

COVID 19 Mission and Ministry with Children, Young People & Families in a Church Setting

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17 th December 2020	3.0	The House of Bishops Recovery Group
Update from version 2.0: This document has been revised with the help of the Diocesan Children and Youth Advisers Network and reflects the updated Government guidance since the 27 th November 2020.		

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](#).

Introduction

In the situation presented to us by Covid 19, we want to ensure that mission and ministry with and among children, young people and families is undertaken safely. Government Regulations and Guidance, and the Church of England's Guidance for Churches need to be followed in doing this.

When returning to face to face activities, it is still vital that the necessary hygiene, ventilation and physical distancing precautions are kept in place in order to protect the NHS and save lives. Risk assessments should be undertaken and approved by the PCC, and local contexts taken into consideration.

It is also important to stay alert to which Tier your area is in and the regulations and restrictions which relate to it.

This document has chosen to quote guidance that follows both government guidelines and best safeguarding practice for children and youth work in a church setting. Its key reference points are:

- [Government guidelines for places of worship](#)
- [Government Guidelines for Early Years](#)
- [Government Guidelines for Out of School Settings](#)
- [Church of England website](#)
- [National Youth Agency website](#)

It is important to only start back when you have planned, prepared your building, consulted your families, young people and volunteers and made a fresh [risk assessment](#), which is approved by the PCC. Considering the safety of participants and leaders should be at the forefront of any re-opening.

Children and Youth Activities

Whilst in the main worship service, children and young people should sit in their households. Children's activities being organised by the place of worship alongside or within a service or at other times during the week should follow principles in the general guidance from the [Department for Education on Out of School Settings](#).

In outline, these recommend that, to reduce the risk of transmission, children over the age of 5 years and young people who attend should be kept in small, consistent groups, and of no more than fifteen children plus additional leaders. Groups should continue to operate the recommended safeguarding adult to child ratios which vary depending on the ages and abilities of the children in the group. Children should be assigned to a particular class or group and should then stay in those consistent groups for future sessions and avoid mixing with other groups in your setting.

Providers caring for children under the age of 5 should refer to the guidance for [Early Years and Childcare providers during the coronavirus \(COVID-19\) outbreak](#).

All activities should still comply with current safeguarding guidance as set out in the [Parish Safeguarding Handbook](#).

Those attending should practise physical distancing and wear face coverings in line with the government's current guidance. As the risk of transmission is considerably lower outdoors, providers who normally run sessions indoors should consider whether they are able to do so safely outside on their premises.

All children and youth activities should also comply with the government [COVID-19: Guidance for the safe use of places of worship during pandemic](#) and can only function if all spaces to be used, worship space or other church buildings and rooms are Covid-19 secure. **Each church will need to assess the risk in their own context and make a clear plan of how to manage expectations, particularly if children and young people spend time in both the main worship service and separate groups.**

Reopening Children and Youth Provision

Once the guidance has been read in full, we recommend that churches take their time to reopen their children and youth provision only after consultation and consent from volunteers, parents, and young people. Action plan and risk assessment templates for youth groups, plus 5 steps to safer working posters can be found <https://youthworksupport.co.uk/>. You must keep your plan under constant review and be ready to react if the readiness level changes, ensuring you communicate changes to young people, staff, parents/carers and other stakeholders. Your action plan should include clear information about how your service can and will respond to different readiness levels to minimise risk.

Churches need to make sure that their plans for restarting face-to-face meetings and activities are developed so that:

- Volunteers, children and young people comply with physical distancing and face covering requirements (determined by the government).
- Hygiene levels are maintained, particularly in the areas of hand washing, use of toilet facilities and surface and equipment cleaning.
- Any risk to volunteers, young people and the wider community, is safely managed, including a reduction in group sizes where necessary.
- Vulnerable young people and adults can be effectively safeguarded, both in relation to COVID-19, as well as other risk factors.
- Volunteers, parents, children and young people all clearly understand what adjustments need to be made to ensure everyone's safety and have had a chance to inform them.

