**Briefing: Reopening places of worship (phase 2)**

The Scottish Government has today published [guidance on reopening places of worship for ‘individual prayer and contemplation’](https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship/pages/purpose-of-guidance/). It is consistent with the [current advice](https://www.bcos.org.uk/COVID19/tabid/127/Default.aspx) of the Bishops’ Conference of Scotland.

I have included the key points of the guidance, below. You can access the full document via the link above.

**Key points from guidance**

The guidance is not intended to provide a checklist approach. Places of worship should use their judgement to ensure the safety and wellbeing of their staff and communities, based on relevant legislation and guidance and individual circumstances.

The following activities are examples of what is **not currently permitted (not an exhaustive list)** within a place of worship. Further information will be given in due course on these activities:

* pre-arranged or scheduled communal, congregational or corporate acts of worship led by a minister of religion or lay person, for example, Evensong, informal prayer meetings, Jummah, Mass or Kirtan
* services and ceremonies other than funerals, for example marriage ceremonies, baptisms or coming of age ceremonies
* study groups and out-of-school settings, including faith supplementary schools such as Sunday schools, madrassas or yeshivas
* lifestyle and leisure/recreational groups such as craft groups or exercise groups
* meetings including practices such as choir practice or bell ringing
* tourism: buildings should remain closed for tourism purposes

Those responsible for places of worship should also familiarise themselves with [Test and Protect](https://www.nhsinform.scot/campaigns/test-and-protect), which is designed to prevent spread of COVID-19 in the community.

If someone who has attended a place of worship has a possible COVID-19 infection, the place of worship should temporarily close so that it can be cleaned.

A place of worship may also wish to consider keeping a register of attendees at the place of worship for test and protect purposes.

Places of worship must put in place measures to ensure that all individuals, including worshippers, staff members and volunteers, can keep 2 metres apart from other individuals not in their household group whilst they remain on any part of the place of worship’s grounds or premises. This includes ensuring that the place of worship only admits people to the premises in sufficiently small numbers to make it possible to maintain that distance.

Places of worship should encourage all staff, volunteers and worshippers to maintain good hand and cough hygiene, including frequent hand washing/use of hand sanitiser. Regular reminders and signs should be used to help raise awareness of this.

Adequate hand hygiene facilities should be available at key areas such as entrances and exits.

Where possible, open doors and windows to improve ventilation. Fire doors should remain closed.

### Faith-specific practices

Faith leaders and those responsible for places of worship should consider whether it is safe to carry out certain faith-specific rites and rituals at this time in accordance with this guidance.

In addition to the [key principles](https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship/pages/key-principles/), it is strongly advised that:

* individuals are prevented from touching or kissing devotional and other objects that are handled communally. 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
* communal resources such as books, prayer mats and services sheets are removed from use. If single use alternatives are used these should be removed by the worshipper
* any personal items brought in to aid worship are removed by the user
* kitchens are closed and no food or drink is made available with the exception of water, if this is necessary for health reasons. Worshippers should be encouraged to bring their own bottled water, but where water is provided it should be in single-use cups or bottles that are disposed of immediately after use. Water taps should be wiped down after use;
* use of shared spaces such as washing/ablution areas is limited, with physical distancing observed at all times. Areas should be cleaned between each use. Wherever possible, washing/ablution rituals should be carried out at home
* cash giving is discouraged, with online giving used instead. Where cash offerings continue, gloves should be worn when handling money
* scientific and medical advice around how activities such as singing and chanting can be managed safely is still being developed. This activity should be avoided at this stage

### Restrictions on capacity

There is no legal limit on the maximum number of people that may attend a place of worship for individual prayer or contemplation at any one time.

However, places of worship should ensure that they offer individual prayer or contemplation to their communities in as safe a manner as possible, and as appropriate to their facilities.

It is the responsibility of those responsible for a place of worship to put in place measures that will allow them to safely reopen for individual prayer or contemplation.

Restrictions must be set by individual places of worship to limit the number of people permitted to enter for individual prayer or contemplation at any one time, so that a safe distance of at least 2 metres can be maintained between individuals from different household groups.

Those responsible for a place of worship should determine the maximum number of worshippers that can be accommodated based on the available space (taking into account total floor space and likely ‘pinch points’ and busy areas), the building design and layout, and the availability of staff/volunteers to help manage attendance.

A risk assessment should be carried out to identify points of high risk in the building and identify any mitigating action.

It is strongly recommended that places of worship close to individual prayer or contemplation during the time normal services would be taking place to avoid the potential for over-crowding.

## **People at higher risk/shielding**

Certain groups of people are at higher risk of developing severe illness from COVID-19. Guidance on individuals who fall into this higher risk group can be found on the [NHS Inform website](https://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/infections-and-poisoning/coronavirus-covid-19/coronavirus-covid-19-general-advice).

People in this higher risk group are advised to stay at home as much as possible. If they do go out they are advised to take particular care to minimise contact with others outside their household.

Places of worship should give special consideration to worshippers, staff members and volunteers who fall within this higher risk group, or who live with people in this group. Faith leaders may wish to discourage this group from attending places of worship during this time, or set aside specific time for them to attend for individual prayer or contemplation.

It is strongly advised that those who are considered to be extremely clinically vulnerable ([shielding group](https://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/infections-and-poisoning/coronavirus-covid-19/coronavirus-covid-19-shielding/)) do not attend places of worship to keep themselves safe. Anyone who is shielding should continue to follow [government advice on shielding.](https://www.gov.scot/publications/covid-shielding/pages/overview/)