

**Guidance for opening church buildings for private prayer – 12 June 2020**

1. From the 13 June (originally the 15 June) the Government has said Churches can be opened for individuals to attend and pray in private. The guidance below sets out things which need to be considered in facilitating this and we would expect every PCC to carry out a full risk assessment before opening. A template risk assessment can be found here (<https://www.churchofengland.org/media/20510>)
2. This guidance relates to private prayer. Separate guidance has been provided in relation to the conduct of funerals. (<https://www.leeds.anglican.org/sites/default/files/files/COVID%2019%20Advice%20on%20Conducting%20Funerals%20v2.pdf>) At this point no other corporate worship activity can take place. Should this change then further guidance will be provided for those activities.
3. The Diocese suggests a 5 step approach to all decisions on what activity should take place in relation to Covid-19.
  - What does the Government and Church of England advice say?
  - Who is responsible for the activity which is to take place and as such has that group/individual accepted and fully considered the risks of proceeding?
  - Can the space be effectively segregated and does making this decision have any impact on any other activity?
  - Is there any benefit to the Church or others in making allowing/enabling this activity at this time?
  - Are there any legal, insurance or liability implications with the decision made?

*Is there Government and Church of England advice to follow?*

4. The Government has made clear that it is for individual not corporate prayer gatherings and that social distancing rules remain. It has published guidance - <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship-during-the-pandemic/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship-during-the-pandemic>
5. The guidance which follows is intended to support the practical implementation of this.

*Who is responsible and have they fully accepted and considered the risks?*

6. The PCC must agree the arrangements for the opening of the church with the incumbent and together they should ensure a full risk assessment is undertaken.
7. In order to open the church for private prayer we would suggest the following steps are taken.

#### **Planning for opening**

8. If the church has been shut since the beginning of lockdown then a number of actions need to take place upon its initial opening. Guidance for this can be found here (<https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2020-05///Access%20during%20lockdown%20v1.pdf>). If this has already been done then it does not need to be repeated.
9. In preparation for members of the community attending you should consider how you are going to manage the flow of people to maintain social distancing. We would suggest a walk through to identify all the potential 'transmission risk' points. You need to develop a plan which as a minimum considers:
  - Entry and exit routes - can you establish a circulation route to minimise the risk of people coming into contact with one another. This should be clearly marked out.
  - Which doors and windows could be left open to aid ventilation
  - Removal of anything unnecessary for private prayer and could be a transmission point or is hard to clean. This would include bibles/hymnbooks/leaflets. You might also want to consider cushions/kneelers and other fabric items.
  - Location of hand sanitiser
  - Arrangement of seating to ensure people can socially distance whilst praying (and also getting to the seat if another is occupied)
  - The capacity of the building to maintain social distancing and enable the supervisor to retain control
  - Other changes to building layout and closing off of areas
  - How to advertise the opening to the community and what guidance is provided about what is permissible as well as the need to socially distance and follow the directions of supervisor
  - Whether a space for offerings/donations should be provided (and if so how contact with money would be minimised)
10. You will also need to think through who is going to be in the building to supervise. The government guidance does not make this an explicit requirement but 'strongly advises each place of worship ensures that visitors comply with the social distancing guidelines'. Supervision is a reasonable, prudent and clear way of demonstrating how a PCC will ensure social distancing takes place and that the church does not exceed agreed capacity. Practically it also means that should any one fall ill whilst in the building support can be provided, as well ensuring no one else enters until it has been cleaned.

11. Your plan should as a minimum cover:

- Who will be the supervisor for each period and how many people will be the maximum able to be in the building at once
- Where they will sit/stand to ensure they are socially distant from those coming to pray
- Whether they need access to PPE equipment if they wish/if someone is taken ill/cleaning is required
- Who they should contact should there be any incident/emergency or if someone is taken ill with covid-19 symptoms
- How you will brief them on the processes in place to ensure everyone's safety

### **Opening**

12. During opening a number of things should be put in place. As a minimum we would recommend:

- Putting up a poster/notice at the entrance to remind people about social distancing and not entering if unwell. A diocese template is available from <https://www.leeds.anglican.org/covid-19>
- Placing hand sanitiser at the entrance
- Having cleaning materials available so key surfaces can be cleaned regularly. We would recommend cleaning (by using a wipe/spray) a seat after use before being used by another person
- If providing handwashing facilities, ensuring they are clean and have soap and hand drying facilities ideally with paper towels and a bin. (We would suggest at this stage including use of toilet facilities may increase risk – if needed they should have adequate supplies and be cleaned regularly)
- Having a system for stopping entry should the pre-agreed capacity be reached and ensuring any subsequent space for waiting support social distancing.

13. Areas should be cleaned regularly during periods of the Church being open, with the Church of England guidance for cleaning being followed.

<https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/Keeping%20church%20buildings%20clean%20v1.pdf>

14. If there has been someone with a known or suspected case of COVID-19 in the Church then the Church must be closed and cleaned in line with guidance set out by Public Health England before it is reopened. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-decontamination-in-non-healthcare-settings>.

15. A risk assessment covering how you have ensured the guidance above is implemented should be completed and shared with everyone who will supervise. PCCs may also wish to consider who the 'supervisors' are and whether they are at increased risk as a result of this responsibility. Taking steps to mitigate (through ensuring socially distancing and PPE being available if needed) should be considered and included in the risk assessment. Those who are classed as clinically vulnerable should not be asked. If they volunteer then the PCC should think very carefully and discuss the risk with the individual before agreeing. This should be documented in the risk assessment.

Can the space be effectively segregated and does making the decision have any impact on any other area?

16. You will want to consider what other activity might be impacted by the use of the church for private prayer. If in doing so it would stop or make another activity more difficult then you will want to decide where the priority lies. This might be due to the church acting as a community hub or supporting another need.
17. Funerals will also be permitted in church from the 15 June. It is unlikely that private prayer will be able to continue during funerals due to a risk to social distancing. Consideration will need to be given to whether cleaning is done between funerals and being open for private prayer in order to minimise the risk of transmission. We would suggest careful thought is given to this before committing to having both funerals and private prayer taking place in the church, and you may need to decide whether there are alternatives available.
18. It may be that in some areas certain churches decide to separate the activities and hold funerals in one location and private prayer in another in order to reduce this risk of increased transmission between groups.

Is there any benefit to the Church or others in making this decision at this time and is it urgent?

19. There will be different contexts here and so local decision making will be required. It is important that the church loves the community through its actions and so you will know how best it can do this. For some this will be by opening as it can be done safely, and for other it will be by not opening in order to minimise risk. The Diocese is not suggesting any church should open if it deems it is not safe to do or if it feels its energy in supporting the community can be spent elsewhere. The key advice those opening is not to rush and take time to get plans in place.

Are there any legal, insurance or liability implications with the decision made?

20. At the moment there is no legal bar on opening churches in line with government guidance. In doing so you will want to ensure you have completed a risk assessment and can demonstrate how you are mitigating the risks. If you decide there is no need for supervision then you will need to ensure your insurer is content that the church will not be supervised whilst it is opened. Guidance from Ecclesiastical Insurance can be found here: <https://www.ecclesiastical.com/latest-news/opening-places-of-worship-after-lockdown/>
21. If changes to the building are required then you should consider whether these are permanent or temporary and whether there are any faculty considerations. The Diocese (through either the Archdeacons or the DAC team) can provide guidance here if you are unsure.