



DIOCESE OF Hexham & Newcastle

Rt Rev Robert Byrne CO
Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle

Bishop's House, 26 West Avenue, Gosforth, Newcastle, NE3 4ES
Tel: 0191 228 0003 | Fax: 0191 274 0432 | Email: bishop.robert@rcdhn.org.uk | Web: www.rcdhn.org.uk

Protecting the Health of Our Clergy and Congregations 10 December 2021

Diocesan COVID Controls

The emergence of the Omicron variant of Coronavirus is causing concern across the country and whilst we do not yet fully understand the effects of the variant, research in other countries has shown it to be much more transmissible.

Following the announcement by the Prime Minister that the Government has moved to implement 'Plan B' of their Winter COVID-19 Plan, new rules have been phased in, in England from (today) Friday 10th December. Face coverings will become compulsory in most public indoor venues including places of worship from this date.

With this in mind, I believe it is an appropriate time to confirm our Diocesan COVID controls which I ask are followed to ensure that our churches continue to be safe and welcoming places.

Once again I have taken both clergy and lay advice in reaching these decisions whilst also giving consideration to the latest guidance published by the Government and the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales.

I confirm our Diocesan position on the most pertinent points to be:

- **COVID symptoms** - people displaying any symptoms of COVID should stay at home and not travel to church or participate in person.
- **Vaccinations** - are the best way to control the spread of COVID. We can show that we care for each other by getting vaccinated and attending for the booster dose when it becomes available.
- **Ventilation** - it is still important to ventilate churches by leaving doors and windows open. This has the effect of diluting and dispersing viral particles.
- **Hand sanitiser** - use of hand sanitiser on entering and leaving church and before liturgies should continue.
- **Face coverings** - all those attending church **MUST** wear a face covering unless they are exempt from doing so. Priests in the sanctuary, providing they are sufficiently distant (2m or more) from the congregation, do not need to wear a face covering except when distributing Holy Communion.
- **Social Distancing and Capacity of Churches** - it is now possible for each row of pews to be used providing that a minimum 1M spacing between households sitting in the same pew is maintained. This clarification may allow church capacities to be increased beyond the minimum number previously stated in your risk assessment.





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- **Cleaning** – Is it possible to clean using commonly available cleaning materials. You should:
 - Clean high frequency touch points in buildings after each act of worship.
 - Thoroughly clean the church once a week.
- **Congregational Singing** – Indoor congregational singing can take place provided that face coverings are worn by members of the congregation. The use of cantor groups and other choirs is permitted, without the use of face coverings, provided all members of the group are a minimum of 1M apart, facing the same direction and are a minimum of 2M from the congregation.
- **NHS Test and Trace** – The Government is still encouraging certain venues, including places of worship, to keep a record of those attending to support the NHS Test and Trace programme. This could be achieved, for example, by displaying an NHS QR code poster close to the entrance. People can check in by scanning the NHS QR code poster via their NHS COVID-19 app. Consideration should also be given to using a separate signing-in system which is manageable for the parish.
- **Hymn books and Mass cards** – can be reintroduced
- **One-way systems and movement of people** - It is no longer necessary to have one-way systems or other restrictions on movement in churches.
- **Celebration of Holy Mass**
 - It is not recommended that Holy Water stoups are refilled.
 - All usual ministers for the celebration of Holy Mass can be deployed such as servers, cantors, readers and Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion.
 - The offertory collection can be resumed in church with baskets and pouches.
 - It is recommended that the physical Sign of Peace remain suspended and its omission will help to reduce physical contact between people during the celebration.
 - Holy Communion will continue to be under one kind and the ministers will continue to sanitise their hands beforehand and wear a face covering whilst distributing. Communion is recommended to be distributed in the hand but those who wish to receive on the tongue may do so. There should be care on the part of the minister to avoid physical contact with the hand or the tongue of the communicant when distributing Holy Communion. In the event of contamination the minister should sanitise their hands before further distribution.
 - Concelebration is permitted and Holy Communion by the concelebrants should be by intinction (including the principal celebrant), and the consumption of the remaining sacred species and cleansing of the chalice should be performed by the principal celebrant alone.
 - Holy Communion should be given at the normal place in the Mass.





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- **Celebration of Holy Baptism** - Baptisms can take place up to the COVID secure capacity of the church based on a minimum of 1M spacing between households. However, it is recommended that single families should have children baptised at any one celebration. Baptisms involving multiple families and children should be avoided for now.
- **Celebration of Confirmation** - Confirmations can be celebrated as usual with the caveat that the laying on of hands should be by the celebrant extending the hands over the confirmandi and the Sign of Peace be a gesture without any physical contact.
- **Celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation** - a physical barrier, such as a Perspex sheet or heavy curtain, should cover the grille between the confessor and the penitent. Good ventilation of the penitent's side of the confessional should be deployed to prevent stagnation of air.
- **Immunisation status of Eucharistic Ministers and others** - all those responsible for distributing communion to the sick and housebound must only do so if they have received their recommended COVID vaccinations. People who are unvaccinated are at much greater risk of becoming infected with COVID and passing it on. In this particular situation, the risk of transmission by touch or expelled breath is increased further because the Eucharistic Minister would be coming into close contact with the sick or housebound communicant. Additionally, a sick communicant is much more likely to develop a more serious reaction to COVID if it were to be transmitted. It is recommended that people who are engaged in a form of pastoral ministry which involves ministry to the housebound, sick and vulnerable, should take regular lateral flow tests to ensure they are safe to do so. These are free from the NHS.

Parish Priests have the discretion to adopt a more cautious approach should they consider that their individual parish circumstances warrant this. However, I would request that there be no further relaxations of the controls outlined above at this time.

Parish Halls and Meeting Spaces

As previously advised to use our church halls and meeting spaces we must first undertake a COVID secure Risk Assessment in a similar way as we have done for our church buildings.

A further review of the COVID controls will take place in early February against the data available at that time.

With every good wish and blessing

