



Oxton St Saviour

Updated COVID-19 Pandemic Measures

Responding to updated advice from the House of Bishops COVID-19 Recovery Group

The House of Bishops COVID-19 Recovery Group ('HoB COVID Group') wrote with updated advice to incumbents (that is, vicars, rectors, and priests-in-charge) at the end of January.

The HoB COVID Group advises that in each parish the incumbent's responsibility for deciding how to proceed

applies to acts of worship, to events run by the PCC or church community, and to decisions on whether to hire out spaces or allow other events to proceed.

Our Vicar has worked collaboratively in reassessing our public health measures with reference to the updated advice from the HoB COVID Group. He has led a subgroup drawn from our PLT which has undertaken a review of our pandemic risk assessment in the light of this updated advice. This revised risk assessment has been agreed by our Health and Safety Advisor.

One of our clergy is currently on sick leave with COVID-19, and two of our clergy are on sick leave suffering from post-COVID exhaustion and other symptoms. Clergy illness has slowed the completion of this review.

Following on from this review, the PLT subgroup has agreed a list of measures which will relax many of the restrictions which have been in place. This list has been agreed with by our Churchwardens, and is given below.

The changes will be introduced in a stepwise fashion – not all at once. Some changes will depend on the recruitment (and/or training) of volunteers.

The Prime Minister made a further statement in late February concerning the COVID-19 pandemic, signalling the Government's intention to remove all remaining domestic pandemic restrictions in law, while acknowledging that the pandemic is not ended and encouraging everyone to act responsibly.

This document has been updated in line with the changes announced by the Government. The HoB COVID Group may issue further advice to incumbents arising from the Government's statement. This document will be further updated as necessary when that advice becomes available.

The Vicar will oversee a further full-scale review in Eastertide.

Reviewing the Pandemic Risk Assessment

The HoB COVID Group has written:

Largely due to the success of the vaccination programme [...], hospitalisations and deaths remain at a much lower level than at similar points during the pandemic, but the continuation of this is dependent upon a good uptake of booster vaccinations.

The current vaccines are very effective in limiting serious illness for those who are fully vaccinated (three doses of a vaccine), but less so for curtailing asymptomatic and milder illness. Unfortunately, no vaccine is 100% effective and evidence suggests that vaccine efficacy wanes with time.

The impact of long-Covid is an ongoing concern, even for those whose illness is initially mild, with estimates suggesting that somewhere between 10% and 20% of those infected experience enduring health problems for three months or longer.

Noting carefully this guidance, the PLT Subgroup has sought to find a balance between increased personal autonomy, reflecting the success of the

Government's vaccination programme, and some continuing corporate measures, reflecting the decreased but still present risks which the virus poses, especially to the most vulnerable.

The PLT Subgroup has worked to respond pastorally both to the views of those who wish to see a clear move away from all corporate restrictions and also to the views of those who wish to take a more cautious approach.

One key pastoral and missional priority for the PLT Subgroup is ensuring that our services remain accessible to as many of our 16,400 parishioners as possible.

The PLT Subgroup has taken note of the obligation to ensure the safety of those who work as staff, volunteers, or office bearers at our church.

Responding to the continuing threat to health

In responding to the continuing threat to health posed at this time by the COVID-19 virus, the PLT Subgroup has been guided by the advice from the HoB COVID Group.

The HoB COVID-19 Group has written:

Vaccination cannot be the sole means of containing the spread of the virus: good hand and respiratory hygiene, social distancing, face-coverings and good ventilation are also important factors in lessening the spread of the disease and should be recognised as such when planning public worship and other church activities.

Moreover, the HoB COVID Group has noted that face-coverings and social distancing perform different tasks.

Coronavirus (COVID-19) can spread predominantly by droplets and perhaps aerosols (which can linger in the air) from coughs, sneezes and speaking. The best available scientific evidence is that, when used correctly, wearing a face covering can reduce the spread of coronavirus droplets and aerosols in certain circumstances, helping to protect others.