Once the planning and consultation phase is complete, each church can make the decision when to resume face-to-face meetings and activities, whilst remaining within the government guidelines. We anticipate a phased return and encourage churches to consider a mixed mode of digital and gathered meetings.

Frequently Asked Questions

Working with early years

1. Can my church parent and toddler group meet?

[Government guidance on the safe use of places of worship](#) permits the restarting of parent and toddler groups (and their equivalents) **as a support group and not a social gathering with a limit of 15 persons attending (group leaders and children under 5 are not included in this number)**. Physical distancing must be maintained, and household groups should not mingle. The safety of participants, leaders and volunteers should be considered in any risk assessment undertaken before reopening.

Best Practice:

- Inform parents/carers of the restrictions which need to be in place
- Encourage parents (or carers) to book in advance so that numbers and setting up can be managed
- Display and use the NHS Test and Trace QR code. If someone cannot access this, their details should be provided and retained for Test and Trace;
- Each household or parent should bring toys etc. for their own children, which should not be shared
- Adults should wear face coverings unless exempt under the guidance
- Anyone experiencing Covid-19 symptoms must not attend

If those organising the activity cannot assure themselves through the risk assessment that they can satisfactorily meet the requirements, then it is recommended that this type of activity should not be held.

In the current situation it may be preferable that you remain in touch with families with very young children using a variety of approaches including phone calls and remote sessions using a video conferencing platform, following [Church of England Safer Church guidance](#).

2. Can my church host a crèche during a church service?

Not yet. For the time being, children who are unable to maintain physical distancing are expected to remain with their households when gathering as a congregation to worship. Any shared facilities for children, such as play corners, soft furnishings, soft toys and toys that are hard to clean, should still be removed and/or put out of use.

3. My church has a group for 3-4-year olds that meets during the service. Can this now meet?

Yes, however children must be confident to stay in their group without their parent/carer. If this is not possible, the child should remain with their household in the main congregation.

4. I have a mixed aged group of young children; can we still meet?

If you are caring for children both over the age of five and under the age of five, then you could apply the measures outlined in the [Early Years guidance](#) to the children under the age of five, and [Out of School Settings](#) guidance to the children over the age of five, if it is possible to do so. However, if you have mixed age groups together you will need to, as far as possible, keep all children irrespective of age in small consistent groups of no more than 15 children with the appropriate number of leaders to meet relevant adult:child ratio requirements. Best practice is for leaders to stay with their bubble.

Working with Primary School Age Children 5-11 years

5. Can Junior Church activities continue?

Yes. These can continue. They come under the Department of Education guidance for [Out Of School Settings](#). These guidelines are for children aged 5 years and above and are set to reduce rates of infection so please consider carefully if your group will be able to fulfil the requirements and recommendations.

It is important to consult with parents and carers about returning to groups and work out a programme that does not exclude those who are still cautious about their child being involved in multiple out of school setting groups, particularly as children readjust to returning to school. The government has also issued [guidance for parents and carers](#).

Working with Secondary School Age Children 11-18 years

6. Can my youth group meet?

Yes. Youth sector activity remains an essential service and can continue where COVID secure [NYA guidance](#) standards are followed in all 3 of the regional tier system in England. However, there is a clear distinction between working with young people under 18 years (on the 31st August 2020) and those who are 18+ years on 31st August 2020. If you have a mixed group of over and under 18 year olds, then the group must follow the guidance for 18+ years.

