

Coronavirus: Guidance on church worship

Version (most recent first)	Changes
29 November 2021	Information box added at start of the document.
1 October 2021	Revision of source documents. Changes to face coverings rules in Wales so that they are not required in areas serving food or drink, nor for weddings.
12 August 2021	Removal of distinct section for Wales now that Wales has moved to Alert Level 0. Revision to guidance in Section 2 to accommodate the slight differences that remain between England and Wales. Clarification regarding self-isolation in the light of exceptions for those double vaccinated or under-18. Addition in Section 1 of link to interactive map.
5 August 2021	Update in Section 1 to the list of source documents. Changes to Section 3 regarding the numbers attending wedding receptions and funeral wakes in Wales, and regarding changes to self-isolation rules.
22 July 2021	Updated list in Section 1 of the source documents. Addition in Section 2 of extra factors to consider when planning worship in England, including further remarks on singing.
15 July 2021	Document re-written to reflect removal of legal requirement in England from 19 July and the completion of the move to Alert level 1 in Wales from 17 July.

On 27 November 2021, the Prime Minister announced new precautionary measures in light of the emergence of the Omicron variant of Covid-19 in the UK. These focus on rules around international travel, and on the compulsory wearing of face coverings from Tuesday 30 November in shops and on public transport for those not exempt.

Updated Government [guidance on face coverings](#) does not make it mandatory to wear face coverings in churches in England, though we note the ongoing recommendation that they are worn in enclosed and crowded spaces. **Wearing face coverings remains mandatory in churches in Wales**, as it has been throughout 2021.

We continue to suggest that it is both sensible and appropriate for churches to take some measures to limit the spread of Covid-19 and we trust churches are already engaged in considering how to make Christmas events accessible and safe for all.

We will monitor the Government guidance and statements in the coming weeks and update our guidance if necessary.

Contents

1. [Sources](#)
2. [Guidance](#)

1. Sources

This guidance is based on a number of Government guidance documents:

UK Government

[Coronavirus: how to stay safe and help prevent the spread](#)

[COVID-19 Response: Autumn and Winter Plan 2021](#)

[COVID-19 Guidance for the safe use of places of worship](#)

[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): Wedding and civil partnership ceremonies, receptions and celebrations](#)

[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): guidance for funerals and commemorative events during the coronavirus pandemic](#)

[Working safely during coronavirus \(COVID-19\) – events and attractions](#)

[Working safely during coronavirus \(Covid 19\) – restaurants, pubs, bars, nightclubs and takeaway services](#)

[Interactive map](#)

Welsh Government

[Alert level 0: guidance for the public](#)

[Alert level 0: frequently asked questions](#)

[Alert level 0: guidance for employers, businesses and organisations](#)

[Places of worship and funerals: potential reasonable measure action card](#)

[Safe use of multi-purpose community centres \(COVID-19\)](#)

[Face coverings: guidance for public](#)

[Interactive map](#)

You may also find the following BUGB guidance helpful:

[Coronavirus: Children's, youth and families' ministry](#)

[Coronavirus: Guidance on re-opening Baptist church buildings](#)

[Coronavirus: Risk assessment prior to re-opening Baptist church buildings](#)

Please note that the Governments' guidance is still often updated. If you feel there are discrepancies between their guidance and ours, please email ministries@baptist.org.uk and we will do our best to respond.

2. Guidance

From 19 July, the UK Government moved to step 4 of their Covid-19 recovery roadmap. From 7 August, the Welsh Government moved to Alert Level 0. In both cases the vast majority of the previous legal requirements have been removed. Any number of people may meet for any purpose both indoors and outdoors in either nation.

The notable exception to this lifting of legal requirements is that in Wales face coverings are still mandatory in almost all public indoor places. This includes churches, though there are two exceptions: Face coverings are not required in areas where food and drink are consumed, nor for weddings. However, despite the permitted exception for weddings, you may still require wedding attendees to wear face coverings if your risk assessment leads you to believe this is wise.

Despite the lifting of legal restrictions, both Governments recommend continuing caution. Good ventilation, diligence in hygiene, wearing a face covering in enclosed and crowded spaces whether or not it is mandatory, and minimising the number, proximity and duration of social contacts with those we do not live with, are all noted as beneficial behaviours.

In the light of this, we recommend that it is both sensible and appropriate for churches to continue to take some measures to limit the spread of Covid-19. Churches have a responsibility to protect their staff, congregations, communities, and other users of their buildings. However, it is now down to each church to determine for itself what these measures should be.

Above all, churches have a legal duty to manage risks to those who attend their buildings or organised events. This is best done by ongoing review of risk assessments. This is good health and safety practice in any case, but for the time being, you should pay particular attention to the risks associated with Covid-19. Please see Section 1 above for a link to a template for risk assessment.

As you undertake a risk assessment, you might consider the following general questions:

- What measures will continue to demonstrate care towards and love for your community?
- Are there measures you can easily take that will protect people, but which incur little inconvenience?
- How can you consult and communicate well with a wide range of those affected by your decisions, recognising that there will be different views on what is an acceptable risk?
- Is anyone likely to be especially disadvantaged or put at risk by the arrangements you make?
- Is what you are proposing sustainable or does it place an excessive burden on a few people?

