

The Advisory Group has met following the announcement by the First Minister on Tuesday this week and draws the following to your attention: –

- The general tenor of the Government communication at present is more optimistic than it has been over the course of the last few weeks. The First Minister has announced some relaxation of the restrictions which were put in place shortly before Christmas as a result of the rising number of Omicron cases. The optimism is welcomed but the Advisory Group encourages clergy, lay readers and congregations to continue to be careful in the weeks ahead and to recognise that many in our churches will remain cautious.
- The previous baseline measures remain in place, namely the continuing requirement for face coverings to be worn in places of worship as well as good hand and respiratory hygiene and ventilation. Places of worship remain under a legal obligation to take such measures as are "reasonably practicable to minimise the incidence and spread" of the virus on their premises. That also means that churches should consider the Government's Places of Worship guidance. The Government has reissued its guidance today which is available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-phase-3-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship/> Dep[site it being an update there are in fact no material changes compared to the previous version.
- Generally, the Advisory Group considers it is appropriate from the beginning of next week to revert to a position broadly similar to that pertaining in early December, before the introduction of the Government's Omicron-related restrictions but please also note the detail of what follows. As ever, decisions should be made on the basis of appropriate local judgement and risk assessment.
- In December, the Government introduced a change to the regulations in relation to facemask exemptions. The "distancing" requirement for face covering exemption for service leaders or choirs/worship bands was increased from 1m to 2m where there is no screen or partition in place. At the present time, that 2m requirement remains in place, although we understand that Government is due to consider a possible review next week.
- In December, in the light of the Omicron cases, the Advisory Group suggested that post-service refreshments should be suspended. The Group now revises that advice and is of the view that refreshments can be reintroduced. However, masks should continue to be worn during refreshments except when individuals are eating/drinking.
- As far as social distancing within the congregation is concerned, no change has been made to the Government's Places of Worship guidance which continues to state *Physical distancing is recommended during worship wherever possible, unless it interferes with a fundamental aspect of faith specific practice*. The Advisory Group notes that such a recommendation seems somewhat inconsistent with the approach being taken by Government in other areas – such as hospitality – and we are taking that matter up with Government. However, for the moment, the Government advice remains as mentioned. The Group suggests that congregations make a local judgement on the basis of risk assessment but is also aware that some church members may anyway be keen to maintain a degree of social distancing. There would, therefore, be merit in making at least some seating in churches available on a

socially distanced basis and ensuring respect for those who are uncomfortable with closer physical contact - there may be many who would still not wish, for example, to shake hands or have other close contact.

- Church members should be strongly encouraged to take lateral flow tests before attending any act of worship and, similarly, should be encouraged to have their booster vaccination if they have not already done so.
- A revised version of the FAQs is likely to be posted to the provincial website next week to reflect these matters but we will wait until further news is available on the 2m requirement mentioned above.

Kind regards

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