From Wednesday 2nd Dec 2020 the youth sector moved into the following readiness framework:

Under 18yrs (on 31st Aug 2020) - AMBER

- Online and digital youth services.
- Detached/outdoor local youth activities (consistent with physical distancing guidelines).
- 1-2-1 indoor sessions with high-need young people (indoors).
- Open access or targeted group sessions delivered indoors or outdoors including parks (bubbles of maximum 15 plus workers/leaders, consistent with physical distancing guidelines).
- Open youth groups (invite no longer required) with bubbles of 15 young people PLUS staff, indoor or outdoor including parks.
- Trips (but NOT residential).
- Young people and staff can travel between tiers to get to activities.
- Further guidance can be found in [NYA guidance document version 4](#)

Those aged 18+ years on 31st Aug 2020 - RED

- Online and digital youth services.
- Detached/outdoor local youth services (but not allowed to gather in a group of more than 6 when off your premises).
- 1-2-1 sessions with high-need young people (indoors).
- Support groups indoors for vulnerable young people (max. 15 individuals plus workers/leaders, consistent with physical distancing guidelines).
- Trips and residential are NOT PERMITTED

When planning activities, physical distancing, hygiene measures, adequate ventilation and risk assessments should be in place. Please read through the FAQ's on what you can do indoors and outdoors, face coverings etc. If you can deliver your activities outdoors do. Keeping the activity time involved as short as possible and in small groups in consistent bubbles.

[Governments guidelines](#) currently state that in worship or devotions:

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 because of the potential for increased risk of transmission from aerosol and droplets.

Whilst this guidance may negate some of the usual youth work activities, please remember that there are no restrictions on discussion, Bible study, sharing of testimonies and prayer. Encourage your group to think creatively about how they would like to run their session and which activities are important to them for building faith. Young people should be encouraged where possible to bring their own equipment (Bible, snack and drink) and avoid sharing equipment.

It is important to discuss with young people expectations and reasons for the changes in behaviour (e.g. complying with physical distancing) and activities (no singing or shouting). We encourage leaders to agree a code of conduct with young people and be prepared to follow through on a protocol should a young person choose to ignore the behaviour code

7. Can I take my youth group to the park?

Yes. You can take a group of maximum 15 young people under 18 years (on 31st August 2020) plus leaders to a park.

However, if your group also has members who turned 18 on or before 31st August 2020, your group size must be limited to 6 people i.e. 4 young people and 2 leaders. You might like to try a social action activity with these smaller numbers.

8. Can I take my youth group away camping?

No. Overnight stays will not be permitted during amber readiness level. Overnight camping will be permitted at yellow readiness level.

FAQ's that apply to both children and youth groups

9. What activities can I do indoors?

If you choose to run sessions indoors there is a higher risk of transmission. **You should maintain current government guidance on physical distancing and consider the risks accordingly.** Activity times should be kept as short as possible.

There are different risk levels depending on the type of activity or provision on offer. If your provision is classroom-based, you should find the Department for Education's [Guidance for full opening: schools section 3 on curriculum, behaviour and pastoral support](#) helpful in determining activities and how to [carry out a risk assessment](#), depending on the age of the children you cater for.

Our interpretation of the guidance suggests activities you can do:

- Use digital media.
- Share stories such as Bible stories and personal testimonies, discussion.
- Pray.
- Non-contact indoor games e.g. *Simon says*.
- Craft activities. **Sharing of equipment is not advised**, particularly of malleable materials e.g. playdough. Resources for activities e.g. painting, sticking, cutting, small world play, indoor and outdoor constructions should be washed before use. An alternative to providing equipment is to encourage children to bring a pack with their own equipment, Bible and snack.

Hands should be washed before and after use.

Singing, shouting-out, blowing instruments and sharing of food is **not** permitted. However, clapping and signing actions are allowed.

Some indoor sports may be possible provided activities are kept short, physical distancing is adhered to and there is adequate ventilation. Any equipment used should be (e.g. table tennis bats) should be cleaned in-between users and at the end of the session. Contact sports should not take place. Government guidance can be found [here](#).

10. Can we sing, and play blown instruments indoors for worship?

The Government guidance for places of worship gives the following guidance on singing, chanting and blown instruments:

COVID-19 spreads from person to person through small droplets, aerosols and through direct contact. Singing, playing some musical instruments, shouting and physical activity increases the risk of transmission through small droplets and aerosols. If singing does take place, steps should be taken to reduce the risk of transmission. This includes limiting the number of individuals participating as far as possible.

