

Using church buildings for individual private prayer and funerals

Issue Date	Version	Issued by
22 nd May 2020	1	The House of Bishops Covid-19 Recovery Group
12 th June 2020	2	The House of Bishops Covid-19 Recovery Group

This document will be kept under review and updated as events develop, 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](#).

Changes from version 1

The title of this document has been changed to reflect the fact churches are now able to open to the public for individual private prayer, and to hold funerals. It was previously named *Access to church buildings during lockdown: general advice for incumbents, churchwardens and PCC members*.

This version incorporates the guidance in the document called *Access to church buildings during lockdown: advice for incumbents* and replaces that document. Considerations for clergy accessing church buildings have been incorporated into the [general template risk register](#).

Links to the government [guidance for the safe use of places of worship during the pandemic](#) have been added.

Entirely new questions are marked with an * in this version and have been grouped at the top of each section for ease of reference.

Contents

Before opening a church building.....	2
Advice for incumbents.....	5
Opening to the public	5
Bells, clocks and organs	8
Maintenance, cleaning and administrative tasks	9
Insurance and Faculty matters	11
Bats	12

Introduction

Churches and cathedrals are legally permitted to open for purposes of individual private prayer from 13th June, and under House of Bishops guidance to open for funerals from 15th June. The government has issued [guidance for the safe use of places of worship during the pandemic](#). This document should be read in the light of this government guidance.

This note provides advice which will help PCCs ensure that buildings are in appropriate condition to be used for such purposes as are allowed as they gradually move back into public use.

In addition to this document the [following advice has been issued](#) to help support parishes and cathedrals with managing church buildings in specific situations as lockdown restrictions change:

- Advice on cleaning church buildings
- Advice on access for professional contractors and construction workers
- Advice on funerals
- Template risk assessments

Before opening a church building

***What is the current status of access to cathedral and church buildings?**

From 13th June churches and cathedrals can choose to open to the public for individual private prayer, and from 15th June House of Bishops guidance provides for funerals with limited numbers to be held in line with government guidance.

It has already been announced that clergy can livestream worship from church buildings and those who cannot work from home can return to work. This means that it is now possible for various people to access church and cathedral buildings. Day to day access to the church is

managed locally, and this note will help local decision making in the evolving phases of opening church buildings.

Government guidance says that it is permissible for employees, volunteers and contractors to enter a place of worship prior to reopening for the purpose of making preparations so that the building can be used safely. The building must remain closed to the general public during this time.

Activities necessary to prepare the venue may include:

- essential maintenance
- essential repair
- cleaning
- reconfiguring the building to allow for social distancing, for example moving furniture, restricting access to parts of the building, preparing exits and entrances and installing signage and floor markings.
- other activities such as making hand sanitiser and paper towels available, ensuring a waste management system is in place, and removing communal objects such as books from use.

Everyone involved with preparing the place of worship should follow all relevant public health advice, including social distancing guidelines and hand and respiratory hygiene measures.

Church buildings still cannot open for general purposes or public worship. This is a specific restriction from the government and applies to all places of worship of any faith.

***Who makes the decision on whether to re-open a church building?**

Whether to open the church for private prayer and funerals is a decision for the minister (i.e. the incumbent or priest in charge). The minister is advised to consult the PCC before taking a decision to re-open, given the responsibilities the PCC has in relation to maintaining and insuring the building. If there is no incumbent or Priest in Charge, the decision is for the churchwardens and rural/area dean, who should consult the PCC.

Government guidance refers to 'venue managers' as the person or persons responsible for making this decision and ensuing compliance with guidelines. This could be the incumbent, churchwarden, or another member of the PCC. The key is that this person is identified clearly and is willing to take on this responsibility.

***What is the guidance on risk assessments?**

A risk assessment should be carried out before anyone accesses the building – whether for private prayer, funerals, or to carry out maintenance or building works. A [template risk assessment](#) is available.

In most cases the risk assessment it should be signed off by the incumbent and churchwardens, which can be done via email or a socially-distanced informal face-to-face meeting, and sent to the PCC for information. Government guidance advises that the risk assessment should be

carried out in consultation with unions or workers (including volunteers and contractors) if relevant, and that it may also be beneficial to include worshippers or other stakeholders (e.g. neighbouring tenants) to assist understanding among faith and local communities and improve reopening design and execution.

Places of worship are encouraged to make their risk assessments available online where possible.

***Where can we get hold of appropriate supplies for re-opening?**

Register with Parish Buying and consult their [dedicated pages on COVID-19 supplies](#).

