

THE REPRESENTATIVE BODY OF THE CHURCH IN WALES
CORONAVIRUS – COVID19
GUIDANCE ON CONDUCTING MARRIAGES AND FUNERALS

Alert Level 2

Introduction

The Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (Wales) Regulations 2020 permit places of worship to be open for:

- Private prayer
- Communal worship including led prayers, devotions or meditations
- Funeral and marriage services
- Holy Communion (see separate guidance note)
- Baptisms (see separate guidance note)

All reasonable measures must be taken to ensure a distance of 2 metres is maintained between every person in the place of worship (except between two members of the same household, or a carer and the person assisted by the carer).

Welsh Government guidance on marriages under Covid-19 restrictions is clear that the solemnization of a marriage can only consist of its essential aspects. Welsh Government Guidance on marriages is available at [Guidance to local authorities, approved premises and places of worship on marriages and civil partnerships: coronavirus \[HTML\] | GOV.WALES](#) Thus, the ceremony must inevitably be much simpler and shorter than a traditional service.

Welsh Government guidance on funerals is available at [Guidance on funerals: COVID 19 \[HTML\] | GOV.WALES](#)

Separate guidance has been prepared on how to open your church for private prayer and other services and is available on the Church in Wales website. This guidance note is to help local churches consider how to organise weddings and funerals under current restrictions.

As for re-opening for private prayer or services, opening your church building for a funeral or marriage service must be based on a robust risk assessment. A risk assessment template, similar to that for private prayer, is attached at Appendix A. It is recommended that you prepare a generic version for funerals and weddings, submit this to your Archdeacon for approval and then adjust the risk assessment as necessary for the particular circumstances of each funeral or wedding. It is useful to have an event specific risk assessment as this can be shared with the organisers of the wedding/funeral. The event specific risk assessment does not need to be approved by the Archdeacon if it essentially follows the approved generic version.

Social Distancing

The most fundamental part of any Covid-19 risk management strategy is the maintenance of physical distancing. At the time of writing, this is 2 metres between persons not of the same household.

In considering, opening for a funeral or wedding, you should assess the capacity of your church to ensure 2 metre distancing at all times including when people are moving around.

- 2 metre distancing is necessary in all directions around someone.
- For a church with pews, this could mean one person in every three or so rows. You will need to carefully measure your church's layout to plan where people sit and the numbers of people your church can hold accordingly.
- Take into account the movement of people along aisles especially in a marriage or funeral service.
- Households can, of course, sit together. A pew or row of seats filled by a household may throw out your calculations over distance to other seat places.
- Seating positions will need to be clearly marked. You could place signs on pews, use labels or perhaps space hassocks on pews to mark where not to sit
- If you have moveable chairs, it will be easier to plan positioning of seats to maintain distancing.

In placing seats or marking pew seat positions, you will need to think about how people will move to and from the seat.

Assessing capacity with physical distancing will dictate the maximum number of people that can attend a funeral or marriage service. You should, however, review this with the organiser of the funeral/marriage as household groups may throw out your calculations. It would be sensible to draw up a plan of the seating positions to help you plan accordingly.

Remember only people from the same household can be closer to each other than 2 metres. The father of the bride and the best man (to take one example) are unlikely to be from the same household and this will fundamentally alter the format of the marriage ceremony. Mourners will want to comfort their close relatives so physical distancing will be challenging.

The Welsh Government Test, Trace, Protect strategy sets out the approach to tackling coronavirus, testing people with symptoms in the community, tracing those who have come into close contact with people who have tested positive for coronavirus and protecting family, friends and our community by self-isolating.

All persons entering places of worship should be asked to complete a record of attendance which records their name, contact telephone number and date and time of visit but people cannot be required to do so. In the case of access to church halls or churches for permitted community activity and by general visitors, it is a requirement that attendees are recorded before being admitted. These records must be handled in accordance with GDPR to protect the individuals' privacy. These records should be kept for 21 days after the event and then destroyed.

A consent form can be found at [Test, Trace and Protect - The Church in Wales](#)

You should also provide a revised privacy notice and templates can be found at the same link. There is a version if you collect this information in advance online rather than 'at the door'. The 'online' privacy notice should be made available on your website, and the 'at the

door' privacy notice should be available for inspection (perhaps on the table where people are completing forms and on the church noticeboard)

The new NHS COVID-19 app is intended to help in this process but is not mandatory. The system involves the creation of a site specific QR code which allows people visiting to use the App. See <https://gov.wales/nhs-covid-19-app-guidance-businesses-and-organisations> This system does not replace the physical recording of attendance set out above.

It is recommended that all public church premises (including churches, halls, offices etc) should display such a QR code.

