handbook for Re-Opening of Churches and the current HM Government Guidance which can be found by [clicking here](#).

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 told 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 social distance in all directions and parishioners will be required to sit apart in the remaining

pews/seats unless they are from the same household or support bubble. 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.

As parishioners leave the church they must do so whilst maintaining social distancing from other worshippers.

Toilets should be kept open and carefully managed to reduce the risk of transmission. Steps needed to make the use of toilets as safe as possible:

- Using signs and posters as a reminder of good hygiene
- Using social distancing marking in areas where queues normally form, and the adoption of a limited entry approach, with one in, one out (whilst avoiding the creation of additional bottlenecks)
- To enable good hand hygiene make hand sanitiser available on entry to toilets where safe and practical, and ensure suitable handwashing facilities including running water and liquid soap and suitable options for drying (either paper towels or hand dryers) are available. Communal towels should be removed and replaced with single use paper towels
- Set clear use and cleaning guidance for toilets, with increased frequency of cleaning in line with usage. Use appropriate cleaning products, paying attention to frequently hand touched surfaces, and consider the use of disposable cloths or paper roll to clean all hard surfaces
- Keep the facilities well ventilated, for example by fixing doors open where appropriate and safe to do so
- Special care should be taken for cleaning of portable toilets and larger toilet blocks
- Putting up a visible cleaning schedule that is kept up to date and visible
- Providing more waste facilities and more frequent refuse collection

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

Priests should remain mindful of their own personal situation with respect to potential exposure to virus transmission. It is permissible for those in the clinically vulnerable group, including those aged 70 and over, who could be at a higher risk of severe illness from coronavirus, to celebrate Mass, but it is strongly advised that they do not distribute Holy Communion and take particular care to be constantly socially distant from the congregation. They should return to the sacristy directly after Mass is ended.

The Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales Guidance for Concelebration at Mass with a Congregation should be followed and can be found by [clicking here](#).

Before Mass

Only those necessary should be in the sacristy before Mass. The celebrant, sacristan, or server should prepare everything for the celebration of Mass with care. Single-use gloves should be worn at this stage. Particular care should be taken over the preparation of the elements for Holy Communion. The altar breads for distribution to the people should be placed into a clean covered ciborium (a pall can be placed over a dish paten). Sufficient altar breads for each celebration should be placed within at this stage. A separate ciborium/paten should be prepared for each person who will distribute Holy Communion. The cover of the ciborium or dish paten should not be removed until the time for distribution of Holy Communion.

The priest should prepare his own chalice and paten with a large altar bread for consecration which is for himself alone. The chalice should have a purificator and a pall. The purificator should be used only once and then laundered. He should prepare the cruets of wine and water and his own bowl for the lavabo. Again, the towel should be used only once and then laundered.

There should be no congregational singing at Mass, but a small choir may perform if it is essential to the act of worship.

During Mass

Any worship aids (missalettes etc.) should be for single use and taken with the user when the Mass ends. They should not be left in the church at the end of Mass.

Servers must wear face coverings whilst in the Sanctuary. Deacons should wear face coverings apart from the proclamation of the Gospel when they should remove the face covering at the lectern and replace it before moving away from it (providing the lectern is sufficiently distant from the congregation).

The priest, and if present, deacon and server, should remain socially distant at all times on the sanctuary during the celebration of Mass. This is particularly important at the Gospel (for the deacon's blessing), the Preparation of the Gifts, and during the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

Readers should avoid touching the microphones or the Lectionary during the Liturgy of the Word, apart from page turning. Readers may remove their face coverings at the lectern to read and should replace them before stepping away from it providing the lectern is sufficiently distant from the congregation. The homily should be brief, to minimise the time that people are congregated in the church building. The Prayer of the Faithful can be re-introduced but the Sign of Peace remains suspended.

The use of incense is now permitted.

The offertory procession of the gifts of bread and wine to the altar is now permitted with those involved sanitising their hands before commencing. There should be no sharing of the collection plate or bag. People should be encouraged to make their donation to the church online or via standing order. Plates or other collecting boxes for cash offerings should be placed at the entrances and exits of churches, and this should be overseen by stewards. The collection should be consolidated into plastic bags, sealed, placed into a secure location and left for 72 hours before counting. Counters should wear gloves when doing this task and the area should be well ventilated and cleaned before and afterwards.

The Communion Rite

Members of the congregation should not exchange the sign of peace.

After the prayer and its response "*Behold the Lamb of God...Lord I am not worthy,*" the priest should hold up the Host to the Congregation and say audibly "The Body of Christ" to which the people should respond "Amen." In the same way, he elevates the chalice and says, "The Blood of Christ" and again the people respond "Amen." The priest should receive Holy Communion under both kinds using his own Host and Chalice, neither of which should be shared.

