

# Guidance for England under ‘Plan B’

---

The purpose of this guidance is to introduce an update to the summary guidance which has been agreed with the House of Bishops Recovery Group following the publication of the Church of England’s own guidance in response to the Government’s Plan B. It clarifies how the mandatory requirement to wear face coverings in places of worship applies to bellringing.

Most ringers and towers had returned to some form of normality prior to the emergence of the Omicron variant. This is because as with all the other things we do in life we have learned the precautions that reduce the risk of transmission, but mainly because vaccination, and particularly third doses, significantly reduces the risk of serious illness from all but the most vulnerable. Many ringers are however still routinely wearing face coverings to help reduce the spread of virus, and Lateral Flow Tests (LFTs) on the day of ringing (or at worst the day before) are seen as an important tool to mitigate risks for longer periods of ringing.

## **Face coverings**

There has been much debate over the mandatory wearing of face coverings in places of worship introduced by the Government’s ‘Plan B’ and how this applies to ringing. There is an exception to this mandatory requirement in situations for “a person providing services in the [place of worship] under arrangements made with the person responsible for the [place of worship]”. Provided the ringing is with the permission of the incumbent (or other responsible party), bellringing is excluded from this mandatory requirement depending on the layout of the church (see below). The legislation does not explicitly say that the incumbent should be made aware if face coverings are not to be worn but we believe that this is a decision that should be made with the incumbent who has overall responsibility for health and safety in the building.

This exception has been reviewed by the House of Bishops Recovery Group’s legal adviser who added “provided that the ringing chamber is not in part of the church which is open to the public, then bellringers are not required to wear face coverings while they are ringing.” So face coverings will still need to be worn in ground floor ringing chambers, during any passage through the church to get to the ringing chamber, or in other shared spaces such as one shared with the choir.

## **Lateral Flow Tests**

The Government recommends lateral flow tests when meeting other people and this recommendation is carried into our guidance. LFTs on the day of ringing (as close to ringing as possible) are a key mitigation for those wishing to ring for longer periods of time, alongside good ventilation. We have however all been encouraged to reduce our social contacts to limit the spread of the Omicron variant. The Government’s Chief Medical Officer Professor Chris Whitty said this week “Prioritise the things that really matter to you.”

## Summary Guidance

The Summary Guidance looks at each of the mitigations in addition to face coverings and LFTs and how they apply to ringing.

We encourage all ringers to take both a personal approach and a collective approach to how residual risk is managed for themselves and each other. A personal approach is what we are probably all doing already when we ask ourselves:

- What's the local risk?
- What's my personal risk?
- How do I reduce both?
- How do I decide if it's safe for me to ring?

Note that there are no limits on numbers, distancing or duration, but an emphasis on considering which mitigations are appropriate for a particular situation, adjusting the length of time accordingly. For instance a fully vaccinated band (two vaccinations and booster) might be comfortable ringing for an extended period of time at a well ventilated tower if all participants have done a LFT within the previous 24 hours, while teaching youngsters is likely to be for much shorter periods, again with an LFT within 24 hours and also with a face covering.

The wearing of face coverings is not mandatory (as noted above) but it is known to reduce risk of spread between people, and as such it remains a strong recommendation. It is however a matter of personal choice and a collective band decision

## Data on local infection levels

If you want the most reliable data on infection levels in your local area as a guide for your own decision making, the 'Gold Standard' is the weekly data published by the ONS which can be found here:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases/bulletins/coronaviruscovid19infectionsurveypilot/previousReleases>

## The nature of Guidance

*"What is the right thing to do when some of the current restrictions are given as guidance only? Guidance can be vague and ambiguous, a linguistic ploy to put off making ultimate decisions, because the liberal state knows that human liberty cannot be taken away lightly. But I see guidance as that which speaks to our conscience, what we know is the right thing to do, despite the lack of legal clarity."*

Dr Mona Siddiqui, BBC Radio4 "Thought for the Day", 14 December