

Frequently asked questions on COVID-19 Guidance

Note that these FAQs sometimes refer to “Government” and “Church” advice. The former refers to the UK Government making guidance that applies in England and the latter to the Church of England within England itself. Governmental advice in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland is published by the appropriate devolved administrations and other countries outside the UK (including Isle of Man and Channel Islands) also have different regulations.

I’m the elected Tower Captain so surely it’s just up to me whether we ring or not?

The fundamental issue to remember is that the Church owns the bells that we ring (with an extremely small number of exceptions) and not us. We therefore need to follow their guidance and their rules. The recommencement of ringing was not a priority for the Church initially and in the first set of Government guidance on reopening places of worship bellringing was joined together with choir practice as being specifically forbidden. We got ringing back on the agenda as part of the reopening of church buildings for services and continue to liaise closely with the Church, who see the value in bells ringing.

The guidance says we could ring but our Vicar and PCC say no. What should we do?

The final decision on whether the bells of a church may be rung lies with the minister (Canons of the Church of England 7th ed Section F8(2)), so if the Vicar says you may not ring his or her word is final.

Couldn’t you have negotiated a better deal?

The decisions were made on the best advice working with those negotiating with the Government. A gradual phased return is better than nothing.

Social distancing has been reduced in many situations to 1m+. Why is ringing staying at 2m?

There are two issues here. First, the social distancing advice has not reduced in the way you say. The current UK Government advice (July 9th) is:

“People should either stay 2m apart or ‘1m plus’ – which is one metre plus mitigations. These mitigations will depend on the workplace or setting. For example, on public transport, people must wear a face covering, as it is not always possible to stay 2m apart.

In other spaces, mitigations could include installing screens, making sure people face away from each other, putting up handwashing facilities, minimising the amount of time you spend with people outside your household or bubble, and being outdoors.”

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-outbreak-faqs-what-you-can-and-cant-do/coronavirus-outbreak-faqs-what-you-can-and-cant-do> Section 3.4)

Second, ringing is an indoor activity. Section 1.5 of the Guidance page linked above says:

“You are able to meet indoors in groups of up to two households (anyone in your support bubble counts as one household). This includes inviting people from one household into your home or visiting the home of someone else with members of your own household. You should continue to maintain social distancing with anyone you do not live with or who is not in your support bubble when doing so.

If you are in a support bubble you can continue to see each other without needing to maintain social distancing.

The more people you have interactions with, the more chance the virus has to spread. Therefore, try to limit the number of people you see - especially over short periods of time. The risk of transmission is also higher indoors, so you should take extra care to stay as safe as possible.”

The underpinning scientific rationale comes from a variety of studies, which have looked at the risk of transmitting virus from one person to another. These show that the exposure reduces the further away one is from someone with the infection with the exposure being about 10 times as great at 1m compared with 2m. The risks are also increased indoors because there isn't the same natural ventilation from wind and breezes.

Just before infection levels started increasing again in early September, we had reached agreement in principle to reduce the distance between ropes to 1m provided mitigations are in place, particularly the wearing of face coverings. This is currently on hold.

So who can ring bells that are less than 2m apart?

Members of the same household (including those in the same support bubble if they are in one) do not need keep socially distanced from each other and can ring bells that are close together. However, each and every one of them needs to remain 2m away from any ringer outside their family group while in the tower. You could therefore have family members on some adjacent bells, then have a gap, etc. There may be towers that have plenty of family members and some bells spaced more than 2m apart may be able to ring all their bells!

Where there are ropes that fall in a straight line it is permissible to ring bells that are 1.5m apart so long as (1) the ringers face forward into the circle and (2) the ropes of the bells opposite in the circle are at least 2m away.

Can't we just form a social bubble comprising the members of our band?

Current Government guidance only recognises "support bubbles". These are where a single person (or a single adult with dependent children) can join with one other household and be treated essentially as one household. However, all of the members of that support bubble can only be a member of that one support bubble. They can't also mix freely or closely with those from elsewhere.

In the unlikely event that a band consisted of one family living together plus one other person who lived alone then that would be acceptable under the current guidance.

Any future changes to the concept of social bubbles will be reviewed to see what effect it could have for ringing.

Do you have any evidence whatsoever that the virus is safe in 15mins but dangerous suddenly after the 15min mark?

