

About continuing to worship (with joy!) safely

Guidance for the ELCE

This guidance has been prepared by the Executive Council based on guidelines published by the British and devolved governments. It is constantly reviewed with the latest information released from the Governments and you should always make sure you are using the most recent guidance.

The box below contains information on the date of issue of each document, with a summary of what is new compared to the preceding issue.

Version 10	Issued: 27 th May 2021
Amendments (in red text)	Links updated to the latest available information as of 27 May 2021
	Updated introduction – to note the risk of variants
	Point 22 – latest advice on singing, including the possibility of amateur choirs singing with a maximum of 6 people
	Point 29 – congregations can gather after the service to eat and drink
	Point 33 – Prayer groups can meet but in-person Bible Study still cannot take place in church.

Hello!

COVID-19 cases and hospital admissions remain of concern, **particularly because of the possible impact of variants**. Please monitor closely the Governments' announcements and guidance in this changing situation.

Public worship can occur in England, Wales and in Scotland. Our contexts are different between those congregations which have their own church buildings and those congregations which rent places for worship, but it remains our responsibility that the places we use are safe and our actions are conducted safely. Fundamentally safety is seen in terms of health – that people do not transmit or are infected by COVID-19 – while at the same time all health and safety, safeguarding, and other measures are not rescinded or minimised. The communal nature of worship can make our church buildings places that are particularly vulnerable to the spread of COVID-19. **The general advice from the Governments is that if public worship is to occur, people are to remain vigilant about physical distancing and also HANDS-FACE-SPACE and those in charge of public worship be scrupulous about COVID-19 safety. Where infection rates are very high, additional calls for public worship not to occur are being made and ELCE congregations need to decide what is best for their context.**

What follows in this document is ELCE guidance regarding public worship, for all ELCE congregations irrespective of location and charity status. Included is a checklist for a COVID-19 Risk Assessment. **Please note that the COVID-19 risk assessment must be completed before you open or reopen the building for public worship and should be reviewed at regular intervals in line with the local guidelines.** All ELCE congregations are to complete it, follow it, file it in your church records AND send a copy to the ELCE Secretary, Mrs Doreen Rosser, by email. Public worship cannot resume until the COVID-19 Risk Assessment has been completed and the matters raised in it are in place and the ELCE Secretary has a copy. Failure to complete a COVID-19 risk assessment constitutes a breach of Health & Safety legislation, as could having a risk assessment with insufficient measures set out. Places of worship are encouraged to make their risk assessments available online where possible.

You will be well aware of the many practical issues of resuming public worship and the following material is designed to help. There is a plethora of weblinks from the various jurisdictions.

The guidelines for Safe Use of Places of Worship have been published for **England** and were updated on **May 25** <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/national-lockdown-stay-at-home?priority-taxon=774cee22-d896-44c1-a611-e3109cce8eae> and **May 24** <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship-during-the-pandemic-from-4-july/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship-from-2-december>

and for **Scotland**, updated on **May 21** <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-stay-at-home-guidance/>

and for **Wales**, updated on March 19 <https://gov.wales/alert-level-4-frequently-asked-questions#section-58346> and on **May 14** <https://gov.wales/guidance-reopening-places-worship-coronavirus-html>

In this new lockdown environment, all ELCE congregations need to be proactive in any and all actions to mitigate the transmission rate and need to remind all members with any symptoms that they are to stay at home. All ELCE congregations also need to assure those who are vulnerable, those who are shielding, and those who have any concerns about the spread of COVID-19 that they should stay at home and be supported by whatever online or postal provision exists.

Cleaning should be carried out in accordance with the government instructions: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-decontamination-in-non-healthcare-settings/covid-19-decontamination-in-non-healthcare-settings> (updated 16th October).

