

Dear Clergy, Lay Readers, Vestry Secretaries and Diocesan Secretaries

In Donald Walker's absence on annual leave at present, this email provides a brief update from the Advisory Group in the light of the First Minister's announcement on Tuesday, 13 July 2021.

The First Minister confirmed that, as expected, with effect from Monday 19 July, all areas of Scotland not already in level 0 will move to that level.

The key aspects of the changes from next week of relevance to churches are:

- The physical distancing requirement for indoor public places (including churches) is reduced from 2 m to 1 m. From Monday, therefore, churches may alter their current practice to reflect that but must ensure a minimum of 1 m distancing between households.
- That will entail recalculation by churches of their capacity, including the maximum Physical Distancing Based Capacity figure which needs to be publicly displayed.
- Congregational singing, subject to the wearing of face masks, is permitted in level 0. There is no change to the existing position requiring the wearing of face coverings in places of worship.
- The limit on those attending weddings and funerals is increased to 200.
- It is expected that the Government's Places of Worship Guidance will be revised by 19 July to reflect the above changes.
- The limits on household gatherings are as follows: in level 0, up to 8 people from 4 households can meet indoors at home without physical distancing; up to 10 people from 4 households can meet indoors in a public place, subject to 1m distancing, and up to 15 people from 15 households can meet outdoors. Physical distancing needs to be maintained between groups of 15 households, but within each 15 household group the requirement to physically distance is removed altogether. Children under 12 are excluded from those numbers and, from 19 July will no longer count in the calculation of the number of households either.
- Organised outdoor gatherings will remain subject to Government guidance for events.
- The Government had previously indicated that a gradual return to office working would be possible in level 0. However, the Government is now postponing that until Scotland moves beyond level 0.
- The current expectation remains that Scotland will be able to move beyond level 0 from 9 August. However that is dependent on the Government's assessment of data available nearer the time and a further Government update will be provided in the week before 9 August. The Advisory Group will meet again that week and will issue such revised guidance as may be necessary in the light of the First Minister's announcement then.

Whilst the Government is implementing its programme for relaxing restrictions, it is doing so cautiously and is keen to protect the position of those who remain vulnerable. The Advisory Group itself endorses that approach and encourages clergy and congregations similarly to bear in mind that, whilst an easing of restrictions will be welcomed by some, there will be those who are concerned at the increased level of exposure. In that regard the Advisory Group reminds the Church of the exhortations contained in the Bishops' Pastoral Guidance:

*Please continue to be careful in all you do as you continue to resume the pastoral activities in the life of our churches and take advantage of the easing of restriction on our shared pastoral life. In Province, Diocese and Charges: please do all you can to protect all those in your care. We must support and encourage those who wish to move quickly as restrictions ease. We must support and care for those who remain anxious and wish to be even more careful*

*than the Government guidance might allow. The pandemic has changed life for more than a year now: it will take a long time for life to return to a way of being together that is life-giving and in which all can be comfortable.*

*Please take to heart the key message to be kind to yourselves and each other in the hard ongoing work to support and help our church life to grow and develop as, God-willing, the pandemic eases.*

The Advisory Group has revised its FAQs to take account of the reduced physical distancing requirement and also to reiterate the pastoral guidance quoted above. The new edition is available at: <https://www.scotland.anglican.org/wp-content/uploads/Frequently-Asked-Questions-Version-9-July-2021-14.07.21.pdf>

Finally, the Group has heard evidence of poor take-up of the opportunity offered by drop-in vaccination centres. Churches are in a good position to be able to remind those congregational members who have not yet been vaccinated (or who have only received one dose) of the desirability of vaccination and the availability of the drop-in centres. A list of vaccination centres, from which you can identify such centres in your locality, is available at: <https://www.nhsinform.scot/covid-19-vaccine/invitations-and-appointments/vaccine-drop-in-clinics>

Best wishes

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