



26 June 2020

Dear Friends,

## **MEETING WITH FAITHS LEADERS TO DISCUSS THE REOPENING OF PLACES OF WORSHIP FOR SERVICES**

Thank you for joining the call on 24 June to discuss the safe reopening of places of worship for services. We appreciate you taking the time to share your thoughts on this subject and welcomed the opportunity to discuss these. Places of worship play an important role in providing spiritual leadership for many individuals, and in bringing communities together. We recognise the challenges you have faced in these exceptional times and hope that the meeting was helpful in allowing you to begin planning for the safe return of your congregations.

As promised, we are writing to share with you the advice provided by the Chief Medical Officer, Dr Michael McBride and the Chief Scientific Advisor, Professor Ian Young on the call. Their recommendations are not legal requirements but intended to assist places of worship to prepare to open in a manner that is safe and in line with social distancing guidelines so that all individuals attending the place of worship, including those who work there, have minimal risk of exposure to Covid-19.

Weddings, baptisms and funerals are not covered by the advice below. The Executive will consider this further early next week.

Although the rate of Covid-19 transmission in the local community is currently low, the risk profile for indoor activities is higher than outdoor. The following steps can be taken to minimise the risks and we encourage you to follow them closely. They are not exhaustive and attention should be paid to the specific circumstances of your place of worship including its size and range of activities, how it is organised, operated and managed:

## **Symptomatic Cases**

- Anyone showing symptoms of Covid-19 must not attend their place of worship under any circumstances due to the risk that they pose to others; they must self-isolate at home immediately with other members of their household.
- Anyone who has been advised to self-isolate via the contact tracing service must not attend their place of worship for the full recommended period of self-isolation (regardless of whether or not they have symptoms)

## **Social Distancing**

- The current level of social distancing recommended by the Executive remains 2 metres where possible. Worshippers should therefore be encouraged to stay at least 2 metres or more apart. If social distancing is not possible at 2 metres, worshippers should be maintain a distance of no less than 1 metre unless part of the same household group. Families who live together in one household can stay and pray together without social distancing.
- There is no regulatory limit on the number of worshipers allowed to attend a service, the maximum capacity of a building that can be utilised for a gathering or on the number of services that can be held. It is at the discretion of each organisation to determine a safe and manageable capacity for their premises in line with social distancing guidelines. Organisations are encouraged to maximise the distance between individuals and use as much of the space available to them as possible, e.g. holding multiple services in different parts of the building; flexible use of overflow areas where appropriate.
- Where only individual worship is permitted in certain parts of the building or complex, families and other worshippers can gather or wait outside so long as social distancing between individuals/households is maintained.

## **Face coverings**

- Face coverings may help prevent the transmission of Covid-19 to others. The use of face coverings are strongly recommended in indoor settings and we recommend that this is adopted in places of worship as a good principle.

## Contact Tracing

- There is no regulatory requirement for organisations to keep detailed records of attendance for contact tracing purposes. However these details would be helpful in assisting contact tracing in the event of an outbreak within a place of worship. Maintaining a record of service attendance may be a sensible precaution for organisations where social distancing cannot be maintained at 2 meters or more.

## Shielded and Vulnerable Individuals

- The Executive have advised those individuals recognised as clinically extremely vulnerable to shield indoors. Those over 70 or with other serious underlying health conditions have been advised to minimise social contact as much as possible and to be particularly careful with social distancing.
- The Executive recently agreed to extend the ability for shielding individuals to socialise outdoors and form support networks with another household. From 31 July, subject to the rate of community transmission continuing to be low, those advised to shield should instead follow the same guidance and precautions as those considered to be generally vulnerable, using extreme caution when in using public spaces and during interactions with other people.
- Those over 70 and with underlying health conditions may comprise a large section of your congregations. We would encourage faiths to investigate alternative arrangements for supporting these individuals where possible.

## Preparing the building

- Covid-19 spreads less easily in a well ventilated environment – it is advisable to keep windows and doors open to improve air flow where possible.
- The virus survives best in cold, dark environments. Places of worship should be kept at a warm temperature and exposed to sunlight where possible.

## Cleaning

- Covid-19 can survive up to 72 hours on hard surfaces. Rooms used for worship should therefore be cleaned regularly following every service. Deep cleaning of rooms or shared areas is not required if they will not be used again within 72 hours, in which case wiping down surfaces with household cleaning products will be sufficient.

- The virus survives longest on hard surfaces. Contact with shared surfaces can therefore increase the risk of infection. Surfaces such as tables, seats, handrails and toilets should be cleaned regularly with household detergent. The virus may survive for less long on soft furnishings, such as seat cushions, but their use should be avoided where possible as they are harder to clean.

## **Toilets**

- Toilets can be used where available but carry an increased risk of transmission. It is therefore advisable to:
  - ensure good ventilation in bathrooms and toilet cubicles;
  - provide hand washing facilities, hand sanitiser if possible and encourage good handwashing practices;
  - avoid the use of air dryers, which can increase virus dispersal, or roller towels - supply disposable paper towels instead.
  - Provide cleaning materials so that individuals can wipe down surfaces after use;
  - Leave a short gap between uses where possible, e.g. 5 minutes.

## **PPE**

- PPE is not required for volunteers greeting people at a distance if social distancing is maintained at 2 metres.

## **Activities and rituals**

- Singing and chanted prayer are an important part of many religious services but can increase dispersal of the virus through aerosols and droplets. This is especially the case at loud volumes. Refraining from singing and chanting, or encouraging only at quiet volumes will reduce the risk of spreading the virus.
- The communion sacrament should not be shared from a common cup or chalice. There are no special measures or precautions recommended for the cleaning or disposal of individual cups beyond standard cleaning and disposal practices.
- There is an increased risk to faith leaders who are required to maintain close physical contact with individuals during religious services and rituals. These individuals will inevitably be placed at greater risk of contracting the virus. Where possible physical contact should be kept to a minimum and social distancing guidance followed.

## Youth work

- Severe disease in children is rare. Children are also likely to be somewhat less susceptible to the virus and somewhat less likely to transmit it when infected, particularly in the case of children under 11. However, caution is advised when undertaking youth work involving considerable amounts of physical activity. Physical contact and exertion can increase the risk of transmitting the virus and should be minimised where possible. Social distancing guidelines should continue to be followed at all times, with the creation of separate environments for the under-18s recommended if they can be safely managed.

We hope that you found this to be useful. Further advice will issue as necessary. More information and guidance on Covid-19 is also available on the Public Health Agency website at <https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/covid-19-coronavirus>

We will continue to engage inclusively with all of our faith communities as we carry on the process of easing restrictions. Covid-19 will be present in all our lives for a long time to come, but together we can help our community adjust and recover as we take the first steps back to normality.

Yours sincerely



**Gordon Lyons MLA**  
**Junior Minister**



**Declan Kearney MLA**  
**Junior Minister**

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