# Government rules and guidelines relating to places of worship

# 21 October 2020

*The full document can be found at* [*https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship-during-the-pandemic-from-4-july/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship-during-the-pandemic-from-4-july#introduction*](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship-during-the-pandemic-from-4-july/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship-during-the-pandemic-from-4-july#introduction)

## Introduction

This guidance for places of worship has been drafted on the basis of the scientific evidence available and will be updated as necessary as more data becomes available on this virus. Places of worship play an important role in providing spiritual leadership for many individuals, and in bringing communities and generations together. However, their communal nature also makes them places that are particularly vulnerable to the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19).

On 12 October the government introduced a system of local COVID alert levels. If you live, work or volunteer in an area that is part of local COVID alert level: high or local COVID alert level: very high, there are additional restrictions which apply to you. In general, these additional restrictions do not have significant implications for Places of Worship. Where they do, they have been included in this guidance.

In areas subject to “COVID alert level – medium” restrictions, when meeting friends and family you do not live with (or have formed a support bubble with) you must not meet in a group of more than 6, indoors or outdoors.

In areas subject to “COVID alert level – high” restrictions, you must not mix outside of your household or support bubble indoors, including within a place of worship. This also applies to private gardens and most outdoor public venues.

In areas subject to “COVID alert level – very high” restrictions, you must not mix outside of your household or support bubble indoors, including within a place of worship, or outdoors.

Breaking these rules is against the law and the police will have the powers to enforce these legal limits, including to issue fines (fixed penalty notices) of £200, doubling for further breaches up to a maximum of £6,400

Whilst engaging in an activity in the place of worship or surrounding grounds, **all parties should adhere to social distancing guidelines at all times, even within a group of six** or where a specific activity-based exemption is applicable. This means people should be 2 metres apart or more than 1 metre apart as well as taking extra steps to stay safe (such as wearing face coverings) to reduce the risk of transmission.

## Definitions

**“Place of worship”**

A place of worship refers to a building used for regular religious ceremonies, communal worship or similar gatherings by religious organisations. It includes the use of surrounding grounds, for example, adjoining carparks, courtyards or gardens. The guidance also covers premises when being used for religious gatherings, even when their primary purpose is not for religious gatherings, such as a community centre. This guidance does not cover public parks, private homes, cultural sites or other open spaces, such as woodlands which may be used for religious purposes. If people do want to engage in worship in these spaces, then the guidance relevant to that place should be adhered to.

**“Significant life cycle events”**

Events to mark or celebrate a significant milestone in a person’s life, according to their religion or belief, such as events to celebrate a person’s birth (other than a birthday) or coming of age. Examples would include a christening, or a naming ceremony. They do not include ‘celebrations’ or parties to mark these events.

**“Worshippers” or “Visitors”**

Those entering the place of worship to engage in worship or other activity for which the place of worship may be used.

**“Venue managers”**

The person or persons responsible for the management of an individual place of worship, including assessment of compliance with the following guidelines and relevant law. This may be a religious leader or lay person.

**“Household” and “Support Bubble”**

A household is a person or a group of people who live together in the same accommodation.

A support bubble is where a single adult living alone, or a single parent with children under 18, can form an exclusive network with one other household where social distancing does not have to be observed. The 2 households that form a support bubble count as one household for the purposes of this guidance.

## Food and drink

* Where food or drink (‘consumables’) are essential to the act of worship, they can be used, however the sharing of food should be avoided, as should the use of communal vessels.
* The person distributing the consumable should release it, into the hand only, in such a way to avoid any contact between them and those receiving it, or wear gloves.
* Speaking, singing and chanting should not happen across uncovered consumables (other than consumables to be used by the celebrant alone). Instead consumables should be securely covered, and prior to the receptacle being opened, it should be cleaned, hands should be washed or gloves worn.
* Hospitality spaces within a place of worship, such as cafes, are permitted to open but should be limited to table-service, social distancing should be observed, and with minimal staff and customer contact in line with the [hospitality guidance](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19/restaurants-offering-takeaway-or-delivery).

