

Dear Clergy, Lay Readers, Vestry Secretaries and Diocesan Secretaries

The Advisory Group has met again recently.

It had hoped that further clarity would by now have been available from Government in terms of revised guidance for Places of Worship, given that Scotland has been "beyond level 0" since 9 August. Such guidance is not yet available but we are assured that it will be issued. We expect it to be considerably shorter than the Government's previous guidance because the level of restrictions applicable in "beyond level 0" is significantly reduced but the fact that it is not yet to hand has made it difficult for the Advisory Group to advance matters as quickly as it had hoped.

We understand that the current situation is frustrating for congregations as they navigate the way forward. It remains the Advisory Group's intention to revise its guidance, once the Government guidance has been issued and it will initially do this by way of a revised set of Frequently Asked Questions to address the issues which are arising at present. These will be available in the early part of next week and will be posted to the coronavirus guidance page on the provincial website as usual.

In the meantime the Advisory Group offers the following in the hope that it will be helpful: –

- Whilst we are now "beyond level 0", and many of the legal restrictions previously in place have been removed, it remains the case that the pandemic is not yet behind us. The Delta variant remains highly transmissible and care should continue to be taken.
- As mentioned in the email update of 5 August, the restrictions regarding physical distancing and limits on the size of social gatherings are removed. Consequently, it is no longer a legal requirement to maintain 1m social distancing in church services (see further below on certain exceptions). The wearing of face coverings continues to be a legal requirement in indoor public places, including places of worship.
- Despite the relaxation of restrictions, churches should continue to mitigate risks by maintaining good hygiene, practising respiratory hygiene, ensuring good ventilation and continuing to engage with Test and Protect. Churches will wish to assess the level of risk in their own particular context and we recognise that some will wish to continue with at least some of the previous restrictions, such as physical distancing. That is likely to include an assessment of pastoral issues – and the likely perception of the level of risk on the part of the congregation. So, if it is thought that members of the congregation perceive that the level of risk is such that they feel uncomfortable, it would be appropriate to consider maintaining restrictions for a longer.
- Regulations state that face coverings do not need to be worn by those leading an act of worship provided there is either a partition between that person and other people, or a distance of at least 1m is maintained between that person and others. Similarly, those who are "performing" need not wear a face mask (provided there is a partition between each performer and others, or a distance of at least 1m is maintained between the performer and others). Church choirs and worship bands can, therefore, sing without face coverings, provided their members maintain at least 1m distance from each other and everyone else. Congregational members are not "performers" and so must continue to wear face coverings whether singing or not.
- On the subject of cleaning practices in this new period, we suggest that routine pre-pandemic cleaning practices can be resumed but, in addition, there should be regular cleaning and disinfecting of "hand touch points" – "regular cleaning and disinfecting" of such touch points in this context would, for example, mean between services. 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.

- Offertory processions and the presence of servers can resume. Processions have, in fact, been possible for some time. Servers should of course wear face coverings and should maintain a distance of at least 1m from any person leading the service who is not wearing a face covering. Good hand sanitising practice should also be observed.
- Use of the Common Cup should not be resumed at this point. Our expectation is that Government guidance will continue to recommend against the use of communal vessels in worship for the time being.
- Refreshments served before or after a service need no longer be on a seated "table-service" basis only. It is acceptable to return to refreshments being served from a hatch or equivalent and for church members to drink tea and coffee without a face mask, whether standing or seated. However, when not consuming beverages or otherwise moving about in any refreshment area, face coverings should be worn (as is the case in hospitality establishments). The Government is still "strongly encouraging" table service where possible and so this is a matter for local judgement. Individually wrapped biscuits carry less risk than people helping themselves from a communal plate.
- There is no ban on the reuse of liturgy books, hymn books, Bibles and similar materials. However, shiny-surfaced materials are more prone to retaining viral deposits for longer and, therefore, the risk of using them is greater. Consequently, the longer the period of quarantine between each use of such materials the better, or if they are to be reused in quick succession, the Group recommends wiping down to disinfect. Some such materials can of course be accessed by people on their mobile phones, so avoiding the use of church-owned materials.
- Previously, the Advisory Group has advised that if churches are open to the public during the day for private prayer, then they should be staffed. The Advisory Group suggests that the staffing presence is now no longer required provided there is adequate signage indicating the need for individuals to hand sanitise on entering the church. Also, cleaning/disinfecting of hand touch points should be undertaken before the next use of the church for a service.

Kind regards

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