Further Welsh Government guidance [can be found here](#) on how to maintain records and on compliance with GDPR.

Further information [about Test, Trace, Protect](#) is available here.

Common Issues to Consider for Funerals and Marriages

Although marriages and funerals can happen, Welsh Government guidance indicates that, as for re-opening for private prayer and services, the service should be kept as simple and short as possible.

- The regulations are clear that attendance at both funerals and weddings should be by invitation only. This must be made clear to the organisers of the event from the outset.
- All persons aged over 11 gathering indoors should wear a face covering. This applies to all activities and services within the church or church hall.

There are exceptions to the requirement to wear a face covering for medical reasons, and it is permitted to remove the covering "to communicate with another person who has difficulty communicating (in relation to speech, language or otherwise)".

Further guidance for the public is available at:

<https://gov.wales/face-coverings-guidance-public>

and for premises managers at:

<https://gov.wales/face-coverings-guidance-measures-be-taken-employers-and-managers-premises>

Worship leaders need not wear a face covering where it is impractical to do so but they should consider a range of other mitigations to provide a barrier to transmission including increasing distancing, screens, visors and additional hygiene measures.

All attendees at a wedding must wear face coverings but it is reasonable for the couple themselves to remove their coverings for a kiss, for taking vows, walking down the aisle and taking photos indoors as long as other measures are in place to

protect people attending the ceremony from the risk of contracting coronavirus, for example, guests staying 2m away from the couple at all times.

The public should be reminded of the requirement to wear a face covering and a standard sign can be found on the Church in Wales website.

- **Singing:** Congregational singing should not take place given the increased risk of infection from these activities. Recorded music may be appropriate as an alternative to hymn singing. Music should not be at a volume that makes normal conversations difficult.

It is permissible for an individual to sing at a service where it is an essential part of the service. Such a singer should sing behind a plexi-glass screen to protect guests. Physical distancing should be observed at all times. It is possible for more than one individual to sing over the course of the service, but this should not be more than one at a particular time and there should be separate arrangements to protect from transmission e.g separate plexi-screens or cleaning of screens between each use.

- **Choirs:** It is now possible for an organised group of musicians or singers to play a part in services but a specific risk assessment listing mitigating actions should be prepared. Organised or choir singing should be facilitated by establishing fixed groups of up to six people who can remain consistent and rehearse and perform together. There should be barriers to transmission between each group of six in rehearsal and performance. However, the guidance is complex and if you plan to start choral singing again you should carefully review the Welsh Government guidance at [Guidance on reopening places of worship: coronavirus \[HTML\] | GOV.WALES](#)
- **Musical Instruments:** Welsh Government guidance also states that you should not play musical instruments indoors that are physically blown into e.g wind or brass instruments. However, a pipe organ can be played as part of a worship, funeral or wedding service. The decision to use an organ (which requires a limited quantity of air to pass through the mechanism) should be based on a risk assessment and adherence with social distancing, hand hygiene and cleaning guidance. The use of alternative instruments such as an electronic keyboard or recorded music should still be considered.

A pipe organ may also be played for practice or maintenance purposes when the building is closed to the public.

NB Whilst the organ can be played, the congregation cannot sing with it. The organ can accompany an individual singer as described above.

Specific Guidance on Music and Organs is available on the Church in Wales website.

- **Bell ringing** is permissible, but bell ringers should observe two-metre physical distancing and hygiene and cleaning regimes should be implemented. Careful consideration of how bell ringers will access the building suitably distanced from other attendees needs consideration e.g different entry points or staggered arrival

times. Bellringing arrangements should comply with guidance available from the Central Council of Church Bell Ringers at <https://ccabr.org.uk/coronavirus/>

- The priest can lead the service with spoken words and readings can be included but the readers must observe very strict social distancing.
- Anyone who is showing symptoms of coronavirus (COVID-19) (a new continuous cough, a high temperature or loss of taste and smell) should not attend the funeral (but see note 10 under Specific Issues for Funerals below) or marriage due to the risk that they pose to others; remote participation should be considered, for example live streaming.
- Attendance at funerals is highly sensitive and there are specific suggestions below for self-isolating or vulnerable mourners who wish to attend.
- Service books should be avoided. Use single use printed service sheets.
- Wedding receptions and funeral wakes can be held but with a limit of 30 people indoors and 50 outdoors.
- The church should be fully cleaned before and after the event.
- Cash giving is discouraged at this time. You may be able to ask for donations by bank transfer through the organisers or use card readers. If cash payments are made, they should be handled wearing gloves and regular cleaning and hygiene maintained.

