

GUIDE FOR OPEN AIR WORSHIP

Version 1	21 July 2020	First published
Version 2	28 July 2020	Updates and clarity on details following direct Government guidance
Version 3	22/09/2020	Updates to current Government guidance including rule of 6, Covid-19 Secure requirements and links for Wales & Scotland

1. Introduction

This Guide is part of STEP 5: Safety First in the process for reopening and managing your church building. It provides specific guidance for Open Air worship as an alternative or in addition to using your church building, but should be read in conjunction with the [Guide to Using Your Worship Space](#).

2. Definition of a Place of Worship

The Government guidance for reopening churches has the following definition of a ‘Place of Worship’:

‘A place of worship refers to a building used for regular religious ceremonies, communal worship or similar gatherings by religious organisations. It includes the use of surrounding grounds, for example, adjoining carparks, courtyards or gardens for which the venue managers are also responsible.

The guidance also covers premises when being used for religious gatherings, even when their primary purpose is not for religious gatherings, such as a community centre. These premises will only be able to be used where they are permitted to be open and additional guidance may be applicable.

This guidance does not cover public parks, private homes, cultural sites or other open spaces, such as woodlands which may be used for religious purposes. If people do want to engage in worship in these spaces, then the guidance relevant to that place should be adhered to.’

The guidance now makes specific reference to Outdoor Worship¹, with the general principles incorporated into Connexional guidance below.

3. General Considerations for all Settings

1. All worship spaces and activities should be [COVID-19 secure](#)², which means they meet the [7 Steps for Working Safely Together](#) for opening and running as outlined in the Government guidance.
2. The rule of 6 applies to all worship activities. Thus, those in attendance should gather in groups of no more than 6 people. This relates to the maximum group size before attendees

¹ In England, refer to **Outdoor Worship** - <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>

In Scotland - <http://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-phase-3-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship/pages/individual-and-congregational-worship/>

In Wales - <https://gov.wales/guidance-reopening-places-worship-coronavirus-html>

² England -

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/903464/staying-covid-19-secure-2020-230720.pdf

Wales - <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2020-08/keep-wales-safe-at-work-five-key-steps.pdf>

Scotland - <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-general-guidance-for-safer-workplaces/>

enter the place of worship and therefore can sit or group together. It is not a directive to sit or group people together in groups of 6.

- a. You can continue to space chairs and people as before with 2m distancing between household groups, which could be individuals, couples, larger families, etc.
- b. Within each group of 6, those who are not in the same household should continue to practise social distancing.
- c. Each group of 6 should **not** mingle with any other groups (see FAQ's below for more information).

4. Considerations for Worshipping on Church Grounds

If Managing Trustees are considering using their external spaces for worship, this has to be considered carefully and in a different way to assessing risk inside a church building. It has some merits, such as better ventilation, but can bring other unforeseen issues which are more specific to a church's location and setting. It is suggested to base initial assessments on the following considerations:

- It is acceptable for more than 30 people to pray or undertake other forms of worship in adjoining grounds to a church building, as long it is [COVID-19 secure](#). Refer to the documents [Guide to Re-Opening and Managing Your Church Building](#) and the [Guide to Using Your Worship Space](#), as the majority of guidance here can be transposed to external settings.
- Still base all decisions on a risk assessment and ensure that a safe number of people can be contained in the space concerned. Worship services will be based on an assessment of who can be safely accommodated in the space, whilst ensuring all guidance is met. **A restriction on 15 people for weddings or 30 people for funerals is still relevant for 'life event' services.**
- Consider the setting of the space, its openness, security, visibility and use by the public.
- It is important that there is an assessment of the ability to control numbers attending, as in a church building. This is the principle behind guidance which restricts 'public gatherings', where there is no control about who joins and how social distancing is managed.
- There needs to be a means of restricting access if required – e.g. agreeing who is attending in advance and having controls around collecting test and trace details. It is essential that people cannot just join a group, so that numbers increase beyond what has been assessed as safe.
- Consider the 'pinch points' around entrances and exits, and any queuing system you needed.
- It is important to consider access to toilet and washing facilities – access to these are essential, or at the very least access to hand sanitiser etc. Government guidance is clear that good ventilation helps reduce the spread of the virus, but hygiene facilities also need to be made available to everyone.
- Any risk assessment should also consider the security of those attending, and may need to consider the involvement of local partners (e.g. police).
- Dependent upon the openness of the setting, it should also be considered how an open air service may impact on neighbours, particularly around noise. It might therefore be considered a good opportunity to liaise with the community about this, to allay any fears, but also as an opportunity for invitation.
- As this activity is based on the Government's guidance for Safe Use of Places of Worship in churches, the same restrictions on sharing of food and cutlery etc. still applies, except where it is part of the service of Holy Communion where specific Connexional guidance has been provided.

