

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

Introduction

This advice should be read alongside the guidance Covid 19 Churches Risk Assessment Guidance Alert Level 0 'available on the Church in Wales Website at <https://www.churchinwales.org.uk/en/clergy-and-members/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance/>

At Alert Level Zero, from August 7th 2021, there are no legal limits (for Covid reasons) on the number of people who can meet, including in private homes, public places or at events. In addition, all businesses and premises may be open and activities can fully resume.

However, the Welsh Government has kept a small but significant number of legal requirements to help reduce the spread of the virus and help protect the most vulnerable. Businesses, employers and other organisations have a duty to protect their employees and customers while on their premises. There are three legal requirements that remain at Alert Level Zero:

1. Businesses, employers and other organisations, including activity and event organisers, must undertake a coronavirus risk assessment of their premises and activities and take reasonable measures to minimise exposure to, and the spread of, coronavirus based on that risk assessment.
2. Everyone must still self-isolate for 10 days if they test positive for COVID-19. If you are a close contact of someone who has tested positive and you are not fully vaccinated you must also self-isolate for 10 days as instructed by the Test Trace Protect system.
3. Adults and children over 12 must wear face-coverings in indoor public places including churches, church halls and community buildings.

It will be noted that social distancing is no longer a legal requirement. However, it is a very useful risk mitigation measure so it is generally recommended that social distancing measures be retained where practical.

It is a general legal duty to protect all people who come into your building/s, or who could be affected by your activities, from harm. This includes taking reasonable steps to protect your clergy, volunteers, members of the congregation or visitors from coronavirus (as with other hazards). This is called a COVID-19 risk assessment and it will help you manage risk and protect people.

PCCs/MACs need to develop their risk assessment for their activities, and this note seeks to suggest reasonable measures that might be considered to control the risk of Covid transmission.

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 opening churches generally, 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 virus is spread most easily when infected people come into close contact with others. That is why until 7th August 2021, social distancing was a legal requirement.

The legal requirement to maintain social distancing between persons or households has been withdrawn but that does not mean it is not an excellent risk control measure. It should still be considered in any risk management regime.

There are clearly lower risks between people who have been fully vaccinated particularly where hand washing and premises cleaning regimes are robust.

Test Trace and Protect

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.

Face Coverings

By law, all persons aged over 11 gathering in churches and church halls should wear a face covering in most circumstances.

From 30 August 2021 face coverings are no longer a legal requirement at weddings, including weddings in churches. Nevertheless, churches may still wish to consider encouraging the use of face coverings for the congregation – weddings are no safer in this regard than any other worship service. As part of your risk assessment, you might consider requiring attendees to wear masks during higher risk activities, such as congregational singing.

Face coverings remain a legal requirement for all other services, including funerals and other occasional offices.

There are also 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.

At funerals, 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.

Common Issues to Consider for Funerals and Marriages

Attendance at a wedding or funeral no longer needs to be by invitation only. Numbers will be dictated by the Church's premises risk assessment.

However, it is worth discussing with the organisers possible arrangements to reduce the risk of Covid transmission. These might include:

- Working out a seating plan to sit households and families together
- Checking whether attendees are fully vaccinated and perhaps seating non vaccinated people in a different part of the church
- Reminding people they should not attend if symptomatic or self-isolating
- Planning the service so it is not overly long or complex
- Reminding attendees that face coverings must be worn (this is not the case in England)
- Consider elements of the service which could be held outside

Ventilation: improving ventilation is a particularly important measure. Carrying out activities outdoors will provide natural ventilation. Natural ventilation indoors might be provided by opening doors and windows where this does not contravene fire safety requirements. Improvements in mechanical ventilation will also help minimise risks if done effectively.

Singing and Music: Raised voices, including singing remains identified as a particular risk factor, so this activity needs to be managed carefully:

- Clearly, face coverings will be worn by law within the building as a public space and congregations must remain masked to sing indoors. For those who find this uncomfortable, a number of places now sell face coverings designed for singers, with an internal frame to keep the fabric a few centimetres away from the mouth.
- The maintenance of social distancing between persons and groups is an effective way of reducing risk of transmission through singing especially where congregations include people who have not been fully vaccinated
- Consider the prevalence of cases in your community. Whilst there are official statistics (see [Local Authority Table \(coronaviruscymru.wales\)](#)), these cover a whole local authority and so may be an inaccurate reflection of the situation in your local area. Try to gauge the prevalence of infection in your community – if you are hearing of people self-isolating it may indicate higher risk levels. If you have a known, regular congregation you can be more confident of potential prevalence (and vaccination rates) than if your congregation is more random.
- Consider gathering outside to sing perhaps at the start and end of the service
- Limiting the number of hymns sung by congregations will reduce risk
- Recorded music presents no risk of transmission
- Choirs are a regular group of known singers. Testing and vaccination recording will be easier to monitor in this group and may help to manage risk of transmission. Previous government guidance suggested 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. This seems a reasonable precaution to retain.
- You might consider barriers to transmission between each group of six in rehearsal and performance and ensure physical distance between the choir and wider the congregation
- All musical instruments can be played but clearly for wind and brass instruments there is a greater potential for spreading droplets further. Maintaining physical distance for such players is a reasonable precaution.