Cleaning must be carried out in a way that is compliant with the health and safety of those involved. When cleaning surfaces, it is not necessary to wear personal protective equipment (PPE) or clothing over and above what would usually be used. The minimum PPE to be worn for cleaning an area after a person with symptoms of, or confirmed COVID-19 has left the setting possible is disposable gloves and an apron. Wash hands with soap and water for 20 seconds after all PPE has been removed. Anyone in a vulnerable risk category should not be involved in any cleaning duties.

The use of 'fogging' is counselled against by all government advisory bodies, so do not be seduced by all the cleaning firms offering that!

Open for worship only after all the requirements have been completed and in line with the local COVID-19 requirements in your jurisdiction.

ELCE Executive Council, 27th May 2021

ELCE Guidelines for Returning to Worship in Church Buildings

This guidance covers worship only, in places of worship, that is a building used for worship services, including rented premises. It includes the use of surrounding grounds, for example, adjoining carparks, courtyards or gardens for which the congregations are also responsible.

Currently the British and devolved governments require us to maintain 2 metre distance between people of separate households. We strongly recommend maintaining 2 metre distancing between separate households, which will determine the maximum number per service. **This is our advice to all ELCE congregations, including those in England, Wales and Scotland and those affiliated with ELCE as separate charities.** We will keep this guidance under review as UK and devolved governments continue to revise guidelines. **Please remind all congregants that 2 metres is further apart than we usually imagine!**

Government guidance for England sets out the legal limits to the number of people within a place of worship (see the **two** documents at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship-during-the-pandemic-from-4-july>, updated 24 May 2021). **Please note that, at this time, it would be prudent to remain vigilant about physical distancing and the number of people in the worship building.**

ELCE Guidelines

Based on the latest rules, ELCE offers the following guidance for ELCE congregations.

In Advance of Worship

- 1) Make sure everyone is aware of the government advice to stay at home if they, or someone they live with, has any of the symptoms of COVID-19:
 - **A new, continuous cough**, where you cough a lot for more than an hour, or have three or more coughing episodes in 24 hours
 - **Fever** - where your temperature is above 37.8C
 - **Loss of smell or taste**

This will help to stop the risk of giving coronavirus to others.

- 2) Ensure you know any lockdown or 'Tier' requirements for your area and for members of your congregation. This is a constantly changing situation.

Information pertaining to funerals and weddings **has also been updated (less restrictive)** and you need to ensure you know the requirement for your locale.

- 3) Calculate the number of people you can accommodate for a service in your building while maintaining the 2 metre distance recommendation. Consider booking attendance in advance.
- 4) If you anticipate more people wishing to attend than the capacity of your worship space, consider scheduling a mid-week service to deal with the overflow (ie. numbers over your maximum capacity). Leaving a building empty for 48 hours will reduce the need for deep cleaning between services.
- 5) Ensure signage remains in place:
 - a) Reminders of maintaining the 2 metre distancing recommendation;
 - b) Reminders to sanitise hands **as a minimum on entry and exit**;
 - c) Indicators for any one way systems in place;
 - d) Reminders of "Catch it, bin it, kill it" (You can make your own, or signs can be purchased, for example at <https://www.stocks signs.co.uk/product-category/mandatory/man-hygiene/>)

- e) Toilet instructions on the loo doors and inside the washrooms.
 - f) The NHS Track and Trace venue QR code.
- 6) Continue to provide hand sanitisers at many points – definitely at the entrance and exit, and other places such as the entrance to the sanctuary.
 - 7) Provide several bins with bin liners in appropriate locations.
 - 8) Any shared facilities for children, such as play corners, soft furnishings, soft toys and toys that are hard to clean, should remain removed and/or out of use.
 - 9) Any pew cushions, kneelers and other soft furnishings must not be shared in the service. Congregants can bring their own as long as they take them home after each service. Instructions should be given that no one is to touch any personal items brought into the service by others.
 - 10) Toilets should be used with particular care, with appropriate cleaning supplies provided such as single use disinfectant wipes which can be used after each use to wipe down the toilet, taps, handles and can be dropped into a bin placed next to the washroom door on way out of the washroom.
 - 11) Ensure those with responsibilities for implementing each requirement before, during and after the service are happy and able to continue fulfilling these responsibilities.
 - 12) Should there be change of circumstances, review and where necessary update your COVID-19 Risk Assessment. Ensure that the form is signed, dated and filed with the ELCE Secretary.
 - 13) Should you be considering holding outdoor services when the weather allows, you must comply with the latest government requirements, conducting a risk assessment, providing security and bearing in mind any requirements for your location. **Please note, in England the latest guidance defines outdoor place of worship as being within the grounds of the place of worship.**

During a service

- 14) Doors and windows to remain open. Adequate ventilation is important as it has been shown to reduce transmission of the virus.
- 15) Implement a one way system if possible, using arrows or clear instructions.
- 16) Fill the pews/seats from front to back. Take care with the movement of traffic during distribution of communion and exit.
- 17) Conduct the service so that worshippers remain seated rather than standing which reduces the risk of contact.

- | |
|--|
| <p>18) In England, Wales and Scotland masks are still mandatory for all congregants in places of worship. Pastors are not covered by the same guidelines about face masks as congregants. Pastors and other assistants (such as a lector) do not have to wear a mask as long as they can maintain 2 metre distancing. The only exception to this is for the Service of the Sacrament until the point where distribution has been completed. For consecration and distribution of Holy Communion the pastor (and distribution assistant) must be masked and should either be gloved or should sanitise their hands prior to distribution. Distribution should take place without kneeling, with households 2 metres apart. Distribution should</p> |
|--|

always be carried out in the safest way possible in your building. Anyone assisting with distribution must follow the ELCE advice regarding curates in worship.

- 19) Speaking, singing and chanting should not happen across uncovered consumables (other than consumables to be used by the celebrant alone). Instead consumables must be securely covered, and prior to the receptacle being opened, it should be cleaned, with either gloved or sanitized hands.
- 20) Only one person should prepare supplies and vessels, carry them in and deal with them afterward, and all linens are washed after use.
- 21) Keep an accurate temporary record of all who attend services in person for 21 days, in a way that is manageable for your congregation, and assist NHS Track and Trace with requests for that data if needed for contact tracing and the investigation of local outbreaks. The record should always be treated and stored according to GDPR requirements. As part of NHS Track and Trace in England and Wales, churches are able to download from the government a poster with a unique QR code for the building to be displayed so people can scan with their smart phone on entering the building. The ELCE encourages all members to participate in the NHS Track and Trace scheme. In Scotland the ELCE recommends that the Test and Protect app be used.
- 22) The general advice about singing **indoors has changed (singing only by any number of a professional choir or a maximum of 6 of an amateur choir, providing social distancing can be maintained)** so that congregational singing, chanting or playing of instruments that are blown into should not take place because there is a possible additional risk of infection in environments where individuals are singing or chanting as a group, and this applies even if social distancing is being observed or face coverings are used.

Congregational singing is allowed in outdoor services, providing that sufficient controls are in place to maintain social distancing, for example providing clear communication, demarcating spaces, using sufficient ushers and that groups comply with the rules (**a maximum of 30 people**).

All singing must follow the principles of the Performing Arts guidance which outlines how such singing is done safely. See:

England

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19/performing-arts>

(Updated May 18)

Scotland

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-for-the-performing-arts-and-venues-sector/> (Updated May 20)

Wales

<https://gov.wales/rehearsing-performing-and-taking-part-performing-arts-guidance-phased-return-html> (Updated May 14)

- 23) Spoken responses during worship should be in a normal speaking voice (i.e. not in a raised voice) because of the potential for increased risk of transmission from aerosol and droplets.
- 24) Any act that involves random movement around the building or physical contact should not be included in the worship service. When it comes to sharing the peace, one option is to use British Sign Language while maintaining the recommended 2 metre distancing.

- 25) Offerings should not be collected during the service. The Offertory can be said without the offering going to the chancel. If offerings are to be collected, they should be placed in one designated receptacle on entering or exiting worship, which should only be handled by one person.
- 26) Government guidance discourages cash giving due to the possible risk of virus transmission. If members wish to give cash offerings, they should be encouraged to put the cash in an envelope or small plastic bag before placing it in the offering receptacle.
- 27) Counting and recording the offering should be done by one person with one observer, according to physical distancing and hygiene requirements. The offering must still be banked as soon as possible following the service; most (if not all) banks will accept cheques sent by post with a bank deposit slip and the account number written on the back of each cheque.
- 28) Either issue hymnals to everyone to keep at home and bring with them to each service, or keep a selection of clean books for individuals to use. Clean books should be quarantined for 48 hours since their previous use and should be quarantined for 48 hours again after use. Items which cannot be easily cleaned should also be subject to the 48 hour quarantine after use. You might consider putting the hymnals out in the marked seating areas, at least 48 hours prior to the service. Alternatively, provide a single use paper copy which everyone takes with them, ensuring compliance with copyright restrictions.

After the Service

- 29) **At the end of worship, congregants can gather providing social distancing is maintained. Congregations can provide food and drink which may be collected from a serving hatch, but please avoid sharing cutlery, dishes etc. Food and drink should be consumed while seated. Please bear in mind that everyone's safety is paramount.**
- 30) Wipe down all surfaces (tops of pews, tables, door handles, organ/keyboard etc) and clean washrooms and other areas that have been used with disinfectant after each service, especially if the building is to be used again within 48 hours. This is critical if you have scheduled multiple services, but if no one will be in the building for 48 hours it is not as critical.

Protecting Vulnerable Groups

- 31) If a congregation intends to hold multiple services, consideration should be given to restricting one of the services to vulnerable groups in order to offer them as much protection as possible.

Other Important points

- 32) As pastors increasingly are being asked to visit and provide home communions, it might be reassuring if pastors undertake a regular regime of COVID-19 testing.
- 33) This guidance and actions are addressing public worship and the resumption of other congregational activities is **not** considered. The government has issued further advice on these activities. **In person Bible Study still cannot meet in church, but prayer groups are allowed** (see <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship-during-the-pandemic-from-4-july/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship-from-2-december> (24 May)). Please also contact the Secretary of the Executive Council if you encounter a situation not covered by these guidelines, or if the guidelines are not clear.

Renting to other groups

- 34) If you are renting to other groups, you should have a signed agreement with each renter regarding their responsibilities for complying with this guidance and observing all local and national government regulations.
- 35) Where your building is used by other user groups, only those activities permitted by law should take place.

Dealing with Positive COVID-19 Test results among congregants

- 36) If a congregant tests positive for COVID-19 our response is determined by the proximity people have been to that person within the previous 14 days. If a physical distance of 2 metres or more has been maintained, with everyone wearing a mask, then no action is required. There is no legal requirement for anyone who attended the service to self-isolate providing they had maintained a 2 metre distance and were wearing masks (unless they are contacted by the NHS), but members can choose to self-isolate, if they wish. Contacts who need to self-isolate will be notified and advised accordingly by the NHS Test and Trace or the Scottish Test and Protect services. If you have not been notified, this means you do not need to self-isolate, but the final decision is up to the individual. The criteria remain proximity and duration of contact. The government guidelines for contact are:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-stay-at-home-guidance>

(Updated May 19)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-for-contacts-of-people-with-possible-or-confirmed-coronavirus-covid-19-infection-who-do-not-live-with-the-person>

(Updated April 26)

- 37) Congregants should be informed that if anyone tests positive for COVID-19 they should inform the pastor immediately. Congregations then use their track and trace list to inform anyone who has attended within the past 14 days that an individual has tested positive. The name of the COVID-19 positive person is only to be shared with the congregation with the permission of the COVID-19 positive person. Reasons for sharing the name (with permission) are so that others can assess their proximity and also pray for the person.