

## COVID-19 Outdoor Worship and Churchyards

Issue Date	Version	Issued by
2 <sup>nd</sup> December 2020	5.0	The House of Bishops Recovery Group
Update from version 4.0: on the 29th November the Government announced that congregational singing outdoors was permitted. Following this we have included an additional FAQ (2) on singing.		

*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](#).*

One of the learnings from the pandemic so far has been that transmission of the virus is reduced by activities taking place outdoors., More and more church communities may be thinking about how to use their churchyard or other nearby outdoor space for church activities. Specific Government [guidance](#) on places of worship and for [performing arts](#) highlights what is possible with outdoor worship.

There are many excellent resources to help with this, such as a [wild worship field guide](#) produced by the Sanctuary Centre and prayer stations from [Engage Worship](#). Further advice and lots of practical resources and examples can be found on our new Outdoor Worship page [here](#).

### **1. Q. Can we have worship in a churchyard or other public outdoor space?**

A. Yes, but the precautions you need to take depend on how many people attend.

If you are intending holding a gathering of more than 6 people in a churchyard or other public outdoor space, you must first carry out a risk assessment. The law allows for multiple groups of 6 people to participate, provided that these groups do not mingle. You can assess the capacity limits in the same way as you would for the inside of the building taking into account current guidance on physical distancing.

A risk assessment should be conducted, which includes security, guidance on physical distancing and other good hygiene practices implemented in relation to the COVID 19 virus. Guidance for this level of risk assessment is provided by the [HSE](#) and a template risk assessment is provided on the Church of England Coronavirus pages.

You must demonstrate that you have taken all reasonable measures to limit the risk of transmission of coronavirus using any guidance issued by the Government relevant to the gathering, such as is included in the places of worship [guidance](#) under outdoor worship and the guidance on [green spaces](#). If you do not manage the public outdoor space you should liaise with those responsible for the open space in question to ensure that the worship can be staged in a safe way that complies with what is said above.

## **2. Q. Can we sing outside?**

A. Yes. Congregations can sing outdoors as part of a service as long as individuals, households or bubbles maintain 2m distancing and other good public health hygiene practices are in place. The maximum number of people present should take into account the area of the outdoor space and the requirement to maintain physical distancing of 2m. Using seating arrangements (or if seats are not practical, markers on the ground) to set out distances may help with this. Particular attention should be paid to how participants can arrive and leave the site safely whilst maintaining physical distancing.

Where services are intending a mix of outdoor and indoor worship then it becomes particularly important to consider how people move between venues to maintain physical distancing of 2m at all times.

It is permitted for a choir to sing indoors, but where there are any performances or services in an indoor setting, the audience or congregation should not join in. The cumulative effect of aerosol transmission means the more people involved, the higher the risk of transmission. This means that it is important to limit the total number of individuals involved in singing or performing indoors as far as possible and why singing indoors should be limited to the performers only.

More details on how singing can be done safely are available in the Governments [Performing Arts](#) guidance.

## **3. Q. Can we open the church grounds for people to walk through and to sit in?**

A. Yes. The government's advice is that people can spend time outdoors, including private gardens and other outdoor spaces. The numbers allowed vary between tiers and depending on the type of outdoor space. In tiers one and two people may gather in groups of up to six people from different households, following social distancing guidelines. Public gatherings of more than six people from different households are prohibited in law unless all involved are from the same household or 2 linked households. There is no limit to the size of a gathering in an outdoor space if the people gathered are all members of the same household.

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. Having access to green space has never been more important than it is today for people's wellbeing, particularly for those without a garden.

Churchyards can be places of reflection. They can offer signs of hope and joy as well as sadness and mourning.

In all circumstances, as set out by the Government, it is absolutely crucial that people from different households/support bubbles maintain social distancing; ideally 2 metres, and if this is not possible then 1m plus appropriate measures to reduce risk of infection. The Government [guidance](#) gives helpful suggestions about managing physical distancing in outdoor spaces where there is considered to be an issue due to large numbers of people using them.

**4. Q. Are we allowed to cut the grass and other gardening?**

A. Yes. Whoever undertakes gardening, whether volunteer or professional, must take responsibility for the equipment that they use and for maintaining appropriate physical distancing. 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 by allowing suitable areas to grow long over the next few weeks, letting natural wildflowers grow and encouraging biodiversity. You can get advice on this from [Caring for God's Acre](#).

**5. Q. Can people visit to tend graves?**

A. Yes. The government has included burial grounds as places that can remain open.

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

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

If this is a regular occurrence you may wish to consider signage as an intervention as suggested in [Government guidance](#).

**7. Q. We have local community groups that work in our grounds. Do we need to tell them to stop?**

A. 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.