

**INFORMATION FROM THE MEETING OF THE GOVERNMENT'S
CORONAVIRUS PLACES OF WORSHIP TASK FORCE
MONDAY 11TH JANUARY**

The safety and opening of churches

1. Research by health professionals to date indicates that the new coronavirus variant is as well controlled by social distancing and mitigations as the old. Further studies are taking place for a more concrete verification on this matter.
2. The Government stressed that there would be no blanket closure of places of worship. They asked that each place of worship should re-evaluate their own local situation and examine all factors that could affect the good COVID security demonstrated by places of worship so far. This is to include (but is not limited to):
 - a. Sufficient stewarding and management of the venue.
 - b. Sufficient cleaning after acts of communal worship.
 - c. Maintaining good social distancing in the space available along with good ventilation and the compulsory wearing of face coverings.
 - d. Factors affecting travel to and from the place of worship, such as public transport.
 - e. The length of exposure time for an act of worship is critical and should be minimised – anything that is not necessary should be omitted.
 - f. Those who have gathered for worship should not mingle before or after the service outside of the church. They should disperse immediately.
 - g. All non-essential worship should be postponed or cancelled (see below)
3. The officials noted that keeping COVID-secure places of worship open for public worship adds no extra burden to the NHS and provides recognised benefits for the community.
4. The task force expressed with great clarity that the role of the Local Authority is one of enforcement of closure in particular circumstances and only on the basis of evidence of lack of COVID security.
5. Public Health England will conduct an exercise in mapping exposure risks from different venues across the country for better data.

Vaccines and their roll-out in the Community

6. All faith communities were asked to encourage and support the roll-out of the vaccines.
7. There should be explicit encouragement of community members to take up the offer of vaccines whenever it is offered to an individual. Evidence across the country is showing that there is “vaccination hesitancy” amongst certain groups of people, in particular the BAME community, because of misinformation on social media. There was strong encouragement from the Government to counteract this.

8. In our case, the fact that Pope Francis will be vaccinated next week should be stressed along with his own personal endorsement for vaccination. See <https://www.rt.com/news/512030-pope-francis-covid19-vaccine/>
9. There was a request for volunteer support in areas with vaccination hubs/centres and this should be done through the local health commissioning groups. There are lots of different roles that are necessary such as stewarding, as well as a request for former healthcare workers to assist in the inoculation programme.
10. The Government has published its vaccination roll-out plan. It can be found here: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/951284/UK_COVID-19_vaccines_delivery_plan.pdf

Updated Guidance for Places of Worship

11. The Government's 'Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government' updated the Places of Worship Guidance on 11th January 2021. The general approach of the guidance is an extension of the previous rules in place under Tier 4 issued in December 2020. However, it has been amended to reflect the new national restrictions. These restrictions:
 - require people to stay at home, except for specific purposes;
 - prevent people gathering with those they do not live with, except for specific purposes; and,
 - close certain businesses.
12. **Under the Government's current restrictions, attending a church for Mass or private prayer is one of the very few specific purposes with legal exemptions for which people are allowed to leave their home.** To keep everyone safe, where places of worship are opened it is crucial that both those with responsibility for the church and those attending comply with the law and with the COVID secure guidance.
13. The following **should not** take place at the present time in a place of worship:
 - a. Ceremonies which do not take place as an established part of normal communal worship.
 - b. Prayer or study groups in person.
 - c. Amateur choir practice or group bell ringing.
 - d. Communal singing or chanting (see below).

Singing, chanting and the use of musical instruments

14. COVID-19 spreads from person to person through small droplets, aerosols and through direct contact. Singing and playing some musical instruments increases the risk of transmission through small droplets and aerosols. Existing risks increased by new variants of the virus, mean that additional safeguards should be put in place to minimise opportunities for the virus to spread:

15. Where singing or chanting **is essential** to an act of worship, this should be limited to **one** person wherever possible. Strict social distancing should be observed and the use of Plexi-glass screens should be considered to protect worshippers, and each other.
16. **Communal singing or chanting should not take place.** This applies even if social distancing is being observed or face coverings are used.
17. The playing of instruments that are blown into should also be avoided in communal worship and in rehearsals.
18. If a place of worship hosts a professional group, for rehearsing or worship, the performing arts guidance should be followed.
19. Spoken responses during worship should not be in a raised voice.
20. Good ventilation plays a crucial role in reducing transmission and therefore ventilation should be improved in churches whenever and wherever possible.