

Access to church buildings during lockdown: general advice for incumbents, churchwardens and PCC members

Issue Date	Version	Issued by
22 nd May 2020	1	The House of Bishops Covid-19 Recovery Group

This document will be kept under review and updated as events develop, with each update issued as a new version. The current version will always be available to download from the Church of England website via the [Coronavirus FAQs page](#).

On 5th May the House of Bishops' announced a phased approach to the return to church buildings, echoed in government guidance published on 11th May. This note provides advice which will help PCCs and Chapters to work towards this in the best way for them and ensure that buildings are in appropriate condition to be used for such purposes as are allowed. It reflects that church buildings remain closed to the public but anticipates their gradual return to use.

In addition to this document the following advice has been issued to help support parishes and cathedrals with managing church buildings in specific situations as lockdown restrictions change:

- Advice for clergy on accessing church buildings
- Advice on cleaning church buildings
- Advice on access for professional contractors
- Advice on re-starting construction projects
- Advice on weddings and funerals
- Advice on individual prayer

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General questions

What is the current status of access to cathedral and church buildings?

A combination of the House of Bishops decision to allow clergy to access buildings, and changes in government guidance to allow those who cannot work from home to return to work, means that it is now possible for various people to access church and cathedral buildings. Day to day access to the church is managed locally, and this note will help local decision making in the evolving phases of opening church buildings.

Clergy should consult the 'Access for clergy' guidance.

What is the general advice on hygiene in buildings?

The government has published [advice on cleanliness in the workplace](#) which can usefully be applied to church and cathedral buildings. This advice is relevant whether the people are paid to be there or are volunteers. Key points of this include:

- Telling people what you are doing to reduce risk of exposure to the virus
- Provide hand sanitiser at every entrance and encouraging people to use it
- If you have them, provide places within the building to wash hands for 20 seconds with soap and water
- Providing disposable tissues and encouraging people to use them
- Using signage to encourage social distancing
- Regulating places of access to the building
- Frequently cleaning and disinfecting surfaces that are touched regularly, with your standard cleaning products

For advice on cleaning church and cathedral buildings please see dedicated advice note [LINK].

If you know that someone with Coronavirus symptoms has been in the building within seven days, then [advice for cleaning a contaminated building](#) should be followed. Other people who have been in the building should be contacted to advise them of the risk.

Each building is different and presents different ways of managing risks. As the easing of restrictions is likely to result in more people being present, consider how the building may lend itself to supporting social distancing. For example, is there a space that could be used only by the vicar with an independent access? Even if you normally only use one door, could additional doors be used temporarily? Could a door that is normally left closed be propped open to save having to use the door handle, provided this did not compromise security or fire safety?

Re-opening closed buildings: general advice

What do I need to consider when re-entering a building that has been closed?

All buildings are different, and you will know your buildings best, but there are some general areas to be aware of:

- If your building has been closed completely for the lockdown period, then it is recommended to leave the doors and any easily opened windows open for at least an hour before spending any time in it. There is a risk of excessive dust and mould spores having gathered during closure, which could potentially be a health hazard. You will need to wait outside the church whilst airing it out, both for your own safety and to ensure that nobody else accesses it.
- If our earlier guidance was followed then electrical systems may have been turned off. If you did not close the church down yourself, ensure you know how to re-start these systems if they are needed.
- Water systems in the church building will have been dormant for some weeks. If you are going to use the water system or toilets, flush all toilets and run the water from all taps and other hot and cold water-outlets for at least five minutes to ensure the water system has been thoroughly flushed through to reduce the risk of legionella and Weil's disease. If you have any concerns seek appropriate professional help/advice. If there are concerns then it is recommended not using water from the church building until a risk assessment of your systems has been carried out. Detailed guidance on this has been provided by the [Health and Safety Executive](#).

What precautions should I take when using the building to ensure my own safety and the safety of anyone else accessing the building?

- Do not share Bibles, prayer books etc. This includes lending libraries, Parish Magazines etc. Each person should bring their own books, order of service and take them home with them.
- If toilets or washing facilities are available, make sure that there are disposable paper towels and that there is plenty of liquid soap. Be aware of concerns over legionella etc; more advice on this is available in our guidance on cleaning church buildings. Ensure these facilities are cleaned regularly (ideally every day), particularly commonly touched areas.
- If you are using candles then take care not to light them immediately after using hand sanitiser gel, especially if this has alcohol in it. Wait a full minute after applying gel, then wipe your hands with a disposable tissue. Candles and matches/lighters should be either removed from the building when you leave, or securely locked away – this is to reduce the risk of someone finding materials to start a fire if they were to break in. Candlesticks, especially if made of valuable metals, should also be locked away.
- Remove holy water from stoups and do not make use of these at present.
- Surfaces and door fixtures, light switches etc. must be frequently sanitised; detail is available in our guidance on cleaning church buildings [LINK].

