

COVID-19 Advice for clergy conducting weddings

Issue Date	Version	Issued by
16 th October 2020	5.5	The House of Bishops Recovery Group
<p>Updates from version 5.4: the Government introduced new legislation on the 14th October relating to permitted activities under the 3 Tier Covid alert system. This has introduced a legal limit for those who gather for a wedding of 15 persons. On the 15th October Government guidance was published that stated “anyone working is not included as part of the limit on those attending”. The guidance also states “It is strongly advised that only essential aspects of the ceremonies take place at this time”. We currently understand that working means those whose presence is reasonably necessary for the event to take place and Question 1 has been changed to reflect this.</p>		

The Recovery Group has been set up to support the Church of England as government guidance changes through the COVID-19 pandemic. This document has been prepared with information available by the issue date. It will be kept under review and updated as the situation develops, 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 document should be read in conjunction with ‘[Conducting Public Worship](#)’ if the marriage is within a celebration of Holy Communion the advice on Holy Communion should also be followed.

Many couples will be looking forward to getting married in church now that weddings in church buildings will be possible from July 4th. At the same time, they might be concerned about what type of service they will be able to have, given on-going restrictions. Others will be trying to rearrange weddings that had to be postponed.

Our intention is to ensure that weddings can be as joyful and fulfilling an experience as possible while continuing to follow best public health practice and government guidance.

1. Who can attend the service?

The Government regulations state that there must be no more than 15 people gathered for a wedding. The Government guidance says that “anyone working is not included as part of the limit on those attending”. The guidance also states: “It is strongly advised that only essential aspects of the ceremonies take place at this time”. We understand that working means those whose presence is reasonably necessary for the event to take place.

The aim of the regulations and guidance is to keep the numbers at weddings down to reduce risk while still enabling them to go ahead. When planning the ceremony consider the local situation, within the Governments three tiered system of risk, and overall number when thinking about who is reasonably necessary to work alongside the officiant.

This is all subject to the church carrying out a risk assessment and taking all reasonable measures to limit the risk of transmission of coronavirus.

2. What about the length of the service?

In keeping with government guidance, we advise that the service should be kept concise while still consistent with the nature of the occasion, focusing on those parts of the marriage that are required in order to be legally binding under the law of England and Wales.¹

Legally, if anyone wishes to lodge an objection to the wedding, they are entitled to do so, and provision must be made to enable them to make their point while observing physical distancing. While this is likely to be a very rare event, it emphasises the importance of having someone present to control access to the building during the service.

3. Should face coverings be worn?

Face coverings are currently mandatory on public transport and in a range of indoor venues including Places of Worship and church halls. While there are exemptions (please see our [guidance document on face coverings](#)) **this is a legal requirement.**

There are valid exemptions for some individuals and groups to not wear a face covering in these settings. In particular, those who are leading services or events in a place of worship. Those exemptions also cover the bride and groom at a wedding and those officiating/leading the wedding. This exemption does not apply to those observing the wedding, who should wear face coverings consistent with the requirements for any other public space.

4. What special provisions should I make during the service?

The church building must be risk assessed and appropriate physical distancing and Public Health hygiene practices put in place so that the ceremony is conducted in a safe way – please see the guidance for [public worship](#).

Apart from the bride and groom, who join hands as an essential part of the marriage ceremony, a physical distance of 2 metres should be observed between individuals as far as is possible. Please note that the minister does not have to touch the rings at the Giving of Rings, nor does he or she have to touch the couple's hands as part of a prayer or blessing.

Where rings are touched by anyone other than the bride and groom alone, hands should be washed or sanitized before and after. The rings should be handled by as few people as possible.

During the service, those participating should not project their voices to minimise risk of droplet spread and the use of face coverings is encouraged.

The organist may play for the ceremony.

If the bride is to be 'walked down the aisle' she should only be accompanied by a member of her household, while bridesmaids should be careful to observe physical distancing unless also from the same household.

