

Dear Friends,

The fast spread of the Omicron variant has put us back in the position where we are all struggling to interpret and apply fast changing rules and guidance. We hope that this briefing will help you to make sense of the announcements of recent days. We also include a lengthy but important letter from the county's Directors of Public Health to places of worship below this briefing.

Worship over Christmas

The Prime Minister is clear that Christmas events need not be cancelled and Churches should continue with their plans for worship over the next weeks. The confident declaration of the joy of the Incarnation by churches and church schools across our Diocese is critical at this time of anxiety and concern. Please make a considered response to the announcements of recent days based on local circumstances; infection rates in Lancashire have remained broadly similar throughout the past 3-4 months.

Compulsory Face Coverings in Church

The new regulations make face coverings in churches compulsory from 10 December. The only exception is singing where coverings can be removed. Those who are reading, preaching or leading worship may also remove coverings when addressing the congregation.

Face coverings are not obligatory for outdoor worship.

Working from Home

The guidance to "work from home if you can" has been reintroduced from Monday 13 December, which provides a challenge to parish clergy, chaplains and lay ministers alike. The guidance is very general and which makes it difficult to understand what it might mean for our own contexts.

The overall aim of the guidance is to limit interactions with others and prevent unnecessary opportunities to spread the virus. If working from home is impractical, then we should consider instead how we might achieve these goals in our settings. In practical terms this will look like moving meetings online where possible and limiting face to face meeting numbers only to those who need to be present.

Pastoral contacts which can be made online or by phone should be. Sometimes pastoral contacts must be face to face so mitigating risk on these occasions will be important, such as meeting outside, wearing face coverings, keeping windows open for ventilation and maintaining a good distance. This is particularly important as a number of those we attend to pastorally are, by definition, vulnerable.

Likewise if it is possible to move small groups and Bible Study groups online, please do so. If this is inappropriate or impossible, please meet in a large and well ventilated space. It would be good practice to ask people to take a lateral flow test before meetings.

Large Services

You would need to be planning a very large service indeed before you had to consider NHS Covid Passes and this part of the announcement will not impact on churches. However:

- Please make sure your risk assessment is up to date. A template can be found [here](#).
- Please consider a booking in system using Eventbrite or a similar system to manage numbers.
- For really large indoor events it would be wise to ask people to take a lateral flow test before attending.
- Real clarity and good signage about what you want people to do when entering a space (face mask, hand sanitising etc) hugely increases people's confidence to attend.

Advent and Christmas Resources

There is an excellent new area on the Diocesan website with resources for Christmas and Advent. You can visit by following [this link](#).

Coronavirus Email Address

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

A prayer (with thanks to Fr Ed Straszak)

Father,

we thank you for your loving care and providence, although we are unworthy.

We thank you for sending your dear Son Jesus to live among us, to share in our lot and to die for all that all might live.

We ask you to look with mercy on all people throughout the world who are fearful of the threats of pestilence, war and famine in these uncertain times.

Give us the courage to overcome fear trusting in your loving plan for all people which gives us hope for the future even in the face of present adversity.

Watch over us and protect us from all harm.

We ask this in the name of Your Son our Lord Jesus Christ,
Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
One God, now and forever.

Amen.

A Letter from the Directors of Public Health

Faith and Community Cohesion – Covid-19 move to Plan B

As we head into the winter months, I wanted to write to our faith communities to outline the latest Covid-19 updates, and how it is more important than ever that we continue to work together to manage the ongoing health risks posed by Covid-19 and the new Omicron variant, and to minimise the impact upon the NHS this winter.

As you will be aware, the Prime Minister announced on Wednesday 8 December, that England will move to Plan B following the rapid spread of the Omicron variant in the UK.

Urgent work has been ongoing to understand the impact of the new variant with regards to vaccines, treatments and transmissibility. Plan B was set out in September and will help to slow the spread of the variant and reduce the chances of the NHS coming under unsustainable pressure, while buying time to deliver more boosters.

Vaccines remain our best line of defence and it is now more vital than ever that those who are unvaccinated come forward, and those eligible for their boosters book when invited.

The new Plan B measures that have been put in place in response to the risks of the Omicron variant are:

- From Friday 10 December, face coverings will be required by law in most indoor settings.
- From Monday 13 December office workers who can work from home should do so.
- From Wednesday 15 December, certain venues and events will be required by law to check that all visitors aged 18 years or over are fully vaccinated, have proof of a negative test in the last 48 hours, or have an exemption.

New precautionary travel restrictions have also been put in place with new countries being added to the UK's travel red list. Anyone aged 12 and over must show a negative PCR or lateral flow test result before travelling to England from abroad. You must take the test in the 2 days before you travel to England.

You must also take a PCR test within 2 days of arriving and self-isolate until you get a negative test result, even if you're fully vaccinated. Check what you need to do to travel to England from another country.

On the following page you will find an update from our Directors of Public Health in Lancashire regarding steps we can all take to help protect each other.

On behalf of the Lancashire Resilience Forum (LRF), I would once again like to thank you for the outstanding support that faith communities have provided to their own and wider communities in Lancashire throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. The support has made a real contribution to protecting peoples' health, our NHS and saving lives.

As always, working together we can make a difference.

