

SUMMARY RE: COVID19 GUIDANCE FOR THE SAFE USE OF PLACES OF WORSHIP AND SPECIAL RELIGIOUS SERVICES AND GATHERINGS

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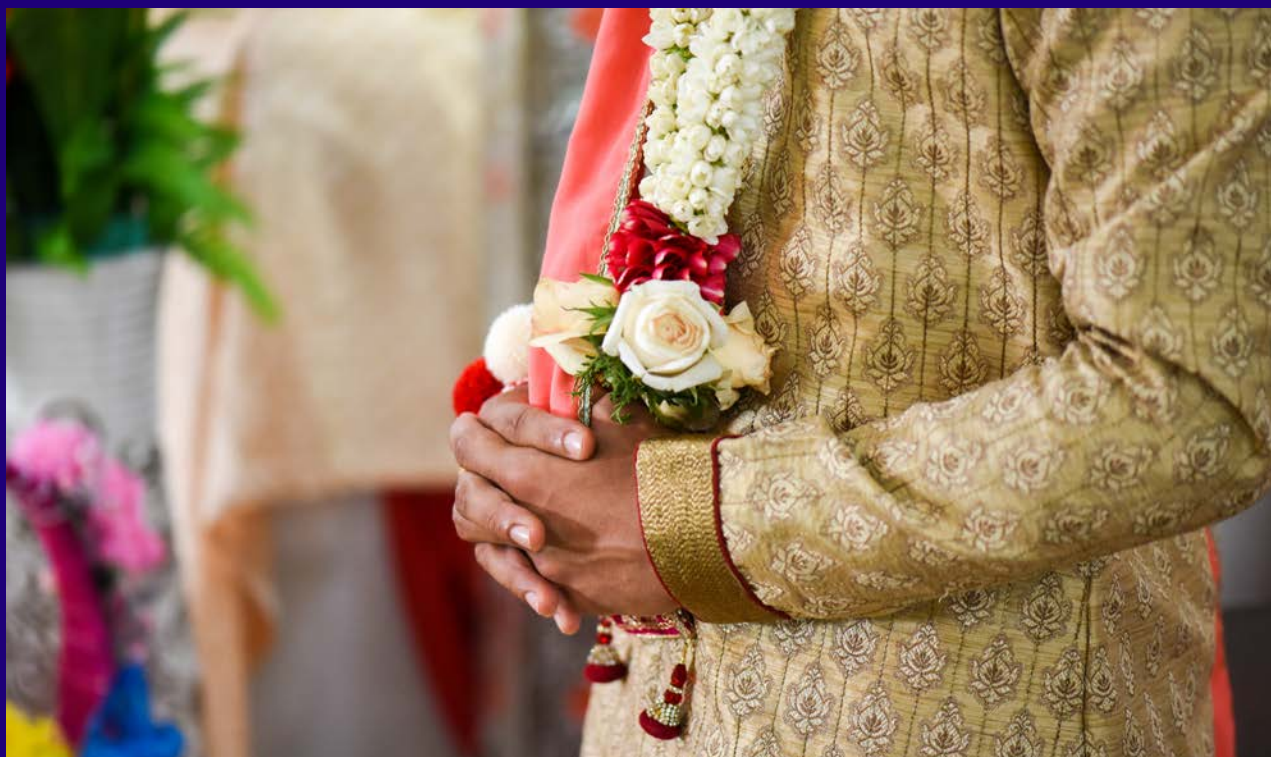
INTRODUCTION

The UK is experiencing a public health emergency as a result of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The transmission of COVID-19 occurs mainly through respiratory droplets generated by coughing and sneezing, and through contact with contaminated surfaces.

Places of worship play an important role in providing spiritual leadership for many individuals, and in bringing communities and generations together. However, their communal nature also makes them places that are particularly vulnerable to the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19).

The government continues to work with its Places of Worship Taskforce and faith leaders to review and amend this guidance, as necessary, in line with the changing situation and to enable the safe opening of places of worship for as broad a range of activities as possible when it is safe to do so.

GUIDANCE AS OF THE 30 MARCH 2021



Weddings

(1) From 29 March - Weddings and civil partnership ceremonies can take place for up to **6 people only**.

Receptions are not permitted. However, small gatherings can take place in line with social contact limits. Therefore, they may take place outdoors in a group of six, or two households (including support bubbles, if eligible to form one).

(2) No earlier than 12 April - Weddings and civil partnership ceremonies are permitted for up to **15 people** in COVID-19 Secure venues that are permitted to open or where a broader exemption applies.

Receptions can take place with up to 15 people in the form of a sit down meal and in any COVID-19 Secure outdoor venue that is permitted to open. Such receptions must not take place in people's private gardens or public outdoor spaces.

(3) No earlier than 17 May - Weddings and civil partnership ceremonies are permitted for up to 30 people in COVID-19 Secure venues that are permitted to open.

