



THE CENTRAL COUNCIL OF CHURCH  
**BELL RINGERS**

# What are we worried about?

The reasons for considering the risks of Covid-19 when bell ringing

We owe it to ourselves and each other to understand and reduce the risks of transmission of the Coronavirus. We will then be able to ring more safely. Returning to ringing will be gradual. This is the first of a set of a six guidance notes to help with that gradual return.

These guidance notes cover the Health and Safety Executive's Five Steps to risk assessment.

**Step 1: Identify the hazards**

**Step 2: Decide who might be harmed and how**

**Step 3: Evaluate the risks and decide on precautions**

**Step 4: Record your findings and implement them**

**Step 5: Review your risk assessment and update if necessary**

## Step 1: Identify the Hazards

The specific hazard we are concerned with is the risk of catching and/or transmitting the Coronavirus. Features of the Coronavirus that are important to ringers are:

- It spreads through droplets, particularly from sneezes and coughs
- These droplets can land on any surface and survive there for periods of up to 72 hours
- It also spreads through aerosol transmission, so the virus hangs in the air much in the same way as an air freshener does. This is invisible and only ventilation will disperse it.
- Our chance of inhaling the virus depends on distance from the source, the time we spend near that source, and the time we spend in an indoor space
- We can easily pick up the droplets on our hands and carry them to our own face, or move them to another object from which someone else might pick up the virus.
- It has a far longer incubation period than influenza and while incubating the disease one can spread it to others very easily
- There is asymptomatic transmission – you can have the disease without knowing it and transmit it to others
- There was no pre-existing natural immunity in the community and there is no vaccine
- As a result of all of the above, it's highly infectious – much more so than seasonal 'flu. The mortality rates are significant with most fatalities being in men over 55-59, women over 65-69 years old, and the BAME community.

Also remember that we have not rung the bells for several months so something may have happened in the tower without our knowledge that may cause problems when we start to ring.

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# What are we worried about (continued)

## Step 2: Decide who might be harmed and how

The characteristics of bell ringing exposes ringers to risks which we need to address and mitigate.

What are the particular features of ringing which increase the risk?

- We ring close together
- Many ringing rooms have little or no ventilation
- Some ringing rooms are up narrow staircases
- We touch lots of things that others touch in the course of normal ringing
- Many ringers are in higher risk groups, as are other church users

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### Ringling Environments

This Coronavirus thrives in airless environments, where it can settle on a smooth damp wall

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There are five other guidance notes published alongside this one. Steps 3 and 4 are covered within these, while step 5 is a continual process of review to which all this guidance is subjected.

### **Making your tower as safe as possible**

How can you make your tower a safe place to ring during the Covid-19 pandemic (covering Step 3)

### **Checklist for recommending ringing**

Guidance for steeplekeepers and tower captains (covering Step 3 and Step 4)

### **Running safe ringing sessions**

Guidance for those running ringing

### **Can I go ringing safely?**

Guidance for individual ringers

### **How bell ringers are assessing risk**

Managing the risk of Coronavirus in bell towers – for Incumbent and Churchwardens



# Making your tower as safe as possible

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How can you make your tower a safe place to ring during Covid-19?

This second guidance note in a set of six considers how we make bell towers and ringing environments as safe as possible. It should be considered in conjunction with the church's own risk assessments and Health and Safety Policies.

Overall Guidance is still to:

- Be meticulous in our hand hygiene
- Maintain social distancing
- Reduce the number of people with whom we interact

Also follow the usual church and tower risk assessment and Health & Safety policies

## Is your tower able to provide a safe place for ringing?

- Check first that the bells and tower are in a safe mechanical condition to ring (this is normally done by the steeple keeper or equivalent, but should always be done by someone with appropriate knowledge and experience)
- Limit the amount of ringing in a session to no more than 15 minutes, and leave 48 hours before the next session
- Restrict the number of ringers (just enough to ring) and ensure that they will not need assistance. The one exception to this is if a young ringer needs a parent to help them.
- Make sure bells can be rung which are 2 metres apart. Where ropes fall in a straight line then 1.5m will be sufficient distance so long as ringers remain facing forwards into the centre of the ringing circle and the ringers opposite are at least 2m away. So the middle rope of a line of three can be 1.5m from the ropes either side, rather than 2m.
- Limit the number of things that can harbour the virus and that different people may touch – put away or mark off “clutter” that is not needed for ringing
- Maintain good ventilation – air changes are important in reducing the risk of virus transmission
- Don't have refreshments in the tower
- Clean all surfaces in particular “touch points” regularly

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# Checklist for recommencing ringing

Guidance for steeplekeepers and tower captains

Don't assume nothing has happened up the tower since you last rang. After a period without ringing, there are a number of things that should be checked. Not all of these will apply to your tower. This third in a set of six guidance notes gives some key things to check before recommencing ringing.

