

FREE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND



A Route Map

29 May 2020

Looking at the other side: a route map out of the pandemic

The COVID-19 (C-19) Group is a sub-group reporting to the Board of Trustees. The Board has the responsibility to address risks in finance, reputation, health and safety within the denomination and mitigate accordingly.

The C-19 group has met weekly since March and has communicated advice through mailings, website and the Moderator's Friday video message.

The group has had direct engagement with government regarding marriage regulations during lockdown.

On 21 May the Scottish government released a 'Route map for moving out of lockdown.' This route map gave details of a gradual four phase move out of the current state of lockdown. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-framework-decision-making-scotlands-route-map-through-out-crisis/>

The C-19 Group offers a route map for moving out of lockdown for our congregations.

Guiding principles

The glory of God. The Church does not exist to self-perpetuate and look within. Its mission is to declare the glory of God in worship and mission. In the present climate we are thankful that the word of God is not in chains. We continue our mission, albeit in different circumstances. (1 Corinthians 10:31, 2 Tim 2:9)

Respect for government. The Free Church of Scotland recognise the teaching of The Bible that we are subject to the governing authorities. We recognise the duty and authority of the civil government to protect the wellbeing of the nation. (Romans 13:1-7)

We shall therefore comply with the law, advice and timings given by government.

Gospel reputation. We recognise that we live in a culture of intense scrutiny of behaviour within the lockdown period. The reputation of our Lord and His Church must be jealously guarded. (1 Timothy 2:7)

Clarity in communication. At all points we shall communicate with the wider denomination in a regular and transparent manner. (2 Corinthians 4:2)

Charity at all times. We recognise that the current situation has brought a high degree of fear. Fear breeds anxiety which leads to tensions over how the crisis ought to be dealt with. In particular we urge wisdom and grace to prevail in all our communications with each other but especially identify social media as a particular point of conflict. (1 Corinthians 13)

Unity of the Church. The effects of COVID-19 vary across the nation. Opinions vary regarding the origin, management and treatment of the pandemic. It is a time to put personal opinions aside as we work for the greater good. (1 Corinthians 1:10)

One of the many benefits of being a denomination is the opportunity for a larger group of churches to act as one in moving through the crisis.

We also commit to consult with and learn from other churches.

A route map

It is impossible to give a timeline for the route map as each phase will be introduced as the effects of the pandemic diminish. Aside from Phase 1, the timing of the phases is not yet known, although the position will be reviewed at least every 3 weeks. We emphasise that:

- the initial route map does not have all the answers and does not set exact timescales;
- further guidance will be issued as we move through the different phases of easing of restrictions;
- notice of changes will be given to allow time to prepare;
- it may be that not everything currently listed in a single phase will happen at the same time, as it may be possible to lift some measures more quickly while others may take longer than presently envisaged;
- a single phase may span more than one review period; and
- we do not know exactly what will happen in each of the phases, or how long each phase will last for – a phase could last for 3 weeks, 5 weeks, 6 weeks or any other length of time, depending on currently unknown factors.

This document is written in the light of current government advice. It is important to bear in mind that this may change over the coming months and beyond and our guidance will be refined accordingly.

1. Phase One

Commenced 29 May. There will be no change to the present lockdown rules as regards church services, church buildings, weddings and funerals.

The regulations allow one household to meet up (outdoors only, including in gardens) with one other household per day, in groups no larger than 8, but with physical distancing required. This allows for a degree of pastoral engagement and fellowship, but we emphasise the need for no physical contact, social distancing of at least 2 metres, and always outdoors.

2. Phase Two

There is a provision for churches to be open for private prayer with physical distancing and hygiene safeguards. Whilst respecting other traditions, the provision of churches for prayer has never been part of our church culture.

Our view is that it is not good stewardship of resources to manage the required security, physical distancing, hygiene and cleaning requirements associated with opening church

buildings for prayer. We await further guidance but, initially at least, weddings and funerals should not occur in Free Churches during this phase.