Receptions can also proceed with up to 30 people in a COVID Secure indoor venue, or outdoors.

(4) No earlier than 21 June - The government aims to remove all limits on weddings, civil partnership ceremonies and receptions.

Under current national lockdown restrictions, it is advised that the ceremonies and services should be concluded in the shortest reasonable time and be limited to those elements to ensure the marriage or civil partnership is valid in law.

Religious communities should therefore adapt traditional religious aspects, especially where celebrations would otherwise have taken place over a number of hours, or even days, to ensure the safety of those present and minimal spread of infection.

Where the exchanging of rings is required or desired, hands should be washed before and after. The rings should be handled by as few people as possible.

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Funerals

(1) **From 29 March** - Funerals remain limited to 30 people - wakes are limited to 6 people

(2) **No earlier than 12 April** - Funerals remain limited to 30 people – Wakes are limited to 15 people

(3) **No earlier than 17 May** - Up to 6 people, or two households, can gather indoors - most significant life cycle events can resume, limited to no more than 30 people.

This will include events such as wakes, private baptisms, naming ceremonies and stone setting ceremonies

(4) **No earlier than 21 June** - The government aims to remove all limits on life cycle events and other gatherings.

Commemorative events to celebrate the life of a person who has died

These are events which commemorate or mark the deceased's passing. Examples include the scattering of ashes and stone setting ceremonies. Such events must have no more than 6 people in attendance. Anyone working is not included as part of the 6 person limit. These limits on attendance do not typically apply to communal worship services, where prayers for the deceased may be said.

Communal worship, including prayers, devotions or meditations led by a Minister of Religion or lay person

Limits for communal worship should be decided on the basis of the capacity of the place of worship **following an assessment of risk.**

Individual prayer

A person, or single household, which may include an existing support bubble where eligible, entering the venue to pray on their own.

The number of individuals or households permitted in a place of worship at any one time will be dependent on the size of the building and ability to socially distance therein.

Essential voluntary and public services

Under the national lockdown, a place of worship that is being used to provide food to the homeless or vulnerable can continue. Activities that are 'reasonably necessary' for the provision of voluntary or charitable services are permitted.

A place of worship may be used for essential voluntary and public services such as the provision of food banks or other support for the homeless or vulnerable people, blood donation sessions, or support in an emergency.

Support groups

Support groups that have to be delivered in person can continue with up to 15 participants where formally organised to provide mutual aid, therapy or any other form of support. They must not take place in a private home. Where a group includes someone covered by an exception (for example, someone who is working or volunteering), they are not generally counted as part of the gatherings limit.

Examples include support to:

- (a) victims of crime (including domestic abuse);
- (b) those with, or recovering from, addictions (including alcohol, narcotics or other substance addictions) or addictive patterns of behaviour;
- (c) new parents;
- (d) those with, or caring for persons with, any long-term illness or terminal condition or who are vulnerable
- (e) those facing issues related to their sexuality or identity including those living as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender;
- (f) those who have suffered bereavement; and
- (g) vulnerable young people, including to enable them to meet youth workers

The limit of 15 does not include children under 5 who are accompanying a parent or guardian. Anyone working would also not be included.

Childcare and Education

These activities are permitted to continue indoors where the provision is for:

Vulnerable children and young people; and
all other children, where the provision is one of the following:

- (1) reasonably necessary to enable their parents and carers to work, search for work, undertake education or training, or attend a medical appointment or address a medical need, or attend a support group;
- (2) being used by electively home educating parents as part of their arrangements for their child to receive a suitable full-time education;
- (3) being used as part of their efforts to obtain a regulated qualification, meet the entry requirements for an education institution, or to undertake exams and assessments; and
- (4) where the place of worship is used as part of a school.

-Numbers should be limited to the number of people who can safely socially distance in the venue in line with COVID-19 Secure guidance.

-Outdoor provision for all children is also permitted from 29 March, without restrictions on the purpose for which they may attend.

Protecting the vulnerable

There should be a particular focus on protecting people who are clinically vulnerable and more likely to develop severe illness, including people who are aged 70 or older, regardless of medical conditions.

Individuals who fall within this group are advised to keep social contacts low and maintain social distancing from those they do not live with.

Food

Where food or drink ('consumables') are essential to the act of worship, they can be used, however the sharing of food should be avoided, as should the use of communal vessels.

If it is necessary to handle consumables as a part of a faith practice, those giving and receiving food items should wash their hands thoroughly before and after consumption, or wear gloves.

No food or drink should be consumed as a part of the marriage or civil partnership ceremony unless required for the purposes of solemnisation. However, food and drink can be consumed outside whilst abiding by the rule of six or two households.

