

## Securing and caring for your church buildings during the Covid-19 pandemic: advice for incumbents, churchwardens and PCC members

### Version Control

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*This document will be kept under review and updated as events develop, with each update issues as a new version. The current version will always be available to download from the Church of England website via the [Coronavirus FAQs page](#).*

*If you have questions about these issues, or would like the answer to additional questions, please email [churchcare@churchofengland.org.uk](mailto:churchcare@churchofengland.org.uk).*

The Archbishops have asked all churches to close with only a small number of exceptions. This is both to reduce travel and to help to model best practice in maintaining social distance. Following on from this it will be necessary to make some basic checks on your building to prepare it for being locked most of the time. For many of us this will be a difficult thing to do. We will miss the communal worship, the companionship, the opportunity for visitors to encounter God in our churches. The building will, of course, remain as a beacon of hope. Every reduction in the amount of travel makes a contribution to slowing the spread Covid-19.

Government and Church guidance is clear; people can only meet with members of their own household. People have been told to stay at home and only make journeys that are absolutely necessary, such as shopping for essential items and to take daily exercise. The Church must take a lead in following this in order to slow down the spread of the virus.

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## Telling people what's happening

### **Should we tell people why we're closing the building?**

Yes. Put notices in place to explain what you have done and why. The Archbishops have provided a template that can be [accessed here](#).

It would be a good idea to put a flyer through the door of neighbours to the church, with details of any online activities you have planned, or directing them to central resources such as [Time to Pray](#) and the weekly services broadcast live on the [Church of England's Facebook page](#).

At the same time encourage those living near your church to keep an eye on the building. There may be a heightened risk of security issues while the building is unoccupied. Ask local people to report suspicious activity and give them the details to do this. If they suspect an act of theft or vandalism is taking place, they should call the police.

## How to close the church building for an extended time

### **Should I turn off the electricity?**

Turn off and unplug all unnecessary electrical equipment. Check manufacturers' instructions about turning off kitchen equipment.

If you turn off the mains supply, check there are no unexpected consequences – such as turning off any alarms, communications devices powered from the church supply, the turret clock or organ humidifier, for example. These devices should be left operational.

### **Should I turn off the water?**

If no-one will access the building, and nothing is in use (such as an organ humidifier or heating) that needs a water supply, turn off the water supply at the mains. If it is appropriate to drain the system, do so. If the water is left on, make sure that there are no taps left running or leaking fittings. When you come to re-open the church be aware that there could be an issue with water storage tanks or plumbing spurs which could become infected by legionella. It would be worth scheduling testing and making sure you give time to run fresh water through your system.

### **Should I leave the heating on?**

If your heating has controls that make it possible, a minimum temperature to protect from frost should be maintained within the property.

If you are one of the small number of churches running a conservation heating regime this should be left in operation.

## Should I stop access to the site, as well as to the church building itself?

Ensure that vehicle access to your church is secured if possible, so that vehicles cannot easily access the building itself. If you have gates, close and lock them. This is partly because it is important to remain conscious of the safety of others accessing the churchyard and church - even if they are not meant to be there. You should take reasonable steps to secure the site, but we appreciate that for many churches it is not possible (or desirable) to limit all access to the churchyard and wider site.

## What should I be aware of when I lock up?

Make sure every space is empty of people and animals that may become trapped when you lock up.

Make sure that any valuables are properly secured. Do not leave cash, unpackaged or fresh food, or valuable stock on the premises. Ensure that you set your alarm, including a roof alarm, if you have one. Store bins away from the building and remove anything else that could help someone break in or cause damage. Secure any letterboxes or other points of entry.

## What can we do?

### Can we do anything to keep an eye on the building?

Yes, but you must always follow government guidelines on travel.

There will probably be members of the congregation taking their daily exercise or shopping for essentials whose route will pass by the church. They could check if all looks well from the outside, without entering the building. Consider whether you could put together a community rota to check the outside of the church daily.

It may be reasonable for **one designated person** to enter the church to check that it remains safe and secure, provided they follow all government guidelines and have access to appropriate materials to sanitise surfaces such as doorknobs. This must not happen on a rota, as numerous people entering the building would represent a transmission risk, and must be limited to essential maintenance checks. The following things can usefully be checked on from ground level:

- The lightning conductor
- Any lead roofs and flashings
- That heating oil is still safe and undisturbed
- That there are no leaks to mains water supplied services
- That downpipes, gutters and gullies are working properly.