Can multiple people enter the building?

Under certain circumstances, yes. Currently a cleric may enter the building to live stream with members of their household. Please consult [our advice on managing access for contractors and](#)

[construction projects](#). The numbers of people who can access a building for various purposes will change so do please keep checking back for what is possible.

Should a record be kept of who goes in the building and when?

Yes. This needs to be done with proper regard for the risk of transmission. A supply of hand sanitiser should be kept with the record near the main entrance to the church. Ask people to bring their own pen to use. A record of who is in the building and when, will reduce the risk of infection spreading if more than one person has a reason to access the building. It will also be invaluable if there is an incident at the church, as it will be clear who the last person to have been in the building, was.

Should I switch the heating back on?

If you are going back into the church for short periods only, think about whether you really need the heating back on. If you need to reintroduce heat into the building, cautious and gentle use of heating should be adopted to slowly bring air temperatures up to the required levels. Sudden increases in heat with resulting decreases in relative humidity should be avoided, to reduce the risk of damage to sensitive fabric and furnishings.

Bells, clocks and organs

Can church bells be rung?

The [Central Council of Church Bell Ringers guidance to ringers](#) says that one ‘appointed person’ can ring a single bell under the following circumstances:

1. Ringers should not enter the church or tower for chiming, ringing or any other purpose under any circumstances unless they are the one “appointed person” for that church as defined by the guidance from their Diocesan Bishop.
2. Not more than one bell should be rung.
3. Care should be taken to ensure all clock hammers and any external chiming hammers are pulled off before either chiming or ringing.

The key issues which affect the safety of ringing, clock winding and the raising and lowering of flags are the physical environment of towers including access to ringing rooms, clock mechanisms or flagpoles, the space between ropes, how to maintain hand hygiene in towers and the numbers of people in a restricted space for a relatively long period of time. You must decide if the ringing of a bell and raising or lowering of flags justifies the risk of a lone person climbing the tower and/or going out onto the roof. It is not recommended that this happens while the current lockdown restrictions are in place.

Before touching any bell ropes check if the bells were left up when the building was last in use. If so they represent a serious risk to anyone using the space or touching the ropes. A prominent notice must be displayed at the ground floor entry to the tower giving a clear warning of the danger and to give contact details should access be required. Only a skilled ringer should attempt to ring down a bell or bells. Although, in normal times, it is straightforward to visit the tower to ring bells down, if you are considering doing so please consider the impact of the sudden sound of the bells being rung down on the neighbours to the church, especially now that there is generally less background noise.

Can I access the church for winding the clock and/or changing the time?

Yes, if a safe working practice can be established with clock winders who are familiar with the situation in the tower and have a robust arrangement in place to manage the risks of lone working.

If the clock is hand wound and has been left to run down completely the weight lines should be checked before the clock is wound. When the weights reach the floor or other resting location, especially for the strike and chime trains, it is possible for the clock to run on a little and for the lines to then jump off the pulleys. Winding the clock without first checking the location of the line can end up with the weight hanging directly on the line rather than with the weight line running over the pulley. With very heavy weights it might not feel wrong to the winder. Caution is needed.

Can I access the church for organ practice?

At present regular access for organ practice is not advised. This advice will be reviewed when there is a prospect of services happening in the church when music will be required. At present access, even for services, is limited to a member of the clergy or worship leader.

Can I perform weekly maintenance of the organ when the church is closed?

Yes. For a cathedral or church with a larger or mechanically complex organ prolonged lack of use will result in long-term problems with its performance. If an organist is available in the neighbourhood to keep all the action parts moving it is appropriate for them to do so. The purpose of this is to run through all the stops on all keyboards, and the pedalboard to keep leatherwork from sticking and keep electrical contacts clean.

Can the organ humidifier and blower be serviced?

Yes. If your organ has a humidifier it will have a maintenance requirement that will differ according to its type. Some are safe with annual maintenance, and others require more frequent attention. The blower will also have a maintenance requirement that will differ according to its type. For most installations it will be an annual service. Now is a good time to contact the contractor who maintains your blower to confirm when the service is due. If you do not have a maintenance contract please contact your organ builder for advice.

Maintenance, cleaning and administrative tasks

What sort of general building checks should be carried out?

Consider checking general maintenance items such as electrical systems, emergency lighting and other lighting, fire alarm systems, heating systems, fridges, security monitoring and access systems, water systems and toilets.