Because face coverings are mainly intended to protect others, not the wearer, from coronavirus (COVID-19) they are not a replacement for social distancing and regular hand washing.

Given this advice, and having consulted with our Health and Safety Advisor and our Churchwardens, we:

- are currently retaining the use of hand sanitizer facilities at entrances and near places where people are receiving Holy Communion; and also the use of alternate pews to promote social distancing.
- continue to invite people to wear face-coverings in church buildings (except for those who were previously exempt under the Government's Plan B regulations); and also ask people to wear a face-covering when singing in services (except those leading singing as members of the choir or music group).

We note that our Parish Church, like many churches, has good ventilation.

The Government will ending the NHS Track-and-Trace project tomorrow (24 February) and so, from that date, we shall no longer invite congregants to record their attendance at services.

As a matter of law, **no-one is obliged** to use hand-sanitizer or to wear a face-covering, in order to attend public worship.

Ensuring that worship services remain accessible virtually

The HoB COVID Group has noted that:

Online [...] worship services have opened up opportunities [to accommodate pastorally the preferences of those who are more cautious] and local practice at services may differ to accommodate different groups of people.

In addition, the PLT Subgroup is encouraged that the provision of worship online, and by means of a dedicated telephone line, supports daily prayer and Bible readings among members of our congregation and others, and that it makes pastoral and spiritual provision for those who are unable to attend church.

Noting the clergy's pastoral responsibility for all the people of the parish, the PLT Subgroup has recommended that our church maintains its present virtual worship provision. This will continue for the foreseeable future.

Recent changes which have relaxed pandemic restrictions

Subject to relevant risk assessments, the Vicar has in recent months given permission for:

- use of the parish centre kitchen, including on Sunday mornings.
- the re-establishment of bellringing.
- the reintroduction of a second midweek Eucharist.
- the reintroduction of service books for midweek Eucharists, the 8.00am Sunday service, and evening choral services.
- the recruitment of sidespersons by the Churchwardens, and, when this ministry is re-established, the reintroduction of hymn books for the 9.15am Sunday service and for evening choral Sunday services, at the discretion of the Churchwardens.
- the reintroduction of use of some children's resources at the 10.45am Sunday service, at the discretion of the Families' and Children's Worker.
- the option of using either Service Cards or AV screens at Baptism services, at the discretion of the presiding priest.

These changes have been introduced in a stepwise fashion; almost all are now in place.

In addition, we are now publishing Orders of Service for a number of Sunday services on the church's website. This enables congregation members to choose to download their own hardcopy and/or follow along on an electronic device, if they wish to do so. This follows 'best practice' advice from the Church of England, and also contributes to wider missional objectives. Work will

continue, as time allows, to increase the number of Orders of Service which are available in this way.

Further relaxation of pandemic restrictions

In light of the recommendations of PLT Subgroup, and with the agreement of the Churchwardens and the Health and Safety Advisor, the Vicar gives permission for:

- changes to be made to arrangements for access to the vestry area, allowing the choir, servers, and Eucharistic ministers access to the choir vestry for the purpose of robing/disrobing and to collecting and depositing books, processional candles, etc.; and allowing the vergers access to the clergy vestry. [We aim to implement this change from.]
- the reintroduction of the ministries of servers at the 9.15am Sunday service, with duties which will be amended to inhibit the spread of infection.
- the reintroduction of the entrance and recessional processions of vergers, servers, Eucharistic ministers, choir, and clergy at the 9.15am service, in a modified form.
- the reintroduction of the use of seat coverings and kneelers at the pews.
- some changes concerning social distancing in the sanctuary area, introduced to allow the reintroduction of the ministries of servers and Eucharistic ministers – as outlined below.
- the reintroduction of the use of the altar rail at the High Altar at the 9.15am service – as outlined below.
- the reintroduction of the ministries of Eucharistic Ministers, and of the Common Cup, at the 9.15am Sunday service – as outlined below.
- changes regarding the duties of stewards – as outlined below.

Please note that these changes will be introduced in a stepwise fashion – not all at once.