***What are the wider security issues around re-opening?**

Although our attention is taken up with the response to Coronavirus, other security risks are associated with a building being open to the public remain. If, prior to the lockdown, you had identified any security risks relevant to your building, the measures that you put in place to manage them should remain. If you introduce new ways of working to manage public health during Coronavirus consider how they relate to your existing security measures. For example, if you introduce a queue outside your building to manage the number of people present, can it be kept away from traffic, especially hostile road vehicles?

Specific advice is available from the [Centre for the Protection of National Infrastructure](#).

What is the general advice on hygiene in buildings?

The government has published [advice on cleanliness in the workplace](#) which can usefully be applied to church and cathedral buildings. This advice is relevant whether the people are paid to be there or are volunteers. Key points of this include:

- Tell people what you are doing to reduce risk of exposure to the virus
- Provide hand sanitiser at every entrance and encourage people to use it
- If you have them, provide places within the building to wash hands for 20 seconds with soap and water
- Provide disposable tissues and encourage people to use them
- Using signage to encourage social distancing
- Regulate places of access to the building
- Frequently clean and disinfect surfaces that are touched regularly, with your standard cleaning products

For advice on cleaning church and cathedral buildings please see this [dedicated advice note](#).

If you know that someone with Coronavirus symptoms has been in the building in the past seven days, then [advice for cleaning a contaminated building](#) should be followed or the building closed for 72 hours. When known, other people who have been in the building should be contacted to advise them of the risk.

Each building is different and presents different ways of managing risks. As the easing of restrictions is likely to result in more people being present, consider how the building may lend itself to supporting social distancing. For example, even if you normally only use one door, could additional doors be used temporarily? Could a door that is normally left closed be propped open to save having to use the door handle, provided this does not compromise security or fire safety?

Advice for incumbents

There are specific considerations for clergy who are entering church buildings for purposes of private prayer and/or livestreaming within the [template risk assessment](#).

Before using your church building for individual prayer or streaming, take the chance to do a basic visual check of general maintenance items such as electrical systems, emergency lighting and other lighting, fire alarm systems, heating systems, fridges, security monitoring and access systems, water systems and toilets. Holy water stoups and the font should be emptied.

To use the building safely:

1. If services are being streamed; filming should be done either with a fixed camera or by a member of the priest's or lay minister's household.
2. You can ring a single bell and/or raise a flag if it can be done from ground level. Further advice on safely ringing bells can be found [here](#).
3. If you are using candles then take care not to light them immediately after using hand sanitiser gel, especially if this has alcohol in it.
4. If others will be using the building, then any surfaces you have touched should be cleaned. Advice on cleaning can be found [here](#).
5. Ensure you close any windows and lock the church when you leave.

Opening to the public

***Does someone from the church need to be present when the church building is open for private prayer?**

Supervision is not required under government guidance.

Government guidance advises on the sorts of safety measures that should be considered, such as queue management and hand cleansing facilities (which could be hand sanitiser or wash basins). For busy churches it may be that this will require someone to be present to ensure social distancing and hygiene measures are being respected, as well as for security. However for churches in quieter areas provision of clear signage and facilities to enable the guidelines to be met will be adequate.

The government guidance advises on the availability of [NHS Test and Trace](#) but places no requirements on places of worship to keep records of those entering.

***Who can come into church buildings for funerals and private prayer?**

Anyone is welcome in our churches so long as they are there for the current legally allowed purposes. However there are certain groups who are more vulnerable, and [government has provided guidance](#) on these including:

- People over 70
- Individuals who are extremely clinically vulnerable/shielding

They also give advice on access for children and young people.

***Should toilets be open, if available?**

This decision will depend on local circumstances, in particular the availability of cleaners and cleaning materials. It may be that a toilet could be made available for emergencies, but not generally open or advertised.

***Should a record be kept of who goes in the building and when?**

Members of the public attending for private prayer or for funerals do not have to give their names and contact details. It is good practice for the church to provide a named contact at the church, so that if a member of the public who has been in the church exhibits Coronavirus symptoms within a week, they can let the contact know.

As was the case before lockdown, access by people for the purpose of working in the building should be recorded, for health and safety purposes. This should include names and contact details and be in writing in an accessible place and should be the individual's responsibility on entering. This needs to be done with proper regard for the risk of transmission. A supply of hand sanitiser should be kept with the record near the main entrance to the church. Ask people to bring their own pen to use. A record of who is working in the building and when, will help manage risk of infection spreading if more than one person has a reason to access the building. It will also be invaluable if there is an incident at the church, as it will be clear who was the last person to have been in the building.

