

Dear friends

The absence of a clamour to hear from the Coronavirus Task Group about next steps with regards to the lifting of restrictions on the 19th July tells us that many of you have made or are currently making plans as to how you will face the coming changes, based on your local circumstances. This is good and right and is also very much what the government are now calling us to do.

We do still await advice from the Church of England nationally but have been told not to expect this until the detailed governmental advice is released and it is therefore quite likely that we will not be able to share this with you until the middle of next week – but please do keep an eye out for anything which may land in the meantime.

We have therefore put on paper a few things which reflect the discussions we have heard coming from the ground, using the experience of our medical experts on the team to tease out some questions which you may find useful in your planning:

Lifting of national restrictions from the 19th July 2021.

There is no greater privilege than being able to gather in person to worship as the body of Christ. For many the restrictions we have endured for so long around singing, sharing the chalice and the peace have been very painful. The next steps for each church will be challenging for some, balancing embracing freedom from national restrictions, and mitigating local risks. The way forward for each congregation will look and feel different. Some will feel able to return to all aspects of worship quickly others will feel the need to slowly phase in changes.

COVID-19 and its various variants will be present in our communities for the foreseeable future. With the lifting of national regulations, the responsibility for how we wisely use our freedom to worship falls to each church leadership team and individual worshippers. Whilst the vaccination programme has reduced the risk of hospital admission for many, COVID and long COVID remain serious risks for our communities. It has been the increased risk from the Delta variant which has caused the Government to move away from its 'Freedom Day' slogan to instead "expect" mask wearing and good decisions around social distancing.

The context of each church, the communities they serve and their experience of COVID has been and continues to be different. It is important to take time to reflect on this as the parish starts to consider how to take the next steps, and a recent study has shown that people entering a space feel considerably more comfortable when they can clearly see what risk-mitigating factors are in place and understand that they will be followed.

To help your thinking we have taken the "hands, face, space" strapline and provided you with some questions to consider:

Hands

Washing hands for two minutes or using hand sanitiser on a regular basis, particularly when entering or leaving a public space is good practice and reduces the transmission of a number of viruses not just COVID. It is also good practice when distributing the bread and wine. Good practice would encourage ongoing use of handwashing and hand sanitiser.

- How can you continue to encourage congregations to regularly wash and/or sanitise their hands?
- How can you incorporate hand hygiene for those celebrating and administering communion?
- Whilst we are still awaiting national guidance around the re-introduction of the chalice, consider how you might incorporate the use of alcohol-based wipes into the cleaning of the chalice between communicants.

Face

The use of face coverings has been encouraged in crowded public spaces throughout the pandemic. This has not been without issue. Using a face covering reduces the risk of the wearer spreading the virus if they are infected and asymptomatic, if it covers the nose and mouth.

- Would asking people to wear masks as they enter or leave a church building provide some reassurance or cause more anxiety in your context?
- Singing is a high-risk activity in terms of spreading the virus. In your context would it be wise to restrict the amount of congregational singing or would encouraging people to initially wear a face covering whilst singing be wise?
- Would it be helpful or unhelpful if those administering communion wore a face covering?

Space

We know that the risk of viral transmission falls the less time we spend in close proximity to each other and the more space we leave between us. Think about how your building can be made as COVID safe as you can, recognising the risks not just of the service itself but before and after it, as well as the need to travel to and from the church building.

- Is it wise and possible to keep some social distancing measures in place, at least in one part of the building? This may be useful for those who still feel uncomfortable in crowded places at the moment.
- Is it wise and possible to continue to administer communion in ways that maintain some separation for people?
- How will you enable people to participate in refreshments and conversations after the service and in other small group activities such as study groups?
- How will you handle weddings, funerals and baptisms so that those enabling such services to take place are not exposed to an excessive risk?
- How will you identify who might be a close contact if someone test positive after a service?
- How will you continue to ensure good ventilation/air movement in your buildings?

Be honest and realistic. For some churches it will be possible to return to a sense of freedom in their worship and church activities within a matter of weeks. For others, changes will need to be phased over a number of weeks or months.

How will you communicate your plans?

- How will you help people to understand your decisions around managing risk and keeping people safe?

Whatever approach build in regular reviews that consider:

- Changes in cases locally
- How well your guidance is being observed by the congregation.
- On-going concerns of the congregation and wider community

The Common Cup

We await clear advice on this issue and appreciate it is a matter of concern for a number of people for various, legitimate reasons. We will share advice when it comes.

Online Worship this Sunday

An Act of Worship from Blackburn Cathedral will be available every Sunday from 9am. You can view this on the [Cathedral YouTube Channel](#) or on [Facebook](#).

You can always find online services from local churches using the [A Church Near You](#) website.

Coronavirus Email Address

If you have questions or problems and can't find answers on the [advice compendium](#) please email: coronavirus@blackburn.anglican.org

Keep us, good Lord,
under the shadow of your mercy
in this time of uncertainty and distress.
Sustain and support the anxious and fearful,
and lift up all who are brought low;
that we may rejoice in your comfort
knowing that nothing can separate us from your love
in Christ Jesus our Lord.
Amen.

Regards,
Coronavirus Task Group