

COVID-19 Churchyards

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2 nd July 2020	2	The House of Bishops Recovery Group

The Recovery Group has been set up to support the Church of England as government guidance changes through the COVID-19 pandemic. This document has been prepared with information available by the issue date. It will be kept under review and updated as the situation develops, with each update issued as a new version. The current version will always be available to download from the Church of England website via the [Coronavirus FAQs page](#).

As lock-down gradually eases, more and more church communities may be thinking about how to use their churchyard or other nearby outdoor space for church activities. Government guidance is clear that outdoor activities are safer than indoor ones.

There are many excellent resources to help with this, such as a [wild worship field guide](#) produced by the Sanctuary Centre and prayer stations from [Engage Worship](#). Further advice and lots of practical resources and examples can be found on our new Outdoor Worship page [here](#).

Can we have worship outside?

Yes, if the churchyard or land around your church is owned or managed by you (for example by the PCC). Under government guidance a place of worship refers to a building used for regular religious ceremonies, communal worship or similar gatherings by religious organisations and includes the use of surrounding grounds for which the ‘venue managers’ are also responsible.

Given this, if you are using a churchyard you own or manage you can assess the capacity limits in the same way as you would for the inside of the building taking into account current social distancing rules, and having completed a risk assessment. Social distancing and hygiene measures must still be maintained. If you are worshipping in an outside space not owned or managed by the church then the relevant guidance for that place should be adhered to. In many cases this will mean lower levels of capacity.

This guidance does not cover public parks, private homes, cultural sites or other open spaces, such as woodlands which may be used for religious purposes. If people do want to engage in worship in these spaces, then the guidance relevant to that place should be adhered to.

Can we open the church grounds for people to walk through and to sit in?

Yes. The government’s advice is that people can spend time outdoors, including private gardens and other outdoor spaces, in groups of up to six people from different households, following social distancing guidelines. Public gatherings of more than six people from different households are prohibited in law. There is no limit to the size of a gathering in an outdoor space if the people gathered are all members of the same household.

The proven mental health benefits of being in nature are well known. For many of our urban churches, the church grounds are the only green space around, and offer a sanctuary. Having access

to green space has never been more important than it is today for people's wellbeing, particularly for those without a garden.

Churchyards can be places of reflection. They can offer signs of hope and joy as well as sadness and mourning.

In all circumstances, as set out by the Government, it is absolutely crucial that people from different households maintain social distancing; ideally 2 metres, and if this is not possible then 1m plus appropriate measures to reduce risk of infection. The Government [guidance](#) gives helpful suggestions about managing physical distancing in outdoor spaces where there is considered to be an issue due to large numbers of people using them.

Are we allowed to cut the grass and other gardening?

Yes. Whoever undertakes gardening, whether volunteer or professional, must take responsibility for the equipment that they use and for maintaining appropriate physical distancing. If they are using the church's equipment, then it should be sanitised before and after use.

This could be an opportunity to change your mowing regime by allowing suitable areas to grow long over the next few weeks, letting natural wildflowers grow and encouraging biodiversity. You can get advice on this from [Caring for God's Acre](#).

Can people visit to tend graves?

Yes. The government has included burial grounds as places that can remain open.

People are congregating in the church grounds, what should we do?

Please do not put yourself at risk by attempting to move on groups of more than six people who are not from the same household. This is a matter for the police to enforce.

If this is a regular occurrence you may wish to consider signage as an intervention as suggested in [Government guidance](#).

We have local community groups that work in our grounds. Do we need to tell them to stop?

The professional organisations and charities that provide these services will have their own guidance on how to work during the Covid-19 emergency. You should ask about their compliance if they continue to use your grounds.