Can multiple people enter the building?

Yes. For private prayer by individuals or members of the same household, multiple members of the public can be admitted provided that no more are present that allows social distancing to be maintained. Depending on how busy the building is likely to be some reminders of the 2 metre spacing may well be helpful. For funerals guidance on numbers can be found in the [dedicated guidance note](#).

Access is also allowed for people undertaking work essential for the maintenance of the building. Please consult [our advice on managing access for contractors and construction projects](#).

What do I need to consider when re-entering a building that has been closed?

All buildings are different, but there are some general areas to be aware of:

- If a building has been closed completely for the lockdown period, then it is recommended to leave the doors and any easily opened windows open for at least an hour before spending any time in it. There is a risk of excessive dust and mould spores having gathered during closure, which could potentially be a health hazard. You will need to wait outside the church whilst airing it out, both for your own safety and to ensure that nobody else accesses it.
- If the electrical systems have been turned off and you did not close the church down yourself, ensure you know how to re-start these systems if they are needed.
- Water systems in the church building will have been dormant for some weeks. If you are going to use the water system or toilets, flush all toilets and run the water from all taps and other hot and cold water-outlets for at least five minutes to ensure the water system has been thoroughly flushed through to reduce the risk of Legionella and Weil's disease. If there are concerns, then it is recommended to not use water from the church building until a risk assessment of your systems has been carried out. Detailed guidance on this has been provided by the [Health and Safety Executive](#).

What precautions should I take when using the building to ensure my own safety and the safety of anyone else accessing the building?

- Do not share Bibles, prayer books etc. This includes lending libraries, parish magazines etc. Each person should bring any book or text they need for private prayer. Shared books should be put out of use for the time being. If any printed material, maybe including information about support available locally, is displayed it should be single use for the user to take away with them.
- Children's play areas should not be accessed and any play equipment inside or outside the church should be taken out of use.
- Parents or other responsible adults from their household are responsible for ensuring that children follow social distancing guidance.
- If toilets or washing facilities are available, make sure that there are disposable paper towels or an electric hand drier and that there is plenty of liquid soap. Be aware of concerns over Legionella etc.; more advice on this is available in our guidance on cleaning church buildings. Ensure these facilities are cleaned regularly (ideally every day), particularly commonly touched areas.
- If you are using candles then take care not to light them immediately after using hand sanitiser gel, especially if this has alcohol in it. Wait a full minute after applying gel, then wipe your hands with a disposable tissue. Candles and matches or lighters should be either removed from the building when you leave, or securely locked away – this is to reduce the risk of someone finding materials to start a fire if they were to break in.
- Remove holy water from stoups and do not make use of these at present.
- If you have any devotional objects that worshippers tend to touch, touching them must not take place. Signage and a cordon, or some similar access restriction, should be used to enforce this.
- Surfaces and door fixtures, light switches etc. must be frequently sanitised. Detail is available in our guidance on [cleaning church buildings](#).

- Under the requirements of the 2005 Fire Safety legislation, where fire alarm systems and/or emergency lighting is fitted, such systems should undergo a comprehensive working check before the building is allowed back into use; even for staff/volunteers to prepare the building for more public use. These checks include:
 - Emergency lighting: Full 3hr discharge test;
 - Fire Alarm systems: check every call point operates the alarm correctly.
- All fire extinguishers should be in their correct place and in working order.

Should I switch the heating back on?

If you are going back into the church for short periods only, especially during the summer months, think about whether you really need the heating back on. If you need to reintroduce heat into the building, cautious and gentle use of heating should be adopted to slowly bring air temperatures up to the required levels. Sudden increases in heat with resulting decreases in relative humidity should be avoided, to reduce the risk of damage to sensitive fabric and furnishings.

Bells, clocks and organs

***Can organists enter church buildings for organ practice and maintenance?**

Yes, from 13th June this is allowed under government guidance. Organists must get permission to enter the building from the incumbent or Church Warden, and their access must be coordinated with those responsible for cleaning. If the organist will be on their own in the building then a lone working assessment should be done. An example can be found [here](#).

Can church bells be rung?

The [Central Council of Church Bell Ringers guidance to ringers](#) says that one 'appointed person' can ring a single bell under the following circumstances:

1. Ringers should not enter the church or tower for chiming, ringing or any other purpose under any circumstances unless they are the appointed person for that church as defined by the guidance from their Diocesan Bishop.
2. Not more than one bell should be rung.
3. Care should be taken to ensure all clock hammers and any external chiming hammers are pulled off before either chiming or ringing.