There are two options for the distribution of Holy Communion. In both cases, it is now permitted to announce "The Body of Christ" for each communicant. The priest and those who are distributing Holy Communion should wear face coverings when doing so.

It is highly recommended that the priest or other ministers should wear disposable gloves during the distribution of Holy Communion to the congregation.

Option 1

Once the priest has received Holy Communion, he should put on his face covering and cleanse his hands with alcohol sanitiser before opening the pre-prepared ciborium for the Communion of the people. If there is a deacon assisting, or any other Minister of Holy Communion, they should similarly cleanse their hands and then receive communion from the priest from the people's ciborium, and under one kind only. They should then put on their face coverings and cleanse their hands again before receiving their ciborium from which they remove the covering or pall if it is still in place.

At the place where communion is to be distributed, a physical barrier should be placed, for example a prie-dieu (kneeler on the priest's side) or small table to socially distance the priest distributing Holy Communion from communicants. Communion is recommended to be given in the hand, with the communicant standing, and avoiding any physical contact, but if people wish to receive on the tongue, then they should wait until the end of the communion line and receive then. Communion on the tongue exposes the minister's hand to their aerosol and increases the possibility of viral infection. The minister should sanitise their hands after each distribution of communion on the tongue. Communion on the tongue should not be given in areas with very high spikes in local infections.

People should wait in their pews until instructed to move forward to the priest for Holy Communion by the Stewards, always aware of the regulations on social distancing in the orderly queue. When parishioners approach the priest, they should do so with arms at "full stretch" so that there is a good distance between the priest and the communicant. Their hands, palms upwards, one of top of the other, should be extended as flatly as possible. The communicants should unloop their face covering and consume the Sacred Host and then replace the face covering before moving back to their pews in an orderly manner. Having received Holy Communion, communicants should move back to their pews in an orderly manner.

Once Communion is complete, the priest returns to the altar and places the unused Hosts, without touching them, into the Tabernacle; he then can remove his face covering before he cleanses the sacred vessels himself in the usual way.

Option 2

The priest receives Holy Communion as described and immediately cleanses his paten and chalice. He then holds a reverent silence before the Prayer after Communion, giving the Blessing and dismissal. At this point, the priest puts on his face covering, cleanses his hands

with hand sanitiser and the other Ministers of Holy Communion who will assist the priest come forward, cleanse their hands and receive Holy Communion under one kind. They should then put on their face coverings and cleanse their hands again before receiving their ciborium from which they remove the covering or pall if it is still in place. They then move to the points for distribution and communicants are stewarded forward in an orderly manner to receive Holy Communion as above, and then immediately leave the Church. The remaining Blessed Sacrament is placed into the Tabernacle; the priest then can remove his face covering before the vessels are cleansed in the usual way.

After the Celebration of Mass

The procession from the sanctuary at the end of the Mass should ensure good social distancing. The sanctuary party should return to the sacristy after Mass. If the clergy wish to greet the people, they should remove their vestments put on a face covering (if in church) and not engage in any physical contact with parishioners, who should be encouraged to return home and not remain.

The celebrant should place the used altar linens into a receptacle for laundry. All sacred vessels should be washed in hot water with a little neutral soap and dried completely before storing. Any discarded printed materials should be removed and bagged for disposal.

The church should be closed after the Mass has finished in order to clean the space. If there is cause for concern regarding the possible contamination of clerical vestments worn during the celebration of Mass, these should be washed in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions, using the warmest water setting allowed for the fabric and allowing time for them to dry completely.

Celebrations of Mass Outdoors

If there is space for the celebration of Mass outdoors around the Church, which allows for the social distancing guidelines of Government to be fulfilled, and that all of the above liturgical advice can be done safely, then there is no reason why Mass cannot be celebrated outside of a church within the boundary of the parish property. If a Catholic parish school or its grounds is to be used for Mass, a separate risk assessment has to be done, the appropriate school authority (Governing Body or Trust) has to give its permission, and both the parish and school insurers should be informed before the event takes place.

Funerals

Before the Service

The Government guidance on the Opening of Churches for Public Worship states that the number of people attending Funerals may be up to the COVID safe capacity of the church.

There should be good collaboration between the family of the deceased, the funeral director and the clergy.

It is important to consider the following issues before the service:

1. Who can attend? As a principle, numbers should be limited to the COVID safe capacity of the church.

It is important that anyone attending should not exhibit any symptoms of COVID-19 or place themselves at risk.

2. The usual guidance on hygiene, hand sanitising and people with symptoms not attending church, as set out above applies.

Preparing the Church for the service

Hand sanitisers should be signposted, readily available and easily accessible. Notices should be clearly placed advising people of correct hygiene practices.