Where singing, chanting or musical instrument performances take place as part of the act of worship:

- Think carefully about the need for singing or performance. Take account of the wider health context in your area and your participants, particularly if vulnerable individuals are involved.
- Where music plays a big part in worship, and recordings are available, we suggest you consider using these as an alternative to live singing or performing.

- If you do plan to proceed, you should limit the number of performers as far as possible.
- Avoid playing music at a volume that makes normal conversation difficult or that may encourage shouting when people will be trying to converse before or after worship.
- Spoken responses during worship should also not be in a raised voice.
- Any instrument played during worship should be cleaned thoroughly before and after use.
- Any performers (for example a church choir) should be positioned in a way that avoids face-to-face performance, as far as possible.
- Limit the duration of any singing, as far as possible.
- Good ventilation plays a crucial role in reducing transmission. Do what you can to improve ventilation whenever possible.
- Always ensuring there is a gap of at least 2m between any performers and the first row of worshippers. Further mitigations like screens or other barriers between performers and worshipper may also be considered.
- Based on public health advice, if worship takes place inside, the congregation should not participate in any activity that can create aerosols, including singing, shouting and chanting. This follows the advice generally for the Performing Arts.
- If worship takes place outdoors, the congregation may join in with singing, and should follow the principles set out in performing arts guidance. This includes ensuring that congregation members follow social distancing.
- The maximum number of people present should consider the area of the space and the requirement to maintain 2m social distancing at all times

If a place of worship is being used as a venue for rehearsing or performing, you should follow the [performing arts guidance](#).

11. Can we serve food as part of our children and youth work?

Not yet. The [Church of England guidance](#) suggests where food or drink ('consumables') are essential to the act of worship, they can be used, however the sharing of food should be avoided, as should the use of communal vessels.

However, you can encourage children and young people to bring their own snack and water bottle to your activity group, although sharing is not allowed.

12. What activities can I do outdoors?

As the risk of transmission is lower outdoors, activities should take place outdoors as often as possible and when it is safe to do so. Equipment should be regularly dis-infected and physical distancing should be maintained. Contact sports should not take place.

Churches should refer to the following advice:

- [Government guidance for the public and sports providers](#) and guidance from [Sport England](#) for grass root sport.

- advice from organisations such as the [Association for Physical Education](#) and the [Youth Sport Trust](#) which has suggestions for physical education for both primary and secondary school age.

Outdoor playgrounds are permitted to open where a risk assessment shows that it is safe to do so, see relevant government guidance. Particular attention should be paid to cleaning frequently touched surfaces by children and those that are at child height.

13. Groups: Can we have multiple groups? If I have different children come each week what do I do about consistent groups? Do the groups have to be children from the same school?

It may be possible for multiple groups to convene in your venue, if all the practices stated in the [NYA Guidance document](#) are implemented. To ensure that participants remain safe:

- Organisers should divide young people into fixed bubbles, with a maximum of 15 young people (plus workers/leaders) per bubble per session.
- There should be sufficient space for bubbles to maintain physical distancing.
- Bubbles should not join with other bubbles.
- Individuals should remain in the bubble they are allocated for that day and ideally over repeat attendance, though this may not be practical in some circumstances.
- As the risk of transmission is lower outdoors, activities should take place outdoors as often as possible and when it is safe to do so.
- Different bubbles should ideally enter and exit through different doors – when sessions begin, during breaks and when leaving the site. If not possible then stagger arrival and departure times where possible.
- Organisers should encourage young people to arrive only with members of their bubble and to avoid mingling before and after sessions. We understand that organisers have limited control in this regard, but we encourage you to brief young people and to educate them on physical distancing requirements.
- Shared spaces such as sports halls, kitchens, etc. must be deep cleaned thoroughly between use if different bubbles are to use them on the same day (sequentially). Spaces should not be used at the same time by more than one bubble.
- Enhanced regular cleaning of commonly used surfaces, such as equipment and door handles, should be ensured.
- It is not necessary for each bubble to use separate toilets; however, efforts should be made to limit the numbers of users at a given time. Use of different toilets for each bubble is ideal. Please consider safeguarding concerns when planning and preparing your risk assessments.