In doing these checks, follow the guidance set out by your church for social distancing and adopt normal safe practices for accessing the ringing room and bell chamber.

## Ringling Room

Remember that the bells might have been left up

## Clock room and any intermediate spaces

Clock may have stopped and links disconnected  
(risk of tangling with bell installation)

Check pulleys still running freely

Check nothing has come dislodged and could interfere with the ropes when moving

## Bell chamber

Check nothing is obstructing any of the bells

Bells left up may have filled with water

Check for nesting birds, squirrels, etc

If work has been done in the tower check that nothing has been left in the way of bells

Inspect ropes for rot or rodent damage

Are shutters / louvres in place correctly?

Check generally that nothing untoward seems to have occurred

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### It's not up to us

It is up to the Incumbent whether we ring or not. Re-starting ringing should be with their permission.

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A full risk assessment covering actions needed following an extended period during which church bells have not been rung has been produced by the Central Council's Stewardship & Management workgroup and is available

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# Checklist for recommencing ringing (cont'd)

## Case Study: re-start of ringing in the Isle of Man

Ringing resumed in the Isle of Man in June following the elimination of the virus from the island. The experience at the two towers is a model for how to approach the re-start and what may have occurred.

Following lockdown in March, the DAC put together a check list of inspection during lockdown. It was only to be done by nominated persons. Those persons were expected to check all rooms within the building. Specialists (bell ringers, organists, etc) were allowed to assist, observing social distancing, lone working rules, etc. (Note that church access permissions differed on the Isle of Man)

As churchwarden at Douglas, ringer Ernie de Legh-Runciman checked the tower once a week. On the 7th April, the damage to the plaster ceiling was found. Approximately 4 m<sup>2</sup> of plasterboard in the corner of the ringing chamber had fallen down. If the tower had not been inspected, this damage would not have been found until ringing resumed, which would have delayed the re-start as a contractor was needed to complete the works.

At another tower, some louvre netting had come down over the bells which had to be removed before ringing started.

Prior to ringing, a small working party at Douglas went to the tower to check the bell installations (ropes, stay bolts, clappers, etc) before ringing the next week.



*Birds nest found after a prolonged period of no ringing*

These experiences emphasise the importance of working with the church authorities. Regular inspections are ideal, however a full inspection of the installation prior to ringing should be carried out by an experienced person.



# Running safe ringing sessions

Guidance for those running ringing

Running ringing whilst maintain social distancing and reducing Coronavirus transmission is very different from what we are used to. This fourth in a set of six guidance notes gives some ideas to try and do to make it as safe as possible.

## Before ringing

- Be sure that your incumbent is content for you to ring - a guidance note is available for them
- Liaise with the church in completing the risk assessment for the church and tower (partly specific Covid-19 measures, plus checking the condition of tower and bells after an extended period of them not in use)

## Ringing

- You should keep ringers on the same ropes for an entire ringing session, including ringing up and down
- Least risk is from ringing alternate bells so they can be two metres apart
- All ringers should wear a face coverings to protect each other and reduce aerosol dispersion – this is mandatory in churches in England and Wales Limit the duration of ringing to 15 minutes.
- Remember ringers should be 2m apart at all times unless they are part of the same household or support bubble. If the ropes of three adjacent bells fall in a straight line, the middle ringer can be a minimum of 1.5m from the ringers on either side, as long as ringers remain facing forwards into the centre of the ringing circle.
- One band per session and one session per day (preferably leave 48 hours between ringing sessions)
- Don't let ringers spit on their hands!
- Encourage your band to face the centre not each other
- Avoid shouting, especially from on a box as this will increase transmission
- No standing behind, face to face or teaching involving physical contact
- Any inexperienced ringer who may need help shouldn't ring (the exception is if an experienced family member can help).
- Increase ventilation as much as possible by opening windows, doors, etc if possible.

This is an opportunity to keep things simple. In the first instance, ringing again is to provide a service to the Church.

Not all your band will be comfortable about ringing, whatever measures are put in place. Try not to make anyone feel pressured to ring if they do not want to. Likewise, you should not feel under an obligation to ring yourself if you are not comfortable doing so or in a higher risk group.

