

THE REPRESENTATIVE BODY OF THE CHURCH IN WALES
CORONAVIRUS – COVID-19
GUIDANCE ON SINGING, MUSIC AND THE PLAYING OF CHURCH
ORGANS

Alert Level I

Updated 17 July 2021

It is now possible to undertake singing as part of worship and other services in some circumstances. This note seeks to explain those circumstances and to provide guidance on how this might be undertaken in a Covid-19 Safe manner.

Music and singing at services, as well as all other aspects of church opening, needs to be based on a written risk assessment which considers the likely routes of transmission of coronavirus and sets out reasonable mitigation measures. The key measures will be based on two-metre physical distancing, hygiene and cleaning and (for congregational singing) face coverings.

Overall Position

From 7th June, Welsh Government has introduced the concept of 'Regulated gatherings' and these encompass a broad range of activities that can be attended by people of any age.

Regulated gatherings are those organised by a business, public body or a charitable, benevolent, educational or philanthropic institution, a club or political organisation, or the national governing body of a sport or other activity.

These gatherings also allow for larger scale events:

- regulated outdoor gatherings with a maximum of 4,000 people of any age (standing) and 10000 people of any age seated.
- organised indoor activities for up to 1000 people seated and 200 people standing (children under 11 and those working/volunteering at the activity do not need to be counted in the limit)

The key point is that such gatherings are organised i.e planned and controlled by a recognisable body such as the PCC/MAC/LMAC. Such activities should be accompanied by a risk assessment to decide the right risk mitigation measures for the activity. Social distancing of two metres must be observed at all times for such activities.

At the Appendix I, we have reproduced Welsh Government's advice on music and singing contained within its Places of Worship Guidance. This was updated on 21 June 2021 to permit congregational singing in areas where Covid-19 prevalence is low. This should be carefully reviewed but below is a summary of the main issues.

Singing:

Recorded music may be appropriate as an alternative to hymn singing. Background music should not be at a volume that makes normal conversations difficult.

Welsh Government has now indicated that congregational singing may resume as part of organised worship indoors in areas of Wales where prevalence of Covid-19 is low. Low prevalence is not defined by Welsh Government but the original suggestions was fewer than 50 cases per 100,000 people in a 7-day period.

You can view the latest rates in your local authority at the following website <https://coronaviruscymru.wales/local-authority-table> - the relevant column is headed “7- day cases per 100k”. Covid-19 rates in a local area can change very quickly, so the local statistics should be checked regularly.

Churches should carefully consider the Welsh Government advice on congregational singing in their local context.

It is important to emphasise that the Government has not said that congregational singing is safe, but rather that the risk can be managed in areas of low Covid-19 prevalence. If you wish to consider restarting congregational singing, then you will need to add this to your risk assessment. All the existing provisions on social distancing continue to apply, and this would be a good opportunity to audit your current practice to make sure that (e.g.) physical distancing has not ‘slipped’ in recent weeks. Particular care should be taken to ensure that a full 2-metre distance is maintained between all households at all times. For this reason, we advise against singing in procession at this time.

It is not possible for a group of six people from six households who are seated together to also sing together. Such a group of six should be social distanced from each other, if singing, so if a service included congregational singing it will not be possible to have people seated in groups of 6.

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. If you have a large number of people in your congregation who are exempt from wearing face coverings, this would be a significant additional risk factor which may lead to you determining that it is not safe to resume congregational singing at this time.

It is also possible for an organised outdoor gathering to include congregational singing subject to a careful risk assessment and maintaining strict social distancing. Some churches (with the outdoor space to do so) have been moving outside for part of their service, and limiting congregational singing those parts of the service which take place outside. If this is possible in your individual context, then this is advisable, as we know that Covid transmission outdoors is significantly lower than indoors.

Despite these recent changes, the Government guidance remains that raised voices, including singing, appear to be a risk factor for the spread of Covid-19. It therefore remains recommended that loud singing is avoided.

Choirs:

Choirs are permitted to rehearse indoors with up to 30 members under the indoor regulated gathering rules. Guidance on arrangements for rehearsal are available at:

Capacity for outdoors regulated gatherings, including practice and rehearsal would need to be determined by a risk assessment which includes taking all reasonable measures to minimise the risk of exposure to and spread of coronavirus.