## Singing, chanting and the use of musical instruments

What the leader(s) and performers can and cannot do:

* For performance during worship (and rehearsals), both indoors and outdoors those performing in:
  + a professional capacity; and
  + those under 18 where supervised, are not limited in number.
* In all other cases, where the number of adult performers will be greater than 6, each group of up to 6 performers should ensure that they do not mix and that appropriate social distancing requirements are observed.
* Singing should be limited to the performers, and worship should not include congregational singing.
* Where music plays a big part in worship, and recordings are available, we suggest you consider using these as an alternative to live singing to mitigate risks.
* Any instrument played during worship should be cleaned thoroughly before and after use.
* 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.

What the congregation can and cannot do

* People should avoid singing, shouting and raising voices. This is because of the potential for increased risk of transmission from aerosol and droplets.
* Activities such as singing, chanting, shouting and/or playing of instruments that are blown into should be specifically avoided by congregations/worshippers. This is because there is a possible additional risk of transmission in environments where individuals are singing or chanting as a group, and this applies even if social distancing is being observed or face coverings are used.
* Therefore, spoken responses during worship should also not be in a raised voice.

## Outdoor worship

**In the grounds of a place of worship**

* The law allows for multiple groups to pray in a place of worship or its grounds.
* In medium COVID local alert level areas, the law allows for multiple groups of six people to participate, provided that these groups do not mingle.
* In high or very high level areas, the law allows for multiple groups of different households and support bubbles to participate, provided that these groups do not mingle.
* A risk assessment must be conducted and COVID-19 secure measures implemented. The number of people who are able to gather will therefore be dependent on the size of the space available.

**Public outdoor spaces**

* For acts of worship taking place away from the place of worship and surrounding grounds please follow the relevant guidance on the number of people permitted to gather in those spaces.

## Young people and children attending places of worship

* Organised children’s activities can take place within a place of worship, and are limited to the number of people who can safely social distance in the venue in line with COVID-19 secure guidance. These can include, but not limited to, activities such as mother and baby groups, youth groups and classes.
* Where adults are supervising young children, they should maintain social distancing from adults from other households.
* Any shared facilities for children, such as play corners, soft furnishings, soft toys and toys that are hard to clean, should be removed and/or put out of use.

## Face coverings

**In England, face coverings are currently required by law to be worn in places of worship**. There are valid exemptions for some individuals and groups to not wear a face covering in these settings. In particular, those who are leading services or events in a place of worship, and those who assist them (for instance by reading, preaching, or leading prayer) do not always need to wear a face covering, although one should be worn especially if physical distancing cannot be maintained (i.e. distributing consumables) This exemption does not apply to worshippers, who should wear face coverings consistent with the requirements for any other public space.

## Restrictions on capacity

Limits for communal worship should be decided locally on the basis of the capacity of the place of worship following an assessment of risk. The number of people permitted to enter the place of worship at any one time should be limited, should maintain social distancing between households or support bubbles.

* The size and circumstance (including ventilation) of the premises will determine the maximum number of people that can be accommodated whilst also facilitating social distancing; this may therefore be lower than the maximum 30 people who can attend a funeral, or the 15 who may attend a wedding.
* The safe number of people should be decided by the venue manager.
* In defining the number of people that can reasonably follow social distancing, the total floorspace as well as likely pinch points and busy areas should be taken into account (such as entrances, exits) and where possible alternative or one-way routes introduced.

## Social distancing

All managers and all visitors to a place of worship must follow the law and should follow the guidance on social distancing including:

* Adhering to social distancing, meaning people should be 2 metres apart or more than 1 metre apart as well as taking extra steps to stay safe (such as wearing face coverings) to reduce the risk of transmission.
* For frequently used places, mark areas using floor tape or paint to help people maintain social distance.
* Ensure that groups attending communal worship together do not exceed more than 6 people per group. In medium local alert level areas, the law allows for multiple groups of 6 people to participate, provided that these groups do not mingle. Any group of 6 can be made up of people from different households. In high or very high level areas, the law allows for multiple households and support bubbles to participate, provided that these groups do not mingle. Strict social distancing must be maintained between members of different households at all times.
* The only exception to this where a single household or support bubble is larger than 6 people. In this case, the single household or support bubble may attend communal worship together.

You should consider and set out the additional actions you will take to reduce the risk of transmission in your risk assessment. These could include, for instance, avoiding any face-to-face seating by changing layouts, reducing the number of people in enclosed spaces, improving ventilation, using protective screens and face coverings, and closing non-essential social spaces, as outlined throughout this guidance.

Queue management is important so the flow of groups in and out of the premises can be carefully controlled in a socially distanced way, reducing the risk of congestion or contact. Considerations should be made for how to manage those waiting outside a place of worship, including the introduction of socially distanced queuing systems.