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**Neighbours** Your neighbours may have got used to the lack of bells and forgotten when you ring. It may be worth reminding them and letting them know the plan for resumption.

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# Can I go ringing safely?

## Guidance for individual ringers

You can consider going ringing provided you are not in quarantine, under instruction to self-isolate, or showing any symptoms. Ringers over 70 years of age and / or those with underlying health problems should consider the potential risks of ringing in groups; those who are in either category should be aware of the significant risks that ringing may pose to their health during the pandemic. The BAME community is also at a higher risk of infection, experiencing more severe symptoms, and a higher mortality rate.

Ringers who have previously had confirmed COVID-19 should remember that they should not ring until after they have self-isolated for the correct time. The disease can also be spread by people who are asymptomatic – no one can ever be sure whether he or she has it or not. Therefore, all of this guidance applies equally to all ringers irrespective of their personal immune status or apparent health.

Your church authorities and tower captain should have done a risk assessment together of your tower to ensure it is as safe as practical to ring while maintaining social distancing and good hygiene. Given that, you can do the following things to reduce your risk while ringing:

- Your tower captain will brief you before your ring
- Try not to touch your face as this increases the likelihood of transmission.
- Take your own hand sanitiser to the tower and use it before and after each ring, before and after touching anything
- Don't spit on or lick your hands during ringing
- Limit what you handle that others may then touch
- Stick to your own rope for the duration of a ringing session
- If you are following someone up a tight staircase, leave plenty of time and space after them
- Do not cross other people on a staircase
- Maintain safe distance from others (current government guidance is 2 metres or 1 metre with mitigations)
- Social distance is not just about you – it is about others – so respect your fellow ringers' personal space, and that of other church users
- Move away from the door so others can come in behind you
- Wear a face covering (this is mandatory in churches in England and Wales). You may want to practice raising your arms up and down in advance to make sure you are happy that you will be able to handle safely with your face covering and that it will not come off.
- Avoid raising your voice as this increases the risk of transmitting infection
- Arrive at the time you are going to ring and avoid congregating before or after outside of your household group or social support bubble

If you are not comfortable going ringing because you are in a high-risk group or more risk averse than other members of your band, you do not have to and shouldn't feel guilty about not ringing. It is a matter of personal choice. Likewise, we must try not to pressure others into anything they feel uncomfortable about.

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### Hand sanitiser

Only the makes with alcohol in (60-70%) actually work, and you should let it dry before touching a rope.

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# How bell ringers are assessing risk

Risk assessment and mitigation for managing the Coronavirus in bell towers

The Central Council of Church Bell Ringers has considered the general and specific risks associated with the transmission of the Coronavirus so that your bells can be rung. This guidance note has been written to explain to Incumbents and Churchwardens how bell ringers are assessing the risk of ringing bells to make it as safe as possible.

These notes are broadly applicable to the ringing of all bells (except clock bells) – i.e. ringing of one bell, a set of bells rung by one person, or a ring of bells rung by a group of ringers.

This recognises the particular risks of bellringing which are that:

- Groups of ringers ring close together in a circle
- Some ringing rooms are small and with little ventilation
- Some ringing rooms are up narrow staircases
- We touch lots of things that others touch in the course of ringing
- Many ringers are in higher risk groups, as are other church users

Bell ringers are following the Health and Safety Executive's Five steps to risk assessment.

Step 1: Identify the hazards.

Step 2: Decide who might be harmed and how.

Step 3: Evaluate the risks and decide on precautions.

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The Churchwardens and Steeplekeeper will have undertaken checks to ensure the bells are safe to ring following the period of silence.

The Tower Captain has considered how the bells can be rung while:

- Maintaining a safe distance between adjacent ringers
- Observing strict hand hygiene
- Limiting the number of ringers in the tower and the frequency of ringing to 15 minutes
- Generally not having extra people in the tower who aren't ringing
- Keeping a record of who has attending each ringing session in case a ringer subsequently contracts COVID and fellow ringers need to be traced

Individual ringers will be fully briefed on what to do by the Tower Captain on specific actions and precautions they need to take to keep themselves and their fellow ringers and other church users safe.

Ringling will be limited to 15 minutes unless all your bellringers are members of the same family or support bubble.

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## Conflicting guidance

We are told that in the case of any conflicting guidance at National, Diocesan or parish level, the guidance on the Church of England Coronavirus website is that authorised by the House of Bishops.

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# How bell ringers are assessing risk (cont'd)

## Case Study: re-start of ringing in the Isle of Man

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