

Dear Clergy, Lay Readers, Vestry Secretaries and Diocesan Secretaries

The Advisory Group has met again this week following the First Minister's announcement to Parliament on Wednesday.

The Scottish Government has updated its guidance for Places of Worship to reflect the fact that Scotland is now "beyond level 0". It can be accessed at:

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-phase-3-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship/>

This new Government guidance is much reduced compared to earlier versions and reflects the fact that many of the legal restrictions which applied in earlier stages of the pandemic have now been withdrawn. It also provides links to a number of other sets of guidance on specific topics which may be helpful for congregations.

The Advisory Group acknowledges that being "beyond level 0" is a more difficult landscape to navigate than the previous periods when there was a more comprehensive framework of applicable restrictions. Despite the less-regulated environment in which we now find ourselves, the Advisory Group wishes to urge caution and also that churches should "go gently" in this period of greater freedom. Infection case numbers have increased substantially in the last couple of weeks and the pandemic is far from over. The First Minister's announcement on 1 September encouraged everyone to play their part in minimising the risk of infection. The Group gives similar encouragement and emphasises the need at this time for those attending church to act responsibly not only for their own benefit but also to be sensitive and care for one another. Those who wish to take maximum advantage of the relaxation of restrictions should bear in mind that such an approach may be a source of anxiety for others. This remains a time when we must all be mindful of one another – in so doing we "love our neighbour".

Going forward, the Advisory Group intends that instead of producing its own lengthy guidance derived from the Government's Places of Worship Guidance, it will direct congregations to that Government Guidance and will address other specific issues through continued revision of the FAQs and Pastoral Guidance available on the provincial website. It is also, for the time being, keeping available on the provincial website its main guidance document (last updated at the end of May 2021) which congregations will be able to use for reference if, within their own context, they feel it appropriate to maintain some of the practices which were recommended during previous periods of lockdown.

Face coverings continue to be a legal requirement in churches and, at the risk of repetition, a reminder that in the last email update, the Advisory Group indicated as follows:

- Regulations state that face coverings do not need to be worn by those leading an act of worship provided there is either a partition between that person and other people, or a distance of at least 1m is maintained between that person and others. Similarly, those who are "performing" need not wear a face mask (provided there is a partition between each performer and others, or a distance of at least 1m is maintained between the performer and others). Church choirs and worship bands can, therefore, sing without face coverings, provided their members maintain at least 1m distance from each other and everyone else. Congregational members are not "performers" and so must continue to wear face coverings whether singing or not.

- Despite the relaxation of restrictions, churches should continue to mitigate risks by maintaining good hygiene, practising respiratory hygiene, ensuring good ventilation and continuing to engage with Test and Protect. Churches will wish to assess the level of risk in their own particular context and we recognise that some will wish to continue with at least some of the previous restrictions, such as physical distancing. That is likely to include an assessment of pastoral issues – and the likely perception of the level of risk on the part of the congregation. So, if it is thought that members of the congregation perceive that the level of risk is such that they feel uncomfortable, it would be appropriate to consider maintaining restrictions for a longer period.

Kind regards

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