3. Phase Three

In phase 3, churches will be allowed to be open to “extended groups” subject to physical distancing and hygiene standards. In this phase there will also be a relaxation of restrictions to attendances at funerals and marriages beyond “close family”.

In phase 4, “mass gatherings” can resume in line with public health advice, and all ceremonies can take place, with improved hygiene and other precautions.

We await more detailed government advice and direction in due course as to what “extended groups” and “mass gatherings” will mean in practical terms for churches, but the following are important matters for congregations to consider in the meantime, in anticipation of being permitted at some point in the coming months to start the process of returning to a “new normal”, through phase 3 and into phase 4.

3.1 When to reopen?

When the time comes that churches are allowed to reopen, this does not mean that all congregations must do so immediately. You should only reopen once you have been able to make all necessary arrangements, and when it is practical and safe for you to do so.

3.2 Who can safely come to church?

When the time comes that churches are allowed to reopen for services, this does not mean that everyone in the congregation should start coming back to church at the same time. For individuals in high risk groups, it may not be safe to return to church immediately. For further information on high risk groups see <https://www.gov.scot/publications/covid-shielding/pages/highest-risk-classification/>. Consideration should be given as to what alternative provision can be made for them until such time as it is safe for them to return. For example, can you continue or start to provide live-streamed services? Also, some older people may be reluctant to stay away from church. How can they be encouraged to follow the appropriate health advice at the relevant time?

It must be made clear that anyone displaying any of the symptoms of COVID-19, or who have been in close contact with any who have displayed symptoms, should not attend church in any circumstances.

3.3 Preparing the building for use after lockdown – some steps to take

Before bringing any building back into use, various steps should be taken in preparation. Different considerations will apply for congregations who do not have their own building but who

use let space – such congregations will require to liaise with the owners of the buildings, but should at all times bear in mind the need to maintain the same physical distancing and hygiene standards as those using their own buildings.

General health and safety

Buildings should be checked over thoroughly to make sure all is in order – wind and watertight, electrics working, no obvious hazards etc.

Legionella

This is a particular concern where buildings have been unused for a prolonged period. If your water supply has not been drained, you should ensure that all taps are run for at least 20 minutes, and all toilets flushed. Instant hot water systems should be set to 60 degrees centigrade.

Cleaning

If no-one has been using the building during the lockdown the virus should not be present on any of the surfaces as it will not have survived over the period of lockdown. However, it is likely that as a minimum someone will have been in the building to do security checks and run taps etc. for legionella prevention, and in some cases the building will also have been used by the minister for livestreaming or recording services. You should ensure that all surfaces which may have been touched during the week prior to reopening are thoroughly cleaned e.g. pews, chairs, tables, pulpit, lectern, microphones, door handles, light switches, kitchen and toilet surfaces etc.

Altering seating arrangements and marking floors

Chairs should be set out a minimum of 2m apart. It is not practical to second guess household groups when setting out chairs. Selected pews should be closed off, and 2m markers placed at suitable points on those left open. 2m markers should be clearly marked on the floors and ground at the entrance/exit areas, both inside and outside the building.

Hand sanitiser

A supply of hand sanitiser should be available at the entrance for use by everyone entering the building.

Face coverings

The public use of facial coverings is not mandatory to prevent the spread of coronavirus. Physical distancing (maintaining a distance of at least 2 metres), hand washing and respiratory hygiene, are the most important and effective measures.

Bibles, psalm/hymn books, service sheets etc.

These must all be removed from public areas for the time being. People may use only their own bibles etc. Where possible, words should be displayed electronically. People may be reminded

that a Sing Psalms App for mobile devices is freely available through iOS and Android stores, and most hymns can be easily found online in advance or during a service.

Offering

As many people as possible should be encouraged to give their offering by electronic means. For those who are unable or who do not wish to do this, a closed donation box should be acquired and securely positioned near the entrance. A supply of disposable gloves for use by those counting money should also be acquired.