- Surfaces of keyboards, pianos, organ consoles, music stands etc should be cleaned regularly.
- Avoid sharing musical scores and books where possible

Bell ringing: Bell ringing is permissible and is to be encouraged. Nothing announces the full return of church life than the sound of bells and they are a key backdrop to weddings and funerals. The challenge with bellringing is that the bell ringers can often be in an enclosed area, sometimes with limited access particularly if the ringing area is upstairs in a tower.

- Consider the ventilation of the ringing space ensuring that all available doors and windows are open, provision of hand sanitising and careful cleaning of hard surfaces including hand rails.
- Bellringing arrangements should comply with guidance available from the Central Council of Church Bell Ringers at <https://ccabr.org.uk/coronavirus/>
- There are likely to be much less risks for fully-vaccinated ringers being together. If a ringer is not fully vaccinated, we would advise the maintenance of social distancing.
- The priest can lead the service with spoken words and readings can be included but the readers must observe very strict social distancing.

Wedding receptions and funeral wakes can be held indoors but this activity should be subject to a specific risk assessment and comply with guidelines for hospitality businesses.

Cleaning: The church should be regularly cleaned – see the Covid 19 Churches Risk Assessment Guidance Alert Level 0 for suggested arrangements.

Collections: If cash payments are made, they should be handled wearing gloves and regular cleaning and hygiene maintained.

Use online giving (Gift Direct) where possible. See:

[Online Giving by Gift Direct - The Church in Wales](#)

Consider contactless card readers. See [Parish Buying - Giving & Payments](#)

As organised events, there may be opportunities to notify attendees in advance of arrangements for donations.

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@lthesanctuary.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 permissible.

You should consider the following practical issues:

1. Prior decoration of the church is possible but participants should avoid undue close contact and face coverings should be worn. Cleaning of surfaces and handles after such decoration activity is necessary.
2. It is advisable to have door stewards to welcome guests and remind them of the requirements of your risk assessment as necessary.
3. 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.
4. The choreography of the event will need to be worked out with the couple so that transmission risks are managed
5. Clearly, there are essential elements to the marriage service where priest and couple must be close together e.g for the joining of hands. 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.
6. The exchange of rings needs planning. 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 could 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.
7. The signing of the register needs to be undertaken, ideally, in a place where the participants can keep at a safe distance. Many vestries are quite small. All those signing the register should sanitize their hands before signing, complete all the signatures necessary for them and then sanitize them again. Individual pens for each signatory might be used. If a shared pen is to be used, have wipes available to clean after each use.
8. Group photographs can take place but arrangements for this should be discussed with the photographer (who in turn will have completed a Covid Risk Assessment). Outdoor group photographs will be the safest place for groups standing close to each other.

Specific Issues for Funerals

Attendees do not need to be invited to the funeral. This may mean much larger numbers attending than for other types of service and also means people may not be familiar with the church's protocols. These are likely to be vary difficult occasions to maintain any form of social distancing in seated areas so other risk management measures will need to be robust.

Some practical issues to consider are:

1. It is vital that detailed planning takes place with the funeral director and/or family so that a plans for covid risk management can be agreed and understood. Advertising might remind people of basic Covid requirements being imposed e.g face coverings and not to attend if self-isolating.
2. It may be necessary to also have stewards in attendance to guide mourners and encourage Covid-safe behaviour.
3. Given the funeral service is likely to attract larger numbers of people and they are likely to be in close proximity consider:
 - Keeping the service brief, omitting optional parts of the funeral service.
 - Not having congregational singing but perhaps encourage a choir or musical group
 - Having congregational singing at the graveside as outdoors is a safer environment for this activity
 - Live streaming the service so that people have an alternative to physical attendance. Useful for those who are self-isolating too.
4. 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.
5. Traditionally, people will queue to meet and express condolences to next of kin. This should ideally take place outdoors, away from the church entrance to avoid queues.
6. There may be key mourners of the deceased person who are self-isolating. For pastoral reasons, they can 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.
7. 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.

9th August 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.

Much of this risk assessment will reflect your general risk assessment for your church so you should review the general guidance document Covid 19 Churches Risk Assessment Guidance Alert Level 0

	Wedding/Funeral Covid Risk Assessment	Name of Church:	Address:		
	Date of Event:	Name of Organiser:		Date:	
	Hazard Area	Detailed risk management arrangements <i>Set out below the detailed arrangements you will implement to manage the risk of each hazard.</i>		Action by?	Completed
1.	Attendees introducing Covid 19 into the building (including those involved in setting up etc)				
2.	Contracting or spreading coronavirus by not washing hands or not washing them adequately				
3.	Contracting or spreading coronavirus by not cleaning surfaces, equipment, shared items etc				
4.	Contracting or spreading the virus by close contact (including arrangements for photographs, reception lines etc)				
5.	Contracting or spreading coronavirus in commonly used or high traffic areas including pinch points (including processions, register signing etc)				
6.	Poorly ventilated spaces leading to risks of coronavirus spreading				
7.	Contracting or spreading coronavirus during activities which spread droplets over a larger area e.g singing and certain musical instruments				
8.	People who remain at home suffering from isolation or in self isolation				

