



DIOCESE OF Hexham & Newcastle

Rt Rev Robert Byrne CO
Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle

Bishop's House, 26 West Avenue, Gosforth, Newcastle, NE3 4ES
Tel: 0191 228 0003 | Fax: 0191 274 0432 | Email: bishop.robert@rcdhn.org.uk | Web: www.rcdhn.org.uk

28 January 2022

Dear Fathers, Deacons and Religious

As you will know, the Prime Minister announced last week that the Government was removing all of its 'Plan B' COVID restrictions from 27th January. Following this, I have taken both clergy and lay advice in considering our diocesan Covid controls whilst also giving consideration to the latest guidance published by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales (CBCEW) on 26th January, a link for which is included below:

<https://www.cbcew.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2022/01/Covid19-Guidance-for-Churches-January-2022.pdf>

Diocesan COVID Controls

Given the local prevailing conditions in the North East please note some additional controls recommended alongside those detailed by CBCEW. The Diocesan position on the most pertinent points is as follows:

- **COVID symptoms** - people displaying any symptoms of COVID should stay at home and not travel to church or participate in person.
- **Vaccinations** - are the best way to control the spread of COVID. We can show that we care for each other by getting vaccinated and attending for the booster dose when it becomes available.
- **Ventilation** - it is still important to ventilate churches. This has the effect of diluting and dispersing viral particles.
- **Hand sanitiser** - it is still good practice to sanitise hands on entry and exit of churches. There is no need for readers (or other ministers) to sanitise their hands before reading or performing other ministries in the church (except Eucharistic Ministers - see below under 'Acts of Worship').
- **Face coverings** - all those attending church are encouraged to wear a face covering. It is recommended that clergy on the sanctuary, providing they are sufficiently distant (2M or more) from the congregation, do not need to wear a face covering except when distributing Holy Communion.
- **Social Distancing and Capacity of Churches** - it is encouraged that social distancing of 1M continues between households.
- **Stewards** - it may be helpful that stewards continue to be deployed where numbers wishing to attend are likely to exceed the capacity of the church.
- **Cleaning** - usual pre-Covid forms of church cleaning are sufficient. Touch cleaning in between services is no longer required.

- **Congregational Singing** – indoor congregational singing can continue to take place and it is recommended that face coverings are worn by members of the congregation. The use of cantor groups and other choirs is permitted, without the use of face coverings, provided all members of the group are a minimum of 1M apart, facing the same direction and are a minimum of 2M from the congregation.
- **NHS Test and Trace** – The Government is still encouraging certain venues, including places of worship, to keep a record of those attending to support the NHS Test and Trace programme. This could be achieved, for example, by displaying an NHS QR code poster close to the entrance. People can check in by scanning the NHS QR code poster via their NHS COVID-19 app. Consideration may also be given to using a separate signing-in system which is manageable for the parish.
- **Hymn books and Mass cards** – can be reintroduced (if you have not done so already).
- **Acts of Worship**
 - Holy water stoups may be refilled but care should be seen that the water is changed regularly (at a minimum of once a week).
 - There should be a return to the normal mode of celebrating Mass respecting the integrity of the Rite. This would include:
 - the reintroduction of the Prayer of the Faithful
 - the Sign of Peace may be offered again if felt appropriate
 - Holy Communion should be distributed at the usual place and in the usual mode (i.e. with the faithful approaching the minister in an orderly procession)
 - For the time being, Holy Communion must continue to be given under one kind only (the Sacred Host) and the ministers will continue to sanitise their hands beforehand and wear a face covering whilst distributing. Communion is recommended to be distributed in the hand but those who wish to receive on the tongue may do so. There should be care on the part of the minister to avoid physical contact with the hand or the tongue of the communicant when distributing Holy Communion. In the event of contamination the minister should sanitise their hands before further distribution
 - For concelebrations of clergy, intinction of the Precious Blood with the Sacred Host should continue to be used
 - Where there is physical touch as part of another Rite of the Church (for example, anointing of the sick, anointing of foreheads etc) the use of cotton buds is no longer mandated, but the hands should be cleaned well before and after the Rite
- **Celebration of Holy Baptism** – Baptisms can take place with a recommended 1M spacing between households. However, it is recommended that Baptisms involving multiple families and children should be avoided for now.
- **Celebration of Confirmation** - Confirmations can be celebrated as usual.
- **Celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation** - a physical barrier, such as a Perspex sheet or heavy curtain, should cover the grille between the confessor and the penitent. Good ventilation of the penitent's side of the confessional should be deployed to prevent stagnation of air.
- **Immunisation status of Eucharistic Ministers and others** - all those responsible for distributing communion to the sick and housebound must only do so if they have received their recommended COVID vaccinations. People who are unvaccinated are

at much greater risk of becoming infected with COVID and passing it on. In this particular situation, the risk of transmission by touch or expelled breath is increased further because the Eucharistic Minister would be coming into close contact with the sick or housebound communicant. Additionally, a sick communicant is much more likely to develop a more serious reaction to COVID if it were to be transmitted. It is recommended that people who are engaged in a form of pastoral ministry which involves ministry to the housebound, sick and vulnerable, should take regular lateral flow tests to ensure they are safe to do so. These are free from the NHS.

An update of the Diocesan Risk Assessment, Handbook and FAQs is currently being prepared to reflect these changes and will be issued in due course.

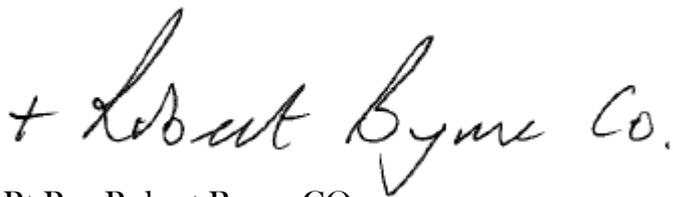
Parish Halls and Meeting Spaces

Church halls and meeting spaces can re-open to all groups and activities with immediate effect. As previously advised to use our church halls and meeting spaces we must first undertake a COVID secure Risk Assessment in a similar way as we have done for our church buildings. Two options continue to be available for having this risk assessment undertaken. Option 1 allows for a physical inspection by PIB Risk Management and will cost in the region of £300 per site. Option 2 includes for the online training of parish volunteers who then assist in carrying out the risk assessment and will cost in the region of £170 per site. Michael McElroy can be contacted at michael.mcelroy@diocesemn.or.uk to explain this in more detail.

I am grateful for your continued support in the implementation of our Diocesan COVID controls. I would also like to express my sincere thanks for the efforts of all our parish volunteers including those who have cleaned or acted as a steward. This vital work has enabled us to continue welcoming people safely into churches during these unprecedented times.

A further review of the COVID controls will take place at end of February against the data available at that time.

With every good wish and blessing



✠ Rt Rev Robert Byrne CO
Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle

