

Update on Covid Restrictions - 2

The Government has updated its guidance for Places of Worship. This is to ensure that social interaction is limited in order to reduce the risk of viral transmission.

From **Monday 28th September**, the following numbers will be permitted for:

- Wedding Services: a maximum of 15 people will be able to attend the service and reception.
- Funeral Services: up to a maximum of 30 people can attend a funeral service but the “Rule of Six” will apply to wakes and receptions afterwards.

Attending Mass in Catholic Churches

There is no change to the attending of Mass or for periods of private prayer in churches. The capacity limit for each place of worship should be set by what is possible within COVID-secure social distancing guidelines for that building – as explained in the Places of Worship Guidance.¹

If you are attending Mass with others, then the group you are attending with should not exceed more than six people. This group of six can be made up of people from outside your household, but strict social distancing must be maintained between members of different households at all times.

All should limit social contact as much as possible and minimise all interactions with those they do not live with within the church building and immediately outside of it. Therefore, when travelling to, entering and inside places of worship, people should observe strict social distancing from anyone not in their household - even if they are attending as a group of six.

The only exception to this new rule is where a single household (or support bubble) contains more than six people, but the same rules on social interaction with others outside their group should apply. No person who lives separately to this household or is not included in the support bubble is permitted to accompany this larger group. This replaces previous rules where groups could be larger than six people if they were made up of two households.

The wearing of a face covering is mandatory for those who attend Mass or church for private prayer unless they have an exemption from this.

Attending other Sacramental Celebrations

What the Government calls “life-cycle events” now need to be differentiated.

Baptisms

If a baptism takes place in a Mass which is part of the normal pattern of parish Masses, the number of people attending will be limited to the secure capacity determined by the COVID-19 risk assessment for the church building. People attending must remain within their groups of six and observe strict social distancing between each separate group.

If a baptism takes place outside of this normal pattern of worship, the numbers attending this celebration is limited to 6.

Confirmations

As the sacramental celebration of Confirmation normally takes place within the context of a Parish Mass, the number of people who can attend will be limited to the secure capacity determined by the

¹ <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-during-the-pandemic-from-4-july>

COVID-19 risk assessment for the church building. Again, people attending must remain within their groups of six and observe strict social distancing between each separate group. Care should be taken to ensure that family groups with sponsors etc do not interact with other groups of 6.

Celebrations of the Sacraments of Christian Initiation of Adults

Again, by necessity, the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults takes place within the context of the Parish Mass and as such the number of people who can attend will be limited to the secure capacity determined by the COVID-19 risk assessment for the church building. People attending must remain within their groups of six and observe strict social distancing between each separate group. This is especially important for supporting families and sponsors.

Celebrations of First Holy Communion

Again, these celebrations take place within the context of the Parish Mass and as such the conditions outlined above for the Sacraments of Initiation of Adults apply. The careful application of social distancing rules should be applied for family groups attending these celebrations.

Nota Bene

One of the main concerns over “life-cycle events” is that they draw people from different parts of the country which may have raised infection levels. Whilst each sacramental celebration is a moment of joy for families, limiting the participation to the immediate family will prevent the potential for viral transmission across the country. Consideration must be given to this when determining those who will participate in these celebrations.

As a general rule, it is strongly advised that there be no receptions or celebratory parties after the sacramental celebration; should families want to gather, they should do so outside of the church environment and must have regard to the Rule of Six.

Other aspects of Church Life

Catechetical activities such as sacramental preparation sessions are not considered as being affected by the Rule of Six, as these are formal Religious Education and Formation sessions. The guidance offered by local dioceses for good practice should be adhered to (for example having fixed groups of children and young people with a single catechist) in all cases.

Choirs and music groups are also not considered to be restricted by this Rule as they come under the realms of the Performing Arts Guidance² which recognises choirs and music groups during liturgies and their rehearsal periods as a performing art, and therefore are subject to that particular set guidance.

NHS Covid-19 Test and Trace App

On 24th September, the NHS is going to launch its Covid-19 Test and Trace App. This app has been developed to assist the Government with its test and trace policy and uses a smartphone. The app works by using the ‘Bluetooth’ system, which all smartphones have. It registers any other phones within a certain distance, which also have the app installed. This takes place between the phones themselves and is entirely anonymous.

The app registers a contact if the two people have been within a certain distance (less than 2m) of each other for a certain amount of time (more than 15minutes), according to what is known about the transmission of Covid-19. No information is sent to the NHS or other bodies. If for any reason a person wishes to delete the app from the phone, all the data is also deleted. Similarly, if the app registers that someone you have met recently has been tested positive for Covid-19, it will tell you what you need to do.

² <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19/performing-arts>

There are six benefits to the app which will help users:

- **Trace:** For contact tracing, the app detects and logs other nearby app users using random unique IDs. If any of those users later test positive for coronavirus (COVID-19), you will receive an exposure alert with advice on what to do. If you are under 18, you are advised to show this alert to a trusted adult.
- **Alert:** When you first register for the app you will be asked for the first half of your postcode. You can check the app every day to see whether where you live has become a high-risk area for coronavirus. If it is, you will also receive a notification to let you know. This will help you make daily decisions to protect yourself and those you love.
- **Check-in:** The app allows you to record when you visit a venue by “checking-in” when you arrive, using the venue’s QR code. The app records the time you spend at the venue without recording any personal information. You will receive an alert, if you have recently visited a venue where you have come into contact with coronavirus.
- **Symptoms:** If you feel unwell, you can use the app to check if your symptoms could be related to coronavirus (COVID-19). The app will give you a list of potential symptoms and you can then choose the ones that apply to you. It will then tell you if your symptoms suggest you have coronavirus.
- **Test:** If you have coronavirus symptoms, the app will take you to a website where you can book a test to see if you have coronavirus or not.
- **Isolate:** If you have been advised by the app to self-isolate, the app provides a countdown timer so that you can keep track of how long you need to self-isolate. When you reach the end of your self-isolation period, the app will send you a notification reminder with a link to the latest advice for you. If a person using the app tests positive for Covid-19 at some stage, they are given instructions about how to share the information through the system, so that those who have been in contact with them can be notified via the app.

People who do not have a smartphone will still be covered by the existing manual track and trace services, which will continue as at present.

There is one aspect of this which can affect our churches, though it is an option, not a requirement. Any public place such a shop, club, office or church can register as a ‘venue’. It will be given a QR code which can be printed out and displayed at entrances.

People attending the ‘venue’ (in our case the Church in question) can use their phone to scan the code, which will register with the app and note their attendance. Then, if it turns out that a number of others who went there have been tested positive, the app will give an alert and provide instructions. This does not replace the main operation of the app, which depends on the distance and time in which individuals are in close contact, but it provides additional information.

If any bishop would like more information regarding this, please do let me know. Through conversations with NHS officials today, it is stressed that there is no information transfer via this app to any central body (Government, NHS). It is secure and will only work effectively if as many people as possible download it and use it.

The officials were keen that respected faith leaders could offer a positive message for the use of the app if they felt they could, as there is much misinformation circulating about this and requested that any help would be appreciated.

Rev. Canon Christopher Thomas
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