

From 6.00 pm on 22 September 2020 new restrictions will be introduced for all households in Northern Ireland which will impact on our individual lives and how our Parishes and clergy operate on a daily basis.

The regulations require there to be no mixing of households in private dwellings, with exemptions for bubbling with one other household. This will mean that normal pastoral house calls by clergy will have to be curtailed and will now really only be possible in the case of an emergency or end of life care. It may still be possible to meet with parishioners in their gardens, (although no more than six people are to gather in a private garden from no more than two households) but with the changing seasons even that will not be practical in the near future.

Limits on the number of people who can meet indoors and outdoors have been imposed but under the regulations these limits do not apply to gatherings for religious purposes, at this time. No changes have been made to the operation of church buildings as places of worship. Congregation numbers will continue for the time being to be limited according to 2 metre social distancing seating capacity. Marriages and funerals can also continue to take place in line with the current restrictions. The reality though is that we need to be very careful when gathering for any purpose and must ensure that good mitigation is in place. A further delay in physical face to face meetings in our Parish Halls may be wise at this juncture and we might be better to take a more cautious approach. Parish officers must have carried out a risk assessment and have taken all reasonable measures to limit the risk of transmission of the coronavirus.

Many of these new restrictions will be with us for a considerable length of time, possibly even six months, so some prayerful thought and consideration will need to be given as to how we keep in contact with and provide support for all members of the church family.