An organised group of musicians or singers can 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 Appendix 1 and at <https://gov.wales/guidance-reopening-places-worship-coronavirus-html> .

Musical Instruments:

A pipe organ can be played as part of a worship, funeral or wedding service. Wind and brass instruments may also be played as part of worship in areas of Wales where prevalence of Covid-19 is low.

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.

The use of wind and brass instruments should be subject to a rigorous risk assessment, and enhanced physical distancing will be required for certain instruments where significant amounts of air are expelled, such as flutes.

Considerations for the assessment of risk relating to organs is attached at Appendix 2.

17 July 2021

Appendix I: Extract from Welsh Government Guidance: Guidance on the Reopening of Places of Worship (updated 21 June 2021)

See: [Guidance on reopening places of worship: coronavirus | GOV.WALES](#)

Singing, chanting and the use of musical instruments

We recognise the importance of music, singing and chanting in worship, religious and belief ceremonies. However, there are significant risks associated with playing wind instruments and with singing or chanting at louder volumes. The risks are associated with the increased spread of droplets or aerosol which rise alongside volume. Respiratory particles in the form of both droplets and aerosols exist in human exhaled breath, and activities such as speaking loudly, singing, sneezing and coughing will result in greater aerosol generation. Some studies suggest singing may result in a 20-30 fold increase in particle generation while loudness of speaking or singing is also important in determining the amount of aerosol emitted.

Infected individuals shed the virus prior to the onset of symptoms, meaning that focusing on symptoms as a basis for preventing infection is not sufficient to prevent transmission. There is also compelling evidence that a significant proportion of cases show no symptoms at all. This means that strategies for control of the virus must include measures that reduce the probability of infected individuals who are not showing symptoms from infecting others, which requires an understanding of the risks associated with singing and playing instruments.

Over the course of the pandemic a number of 'super-spreading' events have been associated with gatherings where a 'vocal' element plays a role in transmission. These include choir practise and recitals, concerts, weddings and worship. The risks of singing, chanting and playing of instruments are then significant. However, scientific advice has concluded these risks are manageable where the community transmission rate is low. For this reason, singing and the playing of instruments as part of worship practise **can** take place where a risk assessment and appropriate mitigations have been put in place. This would include both indoors and outdoors, as well as both performance and congregational singing. However, it is emphasised that extreme caution should be exercised, especially in relation to large groups indoors .

In conducting a risk assessment places of worship should consider the following:

- a. Infectious particles are present in exhaled breath, and these can vary in size. While the dynamics of the largest droplets are dominated by gravitational effects, the smaller aerosol particles form clouds that can remain afloat for long periods of time.
- b. Activities involving speaking, singing or exhaling breath forcibly result in greater aerosol or droplet generation. Generally, the emission of viral particles from individuals follows the series cough > singing > speaking > breathing.
- c. The louder/more sustained the activity, the more aerosol or droplets are generated
- d. The amount and infectivity of virus emitted by an individual varies, depending on a number of factors including their age, size, stage in the infection cycle, A precautionary approach would treat all participants as having the potential to spread the virus.

- e. Face-coverings must be worn indoors. This requirement will apply to all participants in congregational singing.

The environmental factors that would specifically affect the risk to others of an infected individual spreading the virus are;

- a. Lack of social distancing.
- b. Insufficient ventilation indoors.
- c. Temperature (environments below 15°C have been identified as contributing to transmission potential and environmental survival).
- d. Humidity (Droplet dispersal, environment survival and transmission shows a complex relationship with relative humidity. The evidence base is still not clear as different humidities appear to differentially affect survival and dispersal in the air and on surfaces)
- e. Whether the activity is undertaken indoors or outdoors. The evidence clearly suggests outdoors poses a significantly lower risk than indoors.

Other factors have been identified as affecting risk of transmission and therefore should be considered as part of a risk assessment. These include;

- Duration of performance (longer duration equals higher risk)
- Number of singers (more singers potentially equates to higher risk)
- Audience behaviour (e.g. are the audience likely to sing along to a performance.)
- Age of singers. Adolescents emit fewer aerosol particles during singing than what has been known so far for adults.
- Use of masks/visors/physical barriers may reduce spread although while there is good evidence around masks and visors, physical barriers are much less well studied. It is also important to emphasise that visors alone are not recommended, because while they may provide protection to the wearer, they do not protect others.
- Nasal blockage enhances viral discharge from the mouth
- Whether individuals sneeze in which large droplets can carry up to 4
- Times between services or ceremonies.
- Whether amplification is used to reduce singing intensity.