Social distancing and face coverings

Given advice from the HoB COVID Group, quoted above, concerning measures which can inhibit the spread of COVID-19, the PLT Subgroup has retained measures which encourage social distancing and face covering as key ways to protect oneself and others.

For this reason, as noted above, we

- retain the use of ribbons on pew-ends, and ask everyone to remain aware of 1m+ social distancing advice.
- continue to invite everyone to wear a face covering unless they were exempt under previous Government regulations. This is particularly important in some instances, as set out in the relevant risk assessment.

At the same time, the PLT Subgroup recognizes that there is a balance to be struck between the safest practice and people's desire to move towards a new stable 'normal'.

In light of this balance, the Vicar gives permission for servers and Eucharistic ministers at the 9.15am service to sit on the sanctuary seats to the north of the high altar. When they are sitting in the sanctuary, clergy will sit on the sanctuary seats to the south of the high altar.

These arrangements mean that in some cases the 1m+ social distancing guidance cannot be followed. We shall make this clear to servers and Eucharistic ministers when inviting them to begin their ministries again.

It is easier to maintain more social distancing at the crossing and in the choir stalls. Current arrangements which make this possible remain in place.

Reception of Holy Communion

1. Communion 'in both kinds'

In law, both bread and wine must be consecrated at any celebration of the Holy Communion, and the presiding priest must receive in both kinds. The Church of England now permits use of the 'common cup'. We note that the communication of the laity in both kinds is a deeply rooted part of Anglican identity.

At the same time, use of the Common Cup at this time continues to bring a risk of infection. For this reason, the Church of England Legal Office has ruled that the normal requirement that the sacrament be offered to the laity in both kinds is currently at the discretion of the Incumbent.

The PLT Subgroup has agreed that our Church ought to move to allowing members of our congregation to manage for themselves the risks represented by receiving the Consecrated Wine.

Given this, the Vicar gives permission for the reintroduction of the option of receiving in both kinds at some point during Lent. The reintroduction of the Common Cup to the laity is dependent on the availability of Eucharistic ministers. This is likely to mean that its introduction at different services will take place in a staggered fashion, relating to the availability of ministers who hold a licence to administer the Sacrament. Provision will be made to protect the health of clergy and other ministers during and after the service.

2. Use of the altar rail at the High Altar

We note that:

- many people value receiving the Sacrament while kneeling at the altar rail before the high altar; and
- this activity brings with it a risk of infection.

The PLT Subgroup believes that this is the right time to reintroduce the option of reception at the altar rail at the 9.15am Sunday service.

In light of this, the Vicar gives permission for the reintroduction of use of the altar rail for the administration of Holy Communion to the laity at 9.15am Sunday services, provided that, at the same service, we are able to provide a second administration station located in the nave, at which people can receive the Sacrament standing.

Please note that these two changes are subject to detailed risk assessment, which have been agreed with the Health and Safety Advisor and the Churchwardens. They are planned to come into effect at some point in Lent.

Working from home

Government advice to work from home if possible has been rescinded.

Nonetheless, those who work out of the parish office continue to work from home wherever possible until health and safety issues, unrelated to the pandemic, are resolved in the parish office.

Sacristy Matters

Health and safety protocols remain in place in the sacristy, with minor modifications.

Stewards

Stewards continue to be required for Sunday services.

In line with the changes outlined above, the stewards at a given service are responsible for:

- checking that everything is in order;
- welcoming congregants as they arrive and inviting them to sanitize their hands and to wear face masks (unless they were exempted under the Government's Plan B regulations);

- cleaning of high-risk surfaces and touch points (in particular, door handles and the back of pews) after services as appropriate, in line with the relevant risk assessment;
- the safe disposal of potentially contaminated objects after cleaning.

The Government will be ending the NHS Track-and-Trace project tomorrow (24 February) and so, from that date, stewards will no longer invite congregants to record their attendance at services.

Cleaning protocols are in place. High risk surfaces and touch points are cleaned – these are door handles and backs of pews. (Seats of pews and kneelers are no longer considered sufficiently high risk to require cleaning.)

