

Access to church buildings during lockdown: advice for incumbents

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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](#).

This guidance reflects the situation following the new guidance from the House of Bishops on 5th May 2020.

At the present time church buildings remain closed to the general public in line with government requirements.

On 5th May the House of Bishops announced their agreements to a phased return to church buildings. An initial immediate phase will allow very limited access to church buildings for activities such as streaming of services, or private prayer by clergy in their own parishes, so long as the necessary hygiene and social distancing precautions are taken. The Bishops agreed that the decision on the timing of when to implement the revised advice on ministers or worship leaders praying and streaming from their church buildings should be made by individual Diocesan Bishops, depending on their local situation.

This advice is for clergy and worship leaders who, following advice from their Diocesan Bishop, wish to enter their church building. It deals with the practicalities of re-entering a space that has been closed for several weeks and gives some guidance on practical matters. Separate advice will be issued to parishes and cathedrals on the following:

- Re-starting construction projects;
- Allowing access for professional building contractors and advisers;
- Allowing access for volunteers for building maintenance, cleaning and management purposes.

All access to church buildings must be in the context of government advice for good practice in the workplace, which has much guidance which is relevant to buildings where people are present. The advice is relevant whether the people are paid to be there or are volunteers. The advice is published [here](#). Highlights from this include:

- Telling people what you are doing to reduce the risk of exposure to the virus
- Make sure that there are safe places to wash hands for 20 seconds with soap and water or hand sanitisers and encourage people to use them
- Provide tissues and encourage people to use them

- Use signage to encourage social distancing and hand washing
- Regulate entry to and exit from the building
- Frequently clean and disinfect surfaces that are touched regularly with standard cleaning products

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 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. There is a risk of bacterial infection in the systems (e.g. leptospirosis (Weil's disease) or legionella) having accumulated in this time. We recommend 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](#) and is included in our general guidance for parishes on re-opening and allowing access for professional contractors.
- Consider whether the heating needs to be turned on now that we are entering the summer months. If turning it on, cautious and gentle use of heating should be adopted to slowly bring air temperatures up to the required levels. Sudden increases in heat (with consequent decreases in relative humidity) should be avoided, to reduce the risk of damage to sensitive fabric and furnishings.
- 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. 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 Bat Helpline can provide advice on 0345 1300 228.

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 services are being streamed; filming should be done either with a fixed camera or by a member of the priest's or lay minister's household.
- 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. before using these facilities or making them available to others. Ensure these facilities are cleaned regularly, 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.
- Surfaces and door fixtures, light switches etc. must be frequently sanitised in line with Public Health England guidelines, and [Historic England guidance for cleaning of historic and delicate surfaces](#).

Can multiple people now enter the building so long as they do so one at a time?

Please be aware that if someone with coronavirus has been in a building it is considered 'dirty' (i.e. may contain infection) for 72 hours afterwards¹. This means multiple people are strongly discouraged from accessing the space, even if this is done one at a time.

If your church is already being accessed by other people undertaking essential work, ensure that there is a shared calendar so that multiple people being in the space at one time can be avoided and an interval of 72 hours between different people's access can be implemented. In cathedrals and larger churches there may be scope for multiple clergy to offer prayer on different days. This sort of rota system should only be used if each person can use a different space which does not need to be accessed by others, such as a chapel. These different spaces should be clearly labelled with the name of the person authorised to use them.

If multiple people are to access a building, even one at a time, then there should ideally be clearly marked areas for each; perhaps the chancel for offering prayer and another route for someone entering for building checks or necessary maintenance. If this is not possible then a risk assessment must be undertaken and written down, and all individuals entering the building must be warned of the risks.

Should we keep a record 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.

¹ World Health Organisation, accessed 6th May 2020: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/question-and-answers-hub/q-a-detail/q-a-coronaviruses>

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 was the last person known to have been in the building.

Can I ring the bells, wind clocks, or raise and lower flags?

This is not recommended in most cases. The [Central Council of Church Bell Ringers guidance to ringers](#) is that the suspension of all ringing of any kind should remain in place. This includes chiming of single bells and the use of Ellacombe chimes.

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. Ringing bells and raising or lowering of flags does not justify the risk of a lone person climbing the tower and/or going out onto the roof. We do not recommend this happens while the current lockdown restrictions are in place. If you can do these activities from ground level and without the need for other people present, then current restrictions do not forbid this.

What other activities can I carry 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.

What should I be aware of when I lock up?

Make sure every space is empty of people and animals that may become trapped when you lock up. Make sure that any valuables are properly secured. Do not leave cash, unpackaged or fresh food, or valuable stock on the premises. Ensure that you set your alarm, including a roof alarm, if you have one. Store bins away from the building and remove anything else that could help someone break in or cause damage. Secure any windows, letterboxes or other points of entry. If you have any items of high value consult your insurance company in the first instance about any special measures that they consider necessary.

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