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 2. Coronavirus (COVID-19) (<https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus-taxon>)
 3. COVID-19: guidance for the safe use of places of worship and special religious services and gatherings during the pandemic (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship-during-the-pandemic-from-4-july>)
- Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ministry-of-housing-communities-and-local-government>)

Guidance

Special religious services and gatherings COVID-19 checklist

Updated 16 October 2020

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This publication is available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship-during-the-pandemic-from-4-july/special-religious-services-and-gatherings-covid-19-checklist>

We recognise that detailed government guidance can be difficult apply to unique situations, events or places. However, there are some key principles that should help us all make decisions that ensure we can all take part in special religious services and gatherings safely.

And remember, if you are unwell or have any of the main symptoms of coronavirus (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-stay-at-home-guidance/stay-at-home-guidance-for-households-with-possible-coronavirus-covid-19-infection>) - a new continuous cough, a high temperature or loss or change to your sense of smell or taste - get a test immediately and stay at home where you should isolate. Do not invite anyone to your house and do not leave home. You should not prepare food for others.

COVID local alert levels

Before attending a place of worship, or marking a religious event by visiting another household, you should check whether there are any geographic lockdown measures being introduced within your local area (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/local-covid-alert-levels-what-you-need-to-know>).

On 12 October the government introduced a system of local COVID alert levels. If you live, work or volunteer in an area that is part of a:

- local COVID alert level: high or
- local COVID alert level: very high

there are additional restrictions which apply to you.

In most areas of the country “COVID alert level – medium restrictions are in place. When meeting friends and family you do not live with (or have formed a support bubble with) you must not meet in a group of more than 6, indoors or outdoors.

In areas subject to “COVID alert level – high” restrictions, you must not mix outside of your household or support bubble indoors, including within a place of worship.

In areas subject to “COVID alert level – very high” restrictions, you must not mix outside of your household or support bubble, including within a place of worship, indoors or or outdoors.

Find out about what local restrictions apply to your area (<https://www.gov.uk/find-coronavirus-local-restrictions>).

There are some exceptions, to these requirements, for weddings, funerals and events to commemorate someone’s passing. For more information about these exceptions and COVID local alert levels please consult the guidance (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/local-covid-alert-levels-what-you-need-to-know>).

At home/with family

When celebrating religious festivals, your main concern should be to limit risks around the transmission of the virus. Those risks increase whenever households mix. A household means those people who usually live together under the same roof and share facilities with you. If you have family members who do not normally live with you (and are not part of your ‘support bubble’), they need to be treated as a separate household.

That means that, even if your local alert level allows you to meet with other households, (see above):

- As hard as it is, try to meet as few people outside your household as possible.
- You should ensure you wash your hands frequently and keep at least 2 metres (or 1 metre with additional measures) apart from people outside your own household or bubble, even in other people's homes.
- Other actions taken to reduce the risk of transmission should also be considered, for example, any food shared should be pre-wrapped, and ensure friends and family use their own dishes and cutlery.
- Family visits to a grave should follow the social distancing rules, keeping at least 2 metres (or 1 metre with additional measures) apart between different households outdoors or indoors.

At your place of worship

Communal worship or prayer can be attended by as many people as the place of worship can safely accommodate, in a way which complies with COVID-19 secure guidance (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19/offices-and-contact-centres>). Separate households should maintain social distancing from one another at all times and restrictions on mixing should reflect the area's COVID local alert level. It is important that risks are managed sensibly.

In line with wider Places of worship guidance (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship-during-the-pandemic-from-4-july>):

- Do** - Follow the mitigations that places of worship have put in place, for example using booking systems, changes to entrances and exits or staggered arrivals.
- Do** - Continue to broadcast services online for those who need to stay at home or are able to mark the event at home to avoid large gatherings.
- Don't** break social distancing (2 metres between households, or 1 metre with mitigations, if 2 metres is not possible), and especially avoid touching people outside of your household.
- Don't** interact socially outside of your household, or (in Medium local alert levels only) the group (of up to 6 people), that you went to the place of worship with.
- Do** - You must wear a face covering (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/face-coverings-when-to-wear-one-and-how-to-make-your-own/face-coverings-when-to-wear-one-and-how-to-make-your-own>) (unless you are exempt) – you must also wear these if you travel on public transport or visit a shop.
- Do** - Make sure you provide your contact details to the place of worship to support the NHS Test and Trace service designed to track and help prevent the spread of COVID-19. This can be done through the NHS Test and Trace App.
- Don't** use shared areas for ablutions – wash at home, unless in an emergency.
- Do** - Remove communal resources such as prayer mats or prayer books. Single use alternatives should be removed after use and disposed of by the worshipper.
- Do** - Make sure only you touch your belongings, for example shoes if removed.
- Do** - Take home any personal items brought in to aid worship, such as a prayer mat, prayer beads, or any ritual items associated with the festival.
- Do** - Speak into a microphone to lead devotions or sermons to avoid shouting. Avoid sharing microphones between different speakers.