Adrian Phillips

Chair of the Lancashire Resilience Forum Faith and Community Cohesion Group and Chief Executive of Preston City Council

Advice from Lancashire's Public Health leads'

Covid-19 remains a serious health risk and to control the spread of the new Omicron variant, the government has announced that England will move to Plan B in response to the risks of the Omicron variant.

- Wear a face covering in most indoor public places and on public transport
- Get tested and self-isolate if required
- Work from home, if you can
- If you haven't already, get vaccinated
- Let fresh air in if you meet indoors. Meeting outdoors is safer

All of us can play our part by understanding the situations where risks of Covid-19 infection and transmission are likely to be higher and taking action to reduce these risks.

There is some further guidance below on how you can stay safe and help prevent the spread.

Support vaccinations programmes

All adults in England have now been offered at least 2 doses of a Covid-19 vaccine. The vaccines are safe and effective. Getting fully vaccinated is the best way of protecting you and others against Covid-19.

Vaccines continue to remain our best line of defence, the Covid vaccination offer is 'Evergreen', it is never too late to take up the offer if people have not previously felt able.

The third, 'Booster jab' can be pre-booked and taken 3 months after the second injection (for those groups who are eligible) and is really important for maintaining ongoing protection.

Testing

Around 1 in 3 people with Covid-19 do not have any symptoms. This means they could be spreading the virus without knowing it. Testing regularly increases the chances of detecting Covid-19 when you are infectious but are not displaying symptoms, helping to make sure you do not spread Covid-19 by staying at home and self-isolating immediately.

Please continue to support regular use of Lateral Flow Tests (LFT) and places of worship, please consider becoming a distribution point for free LFT kits.

Ventilation

Ventilation is of great importance and in cold weather it may be tempting to avoid or minimise ventilation. We acknowledge that adequate ventilation may cause some draughts and perhaps we should advise worshippers/visitors of the need to wear warmer clothing (dependent upon the prevailing weather conditions).

- It is important to identify and deal with areas that are not well ventilated. The more people occupying an area that is poorly ventilated, and the longer they remain in it, the greater the risk of spread of Covid-19.

- Control measures such as avoiding certain activities or gatherings, restricting, or reducing the duration of activities, providing ventilation breaks during or between room usage should be considered alongside ventilation for reducing the risk of airborne transmission.
- Any actions to improve ventilation should not compromise other aspects of safety and security (for example, avoid propping open fire doors), and should consider other consequences such as health and wellbeing impacts from thermal discomfort.
- Opening windows and doors is the simplest way of improving ventilation for most people.
- If windows have openings at both the top and the bottom (such as sash windows), using just the top opening will help incoming fresh air warm up as it mixes with room air, reducing cold draughts. In warmer weather, use both the top and bottom openings as this will help provide even more airflow.
- Opening windows and doors at opposite sides of your room or home will also provide a good flow of fresh air (this is known as cross ventilation).
- Make sure trickle vents (small vents usually on the top of a window) or grilles are open and not blocked. Air which flows in from these vents will mix with warm room air as it enters, which helps keep the room a comfortable temperature.
- If possible, maintain openings throughout the day to allow a constant flow of fresh air into the building. The weather can affect the amount of air that flows through openings and so these should be adjusted to balance warmth with the amount of ventilation, where possible.

Detailed ventilation guidance for workplaces and public buildings during the pandemic is provided by the Chartered Institution of Building Services Engineers (CIBSE).

Find more information about ventilation of indoor spaces to stop the spread of coronavirus.

Masks/face coverings

From 10 December, face coverings will be required by law in most indoor public places and on public transport, including places of worship. See a full list of places where you must wear a face covering.

Limit close contact with other people

Formal 2 metre social distancing guidance is no longer in place but making space for people and distancing will assist to reduce transmission. Maintain as much space as possible between groups who do not live together.

You may also choose to limit the close contact you have with people you do not usually live with. You may also choose to take a lateral flow test before being in close contact and also encourage those people you are meeting with to do so, which will help to manage periods of risk. This includes close contact in a higher risk environment, or when spending prolonged periods of time with a vulnerable individual.

Hand hygiene including the use of hand gel

Maintaining hand hygiene is always an important means of minimising the spread of infection. This is especially important prior to eating. Please continue to provide suitable hand gel and encourage its usage.

Try to stay at home if you're feeling unwell

If you develop Covid-19 symptoms, self-isolate immediately and get a PCR test, even if your symptoms are mild. You should self-isolate at home while you book the test and wait for the results. You must self-isolate if you test positive.

Even if you don't have Covid-19, staying at home until you feel better reduces the risk that you will pass on an illness to your friends, colleagues, and others in your community. This will help reduce the burden on our health services.

Dr Sakthi Karunanithi, Director of Public Health for Lancashire

Professor Dominic Harrison, Director of Public Health for Blackburn with Darwen

Dr Arif Rajpura, Director of Public Health for Blackpool

More information

You can find the latest messages and resources to share on social media on the Let's Keep Lancashire Safe website - www.lancashire.gov.uk/public-health-campaigns/campaigns/lets-keep-lancashire-safe/

Follow Lancashire Resilience Forum on Twitter for the latest updates – www.twitter.com/LancsResilience