Any accidental damage should be recorded. A pair of binoculars can be helpful in assessing the building. This inspection should be done from ground level and without climbing ladders.

### **What about access to the church for winding the clock and/or changing the time, servicing or surveying for telecoms infrastructure and other essential activities?**

Any access that is required must be in accordance with government guidance for essential travel and social distancing.

Servicing or surveying for telecoms infrastructure is an essential activity and the equipment provider may still require access to the tower.

Correcting the time of the clock does not justify the risk of a lone person climbing the tower, and we do not recommend this happens while the current lockdown restrictions are in place.

### **What about access for organ practice?**

Organ practice cannot be considered as essential activity under the government guidance and does not justify a separate journey.

### **Can I access my closed church to do the cleaning? I can do this alone, so I will be distancing myself from everybody.**

It is crucial to limit unnecessary journeys. Cleaning cannot be considered an essential activity that would justify a separate journey. Please be aware that a building in which someone who may have the coronavirus has been is considered 'dirty' (i.e. may contain infection) for 72 hours afterwards. This means multiple keyholders must not access the space, even if this is done one at a time. In any event surfaces and door fixtures need to be sanitised in line with [Public Health England guidelines](#).

## **Insurance**

*Your church insurer will have advice, please check with them for more detailed information and over relevant conditions in your insurance policy. Your insurer will know that you are not able to continue as normal.*

### **Will my church's insurance premiums rise as a result of Covid-19?**

We have been advised that premiums will not be adversely affected for existing policy periods, and upon renewal such closure, if continued, will not in itself attract any further weighting.

### **I had a business interruption clause in my policy, but my insurer is saying it doesn't cover pandemics. Is this right?**

Cover for business interruption or consequential loss is generally offered in the event of church closure due to damage from fire or other causes. Income loss due to closure arising from the Coronavirus will not generally be an insured peril, as it

will fall under the Force Majeure clause. Your insurer is the only one who can advise on your specific policy.

### **My insurance policy doesn't cover a closed church. What should I do?**

The answer to this varies slightly according to which insurance company your church uses:

**Ecclesiastical** has confirmed that their definition of 'unused' relates to the situation where the church is to close permanently or where the future use of the building is in doubt. In this instance churches are being closed on Government advice/ instruction only. For further guidance see [here](#).

**Trinitas Church Insurance** has extended to 90 days the period before the special provisions related to buildings being unused are applied. This will be reviewed again if closure instructions continue into June.

**Congregational** has waived the special obligations placed upon PCCs in relation to closure for 12 weeks, until 12 June 2020. This will be reviewed again if closure instructions continue. For further detail see [www.kingdom.bank/insurance](http://www.kingdom.bank/insurance)

## Finances

### **Closing the church will mean a drop in voluntary giving, rental incomes, and other sources of finance. Is there any financial help available?**

The government has announced a series of measure to help support organisations and individuals in this unprecedented time. You can see the current provisions [here](#).

We realise a lot of these measures are aimed at businesses and will have limited application to many churches. We expect further guidance on support for charitable organisations in the coming days, and we will update this document as relevant.

With regard to bills, utility companies are aware that some customers will have difficulties paying their bills and are posting advice on their websites. We recommend you check directly with them.

## Building works and public notices

### **My church is part-way through a building project. What should we do about contractors and making the site safe and secure?**

Up to date government guidance should always be followed. The construction industry has [guidance](#) that all contractors should be aware of and follow. With many contractors and builders' supply yards closing, most works will come to a stop. Ideally only safety critical works will be done during the lockdown.

If you have work on site that has stopped it is essential that you confirm with the contractors that the building is left safe, protected from the weather, and the site is secure. Materials and equipment that could attract thieves or vandals must be removed. If scaffolding has to be left in place it must be secured. You should inform your insurer of the situation.

We know that having scaffolding and potentially other building materials on site may have a cost impact, increasing the length of hire periods etc. We suggest contacting the relevant company directly about this; this may be your main contractor, rather than the scaffolding firm.

Contact your project funders. Funders are sympathetic to the current situation and are providing advice on funding deadlines, project outcomes, etc.

If any building work continues within the church, clergy should not enter it to say or to stream services, as surfaces can be contaminated and can remain so for at least 72 hours.

### **My church is due to start work on a building project. What should we do?**

We recommend not starting any works at present, unless they are to deal with immediate safety and security issues.

Up to date government guidance should always be followed. The construction industry has [guidance](#) that all contractors should be aware of and follow. With many contractors and builders' supply yards closing, most works will come to a stop, so there will always be a risk of works being stopped.

