



DIOCESE OF Hexham & Newcastle

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Protecting the Health of Our Clergy and Congregations 17 December 2021 v2

The emergence of the Omicron variant of COVID presents a very significant risk to our clergy and congregations. Whilst the UK Government has kick started an accelerated vaccination programme, the devolved administrations and many experts believe that this alone is insufficient to counteract the very rapid increase in COVID cases which is being driven by the much more transmissible Omicron variant.

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.

The growth of Omicron cases in the UK is now mirroring the rapid increase that has been observed in South Africa with the doubling of case numbers every 2 to 3 days. On Thursday 16th December the UK recorded 88,376 confirmed cases of COVID in the previous 24 hour period. At the time, this was the highest number of cases recorded since the pandemic started. Scientists report that Omicron is the most rapidly spreading COVID variant seen so far. In London, Omicron has overtaken Delta to become the dominant variant. At this early stage of the emergence of Omicron in the UK it is difficult to predict how this will impact on the number of hospitalisations and deaths. It is believed that one person infected with the Omicron variant of COVID will spread the virus to between 3 and 5 other people.

COVID infection rates in the North East were at a seven day average of 380 cases per 100,000 on the 16th December. This rate has remained relatively consistent for the past few weeks. The Delta variant remains dominant in the North East but this is expected to change as Omicron sweeps across the country leading to a significant increase in the local infection rate.

The UK Government has adopted “Plan B” and is strongly advising the population to get a booster vaccination but has stopped short of introducing any further COVID controls, but in the same televised Government briefing on 15th December, Professor Chris Whitty, the UK Chief Medical Adviser, advised that we should “de-prioritise socialising”.

On Tuesday 14th December the Scottish Government announced a series of further, more stringent, measures to reduce COVID spread. Amongst other things The First Minister said that “... if you do plan on socialising, either at home or in indoor public spaces, we are asking that you limit the number of households represented in your group to a maximum of three ... and ask that you test before you go.”





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Two doses of vaccine have been shown to provide a poor level of protection against the Omicron variant so the UK Government is driving an accelerated booster vaccination programme. The North East is providing about 16,000 jabs per day and as of the 15th December had provided booster vaccinations to 42% of the adult population.

This is a serious situation, evidenced by the rise in daily COVID cases and the unprecedented drive to get the whole of the UK adult population vaccinated in 3 weeks. The enhanced vaccination programme is just starting to ramp up but it appears that its ability to control COVID infections is being outrun by the increased transmissibility of the new variant and hence the need for further control measures.

Church services take place in a well-controlled environment if our guidelines are followed and I would like to remind you that it is vitally important that we all do everything we can to keep everyone safe. I set out the most pertinent COVID guidelines in my [last communication on 10th December](#) but in addition I have now asked Parish Priests to be sensitive to the duration of church services and to encourage the congregation to disperse quickly at the end.

Whilst we are still able to safely gather in our churches the same is not true for our church halls and meeting spaces. Socialising and most other forms of group activity in our church halls and meeting spaces present a very serious risk of COVID transmission. We do have controls in place in our halls and meeting spaces but it is much more difficult to maintain social distancing; so the much more transmissible Omicron variant has an ideal environment in which to spread.

I recommend that we close our church halls and meeting spaces to all groups and activities at the end of Friday 17th December. They should remain closed until further notice.

There are some very limited exceptions to this recommendation; for example those halls that are used for essential Caritas activities or registered early years provision. These activities may be able to continue to operate a restricted service providing that they are fully assessed and suitable COVID controls put into place. Please contact the Diocesan Health and Safety Adviser Michael McElroy; telephone 0191 243 3319 or by email: michael.mcelroy@diocesehn.org.uk to discuss your activities before proceeding.

A further review of our COVID controls relating to church halls and meeting spaces will take place in January when the effects of the Omicron variant may be apparent.

