

COVID-19 Advice for clergy conducting weddings

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| 26 th March 2021 | 6.0 | The House of Bishops Recovery Group |
| Updates from version 5.6: this document has been edited following the publication of the Government's four step plan for coming out of lockdown on the 22 nd February and further guidance on for weddings published on the 22 nd March. | | |

The Recovery Group has been set up to support the Church of England as government guidance changes through the COVID-19 pandemic. This document has been prepared with information available by the issue date. It will be kept under review and updated as the situation develops, with each update issued as a new version. The current version will always be available to download from the Church of England website via the [Coronavirus FAQs page](#).

Our intention is to ensure that weddings can be as joyful and fulfilling an experience as possible while continuing to follow best public health practice and government guidance. This document has been drafted to reflect that. Where the marriage is within the celebration of Holy Communion this advice should be read with '[Conducting Public Worship](#)' and the advice on Holy Communion should also be followed.

1. Who can attend the service?

The Government's roadmap out of lockdown for spring 2021 follows four steps, which other than step 1 have **indicative dates** and are dependent on four criteria being met to go ahead. At each step there are changes to the numbers proposed for attending weddings. These are summarised below:

Step 1: 6 people attending, 29th March

Step 2: 15 people attending, estimated for 12th April at the earliest

Step 3: 30 people attending, estimated for 17th May at the earliest

Step 4: no limit on people attending, estimated for 21st June at the earliest

The Government guidance says that "anyone working, including officials, are not included as part of the limit on those attending". However, the intention of the guidance is to keep the numbers at weddings down to reduce risk while still enabling them to go ahead. So, when planning the ceremony consider the overall COVID risk situation with those attending when thinking about who is reasonably necessary to work alongside the officiant.

Please note there is currently a requirement for a risk assessment to be made for the church and all reasonable measures undertaken to limit the risk of transmission of coronavirus.

2. What about the length of the service?

In keeping with government guidance, we advise that the service should be kept concise while still consistent with the nature of the occasion, focusing on those parts of the marriage that are required in order to be legally binding under the law of England and Wales.¹

Legally, if anyone wishes to lodge an objection to the wedding, they are entitled to do so, and provision must be made to enable them to make their point while observing physical distancing. While this is likely to be a very rare event, it emphasises the importance of having someone present to control access to the building during the service.

3. Should face coverings be worn?

Face coverings are currently mandatory on public transport and in a range of indoor venues including Places of Worship and church halls. While there are exemptions (please see our [guidance document on face coverings](#)) **this is a legal requirement.**

There are valid exemptions for some individuals and groups to not wear a face covering in these settings. In particular, those who are leading services or events in a place of worship. Those exemptions also cover the bride and groom at a wedding and those officiating/leading the wedding. This exemption does not apply to those observing the wedding, who should wear face coverings consistent with the requirements for any other public space.

4. What special provisions should I make during the service?

The church building must be risk assessed and appropriate physical distancing and Public Health hygiene practices put in place so that the ceremony is conducted in a safe way – please see the guidance for [public worship](#).

Apart from the bride and groom, who join hands as an essential part of the marriage ceremony, a physical distance of 2 metres should be observed between individuals as far as is possible. Please note that the minister does not have to touch the rings at the Giving of Rings, nor does he or she have to touch the couple's hands as part of a prayer or blessing.

Where rings are touched by anyone other than the bride and groom alone, hands should be washed or sanitized before and after. The rings should be handled by as few people as possible.

During the service, those participating should not project their voices to minimise risk of droplet spread and the use of face coverings is encouraged.

The organist may play for the ceremony.

¹ In the case of the Church of England, this means, for instance, the parts of the Marriage Service included in the Structure on p.103 of *Common Worship: Pastoral Services* read with the Notes to that service.

If the bride is to be 'walked down the aisle' she should only be accompanied by a member of her household, while bridesmaids should be careful to observe physical distancing unless also from the same household.

Good public health hygiene should be observed throughout with hand sanitizers available at the door. If the church is to be used again within 48 hours it should be cleaned after the service following the guidelines [here](#).

5. What about singing and music in the ceremony?

The Government's [guidance](#) on marriages recommends that:

- Where singing or chanting is essential to the service this should be limited to one person wherever possible. Exceptionally, where it is essential to the service, up to three individuals should be permitted to do so. Strict social distancing should be observed and the use of Plexiglass screens should be considered to protect worshippers, and each other.
- Communal (congregational) singing should not take place.
- People should avoid singing, shouting, raising voices and/or playing music at a volume that makes normal conversation difficult or that may encourage shouting. This is important to mitigate the potential for increased risk of transmission - particularly from droplets and aerosol transmission.

6. What about signing the register?

All those signing the register should sanitize their hands before signing, complete all the signatures necessary for them and then sanitize them again. Apart from the bride and groom, all those signing should maintain physical distancing if practicable and, where available, individual pens for each signatory can be used.

Please note there will be changes to the registration of marriages from the 4th May.

7. What about legal aspects of weddings?

The following should cover most situations, but if in doubt, please consult your surrogate or the diocesan registrar:

- Please make sure that you know where you stand on the banns being read – and on the necessity for attendance to establish a connection if this was required. A Common Licence or a Special Licence may be appropriate in some cases, or a postponement of the wedding for others.
- If a couple want to cancel their wedding, the statutory fees will not be payable and must be refunded in full if already paid. Alternatively, they might wish to postpone their wedding to a mutually convenient date. If issues arise with regard to repayments including deposits, the DBF portion of the statutory fees and any other payments made prior for the marriage, advice should be sought from the diocesan registrar.
- You might wish to suggest that if the wedding goes ahead with restricted numbers, there could be a blessing in the year ahead with all guests present.

8. Can the couple have a wedding reception?

Wedding receptions and other celebrations for weddings and civil partnerships can continue to take place from step 2 onwards, but only in a COVID-19 secure venue. For step 2 no more than 15 people may attend, for step 3 30 people, for step 4 there will be no legal limit.

Specific Government [guidance](#) is available on wedding receptions.

9. What is the advice about booking future weddings?

Given the on-going uncertainties about how measures to tackle COVID-19 will progress during 2021 it would be prudent to ensure that when booking weddings couples are advised that there may still be a possibility that the indicative dates for steps 2, 3 and 4 may in fact be later with the lifting of restrictions being consequently later.

It is therefore recommended that you write to or email the couple to make clear that while we will do all we can to make sure the day goes as planned, we are not in control of the circumstances. Couples may wish to postpone their weddings and indeed the church may have to cancel dates that have been booked. In these circumstances the provision of extras such as music and bell ringing can only be provisional and couples may wish to consider taking out insurance.

10. Can blessing couples after a civil ceremony go ahead?

Yes, these can go ahead from step 2 onwards as stand-alone events following the same guidance above for enabling a wedding to go ahead in a safe way: with a limit of 15 during step 2, 30 during step 3 and no limit in step 4.

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