

Safe Use of Places of Worship

This guidance is regularly reviewed and will be updated if any changes occur.

This guidance for the safe use of places of worship should be regarded as supplementary to the [general guidance on staying safe and protecting others](#).

We are hugely grateful to the efforts and collaboration of Scotland's faith and belief communities in continuing to follow best practice guidance in places of worship. Places of worship remain open with appropriate mitigations, ~~and capacity limits do not apply in places of worship for religious services and ceremonies. There are no limits on the numbers of people that can attend places of worship.~~

~~With the recent rapid increase in Omicron COVID-19 cases, we are facing an exceptionally challenging winter and know that this presents significant risks to the National Health Service. It is within the context of these pressures, that further regulations have been introduced. From 24 January 2022, given the improving situation regarding the status of the Omicron variant, remaining statutory measures introduced in response to Omicron will be lifted. Current Regulations can be found at [The Health Protection \(Coronavirus\) \(Requirements\) \(Scotland\) Amendment \(No. 5\) Regulations 2021 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#)~~

The baseline mitigation measures that were in place before Omicron will be retained at this stage to help keep Covid contained as this wave recedes.

It is still within Regulations that Those responsible for a place of worship must take such measures as are reasonably practicable, to minimise the risk of the incidence and spread of coronavirus on the premises. This includes measures to reduce crowding and encourage distancing such as changing the layout of furniture; appropriate use of signage; controlling the use of entrances, smaller spaces and shared facilities-

It is essential that those responsible for a place of worship, carry out a full risk assessment to help decide which actions to take to ensure the safe management of a place of worship. They must have due regard for the guidance.

Face coverings remain mandatory in most indoor public places – including places of worship - subject to exemptions. They continue to be an important part of stopping the spread of coronavirus and should be worn correctly. The current guidance and exemptions are set out here: [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): face coverings and masks - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](#). Those responsible for places of worship should encourage worshippers and members of the public to wear face coverings in line with the requirements on individuals.

Physical distancing is ~~highly~~ recommended during worship wherever possible, unless it interferes with a fundamental aspect of faith specific practice. We strongly encourage people to undertake Lateral Flow Testing before attending services or gatherings. Places of worship may wish to continue to collect visitor details for the purposes of supporting [NHS Scotland's Test and Protect](#) system.

Commented [A1]: [Redacted – SG] Suggestion: From 24 January – given the improving situation regarding status of the Omicron variant – remaining statutory measures introduced in response to Omicron will be lifted (add link to regs?).

The baseline mitigation measures that were in place before Omicron will be retained at this stage to help keep Covid contained as this wave recedes. (don't think we need the link for staying safe as it's already above).

Ensuring adequate ventilation in buildings also remains an important precautionary measure.

~~Further guidance for the Christmas season and festivities is available however if you are unsure about additional activities and events at a place of worship (beyond acts of worship) over the Christmas period, consider the advice to limit your contacts where possible and assess whether such activities and events can be deferred.~~

Every person and every organisation in Scotland has a part to play in protecting the most vulnerable in society and staff working in public-facing roles, easing the burden on the NHS and supporting our economic recovery. Thank you for your continued support.

Faith-specific practices

In addition to the requirements above we advise that:

General risks

- services or ceremonies that would traditionally take place over a period of hours or days are adapted to reduce the time spent gathered together and therefore reduce the risk of transmission.

Hygiene and communal resources

- good respiratory hygiene ("Catch it, kill it, bin it") is required at all times
- individuals are prevented from touching or kissing devotional and other objects that are handled communally, or from placing their face or head in the same location as other worshippers. Use barriers and signs where necessary.
- individuals avoid touching property belonging to others such as shoes which, if taken off, should be handled only by their owner.
- where communal resources such as books, prayer mats and services sheets are required to be used as part of worship, you should follow good hygiene principles (careful hand washing/cleansing with soap and warm water/alcohol-based hand sanitiser before and after handling books or similar objects/items of equipment and avoiding touching the face with unwashed hands).
- any personal items brought in to aid worship are removed by the user
- cash giving is discouraged, with online giving used instead. Where cash offerings continue, any receptacle should be set in one place and not handled communally. Any person who has handled money should wash their hands thoroughly afterwards and avoid touching their face.