Specific Issues for Marriages

Banns of Marriage can now be called in churches that are regularly open for public Sunday worship. However, any Banns Certificates issued prior to lockdown have now expired. Before you agree to call Banns, you should make enquiries to ensure that all churches where Banns need to be called are open for Sunday worship. If Banns cannot be read because the church (on another church where the Banns need to be called) is not regularly open, marriages may only take place as follows:

- Marriages by Surrogate's (Common) Licence can take place where a party has a qualifying connection to a church.
- Marriages pursuant to a Superintendent Registrar's Certificate (again, where a party has a qualifying connection) may take place, as Register Offices have now reopened to allow couples to give notice of marriage. Superintendent Registrar's Certificates are valid for 12 months, so there will be some certificates issued prior to lockdown which are still valid.
- If a couple wish to marry because of a pastoral emergency or other compelling circumstances, it may be possible to obtain an Archbishop of Canterbury's Special Licence for a wedding either in church or at another venue (such as at home). Clergy should discuss the matter with their diocesan bishop before then contacting the Archbishop of Canterbury's Faculty Office at faculty.office@thesanctuary.com.
- In all circumstances, if you receive a request, you should approach your Archdeacon for approval. Such approval will be based on a demonstration of a robust risk management strategy.

Services for the Blessing of a Marriage are legally possible, although many couples may wish to wait until restrictions on capacity are further relaxed. Again, such services should not take place without the approval of your Archdeacon and a robust risk management strategy.

You should consider the following practical issues:

1. Prior decoration of the church is possible but participants should observe social distancing and hygiene precautions. This should take place when the church is otherwise closed to avoid undue contact. Cleaning of surfaces and handles after such decoration activity is necessary.
2. For the purposes of the marriage, the two individuals forming the union should be considered as part of the same household even where they have previously lived in separate households.
3. Guests to the wedding must be by invitation only up to the maximum capacity of the building to maintain physical distancing. It is advisable to have door stewards to welcome guests and remind them of the requirements as necessary.
4. If anyone wishes to lodge an objection to the marriage, they are legally entitled to do so, and provision must be made to enable them to make their point while observing physical distancing. While this is likely to be a very rare event, it emphasises the importance of having some control over access to the building during the service. Door stewards should be briefed accordingly.
5. As for re-opening for private prayer, ensure sanitiser is available and signage is in place to remind people of physical distancing requirements. You should ask the couple to remind their guests in advance.
6. The choreography of the event will need to be worked out with the couple. For example, it is not going to be possible for 'father and daughter' to walk down the aisle together unless they are from the same household.
7. Clearly, there are essential elements to the marriage service where priest and couple must breach the 2-metre distancing e.g for the joining of hands. This is permissible though careful consideration should be given as to do this as safely as possible. Please note that the priest does not have to touch the rings to bless them, nor does he or she have to touch the couple's hands as part of a prayer or blessing.
8. The exchange of rings could be problematic. This traditionally involves the 'best man' passing these to the priest and for these to then be picked up by the couple and exchanged. Alternatives should be considered to minimise the numbers of people handling the rings. For example, the priest could ask that the rings remain boxed, are placed on an adjacent table 2 metres away, blessed, and then collected by the couple. Hand sanitiser should be available for this element of the service.
9. The signing of the register needs to be undertaken in a place where the participants can keep at a safe distance. Many vestries will be unsuitable. All those signing the register should sanitize their hands before signing, complete all the signatures necessary for them and then sanitize them again. Apart from the bride and groom, all those signing should maintain physical distancing and, where available, individual pens for each signatory can be used. If a shared pen is to be used, have wipes available to clean after each use.

10. Group photographs at church cannot take place. The attendance by a photographer/videographer needs to be carefully considered as their activities can cause crowding and grouping. Limited photographs of the couple may be feasible in an area with sufficient space or outside the church.
11. It is permissible for an individual to sing at a marriage to support the sense that the marriage is a sacred occasion. Such a singer should sing behind a plexi-glass screen to protect guests. Physical distancing should be observed at all times.

Specific Issues for Funerals

The Regulations require that those attending a funeral are invited by the person responsible for arranging the funeral. This needs to be made clear to the organisers as it is very different from the traditional position.

It is easiest to manage physical distancing and other precautions at a graveside funeral. This should still be the preferred option, where possible. A maximum of 30 people can now attend such a funeral outdoors. The funeral must still comply with 2 metre physical distancing requirements and hygiene arrangements as if the service were within the building. A risk assessment should still be prepared accordingly.