The key issues which affect the safety of ringing, clock winding and the raising and lowering of flags are the physical environment of towers including access to ringing rooms, clock mechanisms or flagpoles, the space between ropes, how to maintain hand hygiene in towers and the numbers of people in a restricted space for a relatively long period of time. You must decide if the ringing of a bell and raising or lowering of flags justifies the risk of a lone person climbing the tower and/or going out onto the roof.

Before touching any bell ropes check if the bells were left up when the building was last in use. If so, they represent a serious risk to anyone using the space or touching the ropes. A prominent notice must be displayed at the ground floor entry to the tower giving a clear warning of the

danger and to give contact details should access be required. Only a skilled ringer should attempt to ring down a bell or bells.

Can I access the church for winding the clock and/or changing the time?

Yes, if a safe working practice can be established with clock winders who are familiar with the situation in the tower and have a robust arrangement in place to manage the risks of lone working.

If the clock is hand wound and has been left to run down completely, the weight lines should be checked before the clock is wound. When the weights reach the floor or other resting location, especially for the strike and chime trains, it is possible for the clock to run on a little and for the lines to then jump off the pulleys. Winding the clock without first checking the location of the line can end up with the weight hanging directly on the line rather than with the weight line running over the pulley. With very heavy weights it might not feel wrong to the winder. Caution is needed.

Can the organ humidifier and blower be serviced?

Yes. If your organ has a humidifier it will have a maintenance requirement that will differ according to its type. Some are safe with annual maintenance, and others require more frequent attention. The blower will also have a maintenance requirement that will differ according to its type. For most installations it will be an annual service. Now is a good time to contact the contractor who maintains your blower to confirm when the service is due. If you do not have a maintenance contract, please contact your organ builder for advice.

If the humidifier has been turned off for an extended period of time please seek advice from the company that maintain it over bringing it back into use.

Maintenance, cleaning and administrative tasks

What sort of general building checks should be carried out?

The following things can usefully be checked on from ground level:

- The lightning conductor
- Any lead roofs and flashings
- That heating oil is still safe and undisturbed
- That there are no leaks to mains water supplied services
- That downpipes, gutters and gullies are clear and working properly

Any damage or issues should be recorded and reported to the churchwarden or relevant member of the Chapter or cathedral staff.

Some of these tasks which impact on health & safety might involve two or more people working together with as much social distancing as is possible. Every effort should be made to minimise the risk of transmission.

Can gas safety inspections and boiler services be done?

Yes. Gas Safe has published specific guidance on this, which you can find [here](#). If you are a Landlord and an annual inspection is required on a property that you let, additional guidance is available [here](#). The government has not removed the requirement for the inspection, but has pragmatic guidance that recognises it may sometimes not be possible.

On boiler servicing, Gas Safe has published specific guidance on this, which you can find [here](#). If work is not essential, discuss the situation with the company that carries out the service. If your installation has a warranty that requires an annual service, you are advised to take advice from the company that carries out the service.

Can electrical safety inspections be done?

Yes. If any parish building requires a renewed Electrical Installation Condition Report (previously known as a Periodic Inspection Report) access to building by a suitably qualified contractor to complete it is appropriate. However, the electrician, or specialist contractor, must be able to adhere to the general social distancing guidelines that are now well publicised.

Lone working is not desirable when testing an electrical installation. If it is reasonable and safe for a lone engineer to have someone present in the building but away from where they will be working, then 90% of all testing (possibly more if it is a small church) can be achieved. The limitation can be clearly stated on the certificate, for which there is a section left for this reason. The final items can always be picked up at a later date.

Can fire safety equipment inspections be done?

Yes. If you have fire safety equipment whose inspection is due, please contact the service company to see if a service can be arranged with social distancing in place. Equipment that may require a service will include fire extinguishers, fire alarms and emergency lighting.

Can I access the tower for servicing or surveying for telecoms infrastructure and similar activities?

Yes. The liability for assessing the risks of access will usually lie with the contractor carrying out the work. See our 'Access for contractors' [advice note](#).

Should we tell people what is happening with the building?

Yes. It is good practice to advise neighbours to the church that public access is being restored for some purposes, but that the building is still closed for public worship. Include details of any online activities you have, or direct them to central resources such as [Time to Pray](#) and the weekly services broadcast live on the [Church of England's Facebook page](#).

Encourage those living near your church to keep an eye on the building. Encourage local people to report suspicious activity and give them the details – on your website and on the church noticeboard – of how to do this. If they suspect an act of theft or vandalism is taking place, they should call the police.