More specifically, you can consider whether it will be beneficial to:

- Remind all worshippers that anyone with Covid-19 symptoms or who is self-isolating should not attend. This includes anyone who receives a positive test, those who been told to do so by NHS Test and Trace, and those advised to do so by the NHS Covid app. There are two exceptions:

- a) In Wales from 7 August and in England from 16 August, those who are fully vaccinated or under-18 do not have to self-isolate after close contact with someone who has tested positive unless they themselves test positive.
 - b) In both England and Wales, even those who are self-isolating because they have tested positive may attend the funeral of a close family member (England) or a close family member or friend (Wales), as long as they are showing no symptoms. Please note however that both Governments make this allowance on compassionate grounds and they recommend remote attendance where possible. This exception does not apply to funeral wakes.
- Maintain a careful hygiene routine for your buildings, especially for those areas commonly touched such as handles and switches.
 - Ask those entering the building to wash or sanitise their hands.
 - Seat people from different households apart if your building has space for this.
 - Avoid the use of shared objects such as hymnbooks or offering plates.
 - Ventilate the building where possible.
 - Move activities outside whenever possible.
 - Chlorinate baptistry water if multiple baptisms are taking place and minimise the time when the candidates are in proximity to whoever is baptising them.
 - Use stewards to serve communion rather than passing round a common loaf or cup.
 - Keep services shorter rather than longer.
 - Ask leaders, attenders and welcomers to avoid or minimise physical contact such as handshakes, hugs, laying on of hands.
 - Ask those likely to interact with many attenders, such as ministers and welcomers, to utilise the free self-testing that is available before weekly gatherings.
 - Take extra care for weddings, funerals and other events that gather people from a wider area.
 - Expect attenders to use face coverings, either all the time or when moving around the building or when singing. Please note that:
 - a) In Wales face coverings remain mandatory in churches in any case. There are two exceptions: face coverings are not required in areas where food and drink are consumed, nor for weddings. However, despite the permitted exception for weddings, you may still require wedding attendees to wear face coverings if your risk assessment leads you to believe this is wise. We assume also that exceptions remain for those leading, singing or speaking from the front during any service.
 - b) At the Christian Faith Leaders' Roundtable with Government on 19 July, the UK Government said it is wise to expect worshippers to wear face coverings during singing, though this advice does not appear in any of their guidance documents. It is in fact not the singing itself that raises the risk of aerosol transmission, but the

projection of the voice at loud volumes, whether in singing, speaking, or shouting. Rather than protecting the wearer, they do more to protect others from any infection the wearer may unwittingly otherwise transmit.

- Ask for congregational singing to be at low volume levels. You might also consider reducing the number of songs used, as an additional precaution.
- Encourage those who stay after the service for conversation and refreshments to engage with just a few people rather than everyone.
- Serve refreshments from behind a counter rather than offering a self-service area. In Wales, those who remove face coverings to eat and drink indoors should be seated first.
- Record who is present for Test and Trace purposes and nominate a coordinator to receive news of anyone who tests positive and to tell those who have been in close contact with them.
- Apply some of these measures, as appropriate, to small groups in people's homes.
- Communicate all measures clearly to the congregation, thinking especially of those who might be visiting.

While infection rates remain high, we suggest all the above measures are worth serious consideration.

However, each church will have to determine its own approach and this will vary from setting to setting according to at least these factors:

1. The size and ventilation of your buildings.
2. The number of people who gather for worship.
3. The risk profile of your congregation (with respect to age, vulnerability, vaccination status and so on.)
4. Your desired style of worship – for example how much interaction takes place between worshippers.
5. How important each aspect of worship is to you – for example if singing without face coverings is a priority, this might mean you have to plan for a greater distance between those who attend.
6. Infection rates in your area. The interactive map (please see link in Section 1) shows those areas where Covid-19 cases are highest. You may wish to take extra precautions if rates are particularly high in your area, such as meeting outside where possible and maintaining 2m social distancing.

Clearly, some of these factors intersect. For example, a church with a small congregation in a large building may consider the use of face coverings during worship to be unnecessary. A church with more people in closer proximity may conclude differently.

It may be that your church has not met at all in-person since the start of lockdown. You may be approaching a risk assessment and wondering about how to conduct worship safely for the first

time. In this instance, we encourage you to ask neighbouring churches or your regional association team for support and suggestions about best practice.

We also recommend you consider a gradual, phased re-engagement with your usual worship pattern, so that those who are nervous about returning may over a period of time grow in confidence about attending.

In writing this guidance we are not suggesting that churches *ought* to meet. The outcome of your risk assessment might suggest to you that it would be wise not to meet in person at all for a further time.

When you complete your risk assessment, you should agree a date when it will be reviewed. The rapidly changing nature of the situation and of Government guidance may mean the intervals between reviews should be short for the time being.

We encourage you to be creative in your planning. For example, to account for differing levels of confidence in the congregation, some churches intend to offer an area within their church sanctuary for those that wish to continue with social distancing. Or, to account for the greater burden placed on the technical team by live-streaming services in the building, some churches intend to alternate between online and in-person Sunday worship.

We are acutely aware that the process for making these decisions has the potential to be divisive. In some respects it was easier when rules were more restrictive but at least definite. How we make decisions may prove to be as important to churches as the decisions themselves. We appeal to everyone involved to be kind to each other, to listen well, to appreciate the pressure leaders are under, and to compromise accordingly. This is a very vulnerable time for churches and we ask you to recall the exhortation in Ephesians 4 to “be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”

Ministries Team

This version: 29 November 2021

This is one of a series of Guidelines that are offered as a resource for Baptist ministers and churches. They have been prepared by the Baptist Union of Great Britain and are, of necessity, intended only to give very general advice in relation to the topics covered. These guidelines should not be relied upon as a substitute for obtaining specific and more detailed advice in relation to a particular matter. The staff at the Baptist Union of Great Britain at Baptist House will be very pleased to answer your queries and help in any way possible.

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