Some practical issues to consider are:

1. Any interaction with the bereaved should be done safely; this may mean by telephone or video link. It is important not to share documents, books, photos etc.
2. It is vital that detailed planning takes place with the funeral director and/or family so that the limitations of the service can be fully understood. Advertising of the funeral should be avoided as attendance is by invitation only.
3. If you anticipate that the funeral will attract significant numbers of people wishing to pay their respects (beyond those specifically invited), you should think carefully before agreeing to host the funeral. You would need to consider, with the family and funeral director, whether you can manage the situation adequately and what measures you could put in place accordingly. One option might be a notice at the church gate stating, *'In accordance with Covid-19 Regulations, attendance at this funeral is by invitation only'*
4. The maximum number of invited mourners needs to be clearly communicated and understood. Clergy should communicate carefully with funeral directors, to confirm that the funeral director will, where possible, assume responsibility for compliance with the Regulations, including inviting mourners to be present and ensuring that social distancing measures are observed.
5. However, it may be necessary to also have stewards in attendance and the guidance for re-opening churches should be followed in this respect. The funeral should be kept brief, omitting optional parts of the funeral service.
6. Careful consideration needs to be given to any procession. It may be safer to have the coffin arrive in advance of the funeral starting. Depending on your church, it may be possible to plan different routes inside the church or a one-way system.
7. Traditionally, people will queue to meet and express condolences to next of kin. This should be avoided to prevent crowding.

8. Key mourners of the deceased person may include those who are self-isolating due to another member of the household being unwell with symptoms of coronavirus (COVID-19). Where the funeral is scheduled before the period of household isolation has been completed (14 days from the first person in that household showing symptoms) mourners who are self-isolating should be facilitated to attend but should:
 - not attend if they have any symptoms of any kind, even if these are very mild
 - maintain a distance of at least 2 metres between themselves and others
 - advise the other mourners that they are otherwise self-isolating at home, and communicate that their presence means that others who are extremely clinically vulnerable should not attend
 - practise careful hand and respiratory hygiene:
 - washing their hands more often - with soap and hot water for at least 20 seconds or by using a hand sanitizer.
 - avoiding touching their eyes, nose, and mouth.
 - covering their coughs or sneezes with a tissue, then throwing the tissue in a bin which should be clearly sign-posted and readily accessible.
 - Mourners who are from a household that is self-isolating are advised to use their own transport where possible.
9. Mourners who are in an extremely clinically vulnerable group should be facilitated to attend, should they decide to do so. They should have received a letter telling them they are in this group or been told by their GP. Mourners who are in an extremely clinically vulnerable group have been advised that they should minimise their contact with others for their personal protection. However, they may decide to attend a funeral despite the additional risk this poses to them and should be facilitated to do so. Actions to reduce their risk of infection could include:
 - advising other attendees that there is an extremely clinically vulnerable person attending and reiterating the need to stay at home if they are unwell, and to be respectful of the vulnerable person's need to avoid close contact at any point
 - advising the mourner to travel to the venue via the safest route possible, preferably in a car by themselves, or with someone from their household
 - considering the additional risk involved if attending the funeral requires travelling by public transport
 - ensuring that mourners who are in a clinically vulnerable group do not attend the same ceremony as mourners who are in household isolation.
10. There is specific guidance from Welsh Government on attendance at funerals which should be reviewed at [Guidance on funerals: COVID 19 \[HTML\] | GOV.WALES](#) . This includes arrangements where a close relative or friend who has tested positive wishes to attend a funeral.

17th May 2021

Appendix A: Funeral or Wedding Risk Assessment Template

Use the template below to plan your Covid-19 precautions for a funeral or wedding. Prepare a generic assessment for approval by your Archdeacon but it is recommended that an assessment be completed for each specific event to reflect specific details and enable sharing with the organisers.

You should review the general re-opening guidance to plan your arrangements more generally.

Name of Church:	Address:		Date:	
Funeral/Wedding Details:			Date of Event	
Area of Focus	Control Measure <i>These are the main themes from the checklist and guidance. They may not apply in each case.</i>	Detailed arrangements <i>Set out below the detailed arrangements you will implement under each control measure. The boxes will expand as you complete them.</i>	Action by?	Completed
PREPARATIONS	Assessment of Capacity with 2 metre distancing			
	Discussions with organisers including communications with attendees			
	Special arrangements for potentially vulnerable attendees			
	Plan for non-invited attendees			
PHYSICAL DISTANCING	Staffing/stewarding arrangements			
	Signage			
	Entry and Exit points			
	One-way system/processional routes			
	Seating arrangements			
	Arrangements for household groups			

	Restricted areas			
	Arrangements for blessings, exchange of rings etc			
	Arrangements for Music			
	Arrangements for readings			
	Arrangements for bell-ringing			
HYGIENE	Hand washing/sanitising			
	Face coverings			
	Service sheets			
	Shared objects			
CLEANING	Cleaning team			
	PPE			
	Cleaning regime			