There are a number of mitigations that can be put in place to reduce (though not eliminate) the risk of transmitting the virus.

- As set out in national [self-isolation guidance](#) guidance, people with symptoms, have tested positive or who live with people who have symptoms or have tested positive or who have been advised by NHS Test Trace Protect that they are a contact of someone who has tested positive should self-isolate and not attend worship.
- Singing and playing of instruments should take place only in larger well-ventilated spaces, or outdoors.
- Face coverings should be worn where this is practicable. Singers' masks are available which are designed to hold the material away from the nose and mouth allowing normal vowel production and projection.

- Performance, congregational singing or rehearsal is for limited periods of time and should be at a reduced level of loudness, using microphones for amplification if available.
- Limited numbers of people sing together. Communal chanting with face coverings should be in a quiet voice.
- Singers/musicians are spaced at least 2 metres apart in all directions. This also applies with the members of congregations if singing is to take place.
- Audience, gatherings, observers and teachers are also spaced at least 2 metres from the singers or musicians.
- Orientation of performers avoids face-to-face positioning.
- Avoid sharing of written materials, microphones, sheet music, stands, hymn books etc.,
- Due consideration is also given to reducing transmission risk within the venue (hand hygiene, regular cleaning and disinfection of surfaces) and associated secondary activities (e.g. travelling to the venue, public toilets, socialising before, during and after the event). Avoid sharing of refreshments at any point before or after events.
- Lateral flow devices or PCR testing for officiants are used in advance, where a congregation is going to be present.
- Avoid singing in areas with high disease prevalence.

All types of instrument can be used subject to their specific consideration in risk assessment and adoption of the mitigation set out above. This would include wind and brass instruments as well as pipe organs..

This guidance relates to musicians playing as part of worship. Other circumstances, such as concerts given to the public should follow the guidance made available to the performing arts sector which can be [found here](#).

Music should not be played at levels that make normal conversations difficult. This is because raised voices or shouting significantly increase the risk of transmission through aerosol and droplets, and even more so with the increased risks of transmission through the new variant. Where a band or recorded music is playing it is advisable to stress to those in attendance the importance of avoiding singing and organisers should consider the impact of the volume or sustained length of music on the likelihood that people will converse with raised voices.

Ringling of bells, or similar, may take place. The risk assessment should consider the number of people attending to peal the bells; how they will enter and leave the building, room or bell tower; how they will maintain 2 metre distance between individual bell ringers and if this is not possible what other mitigations will be put in place; the protocols for hand hygiene while pealing the bells and how they will maintain physical distancing between other members of the congregation.

Appendix 2: Risk Assessment considerations for Organs

Physical Distancing	<p>A clear 2-metre distancing should be maintained between the organist and any other person. This might be demarked by floor tape and signage where the organ is accessible to service attendees. Signage on organ loft entrances should be considered. The organist should play alone i.e no page-turner or registrant should be present (unless a member of the organist's household)</p> <p>It is advised that 2 metre distancing should be maintained between people and the organ itself. Whilst air movement from organs is minimal, this is safe precaution especially for certain instruments like pedal-powered harmoniums.</p> <p>Consider access routes to and from the organ or organ loft.</p>
Hygiene	<p>As for all other attendees at the church, sanitiser should be available at entry and exit points. It is advised to provide sanitiser specifically for the organist near to the organ or loft.</p> <p>Face coverings should be worn by all person aged over 11 gathering inside the building.</p> <p>It is sensible to ensure a break of 72 hours between different organists using the instrument if rigorous surface cleaning cannot be achieved between users. Prevent anyone else from touching the instrument during such a break too.</p> <p>Music scores, books and sheets no scores to be left in situ following occupancy or shared unless a 72-hour break between use can be guaranteed. Hand sanitize before and after use.</p>
Cleaning	<p>The touched surfaces of the organ should be cleaned before and after use. Cleaning wipes can be used for this and bagged and disposed of carefully after use.</p> <p>Keyboards and stops are obvious points of contact but also consider handles, doors, handrails, organ seat and other areas around the organ which will be touched.</p> <p>Cleaning of the organ surfaces should sit alongside the Covid-19 cleaning regime of the wider church.</p>