Regular routine cleaning of the church is not the responsibility of stewards. Arrangements are now in place for routine cleaning every 2-4 weeks.

Not every Steward need be available to clean. However, at those services when cleaning is required, at least one Steward needs to be available to clean. We have advised all stewards that the Church of England recommends that cleaning should not be done by anyone who is clinically vulnerable. Stewards should abide by the terms of the Lone Worker policy. Cleaning will take place in accordance with Church of England national regulations.

Provision for those who are clinically extremely vulnerable (CEV)

For the sake of clarity, we have gathered together the pastoral provision we continue to make for those who are clinically extremely vulnerable (CEV).

The Government's advice for most of those who are CEV is the same as for everyone else. At the same time, the Government recognizes that people who are CEV may want to consider, alongside any advice from their clinician, if additional precautions are right for them.

The Government notes that these could include:

- considering continuing to practice social distancing
- meeting in well ventilated spaces,
- wearing a face covering in crowded and enclosed spaces, and
- regular hand washing.

In addition, the HoB COVID Group recognizes that everyone has a different set of criteria by which they judge whether they feel safe in different situations; and that, in consequence, the relaxation of restrictions is a source of significant anxiety for some people. This may include members of clergy, lay leaders, PCC members, members of congregations and of our wider communities, and the Church of England urges that care should be taken not to make assumptions about how someone else is feeling about the current situation.

As we remove some of the pandemic measures, the Church of England advises that churches should consider how they can provide for the needs of CEV people and for those who feel anxious about the relaxation of restrictions. Again these groups may include clergy, lay leaders and PCC members, as well as members of congregations and visitors.

For this reason:

- we make it possible for people to worship virtually. In particular,
(1) we make a “podcast” available each Sunday morning for those who cannot come to church. This is available on our website, on social media, and on a dedicated telephone line.
(2) we say Morning Prayer online at 9.00am Monday to Friday.
- we continue to invite everyone to practice the 1m+ advice and to wear a face covering when in church or on church-owned property.
- we provide several weekly opportunities to attend the Eucharist at times which attract significantly smaller congregations, and so which allow for greater social distancing. At these services, there is no singing.

- where it is not feasible or proportionate to have two administration stations at Holy communion, we distribute the sacrament at the crossing in the nave without use of an altar rail.
- we provide hand sanitiser at entrances and also near key points – such as lavatories, catering facilities, and administration stations for Holy Communion.
- we make the Orders of Service for our most attended services available to download from our website.

Bearing one another's burdens

In its guidance to incumbents, the HoB COVID Group notes that:

In every situation there is likely to be a range of feeling about risk, both to ourselves and to others, that will need to be accommodated by our churches in a way appropriate to each of them. [...] We recognise the continuing difficulty deciding on the measures needed.

And also that:

Within the Church we believe that everyone is known and loved individually by God and that as many members within one body we are called to be responsible to and for one another, respecting the more vulnerable whose suffering is our suffering (1 Cor 12:12-27).

The past two years of pandemic has been a time of irretrievable loss for everyone. In addition, tragedy and trauma have touched many people's lives.

It is natural, in these circumstances, that feeling can run high at times, and that opinions on all sides are often keenly felt. For instance, in every church community some people will wish to move more quickly and others will wish to move more slowly as we reduce public health restrictions

One study from January 2021 showed that the pandemic is a 'traumatic stressor' and that our experience of this time can lead to (for instance) anger, anxiety, a feeling of helplessness, or other stress symptoms.

If we or others around us are experiencing stress symptoms, it can be particularly difficult for each one of us to hear the voices of those who feel differently from us. When we recognize this in ourselves, God invites us to respond with compassion both for ourselves and for others who feel differently from us.

Let us then be encouraged to prefer others to ourselves. Let us not be conformed to the selfish pattern of this world, but let us rather be transformed by being conformed to Christ Jesus our Lord.

More information:

COVID-19 Opening and managing church buildings, 25th January 2022, Version 2.4, The House of Bishops COVID-19 Recovery Group

23 February 2022 – Version 2