Consideration should be given as to the flow of groups in and out of the church to minimise any risk of compromising physical distancing, avoiding overlap between different groups while also leaving time for adequate cleaning. The church should be well ventilated, preferably by opening windows and doors where possible.

If a Requiem Mass is to be celebrated, then the preparations should follow the Guidance for the Celebration of Mass in terms of preparing the credence table and elements for Holy Communion.

Safeguarding the Priest/Deacon/Minister from infection

Clergy should remain mindful of their own personal hygiene, sanitising/washing their hands before and after the service and again after the committal. Physical contact with mourners and the coffin containing the body is to be avoided.

Physical contact

While it is contrary to human instinct and normal pastoral practice, it is important to advise mourners that there should be no physical contact including shaking hands, hugging or kissing outside their own households.

Reception of Remains

Coffin bearers from friends and family (up to 6) are permitted. Placing of a funeral pall over the coffin or Christian symbols is permitted.

During the Service

At this time, there should be no congregational singing. Single-use service sheets can be provided which the participants should take with them as they leave the church.

If the family are to participate in the Liturgy of the Word, then they should avoid unnecessary contact with any microphone or the prepared lectionary or the book containing the Prayer of the Faithful. Portable microphones should not be used or passed from hand to hand.

If there is a Requiem Mass, it is important for the celebrant to explain to the congregation the mode of receiving communion. He should be assisted by the stewards to direct people safely to receive Holy Communion at the appropriate time. Care should be taken by those moving around the church at this time, especially in the proximity of the coffin.

Incense and Holy Water can be used as part of the reception of the coffin or final commendation.

After the Service

The church should be closed after the funeral service has finished in order to clean the space.

If there is cause for concern regarding the possible contamination of clerical vestments, these should be washed in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions, using the warmest water setting allowed for the fabric and allowing time for them to dry completely.

The Committal

The management of people at the place of committal comes under the local regulations of the cemetery or the crematorium, and these should be observed.

Confession

The Sacrament of Confession/Penance requires the one-to-one encounter between a priest and the penitent. As such, this must be conducted in as safe a way as possible.

Principles

The principles used to stop infection transmission during confession are:

- preventing droplet spread between priest and penitent through physical distance or barriers or positioning and
- by means of cleaning and personal hygiene which prevent spread of viral particles.

The times of confession, either indoors and/or outdoors, may now be advertised.

Outdoors Confession

Confession outdoors is permitted. Social distancing should be observed for this and good hygiene though cleaning surfaces frequently touched by penitents should be ensured. Placing the penitent and priest at right angles to each other or back to back would further reduce air spread containing droplets between them. Asking penitents to sanitise their hands when arriving is a sensible step.

Confession inside churches or buildings

Within a church, if the church environment allows for confession to take place in an open space (such as a side chapel or other private area), this is preferred. If possible, the priest and the penitent should not sit face-to-face but at right angles to each other or side-by-side, facing opposite directions, whilst still allowing for the spoken matter to be heard. Penitents should have sanitised their hands when entering the church as part of existing measures.

- It may be possible to place a plastic or glass screen between the priest and the penitent which would allow for a face-to-face encounter. If so, the screen should be made of a solid material
- If a grille is used, a cloth curtain (or a piece of plastic film) should be placed over the priest's side to minimise transmission risk

“Roman style” confessionals (penitent kneeling at right angles to the priest speaking through a grille) are best. A plastic film on the priest's side covering the grille will provide a barrier against air droplets.

Priests should limit the number of confessions they hear each day to reduce their exposure risk.

Marriage and Baptism

The Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales Guidance for Marriage and Celebration of Baptism, Adult Baptism, Reception into the Church and Adult Confirmation should be followed and can be found by [clicking here](#).

Where significant life cycle events, outside of marriage ceremonies and funerals, are an element of communal worship they may continue, but they are subject to the requirements of communal worship set out above.

The government has published the '[COVID-19 Response - Spring 2021](#)' setting out the roadmap out of the current lockdown for England. This explains how restrictions will be eased over time, including any restrictions on places of worship and faith activities. The decision to proceed with each of the four steps in the roadmap will be guided by data not dates and the four tests set out in the roadmap. A week's notice will be provided before any step is taken.

For places of worship and faith communities, the key changes involved in each of the remaining Steps include:

Until 12 April (Step 1)

- up to 6 people, or two households, can gather outdoors including in private gardens
- weddings and civil partnership ceremonies can take place with up to 6 people
- funerals remain limited to 30 people
- wakes are limited to 6 people

Step 2 - from 12 April

- outdoor gathering rules are unchanged
- funerals remain limited to 30 people
- weddings and civil partnership ceremonies, wakes and wedding receptions and wakes are limited to 15 people

Step 3 – from 17 May

- up to 6 people, or two households, can gather indoors
- most significant life cycle events can resume, limited to no more than 30 people. This will include events such as weddings, wakes, private baptisms, naming ceremonies and stone setting ceremonies
- wedding receptions can also proceed with up to 30 people
- the number of people who can attend a funeral will be determined by the COVID safe capacity of the venue.

