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Frequently Asked Questions for Scottish Episcopal Churches in Scottish Government Pandemic Easing

The following questions and answers apply to the present phase of the Scottish Government Covid pandemic easing. This update reflects changes from 9th August 2021 when all local authority areas in Scotland changed to “beyond level 0”. The key change for churches is the removal of distancing requirements but an ongoing requirement for congregational wearing of face coverings, coherent with the ongoing rules for all public buildings in Scotland.

Take care: we are still in the pandemic: ‘Beyond level 0’ means that many of the legal restrictions previously in place have been removed, but the pandemic is not yet behind us. The Delta variant remains highly transmissible and may infect and be transmitted by the double vaccinated. Even though new variant infection causes less clinical severity in vaccinated persons such infections still pose significant lethal risk to those who are non-vaccinated 9%. Care should continue to be taken in all aspects of personal and church life. Churches should continue to mitigate risks by maintaining good hygiene and ensuring good ventilation. Churches already have the practice of assessing the level and perception of risk in their own particular context and some will wish to continue with at least some of the previous restrictions or manage a phased removal of restrictions.

Status of existing guidance: The status of the majority of government and church Covid guidance has now changed and should be regarded as ‘good practice’ rather than regulations. The latest Scottish Government guidance for Places of Worship can be found at <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-phase-3-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship/>. This guidance is unchanged from previous levels but is under active review by the Scottish Government. It is therefore a denominational/local matter to decide if and when to drop the restrictions and constraints. This may change as the Scottish Government update their wider guidance as they remove aspects of ‘good practice’.

This set of FAQs presents the latest guidance from the Advisory Group on navigating the current regulations and the wider set of ‘good practice’ guidance.

For more detailed technical/pastoral queries please contact your Diocesan Bishop/office or the Advisory Group via GSO.

The FAQs are presented in three sections:

1. Congregational worship
2. Non-Worship Activities
3. Weddings, Funerals, Ordinations etc.

Section 1: Congregational Worship

Q: How many people are allowed in church buildings for worship?

A: The restrictions regarding physical distancing and limits on the size of congregations have been removed. There is no legal requirement to maintain social distancing in church services (with certain exceptions below) so we are potentially back at 'pre-pandemic' capacity for churches. Many churches are judging when to make this change and some are leaving areas with spacing still in place for people who may be anxious about the loss of distancing.

Q: Do we have to keep contact details for people attending church services, funerals or other church events?

A: Yes please. This is not a regulation but, as we are still in the pandemic, churches should continue to support the Test and Protect systems by keeping contact details for 21 days.

Q: Who has to wear face coverings in church?

A: Everyone must wear face coverings in church buildings (as in other public buildings) with the following exceptions:

- Those leading worship (provided a 1m distance or a partition is maintained between that unmasked person and others).
- Church choirs and worship bands when they are "performing" (again provided there is 1m distance or a partition between each unmasked performer and others).
- While eating or drinking
- Anyone with an exemption from wear face coverings

Congregational members are not regarded "performers" and so must continue to wear face coverings when singing.

Q: What size of choir or music group are we now allowed?

A: The size of any unmasked choir or music group will be defined by the space in which they are "performing" and the requirement for 1m distancing (or partitions) between them. In practice, this should mean a choir or music group should, in most settings, be similar to pre-pandemic levels.

Q: Can we go back to using hymn books, liturgy booklets, kneelers etc.?

A: Yes. However, we are still in a pandemic and shiny-surfaced materials (such as hard copy liturgy books, pew bibles etc.) are more prone to retaining virus so the risk of using them is still greater than other options. The longer the "quarantine time" between each use of such materials the better, or if they are to be reused in quick succession, they should be wiped down to disinfect. This can be judged for each local context—but a return to pre-pandemic practice is now possible.

Q: Can we resume servers, offertory processions and similar elements of worship?

A: Yes. These restrictions were imposed back in earlier phases mainly for keeping distancing physical distancing. Clergy, servers and people bringing up elements (or anything similar) should of course wear face coverings and observe good hand sanitising practice.

Q: Can we reinstate the Common Cup?

A: Not yet. Government guidance continues to recommend against the use of communal vessels in worship for the time being. The College of Bishops is well aware of the breadth of theological and ecclesiological views that a broad church like the SEC holds and differing views on what might constitute 'full communion'. We will continue to liaise with the Scottish Government and look forward to when a process to allow a return to the Common Cup may be possible.

Q: Can we offer post-service refreshments?

A: Yes: Refreshments can be served before or after a service. This needs no longer be on a seated "table-service" basis only. We can return to refreshments being served from a hatch/table or equivalent and for church members to drink tea and coffee without a face mask, whether standing or seated. However, when not actually eating or drinking, face coverings should be worn (as is the case in hospitality establishments). The informal Government line is "strongly encouraging" table service where possible and so this is a matter for local judgement.

Q: What special cleaning is required between church services?

A: Routine pre-pandemic cleaning practices can be resumed but, in addition, there should be regular cleaning and disinfecting of "hand touch points", for example, between services on the same day. There is no requirement for a minimum quarantine period between uses of buildings provided cleaning and disinfection of such "touch points" is carried out between such uses. Many churches have already established this pattern for hygiene.

Section 2: Non-Worship Activities

Q: Do we have to staff SEC churches when they are open for private prayer?

A: No. The Advisory Group suggests that the staffing presence is now no longer required provided there is adequate signage indicating the need for individuals to hand sanitise on entering or leaving the church.

Q: Can church meetings like vestries or small groups take place in church buildings or private homes?

A: Yes. There are no restrictions on meetings in private homes. In church buildings face coverings should be worn unless 1m distancing is maintained ('worker or volunteer' rules) or when eating or drinking.

Q. Can non-SEC hall/church tenants/users restart their activities in SEC church buildings or halls?

A: Yes. If there are sector specific restrictions for the specific activity, they should follow those restrictions at their own discretion. Face coverings should be worn in public spaces as appropriate.

Q: Can a cleric or lay pastoral visitor make pastoral visits or take home communion to church members?

A: Yes. There are no constraints on visiting others. Good hand hygiene should be maintained.

Section 3: Weddings, Funerals, Ordinations etc.

Q. How many people can attend weddings or funerals?

A: There are no special limits on this, other than the size of the venue. Face coverings must be worn (with the usual exceptions) and good hand hygiene should be followed.

Q: What constraints are there on ordinations?

A: As we are still in the pandemic, face coverings should be worn and good hand hygiene practised for e.g. anointing and laying hands on candidates. For ordinations of priests, it is still advised that the bishop lays on hands with no more than two other presbyters also laying on hands on the candidate.