Other actions to take to reduce the risk of transmission to support social distancing could include:

* Those leading the worship reminding congregants of the importance of social distancing and hygiene.
* Introducing a one-way flow in and out of the premises with appropriate floor markings or signage, with restrictions on accessing non-essential areas. At the end of worship, this could include worshippers leaving one row at a time, in order to prevent crowding at entry or exit points.
* Multiple entry points could be opened, and clear signposting or assistance could be offered to guide worshippers and to avoid congestion.
* Staggering arrival and departure times will reduce the flow at exits and entrances as well as reduce any impacts on public transport. Venues could also consider introducing a booking system to help facilitate this. You may want to consider how prioritisation could be given to people who may have a specific need or requirement.
* Using screens, barriers or alternative rooms and spaces to separate worshippers.
* Any changes to entrances, exits and queues should take into account reasonable adjustments to accommodate those who need them, such as worshippers with physical disabilities.
* Introducing a booking system to help with managing numbers, particularly for services where demand will be high.
* Venue managers advertising set days or times when places of worship are open solely for those particularly vulnerable to COVID-19, such as those over 70 or clinically vulnerable.
* Leading worship in different spaces of the place of worship to limit the number of people in any one location - while avoiding risk of crowding at entry/exit points.

The above advice on social distancing also applies when travelling to and from a place of worship. Decisions to reopen car parks are to be made locally and practical measures such as changing the car park layout to help people socially distance should be considered.

## Hygiene

* On entering and leaving a place of worship, everyone, including staff, should be asked to wash their hands thoroughly for at least 20 seconds using soap and water or to use hand sanitiser if hand washing facilities are not available.
* There should be signs and posters to build awareness of good handwashing technique, the need to increase handwashing frequency, avoid touching your face and to cough or sneeze into a tissue which is binned safely, or into the crook of your sleeved arm if a tissue is not available.
* You should provide hand sanitiser in multiple locations in addition to toilet facilities.

## Toilets

Toilets inside or linked to places of worship should be kept open and carefully managed to reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19. Steps that will usually be needed to make the use of toilets as safe as possible:

* Using signs and posters
* 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 normal 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.
* Putting up a visible cleaning schedule that is kept up to date and visible.
* Providing more waste facilities and more frequent refuse collection.

## Cleaning

* All surfaces, especially those most frequently touched such as door handles and rails, should be regularly cleaned using standard cleaning products. Sufficient time needs to be allowed for this cleaning to take place, particularly before reopening for the first time. Frequently used objects, surfaces or spaces, including for example doorways between outside and inside spaces should be given particular attention when cleaning.
* A decision should be made locally on how frequently cleaning should take place based on an assessment of risk and use of the building.

## Individuals aged 70 years and over attending the place of worship

* Certain groups of people may be at increased risk of severe disease from COVID-19, including people who are aged 70 or older, regardless of medical conditions.
* Individuals who fall within this group are advised to stay at home as much as possible and, if they do go out, to take particular care to minimise contact with others outside of their household.

## Weddings

Weddings can continue to take place with up to 15 people.

* No food or drink should be consumed as a part of the event unless required for the purposes of solemnisation.
* Those attending should socially distance from anyone they do not live with (or have formed a support bubble with).
* Wedding receptions can take place in areas that are subject to medium or high COVID local alert levels, with up to 15 people in the form of a sit down meal. They must not take place in areas subject to very high local alert level restrictions.

## Funerals

* Funerals can continue to take place with up to 30 people at all COVID local alert levels. See the [guidance on funerals](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-managing-a-funeral-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic) for further information.
* Events which occur to commemorate or mark the deceased’s passing, such as a wake, stone setting ceremony or the scattering of ashes, can take place with up to 15 people at all COVID local alert levels.

## Enforcement

It is important to be aware of the enforcement provisions, as is the case for other sectors. Where the enforcing authority (your local authority), identifies responsible individuals who are not taking action to comply with the relevant public health legislation and guidance to control public health risks (including this guidance), they will consider taking a range of actions to improve control of risks.

Under existing [Health & Safety legislation](https://www.hse.gov.uk/legislation/hswa.htm), failure to complete a risk assessment that accounts for COVID-19 could constitute a breach of that legislation, as could having a risk assessment with insufficient measures