Do - Small groups of singers, including choirs, can perform in front of worshippers. Singing should be limited to a small set group of people and

Don't - Activities should not include congregational singing or audience participation.

Gathering outside

We know that prayers in the park and other outdoor spaces are an important feature of some festivals.

People must follow the restrictions on social mixing set out by their area's COVID local alert level and adhere to social distancing between households.

In local 'COVID alert level: medium or high' areas people must not mingle in a group of more than 6 (other than with those they live with or have formed a support bubble with) outdoors.

In 'local COVID alert level: very high', people must not mingle outdoors with anyone they do not live with or have formed a support bubble with.

These are legal restrictions and the police will have the powers to enforce these legal limits, including to issue fines (fixed penalty notices) of £200, doubling for further breaches up to a maximum of £6,400.

In the grounds of a place of worship

The law allows for multiple groups to pray in a place of worship or its grounds.

In medium COVID local alert level areas, the law allows for multiple groups of 6 people to participate, provided that these groups do not mingle.

In high or very high level areas, the law allows for multiple groups of different households and support bubbles to participate, provided that these groups do not mingle.

A risk assessment must be conducted, and COVID-19 Secure measures implemented. The number of people who are able to gather will therefore be dependent on the size of the space available.

A risk assessment should also consider the security of worshippers. This may require involving local partners such as the police.

Public outdoor spaces

For acts of worship taking place away from the place of worship and surrounding grounds please follow the relevant guidance on the number of people permitted to gather in those spaces.

If anyone is considering arranging an event for more than 6 people in a public outdoor space they should liaise with those responsible for the open space in question and the local authority to ensure that the event can be staged in a safe and legal way, which includes undertaking a risk assessment that considers security.

Events taking place in public outdoor spaces should follow the principles outlined in the Guidance for providers of outdoor facilities (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-on-phased-return-of-sport-and-recreation/guidance-for-providers-of-outdoor-facilities-on-the-phased->

return-of-sport-and-recreation).

Private outdoor spaces

It is illegal for groups larger than 6 to meet in a private outdoor space, including private gardens unless the group consists solely of a single household plus any support bubble.

Religious activity is not exempt from this rule.

To make sure that people are not putting themselves at risk of contracting COVID-19, where possible you should avoid attending large gatherings.

Don't join in with any large gatherings in outdoor spaces which do not have safety measures in place.

Don't risk your health by attending an event that hasn't been approved by your council or the land owner.

Do - If you choose to attend any gathering, you should ensure that it is COVID-19 secure and that you follow the safety advice set out by event organisers.

Do - The best way to make an event COVID-19 secure is for the community to actively work with the owner, the council, the local police and local partners. Those partners will have to carefully check that people can attend with minimal risk of transmitting COVID-19.

Do - Limiting the numbers attending any gathering as far as possible will greatly reduce any transmission risks.

Do - All events should follow social distancing guidance, and organisers should carry out risk assessments and apply the principles above.

Do - In public spaces (beyond the place of worship's own grounds), you should work alongside the owner of that space and with other relevant authorities such as the local authority and police to put safety measures in place. You may want to do that even if on the grounds of a place of worship to manage other risks.

Do - Most importantly - if you are any doubt that risks can be managed effectively, then find a safer way to host your event.

Do - It's also important that you do not stay long after prayers/worship and you should not hug or touch anyone outside your household.

We know this might be disappointing but it's important to remember that the virus is still with us and we need to do all we can to protect ourselves and our family and friends.

These restrictions and guidance are in place to keep all of our families, friends and communities safe during this time and we recognise that festivals will be marked differently throughout this pandemic.