Singing, projection of voices

- the use of a microphone and sound system can mitigate the need for the projection of voices where appropriate. Any microphone used should not be handled communally.
- Face coverings must be worn when involved in congregational singing, chanting and the playing of instruments.
- There is an exemption for performers and those leading an act of worship, **subject to physical distancing of 2 metres (revised from 1m)** or use of a partition or screen. Full details can be found in the [Guidance on the use of face](#)

[coverings](#). A risk assessment should be carried out to consider any mitigating measures that may be put in place.

Food and drink as part of worship

- where the consumption of food and drink is part of the act of worship, the use of communal vessels is avoided.
- other mitigations for the preparation and handling of food which is part of the act of worship are taken, including strict hand hygiene, pre-wrapping food items and avoiding the sharing of cutlery, crockery or utensils. Face coverings must be worn while preparing and handling food unless an exemption applies.

Cleansing, ablutions and use of water

- pre-requisite washing and ablution rituals can be carried out at places of worship if they can be done safely. Otherwise we advise that they are carried out at home. Where such facilities are used hygiene measures should be observed at all times and areas should be cleaned regularly. Individuals should not wash the body parts of others.
- where rituals or ceremonies require water to be applied to the body, where possible full immersion is avoided and only small volumes are splashed onto the body. Where an infant is involved a parent/guardian should hold the infant. Strict hand hygiene should be maintained throughout.
- during full immersion in water, where possible, the person being immersed should self-immersed;
- during the immersion, clergy/the officiant may place their hands on the head of the person being immersed, but they should consider the need to touch them in any other way.
- during the immersion, the person being immersed should remove their face covering, however any officiant/clergy attending them should wear a face covering unless an exemption applies;
- if any contained body of non-chlorinated water is used in full immersion, such as a baptismal font, the water should be drained and the font cleaned, after each immersion;
- where a swimming pool is used, please consider the latest [Swimming Scotland guidelines](#). Immersion may also take place in a safe external space of open water.

Following best practice guidance for Places of Worship helps to reduce the transmission of COVID-19, protects the NHS and saves lives.

Useful Links to Relevant Regulations and Guidance

[Guidance - Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): staying safe and protecting others](#)

[Guidance on carrying out a COVID-19 risk assessment](#)

[Returning to work](#)

[General Guidance for Safer Workplaces](#)

[COVID-19: guidance for non-healthcare settings](#)

[NHS Inform Coronavirus Communications Toolkit](#)

[Covid-19 ventilation guidance](#)

[Guidance on collection of customer and visitor details](#)

[Guidance on the use of face coverings](#)

[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): organised activities for children - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot)

Guidance for performers is contained in the [Guidance - Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): staying safe and protecting others](#)

Guidance for hospitality - [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): tourism and hospitality sector](#). Where a place of worship manages a hospitality business, e.g. café, they should follow this guidance.

[The Health Protection \(Coronavirus\) \(Requirements\) \(Scotland\) Amendment \(No. 5\) Regulations 2021 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](https://legislation.gov.uk)

Safe Use of Places of Worship

From 9 August, all of Scotland moved beyond Level 0 restrictions when most of the legally imposed restrictions were lifted. This replaces the previous Guidance for the Safe Use of Places of Worship which no longer applies from that date. Some protective measures remain in law, such as the use of face coverings in indoor public places, subject to exemptions. The remaining restrictions and exemptions are set out in the [Health Protection \(Coronavirus\) \(Requirements\) \(Scotland\) Regulations 2021/277](#) (“the Regulations”).

We will have to manage COVID-19 for some time to come and it will be important that places of worship continue to take measures to mitigate the risks of transmission. The [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): staying safe and protecting others - Guidance](#) contains information on a range of precautionary measures including hygiene, ventilation and face coverings as well as links to sectoral guidance. We advise religious and belief bodies to continue to consider adapting their rites, rituals and traditions in light of the remaining precautionary measures and in addition consider the advice set out below on good practice. Links are provided to the most relevant guidance for places of worship.

Considerations for good practice

While the vaccination has significantly weakened the link between new cases and serious health harms, it has not been completely broken. It is therefore important that places of worship continue their good practice and step up their efforts to reduce the spread of the virus. This means taking all possible proactive steps to promote and reinforce the baseline measures, promote advisory precautionary measures and specific good practice for places of worship.