¹ In the case of the Church of England, this means, for instance, the parts of the Marriage Service included in the Structure on p.103 of *Common Worship: Pastoral Services* read with the Notes to that service.

Good public health hygiene should be observed throughout with hand sanitizers available at the door. If the church is to be used again within 72 hours it should be cleaned after the service following the guidelines [here](#).

5. What about singing and music in the ceremony?

People should avoid singing, shouting, raising voices and/or playing music at a volume that makes normal conversation difficult or that may encourage shouting. This is important to mitigate the potential for increased risk of transmission - particularly from droplets and aerosol transmission.

It is now permissible for both professional and non-professional singers and musicians to perform individually or in small groups to people inside and outside of buildings in line with the recommendations for physical distancing and hygiene set out by the Government in their [performing arts guidance](#).

This includes those who regularly volunteer to do music and singing, as part of a choir for example, to perform as a part of worship.

Congregations are still at this time not permitted to sing as part of the ceremony.

In considering music and singers as part of the ceremony the following points should be thought about:

- Maintaining physical distancing wherever possible. Non-professionals should not engage in activities that may lead to social distancing being compromised.
- Limiting the number of performers as far as possible (with non-professionals being restricted by rules on meeting people outside your home)
- Limiting the duration of performances as far as possible
- Taking steps to improve ventilation as far as possible, both through the use of mechanical systems and opening windows and doors.

6. What about signing the register?

All those signing the register should sanitize their hands before signing, complete all the signatures necessary for them and then sanitize them again. Apart from the bride and groom, all those signing should maintain physical distancing if practicable and, where available, individual pens for each signatory can be used.

7. What about legal aspects of weddings?

The following should cover most situations, but if in doubt, please consult your surrogate or the diocesan registrar:

- Please make sure that you know where you stand on the banns being read – and on the necessity for attendance to establish a connection if this was required. A Common Licence or a Special Licence may be appropriate in some cases, or a postponement of the wedding for others.

- If a couple want to cancel their wedding, the statutory fees will not be payable and must be refunded in full if already paid. Alternatively, they might wish to postpone their wedding to a mutually convenient date. If issues arise with regard to repayments including deposits, the DBF portion of the statutory fees and any other payments made prior for the marriage, advice should be sought from the diocesan registrar.
- You might wish to suggest that if the wedding goes ahead with restricted numbers, there could be a blessing in the year ahead with all guests present.

8. Can the couple have a wedding reception?

Wedding receptions and other celebrations for weddings and civil partnerships can continue to take place, but only in a COVID-19 secure venue within Tiers 1 and 2 of the Government's risk levels. Wedding receptions are not permitted in Tier 3.

For Tiers 1 and 2: No more than 15 people may attend. Such receptions must not take place in people's private homes (or adjoining outdoor spaces like gardens), given that these will not have the same COVID-19 secure measures in place.

Specific Government [guidance](#) is available on wedding receptions.

9. What is the advice about booking future weddings?

Given the on-going uncertainties about how COVID19 will progress during the coming months it would be prudent to ensure that when booking weddings for later in 2020 or 2021 couples are advised that there may still be a possibility that their wedding may not be able to take place or that it may be subject to restrictions which are imposed at some future time.

It is therefore recommended that you write to or email the couple to make clear that while we will do all we can to make sure the day goes as planned, we are not in control of the circumstances. Couples may wish to postpone their weddings and indeed the church may have to cancel dates that have been booked. In these circumstances the provision of extras such as music and bell ringing can only be provisional and couples may wish to consider taking out insurance.

10. Can blessing couples after a civil ceremony go ahead?

Yes, these can go ahead following the same guidance above for enabling a wedding to go ahead in a safe way including the limit of 15 in Tiers 1 and 2. Post wedding ceremony celebrations are not permitted in Tier 3 risk areas and it will be necessary to postpone blessings in these areas until the risk has decreased, unless they are part of public worship where the appropriate guidance for worship in those areas then applies.

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