The following things can usefully be checked on from ground level:

- The lightning conductor
- Any lead roofs and flashings
- That heating oil is still safe and undisturbed
- That there are no leaks to mains water supplied services
- That downpipes, gutters and gullies are clear and working properly

Any damage or issues should be recorded and reported to the churchwarden or relevant member of the Chapter or cathedral staff.

Some of these tasks which impact on health & safety might involve two or more people working together with as much social distancing as is possible. This advice about how you might approach these tasks does not impact on what you should do about other activities because the balance of risks is different. Every effort should be made to minimise the risk of transmission.

Can we clean the building?

Yes. This needs to be done with proper regard for the risk of transmission. As specified on advice about hygiene, a supply of hand sanitiser should be kept with the record of people entering, near the entrance to the church. Gloves should be used for cleaning, in the normal way.

Refer to our advice note on cleaning church buildings for more details [LINK].

Can gas safety inspections and boiler services be done?

Yes. Gas Safe has published specific guidance on this, which you can find [here](#). If you are a Landlord and an annual inspection is required on a property that you let, additional guidance is available [here](#). The government has not removed the requirement for the inspection, but has pragmatic guidance that recognises it may sometimes not be possible.

On boiler servicing, Gas Safe has published specific guidance on this, which you can find [here](#). If work is not essential, discuss the situation with the company that carries out the service. If your installation has a warranty that requires an annual service, you are advised to take advice from the company that carries out the service.

Can electrical safety inspections be done?

Yes. If any parish building requires a renewed Electrical Installation Condition Report (previously known as a Periodic Inspection Report) access to building by a suitably qualified contractor to complete it is appropriate. However, the electrician, or specialist contractor, must be able to adhere to the general social distancing guidelines that are now well publicised.

Lone working is not desirable when testing an electrical installation. If it is reasonable and safe for a lone engineer to have someone present in the building but away from where they will be working, then 90% of all testing (possibly more if it is a small church) can be achieved. The limitation can be clearly stated on the certificate, for which there is a section left for this reason. The final items can always be picked up at a later date.

Can fire safety equipment inspections be done?

Yes. If you have fire safety equipment whose inspection is due please contact the service company to see if a service can be arranged with social distancing in place. Equipment that may require a service will include fire extinguishers, fire alarms and emergency lighting.

Can I access the tower for servicing or surveying for telecoms infrastructure and similar activities?

Servicing or surveying for telecoms infrastructure is an essential activity and the equipment provider may still require access to the tower. The liability for assessing the risks of access will usually lie with the contractor carrying out the work. See our 'Access for contractors' advice note [\[LINK\]](#).

Can I collect post that is delivered to the church?

Yes. It should only be by one person to avoid spreading infection (unless you are with someone from the same household). The risk of infection from card and paper surfaces should be taken into account, and all safety practices put into place.

Should we tell people what is happening with the building?

It would be prudent to put up signs to explain that the church is closed and why. The Archbishops have provided a template that can be [accessed here](#).

It would be good to advise neighbours to the church that some sort of access is being restored, but that the building is still closed to the general public. Include details of any online activities you have, or direct them to central resources such as [Time to Pray](#) and the weekly services broadcast live on the [Church of England's Facebook page](#).

Encourage those living near your church to keep an eye on the building. There may be a heightened risk of security issues as there is a gradual return to work, with more people about, but the building will still be generally unoccupied. Encourage local people to report suspicious activity and give them the details – on your website and on the church noticeboard – of how to do this. If they suspect an act of theft or vandalism is taking place, they should call the police.

Social media or the telephone are the safest way to communicate. Written communication can be sent using the postal service, which carries the lowest risk of spreading infection. Please do not post leaflets through letterboxes yourself.

Insurance

Your church insurer will have advice, please check with them for more detailed information and over relevant conditions in your insurance policy. Your insurer will know that you are not able to continue with normal activity and occupation of the building.

Will my church's insurance premiums rise as a result of Covid-19?

Insurance premiums are unlikely to be adversely affected for existing policy periods, and upon renewal such closure, if continued, should not in itself attract any further weighting.

My insurance policy doesn't cover a closed church building. What should I do?

The answer to this varies slightly according to which insurance company your church uses:

Ecclesiastical has confirmed that their definition of 'unused' relates to the situation where the church is to close permanently or where the future use of the building is in doubt. In this instance churches are being closed on Government advice/ instruction only. Further guidance is [available here](#).

Trinitas Church Insurance has extended to 90 days the period before the special provisions related to buildings being unused are applied. This will be reviewed again if closure instructions continue into June.