Social media or the telephone are the safest ways to communicate. Written communication can be sent using the postal service, which carries the lowest risk of spreading infection. Please do not post leaflets through letterboxes yourself.

Insurance and Faculty matters

***What if we need to make changes to the building to enable it to re-open?**

Advice on gaining temporary permissions for changes to your building is [available here](#).

Will my church's insurance premiums rise as a result of Covid-19?

Your church insurer will have advice, please check with them for more detailed information and over relevant conditions in your insurance policy. Your insurer will know that you are not able to continue with normal activity and occupation of the building.

Insurance premiums are unlikely to be adversely affected for existing policy periods, and upon renewal such closure, if continued, should not in itself attract any further weighting.

My insurance policy doesn't cover a closed church building. What should I do?

The answer to this varies slightly according to which insurance company your church uses:

- Ecclesiastical has confirmed that their definition of 'unused' relates to the situation where the church is to close permanently or where the future use of the building is in doubt. In this instance churches are being closed on Government advice/ instruction only. Further guidance is [available here](#).
- Trinitas Church Insurance has extended to 90 days the period before the special provisions related to buildings being unused are applied. This will be reviewed again if closure instructions continue into June.
- Congregational has waived the special obligations placed upon PCCs in relation to closure for 12 weeks, until 12 June 2020. This will be reviewed again if closure instructions continue. Further detail is [available here](#).

Who do I contact if the DAC officers are furloughed?

Your Archdeacon is the first person to consult for matters that would have been directed to the DAC Secretary or other church buildings officers. They will know what provision is in place for managing statutory DAC functions and how to access them.

What should we do about posting public notices?

Displaying public notices, for example for applications under Faculty, is a requirement of primary legislation. Your diocesan Chancellor can give a dispensation from posting a notice if this is necessary and guidance has been sent to each Chancellor about this. Guidance for Diocesan

Chancellors has been circulated by the Dean of the Arches, the senior judge overseeing the Faculty Jurisdiction.

For situations where the need to post notices in public view (i.e. to a gate or notice board) remains, it is up to each parish who does this and how, but it should be done in the safest way possible, ideally by someone living nearby, observing advice on social distancing and careful handwashing, etc. Although continuing to post physical notices of any application will ensure that you are adhering to the letter of the law, it is equally important to abide by the spirit of it, which means that members of the public and statutory consultees should have the opportunity to engage fully with every application made under Faculty through a transparent and straightforward consultation process. The current situation will greatly reduce the opportunities for members of your congregation, local residents and visitors to see a public notice. If you are preparing to apply for permission, particularly for a large or complex project, please ensure that the plans and supporting documents are available on your website if you have one, and that responses to the consultation are invited through social media and relevant email lists, to ensure that the process remains fully open.

The need to carry out consultation in different ways is an opportunity to engage creatively and widely using electronic media and may help foster support for the church and awareness of what it is doing at this time. If your public notice is for a faculty petition and was started on the online faculty system on or after 1 April 2020 the documents required for the public notice will all be made available online when the public notice is issued. This will provide a straightforward way of engaging using electronic media.

Bats

If your church is known to have bats, then hopefully our guidance on covering surfaces will have been taken. Ideally a church building with bats that affect worship areas will not be open to anyone until it has had a thorough clean, which will have to wait until multiple people are able to safely enter, and appropriate PPE has been sourced. Advice on cleaning up bat droppings is published by [the Bats in Churches project](#).

However, if you do wish to offer prayer from a building affected by bats then avoid spending prolonged amounts of time in areas with high concentrations of droppings. If you find a dead or grounded bat, please do not pick it up. The [National Bat Helpline](#) can provide advice on 0345 1300 228. If you're involved in the Bats in Churches project or are planning bat mitigation surveys or works, you can find how this has been affected [here](#).

The churchyard

Are we allowed to lead worship outdoors, if people maintain 2m distance?

Government advice does not allow for any public worship, including in enclosed outdoor spaces such as a churchyard. However, you can encourage people to worship individually outdoors. 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 from the government on outdoor worship is expected soon.

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. In all circumstances, as set out by the Government, it is absolutely crucial that people from different households must stay at least two metres apart at all times.

If people in the churchyard are not observing social distancing it is not expected that incumbents, Churchwardens or PCC members take any role in 'policing' use of churchyards. The [government's guidance on access to green spaces](#) makes this clear.

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. It is better that anyone undertaking works in the churchyard should work alone (unless they are with someone from the same household). 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. It specifically includes visiting a grave as an appropriate activity.

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.

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.

END