No. The risk of catching the infection is related to the time spent in the presence of someone who is carrying and shedding the virus into the air. There is no specific cut off but the exposure during a 30 minute period is likely to be twice that in 15 minutes and so on. In a poorly ventilated space the levels of any virus dispersed into aerosol form will tend to build up with time as well. The guidance used in contact tracing defines a significant contact as being with someone within 2m for more than 15 minutes so this was a sensible cut off point. It is also an amount of ringing time that is viable for a service.

We are not going to be able to ring our bells up, ring some rounds or changes, and then ring the bells down in 15 minutes. Can we ring for longer?

15 minutes is the current limit unfortunately. Some bands are arranging to ring bells up the day before ringing (with the incumbent's permission) and then have more time actually ringing on the Sunday.

Why can't we just put up Perspex screens like they do in shops?

While Perspex may well reduce the risks from people coughing or sneezing at you in some settings they do not in themselves prevent aerosols moving about and might even disrupt what natural airflows there are in ringing rooms. More importantly the risks of ropes catching or the screens moving during ringing are significant. After extensive discussion with Public Health England it has been agreed that Perspex or similar screens should not be used as a mitigation measure in a ringing setting.

We have also considered the use of face visors and do not recommend the use of visors while ringing for similar reasons.

Can we wear face coverings in order to ring adjacent bells?

Face coverings became mandatory in the Church of England and Church in Wales anyway on 7th August so they would be worn. This was not part of a reduction in the requirement for social distancing, but increased evidence that face coverings reduce transmission. The addition of face coverings has not changed the 2m rule for bell ringing separations, at least for the time being.

Does it not make a difference that we are standing side by side facing in rather than facing each other?

Yes it does make a difference. There is a lower risk of droplet transmission from two people standing side by side than facing each other. Although the social distance rules we need to adhere to do not currently make a distinction facing into the circle is a form of mitigation so where the ropes fall in a line adjacent bells may be rung where the distance between them is 1.5m.

We have a small tower with a tight circle but if we rang facing outwards from the circle wouldn't that be all right?

No. First, there are risks involved as most ringers are unfamiliar with ringing in this way. Second, if the circle is really this small then it implies that the ringing room will also be small and that ventilation will be insufficient.

When do you think we will be able to ring for longer or ring more bells?

We are going to need to continue to follow Church of England guidance and Government guidance. That is only likely to change if infection levels drop, and at the moment infection levels are rising.

Early guidance talked about just ringing for Sunday service. Can we ring for a wedding?

Yes you can. As long as the ringing is permitted by the Incumbent and follows the guidance, it does not have to be for a Sunday service. Remember though if ringing is going to take place the following day as well, e.g. Sunday after a Saturday wedding, you will need to have same ringers again on the same bells because of the '48 hours between ringing' restriction.

We are a ground floor ring with a large East door. Surely we can ring for longer as there is less risk?

We cannot yet give different guidance for different ringing chambers. This would lead to too much inconsistent interpretation of the guidance. It may be possible in due course to view well ventilated ground floor rings differently but not at the moment.

How do we get this guidance across to young ringers who might not want to study the detail?

Parents are responsible for ensuring that their children are safe at all times and especially in the current circumstances. Parents will need to understand and explain to their children, especially the younger ones. Older ones could be encouraged to read it as well themselves, depending on the individuals and parents wishes. Where the parents are ringers they will appreciate what ringing involves and will have to read and understand the procedures for themselves anyway. It could be more difficult and time consuming for parents who are not ringers to understand and explain to their children. Tower captains therefore will have the duty to ensure that parents and children are content with the arrangements.

I find this really confusing and it all seems unfair!

You are not alone in feeling like that. Although the Government seems to have lifted many restrictions all at once they have to some extent taken the approach of trying to relax restrictions in some areas to see how things go. Now we are finding restrictions being increased in some locations as restrictions may have been lifted too far. We are actually better off than some activities - church and cathedral choirs aren't able to sing even in services.

Some of the confusion arises from the way in which new and old advice fits together and how announcements may be made some time before new changes come into effect. The best places to find up to date guidance are

- <https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus> - for HM Government advice
- <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship-during-the-pandemic-from-4-july/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship-during-the-pandemic-from-4-july> - for specific HM Government guidance relating to places of worship including churches
- <https://www.churchofengland.org/more/media-centre/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-churches> - for central Church of England advice
- <https://cccbr.org.uk/coronavirus/> - for advice from the CCCBR agreed with the CofE
- Your local Diocesan website for any local variations