Any part of the premises ordinarily used for the consumption of food or drink indoors must remain closed. This means, for example, that a wedding ceremony can take place in the function room of a hotel (if licensed to do so), but not the restaurant. Food and drink should not be consumed unless this is necessary for the purposes of a religious ceremony.

Where it is necessary, **food and drink must not be provided by the venue. However, it appears that you can provide it yourself.**

Furthermore, the guidance does not state the amount of food that is permissible. Therefore, it would automatically fall down to what is considered 'just and reasonable in all of the circumstances'.



Singing, chanting and the use of musical instruments

COVID-19 spreads from person to person through small droplets, aerosols and through direct contact. Singing, playing some musical instruments, shouting and physical activity increases the risk of transmission through small droplets and aerosols. Safeguards should be put in place to minimise opportunities for the virus to spread. However, it does not appear that this is a legal requirement.

From 29 March 2021

Indoors - a single small group of singers will be allowed to perform, or rehearse for performance, only where essential to an act of communal worship. This should be limited to as few singers as possible, with social distancing being maintained at all times. Communal singing should not take place.

Outdoors - in the grounds or the outside space of a place of worship: When communal worship takes place outdoors, the congregation may join in with singing, and should follow the principles set out in the performing arts guidance. This includes ensuring that congregation members follow social distancing rules. Social contact limits apply, meaning that households, support bubbles or groups of 2 must not mingle. Communal singing in other public open spaces should not take place.

Where singing or chanting is essential to the solemnisation of a marriage or civil partnership ceremony, this should be limited to **one person wherever possible**.

Exceptionally, where it is essential to the solemnisation, **up to three individuals should be permitted to do so**.

Communal singing should not take place. This applies even if social distancing is being observed or face coverings are being worn.

Shouting and/or playing of instruments that are blown into should also be avoided.

Where singing plays a big part in the solemnisation of a marriage or civil partnership ceremony, and recordings are available, we suggest you use these as an alternative to live singing.

Any performances should follow the performing arts guidance:

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



Social Distancing

The actual number of people able to attend a wedding or civil partnership ceremony will depend on how many people can be safely accommodated within the venue with social distancing, and where the venue manager has carried out a risk assessment and taken all reasonable measures to limit the risk of transmission of COVID-19.

All individuals involved in the ceremony (including attendees, guests and officiants) should observe social distancing from those they do not live with.

Wherever possible, adhere to social distancing of at least 2 metres, or 1 metre with risk mitigation (only where 2 metres is not viable), between households. For frequently used venues, mark areas using floor tape or paint to help people maintain social distance.

Venue managers should consider and set out the mitigations that will be introduced in the risk assessment. These could include, for instance, avoiding any face-to-face seating by changing layouts, reducing the number of people in enclosed spaces, improving ventilation, using protective screens and face coverings, and closing non-essential social spaces, as outlined throughout this guidance.

In England, face coverings are currently required by law to be worn in many indoor settings, including places of worship.

Cleaning

All surfaces, especially those most frequently touched such as door handles and rails, should be regularly cleaned using standard cleaning products. Please see:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-decontamination-in-non-healthcare-settings/covid-19-decontamination-in-non-healthcare-settings>



Enforcement

The police have the powers to enforce the wearing of face coverings, including to issue fines (fixed penalty notices) of £200, doubling for further breaches up to a maximum of £6,400.

There are **valid exemptions** for some individuals and groups to not wear a face covering in these settings. In particular, **those who are leading services or events in a place of worship**. Those exemptions will also cover **the couple being married or joined in a partnership and those officiating at the wedding**. This exemption does not apply to those observing the wedding, who should wear face coverings consistent with the requirements for any other public space.'

Where the enforcing authority, such as the HSE or your local authority, identifies employers or venues who are not taking action to comply with the relevant public health legislation and guidance to control public health risks, they are empowered to take a range of actions to improve control of venue risks. Enforcement officers will take relevant guidance into account.

Failure to complete a risk assessment which takes account of COVID-19, or completing a risk assessment but failing to put in place sufficient measures to manage the risk of COVID-19, could constitute a breach of existing health and safety legislation:

<https://www.hse.gov.uk/legislation/hswa.htm>

The actions the enforcing authority can take include the provision of specific advice to venues to support them to achieve the required standard, through to **issuing enforcement notices** to help secure improvements. Serious breaches and failure to comply with enforcement notices can constitute a **criminal offence**, with **serious fines** and even **imprisonment for up to 2 years**. There is also a wider system of enforcement, which includes specific obligations and conditions for licensed premises.

Venue managers are expected to respond to any advice or notices issued by enforcing authorities rapidly and are required to do so within any timescales imposed by the enforcing authorities. The vast majority of venues and venue managers are responsible and will join with the UK's fight against COVID-19 by working with the government and their sector bodies to protect their workers and the public. However, **regulators are carrying out compliance checks nationwide to ensure that employers and venues are taking the necessary steps**.