Step 4 - no earlier than 21 June

- At Step 4, the government aims to remove all limits on life cycle events and other gatherings. This will be subject to the outcome of the scientific Events Research Programme, which will include a series of pilots using enhanced testing approaches and other measures to run events of larger sizes.

Singing

COVID-19 spreads from person to person through small droplets, aerosols and through direct contact. Singing, playing some musical instruments, shouting and physical activity increases the risk of transmission through small droplets and aerosols.

Singing should follow the [principles of safer singing](#).

- **Indoors:** single small group of singers will be allowed to perform, or rehearse for performance, only where essential to an act of communal worship. This should be limited to as few singers as possible, with social distancing being maintained at all times. Communal singing should not take place.
- **Outdoors:** in the grounds or the outside space of a place of worship: when communal worship takes place outdoors, the congregation may join in with singing, and should follow the principles set out in the [performing arts guidance](#). This includes ensuring that congregation members follow social distancing rules.

- Social contact limits apply, meaning that participating groups must not mingle. Communal singing in other public open spaces should not take place.

For further information, including guidance on singing in other settings or outside of communal worship, please refer to the [performing arts guidance](#).

Key principles to follow

Steps should be taken to reduce the risk of transmission. This includes limiting the number of individuals participating as far as possible.

If a place of worship is being used as a venue for rehearsing or performing, you should follow the performing arts guidance.

Where singing, chanting or musical instrument performances take place as part of the act of worship:

- Think carefully about the need for singing or performance. Take account of the wider health context in your area and your participants, particularly if vulnerable individuals are involved
- Ensure that anyone with COVID-19 symptoms (or who has been in contact with others who have symptoms, or who has been told to self-isolate) does not attend a place of worship or participate in singing activities (even if they have no symptoms)
- Where music plays a big part in worship, and recordings are available, we suggest you consider using these as an alternative to live singing or performing
- Avoid playing music at a volume that makes normal conversation difficult or that may encourage shouting when people will be trying to converse before or after worship.
- Spoken responses during worship should also not be in a raised voice
- Any instrument played during worship should be cleaned thoroughly before and after use
- Any performers (for example a church choir) should be positioned in a way that avoids face-to-face performance, as far as possible
- Limit the duration of any singing, as far as possible
- Good ventilation plays a crucial role in reducing transmission. Do what you can to improve ventilation to ensure plenty of fresh air whenever possible, including opening windows
- Always ensuring there is a gap of at least 2m between any performers and the first row of worshippers. Further mitigations like screens or other barriers between performers and worshipper may also be considered

- If worship takes place inside, the congregation should not participate in any activity that can create aerosols, including singing, shouting and chanting. This follows the advice generally for the Performing Arts.

The maximum number of people present should take into account the area of the space and the requirement to maintain 2m social distancing at all times.

General comments

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

- All those attending church must wear a face covering unless they are exempt from doing so
- 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 – Re-opening of Churches

With the re-opening 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 was previously made by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales that those individuals on a current safety plan and managed by the Safeguarding Department would be unable to access any Church. Every person within the Diocese on a current safety plan was contacted by the Safeguarding Coordinator/Advisor and informed of this decision.

The situation has since been reviewed and updated by the Bishops' Conference as follows.

If an individual on a safety plan makes a request to attend Church this should be considered by the Parish Priest in consultation with the Safeguarding Coordinator/Advisor. The request must come from the individual themselves.

The Parish Priest should identify a suitable Mass in consultation with the Safeguarding Coordinator/Advisor including weekday Mass.

Care should be given to the question of how the person is accompanied to ensure safety and the demands of social distancing.

It must be made clear that the new arrangement is temporary.

A new formal safety plan must be drawn up by the Safeguarding Coordinator/Advisor, agreed and signed by the individual and Parish Priest to reflect the new, temporary arrangement. This safety plan will be monitored by the Safeguarding Coordinator/Advisor.

Parish Priests should already be aware if there is an individual on an active safety plan within their parish.

Safer Recruitment of Volunteers

Stewards and cleaners in particular will be required to maintain a safe environment. These roles do not require a Diocesan DBS certificate, but for those individuals who are new volunteers they must undergo a "safer recruitment process." These roles must not be filled by those individuals who are clinically extremely vulnerable as they are shielding. These roles must not be filled by anyone below the age of 18.

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, who could be the priest, must have a Diocesan DBS certificate. 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