Congregational has waived the special obligations placed upon PCCs in relation to closure for 12 weeks, until 12 June 2020. This will be reviewed again if closure instructions continue. Further detail is [available here](#).

Building works and public notices

Following the encouragement from the government for the construction sector to get back to work separate guidance has been provided on managing construction projects during Covid-19. This guidance is available [HERE \[LINK\]](#).

Who do I contact if the DAC officers are furloughed?

Your archdeacon is the first person to consult for matters that would have been directed to the DAC Secretary or other church buildings officers. S/he will know what provision is in place for managing statutory DAC functions and how to access them.

What should we do about posting public notices?

Displaying public notices, for example for applications under Faculty, is a requirement of primary legislation. Your diocesan chancellor can give a dispensation from posting a notice if this is necessary and guidance has been sent to each chancellor about this.

For situations where the need to post notices in public view (i.e. to a gate or notice board) remains, it is up to each parish who does this and how, but it should be done in the safest way possible, ideally by someone living nearby, observing advice on social distancing and careful handwashing, etc.

Although continuing to post physical notices of any application will ensure that you are adhering to the letter of the law, it is equally important to abide by the spirit of it, which means that members of the public and statutory consultees should have the opportunity to engage fully with every application made under Faculty through a transparent and straightforward consultation process. The

current situation will greatly reduce the opportunities for members of your congregation, local residents and visitors to see a public notice. If you are preparing to apply for permission, particularly for a large or complex project, please ensure that the plans and supporting documents are available on your website if you have one, and that responses to the consultation are invited through social media and relevant email lists, to ensure that the process remains fully open.

The need to carry out consultation in different ways is an opportunity to engage creatively and widely using electronic media and may help foster support for the church and awareness of what it is doing at this time. If your public notice is for a faculty petition and was started on the online faculty system on or after 1 April 2020 the documents required for the public notice will all be made available online when the public notice is issued. This will provide a straightforward way of engaging using electronic media.

If it is possible for you to delay an application, at least until the lockdown is lifted, then please do so.

Bats

If your church is known to have bats, then hopefully our guidance on covering surfaces will have been taken. Ideally a church building with bats that affect worship areas will not be open to anyone until it has had a thorough clean, which will have to wait until multiple people are able to safely enter, and appropriate PPE has been sourced. Advice on cleaning up bat droppings is published by [Historic England](#).

However, if you do wish to offer prayer from a building affected by bats then avoid spending prolonged amounts of time in areas with high concentrations of droppings. If you find a dead or grounded bat please do not pick it up. The [National Bat Helpline](#) can provide advice on 0345 1300 228.

If you're involved in the bats in churches project or are planning bat mitigation surveys or works you can find how this has been affected [here](#).

The churchyard

Are we allowed to lead worship outdoors, if people maintain 2m distance?

The House of Bishops' Guidance is clear that there is still no public worship. However, you can encourage people to worship individually outdoors. There is a [wild worship field guide](#) produced by the Sanctuary Centre.

Can we open the church grounds for people to walk through?

Yes. The proven mental health benefits of being in nature are well known. For many of our urban churches, the church grounds are the only green space around, and offer a sanctuary. Having access to green space has never been more important than it is today for people's wellbeing, particularly for those without a garden. In all circumstances, as set out by the Government, it is absolutely crucial that people from different households must stay at least two metres apart at all times.

If people in the churchyard are not observing social distancing it is not expected that incumbents, Churchwardens or PCC members take any role in 'policing' use of churchyards. The [government's guidance on access to green spaces](#) makes this clear.

Are we allowed to cut the grass and other gardening?

Yes. Whoever undertakes gardening, whether volunteer or professional, must take responsibility for the equipment that they use and for maintaining appropriate physical distancing. It is better that anyone undertaking works in the churchyard should work alone (unless they are with someone from the same household). If they are using the church's equipment, then it should be sanitised before and after use.

This could be an opportunity to change your mowing regime by allowing suitable areas to grow long over the next few weeks, letting natural wildflowers grow and encouraging biodiversity. You can get advice on this from [Caring for God's Acre](#).

Can people visit to tend graves?

Yes. The government has included burial grounds as places that can remain open. It specifically includes visiting a grave as an appropriate activity.

People are congregating in the church grounds, what should we do?

Please do not put yourself at risk by attempting to move on groups of more than two people who are not from the same household. This is a matter for the police to enforce.

We have local community groups that work in our grounds. Do we need to tell them to stop?

The professional organisations and charities that provide these services will have their own guidance on how to work during the Covid-19 emergency. You should ask about their compliance if they continue to use your grounds.

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