We strongly advise those responsible for a place of worship to consider carrying out a risk assessment to help decide which actions to take to ensure the safe management of a place of worship. For example, places of worship may wish to continue to collect visitor details for the purposes of supporting [NHS Scotland's Test and Protect](#) system. The law no longer mandates physical distancing, however we continue to advise the public that – especially indoors – it is advisable to keep a reasonable distance from people from other households. Therefore, places of worship may wish to continue the practice of physical distancing as an additional protective measure for their congregations.

Face coverings continue to be an important part of stopping the spread of coronavirus. Under the Regulations everyone in a place of worship is required to wear a face covering, unless an exemption applies.

Faith-specific practices

In addition to the general principles we advise that:

General risks

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Hygiene and communal resources

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Useful Links to Relevant Regulations and Guidance

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- [Guidance on carrying out a COVID-19 risk assessment](#)
- [Returning to work](#)
- [General Guidance for Safer Workplaces](#)
- [COVID-19: guidance for non-healthcare settings](#)
- [NHS Inform Coronavirus Communications Toolkit](#)
- [Covid-19 ventilation guidance](#)
- [Guidance on collection of customer and visitor details](#)
- [Guidance on the use of face coverings](#)
- Guidance for performers is contained in the [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): safer businesses and workplaces - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](#)
- Guidance for hospitality - [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): tourism and hospitality sector](#). Where a place of worship manages a hospitality business, e.g. café, they should follow this guidance.
- [Health Protection \(Coronavirus\) \(Requirements\) \(Scotland\) Regulations 2021/277 \(“the Regulations”\)](#)

Faith and Belief - Representatives Meeting – 18 August 2021

Attendees

Redacted
Redacted
Redacted
Redacted
Redacted
Redacted
Redacted
Redacted
Redacted

Apologies

Redacted
Redacted

Officials

Redacted
Redacted
Redacted
Redacted
Redacted

Guidance for places of worship

- Redacted explained that we are still in the process of reviewing the position on face coverings and we are expecting this process may will take around a week, though stressed this could be longer.
- Redacted asked for views on whether the POW guidance needed, noting that most of the contents are now covered within wider Covid guidance and we were left faith specific practices.
- Redacted noted that a fortnight had passed since the First Minister’s announcement and the changes took effect on 09 August. He said the lack of guidance created the risk of people assuming a return to normality rather than a cautious approach based on limiting transmission.
- Redacted and Redacted favoured less guidance, allowing communities greater freedom to use their common sense and move gradually towards greater levels of normality. Redacted said it would be helpful to highlight the difference between regulation and guidance, giving places of worship the ability to adapt accordingly.
- Redacted noted that whilst less guidance is better, their position was that continued guidance is helpful in supporting communications with congregations where they choose to adopt additional measures other than those regulated.
- The group agreed that a short document could include:
 - Clarity around what is regulations and what is advice,
 - Explain that the majority of the guidance has been removed and that SG encourages a “common sense” approach on implementation the remaining precautionary measures.
 - Some examples of recommended Scottish Government advice which is not regulation (E.G. encouraging physical distancing)
 - Link to relevant guidance pages (E.G. Hospitality setting)
 - Advice on provide faith specific practises (communions, ablutions and full immersion baptisms) that are not covered elsewhere in guidance.

- Places of worship would then be able to consider the recommended advise for faith specific practices which they can consider (“Due Regard”) within their risk assessments.
- **ACTION** – Officials will send the draft document to the group for comments.

Wedding Guidance

- Redacted spoke about accessibility of remaining guidance for marriage ceremonies etc., suggesting:
 - that the hospitality guidance information on the remaining face covering exemptions for the marriage ceremony and relevant to receptions was not being found by individuals;
 - that people wouldn’t expect to refer to hospitality guidance in respect of weddings in places of worship; and
 - that the information in the general guidance on [staying safe](#) applicable to weddings was not sufficient.
- Redacted explained that they had sent out a newsletter to advise on these changes.
- **ACTION** – Officials will look to make the guidance are more visible for individuals.

Update Hygiene Guidance

- Redacted noted that Health Protection Scotland advice on cleaning has been updated and this is not yet reflected in the Covid pages on the SG website.
- **ACTION** – Officials to feed this into the relevant department.

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