14. Can I lead a group on a Friday night and then a different group on a Sunday?

The [NYA Guidelines](#) state that it is best practice to:

- Reduce the number of people each person has contact with by using ‘fixed teams or partnering’ (so each person works with only a few others).
- Individuals should remain in the bubble they are allocated for that day and ideally over repeat attendance, though this may not be practical in some circumstances.

- Organisations have a duty of care to volunteers to ensure as far as reasonably practicable that they are not exposed to risks to their health and safety. This guidance for working safely during the COVID-19 pandemic should ensure that volunteers are afforded the same level of protection of their health and safety as employees and the self-employed.

Best practice would suggest not leading two groups back to back on the same day. However, if this is unavoidable, the leader must be scrupulous about hygiene practices and preferably change clothes. Ideally, volunteers should be kept in fixed teams for repeat attendance groups, to reduce the amount of social contacts. Whilst it is ideal to keep the same leaders from week to week, this may not always be possible. Each church will have to make a local decision, based on their context, in consultation with parents/carers and volunteers.

15. Do I need to keep a register?

Yes. Although the NHS has established a new Test and Trace Service which places of worship are encouraged to display, it is for use by over 16s and does not replace the register of attendance which is best practice in youth and children's activities.

The government is asking cafes, restaurants, social venues and places of worship where individuals are onsite (inside or out) for more than fifteen minutes to record attendance information for the purposes of contacting individuals who may have been exposed to COVID-19. There is new [guidance from the Department for Health and Social Care](#) .

What should you be doing?

- For all activity that lasts more than fifteen minutes in duration should capture the following information on all leaders and young people in attendance:
 1. Name
 2. Phone number of next of kin, or the individual if over 16
 3. Email address for next of kin, or the individual if over 16
 4. Date and time of entrance and exit
- Visitors who do not remain onsite for more than fifteen minutes do not need to be recorded. For example, parents who drop off their child or young person and leave quickly do not need to be recorded. However, a sports coach who delivers a 30-minute session would need to be recorded.

16. Is it safe for children with SEND to attend?

Yes. However, their return should be informed by agreeing a risk assessment and action plan with parents/carers, to help churches ensure that the right support is in place for them to come back. The government has the following [SEND risk assessment guidance](#).

17. Do we have to wear face coverings in our groups?

The [NYA Guidelines](#) section 21.0 state that:

In England, face coverings are now required by law to be worn in shops, supermarkets, indoor transport hubs, indoor shopping centres, banks, building societies, post offices, on public transport, places of worship and importantly community centres. The law now requires **all those over 11yrs to wear a face covering** unless with good reason when attending youth sector activities.

Children and youth leaders can remove face coverings whilst they are reading aloud, teaching or leading prayer. However, they must maintain physical distancing from both children, young people and other adults in the session and replace their face covering afterwards. If this is not possible, it is best practice to wear a face covering throughout the session.

Please see the Church of England guidance on [face coverings](#) for more information.

18. My church has started to livestream services with a gathered congregation. What is the advice for featuring children and young people in a service?

Church of England advice on GDPR and permissions for adults and children, photo and video free zones and other considerations can be found [here](#).

19. Can my Messy Church have a gathered meeting?

Messy Church is an act of worship, not a school, children's activity or toddler group, so comes under the [guidance provided for acts of worship](#). Key factors to consider are maintaining physical distancing, minimum contact between people; maintaining household groups of no more than 6, minimum contact with materials/equipment; hand hygiene and risk assessments. The BRF Messy Church team have suggested a format that should be viewed as a starting place for planning a Messy Church in your context. It can be viewed [here](#).