

CHURCH OF IRELAND, Diocese of Armagh, COVID-19 UPDATE – 14th February 2022

Information about the easing of restrictions in Northern Ireland

With the easing of Covid-19 restrictions announced today, there are some new updates which will affect the way we do things within our Church buildings, and the arrangements for acts of worship, parish meetings and organisations. Despite the easing of the restrictions, we still though have to be mindful that the transmission rate is still high and therefore we have to continue to do everything we can to keep everyone in our parishes and wider community safe. We also need to be mindful that many of those who have regularly attended services in our church buildings throughout the pandemic have found reassurance and comfort in the mitigation that has been in place so to instantly remove it would leave those same people feeling vulnerable and exposed. As we look to a brighter future, with more freedom and less restrictions, we need to move forward cautiously and with a measure of restraint in the early stages in order to bring everybody with us as we return to some level of normality.

The following guidance notes are simply to provide some help and assistance to clergy, Select Vestry members and parishioners as together we all try to navigate our way forward. Many of the decisions about practical arrangements will have to be made at parish level based on local knowledge, context, and the current situation at any given time.

Covid symptoms - Anyone who has (or think they might have) any of the symptoms of Covid-19, or are just generally feeling unwell, should be encouraged not to come to services or other meetings to avoid the risk of spreading the virus to others.

Hand sanitisers should continue to be available at the entrance to buildings and used by everyone entering and leaving the premises.

Ventilation remains a significant mitigation against the spread of this airborne virus. Windows and doors should be open where possible to allow good airflow.

Contact Tracing is no longer required.

Social Distancing is no longer a requirement but some spacing is still encouraged in church buildings when people are seated together with others who they are not in regular contact with, particularly in the early stages of the easing of restrictions. Clergy and Select Vestries may want to reflect on what is right and appropriate in their own local situation. Some will choose to maintain social distancing for the time being. Others, where there is significant pressure for space, may wish to revert to more 'normal' seating patterns.

Face coverings - It is strongly recommended that they continue to be worn, for the time being, when people are in close contact with others inside. When entering and moving around inside a building and particularly during congregational singing, face coverings should be worn. Face coverings may be removed when people are seated

and not singing but that is a matter of personal preference. This guidance applies to services and meetings.

Pastoral visitation is possible for clergy and lay visitors in both care homes and hospitals subject to the local situation and current regulations as stipulated on each site. Clergy are advised to contact hospitals and care homes in advance of visiting to confirm local arrangements. Visits to parishioners in their own homes is also possible subject to a sensitive awareness that not everyone will be comfortable with others visiting in their home just yet. It may be useful to ring ahead to arrange visits rather than to be in the difficult or embarrassing position of being refused entrance.

Sunday Schools and Parish organisations can meet in Church premises provided that some thought is given to careful management of groups and their planned activities. The wearing of face coverings should be encouraged when individuals are moving around inside a building but may be removed when seated.

General

With the current trajectory, and if there are no new variants or major increases in the spread or seriousness of the symptoms of the virus, then it is hoped that by Easter we should all be facing a much better situation as we move on into the summer months and beyond.

It has been a very difficult two-year period but the hard work, careful observance of the restrictions and general care for the well-being of the whole community has enabled us to reach this point in what has been one of the most difficult global situations in recent history. As we start into the work of renewing, re-energising and rebuilding the life of the Church we give thanks to God for his presence with us in the midst of the storm.