Contact your project funders. Funders are sympathetic to the current situation and are providing advice on funding deadlines, project outcomes, etc.

### **Should we go ahead with our church's Quinquennial Inspection, if it's only one person who will be on site?**

No. Undertaking the inspection will require travel to the site. Although it is important it is not essential under the government advice on travel restrictions as they stand.

### **What should we do about posting public notices?**

Displaying public notices, for example for applications under Faculty, is a requirement of primary legislation. Your diocesan chancellor can give a dispensation from posting a notice if this is necessary and guidance has been sent to each chancellor about this.

For situations where the need to post notices in public view (i.e. to a gate or notice board) remains, it is up to each parish who does this and how, but it should be done in the safest way possible, ideally by someone living nearby, observing advice on social distancing and careful handwashing, etc.

Although continuing to post physical notices of any application will ensure that you are adhering to the letter of the law, it is equally important to abide by the

spirit of it, which means that members of the public and statutory consultees should have the opportunity to engage fully with every application made under Faculty through a transparent and straightforward consultation process. The current situation will greatly reduce the opportunities for members of your congregation, local residents and visitors to see a public notice. If you are preparing to apply for permission, particularly for a large or complex project, we feel that there is a moral imperative for you to ensure that the plans and supporting documents are available on your website if you have one, and that responses to the consultation are invited through social media and relevant email lists, to ensure that the process remains fully open.

The need to carry out consultation in different ways is an opportunity to engage creatively and widely using electronic media and may help foster support for the church and awareness of what it is doing at this time.

If it is possible for you to delay an application, at least until the lockdown is lifted, then we strongly advise you to do so.

## Bats

### **How can I protect the church interior from bat droppings and urine while the church is not being regularly cleaned?**

Cover the surfaces where you know bat droppings or urine will accumulate. You can use plastic sheeting, fabric such as old sheets or banqueting roll. If you are concerned about the smell from bats while the church is closed, scatter the covering with something like dried lavender.

If you're involved in the bats in churches project or are planning bat mitigation surveys or works you can find how this has been affected [here](#).

## The churchyard

### **Are we allowed to lead worship outdoors, if people maintain 2m distance?**

No. The Archbishops have given clear guidance that our church buildings are closed and there should be no public worship.

However, you can encourage people to worship individually while they are out for their daily walk. There is a [wild worship field guide](#) produced by the Sanctuary Centre.

### **Must we lock the gates, or are we still allowed to keep the church grounds open for people to walk through?**

The government guidance allows daily exercise, and the proven mental health benefits of being in nature are well known. For many of our urban churches, the church grounds are the only green space around, and offer a sanctuary. We believe strongly that having access to green space has never been more important



than it is today for people's wellbeing, particularly for those without a garden. However, social distancing, as set out by the Government, is absolutely crucial so people must stay at least two metres apart at all times.

You should take reasonable steps to secure the site, but we appreciate that for many churches it is not possible (or desirable) to limit all access to the churchyard and wider site. Vehicular access should be restricted. Gates to car parks and driveways should be closed and locked. This is partly because it is important to remain conscious of the safety of others accessing the churchyard and church - even if they are not meant to be there.

If a public footpath runs through the churchyard it should not be obstructed. If the churchyard has become a gathering place the police may act to move people on.

**Are we allowed to cut the grass and other gardening? If we don't the church grounds will quickly look very overgrown.**

After the Prime Minister's address to the nation on Monday 23 March, Michael Gove clarified matters relating to 'exercise'. He said people would be allowed to run, walk or go to an allotment, but that more social activities, such as playing golf, were not allowed. On this basis, we believe it is appropriate for someone to come to church occasionally to mow the grass and carry out essential gardening. They should work alone (unless they are with someone from the same household). If they are using the church's equipment, then it should be sanitised before and after use.

This could be an opportunity to change your mowing regime, minimising mowing by allowing suitable areas to grow long over the next few weeks, allowing natural wild flowers to grow and encouraging biodiversity. You can get advice on this from [Caring for God's Acre](#).

**People are congregating in the church grounds, what should we do?**

Please do not put yourself at risk by attempting to move on groups of more than two people who are not from the same household. This is a matter for the police to enforce.

**We have local community groups (such as groups supporting people with disabilities, mental health issues, or suffering from social isolation) that work in our grounds. Do we need to tell them to stop?**

The professional organisations and charities that provide these services will have their own guidance on how to work during the Covid-19 emergency. You should ask about their compliance if they continue to use your grounds.

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