Signage

To assist in communicating the new rules, consider preparing and placing appropriate signage which can be clearly seen and understood by all.

3.4 Altered building capacity – issues arising to be considered

Once churches are open for the holding of services and other activities, the present rules on physical distancing will still apply. Consideration therefore should be given as to how this will affect your gatherings, as the capacity of your building will inevitably have changed to a significant extent.

Depending on the size of the building and the numbers typically attending services pre-lockdown, it may no longer be possible for the building to accommodate the same number of people as before. You need to think about what arrangements you will need to make around this. How will you deal with limiting numbers where this is necessary? How will you seek to avoid situations of people arriving and having to be turned away? What about too many people arriving all at the same time/late/too close to the start of the service? Ideally arrival times would be sufficiently spread out, to facilitate physical distancing outside the building, around the entrance (inside and out) and inside the building on the way to a suitably distanced seat. Should consideration be giving to dividing numbers between more than one service? If so, on what basis would this be done, and how would it be communicated to the congregation? What about visitors? What about the number of services this would mean the minister having to lead?

As a starting point, you will need to work out the maximum number of people who can be safely accommodated in your building at any one time, and then consider the practicalities of ensuring that this limit is always adhered to.

3.5 Before the service

All surfaces in the building should have been thoroughly cleaned/disinfected before each use. This includes toilets, kitchen areas (even although teas/coffees are not being served surfaces may still have been touched, e.g. for providing glasses of water), pews, chairs, tables, pulpit, lectern, microphones, door handles and light switches.

If possible, doors should be kept open to avoid the need for anyone having to touch them.

Check that there is sufficient hand sanitiser at the entrance for people to use on arrival.

Welcomers must remain at a 2m distance from everyone arriving, this may mean standing outside rather than in the vestibule/lobby. Welcomers should not shake hands with people arriving.

There should also be stewards on duty to count the numbers arriving and ensure that once the maximum permitted number are in the building no-one else is admitted.

3.6 During the service

If possible, some windows/doors should be left open for ventilation.

Ministers and others with a formal part in the service, where possible, should be at least 4m away from the front row of the congregation whilst preaching, singing etc.

Any music group should be as small as possible. Group members should maintain at least a 2m distance from each other. Singing may require more than 2m social distancing and so may have to be restricted initially.

For the time being, there should be no Sunday School or creche.

Communion and Baptisms

These are suspended until further notice. The C-19 Group is considering options for communion during this phase and will provide further guidance in due course. We do not encourage 'virtual communion'.

Weddings and Funerals

Further government advice is awaited. As a minimum, the same rules on physical distancing and hygiene and funeral services can be expected to apply.

3.7 After the service

People should leave the building one at a time keeping a 2m distance. The appointed stewards should supervise this.

For the time being there should be no social gatherings for tea/coffee etc.

Hand sanitiser should be available at the exit.

Those counting money should do so wearing disposable gloves provided.

Door handles and handrails should be disinfected at the end.

All surfaces in the building should be thoroughly cleaned before the building is next used, which is of course an ‘act of necessity and mercy.’

3.8 Lettings

Unless adequate thorough cleaning between uses is guaranteed, it may be advisable to delay restarting short-term/casual lettings of church buildings to other groups for the time being. The use of kitchen facilities by other groups should not be permitted.

4. Phase Four

Once we are in phase 4, the country should have reached the “new normal”. The Scottish Government states: “In this, the final phase in our transition through the crisis, the virus remains suppressed to very low levels and is no longer considered a significant threat to public health, but society remains safety conscious...Scotland is open with precautions and the importance of hygiene and public health are emphasised. It could be many months, or longer, until we reach this phase.”

The Church should also have reached a ‘new normal’, with a new appreciation of the importance of health and safety within our buildings.

*In dwellings of the righteous
is heard the melody
Of joy and health: the Lord's right hand
doth ever valiantly.*

Psalm 118:15 (Scottish Psalter)