5. **Specific Considerations for Worshipping on Publicly Owned Grounds**

Acts of worship not taking place within the grounds of a Place of Worship as defined above but in publicly owned grounds, will have to meet the specific requirements of the Government guidance for that space, e.g. a public park. This is particularly relevant to the number of people allowed to gather in that space.

A gathering of **over 6 people** is not automatically permissible, you must undertake the following:

- Liaise with those responsible for the open space;
- Ensure that it is safe to hold the event;
- Ensure a risk assessment is undertaken;
- Refer to all the other considerations suggested in Item 3.

Important Note:

It is very important that if you are considering outdoor worship in a public outdoor space that you also consult your local authority to ensure you have the right permissions and support in place. This type of support may include the local Police. You should therefore consider the wider implications on neighbours and resources if considering worship in this public outdoor setting.

6. **Specific Considerations for Worshipping on Privately Owned Grounds**

Acts of worship planned to be undertaken on privately owned grounds will have to meet the specific requirements of the Government guidance for that space, e.g. a private gardens. A gathering of **over 6 people** is illegal in a private outdoor space unless the group consist solely of a single household or two linked households. A religious activity in this space is not exempt from this rule.

7. **FAQ's with answers provided the Ministry for Housing, Community & Local Government**

Q. Do I need to arrange my seating into groups of six rather than in households?

- No. The total number of people attending worship is limited by how many people can socially distance within the venue. Seating should enable everyone to practise social distancing from those they don't live with.
- The maximum number of people that you should socially interact with in a place of worship is six, particularly when leaving or arriving.

Q. Can you stop social distancing within a group of six?

- No. Everyone should continue to practise social distancing when mixing with people they don't live with or are not in a support bubble with, even within a group of six.

Q. How does the rule of six work where the activity is communal, and not in groups?

- The number of people able to attend a place of worship is determined by the number of people the space can safely contain while all attendees adhere to social distancing of 2m between households, or 1m with additional safeguards.
- You should only enter and leave the venue together, and socially interact, within a group of up to six, whether this six consists of one household or multiple households.
- Where group members are from different households, they should maintain social distancing of 2meters, or 1meter with additional safeguards

Q: Can groups socialise with one another after worship/ study?

- No, groups of six should not mix within the venue and should leave in the group they arrived in.
- Everyone, at all times, needs to limit social contact as much as possible.

Q. Does the exemption for Places of Worship cover faith groups hiring other venues (or outside spaces) for communal worship?

- Yes, it is the activity of communal worship that is exempt from the law against groups of more than six people from gathering.
- A faith group can host a prayer service or communal worship at a hired venue that is Covid-19 secure, with the same restrictions as a place of worship.

Q. Does the exemption cover faith groups gathering in outdoor public spaces for communal worship?

- Yes, it is the activity of communal worship that is exempt from the law against groups of more than 6 people from gathering, rather than the place of worship.
- This means that a faith group can host a prayer service or communal worship in an outdoor public space, with the same restrictions as a fixed place of worship.
- In order to do so, they must undertake a rigorous risk assessment for the event alongside the private owner or relevant local authority, and ensure that safeguards are in place to allow for strict social distancing between attendees.
- All attendees should provide contact details for the purposes of NHS Test and Trace.
- This exemption does not apply to private spaces such as gardens.

Q. Does the exemption cover faith groups gathering in outdoor private spaces, such as gardens, for communal worship?

- No. The “rule of six” applies to all private dwelling spaces, including gardens.
- Only six people are permitted by law to gather in a private garden.
- We do understand that this may cause challenges for communities planning to host religious services in private, however the regulations have been changed given the public health risks associated with private houses and gardens.

Q. Are prayer groups/ study groups for adults meeting in Places of Worship capped at six?

- No, there can be multiple groups of six people doing the same activity provided that these groups do not mingle.
- Faith groups can organise prayer and study groups, both at a fixed Place of Worship and at a hired venue that is Covid-19 Secure venue.
- If the group is hiring a venue, they must undertake a rigorous risk assessment for the event alongside the private owner or relevant local authority, and ensure that safeguards are in place to allow for strict social distancing between attendees.
- All attendees should provide contact details for the purposes of NHS Test and Trace.

Q. Can six adults meet for worship in a house if the children are asleep?

- The law is clear. If there is any risk that a group of more than six will mix (including young children) then this must not happen.