

COVID-19: Guidance for Safe Group Music-making in Church

UPDATE: This paper now reflects the move from Lockdown 2 in England to changes coming into effect from 12.01am on Wednesday 2nd December in the UK, and in our understanding covers the whole of December.

A summary of the current situation with relation to worship within the Church of England is:

- All church choirs are able, in principle, to continue singing and rehearsing.
- **The Rule of 6 now only applies in Tier 1** if your choir has more than 6 members (noting that arrangements for under-18s are separate and excluded from this). In this situation, a choir effectively operates as (multiple) social groups of 6 – ie there must be no mingling between groups, including before and after services and/or rehearsals, and employing appropriate social distancing etc within each group. If you don't think the choir can avoid social mingling at an activity, it should not take place; but in theory (and in careful practice) larger choirs can still meet and sing.
- **In Tiers 2 and 3 all choir activity must be predicated on social distancing at all times. Choirs of more than six can meet – however all related activity must be risk assessed and judged practical for rehearsal and performance, as well as arrival and departure.**
- Concerts in church: See DCMS guidance (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19/performing-arts>) - there are lots of parameters to consider to enable them to happen safely; but in principle these are possible; **performances in Tier 2 must take place at reduced (50%) audience capacity, and in Tier 3, are not permitted**
- Congregational singing: the CofE is continuing to actively investigate the parameters within which congregations might return to singing in due course, but as it stands, **congregational singing indoors should not take place, but congregational and carol singing outside is now permitted**. RSCM and the CofE continue to work together on this.

See below for more information in the FAQs. They are based on the guidance from the Government in Westminster, and not arrangements for devolved administrations. We will supply separate information for these parts of the UK in due course. **Our website contains other information for the UK's devolved administrations;** this set of guidance notes has taken the Church of England as the guiding 'church' context.

Carol Singing special update:

(see <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/guidance-for-the-christmas-period#carol-singing>)

Q: Can carol singing or carol services take place this Christmas?

Yes, but take careful note of sections below. Carol singing or carol services can take place safely if you follow advice based on guidance for the Performing Arts.

Q: Can we have Carol singing outdoors?:

Yes. Congregations can sing carols 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 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.

Door-to-door carol singing is permitted but you must abide by the relevant gathering limits, stay at least 2m away from the threshold of any property, maintain physical distancing between singers and follow the Performing Arts guidance.

Q: Can we have Carol singing indoors?

Yes – but only led by a choir. 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.

Where carol 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.

General principles:

Numbers: If singing does take place, steps should be taken to reduce the risk of transmission, including limiting the number of people participating as far as possible. The cumulative effect of aerosol transmission means the more people involved, the higher the risk of transmission.

Go ahead?: For adult amateur performances and rehearsals, you should consider the case for proceeding (or not), given the wider health context in your area and the context of your participants, particularly if vulnerable individuals are involved.

If you do proceed, you should follow performing arts guidance, and remember, it will be subject to local gathering limits. This means that if more than one group of six (in tier 1) or household (in tier 2 or 3) is performing or rehearsing indoors, they must not interact, 'mingle' or otherwise socialise together. You should maintain social distancing between groups or households at all times, including when entering or leaving the building or in any breaks. Direction can continue to take place during the activity i.e. between a conductor and a group, but other physical and social interaction is prohibited.

FAQs – General.

They are not definitive; and the key point is that you MUST undertake a proper risk assessment. Sample risk assessments are available on the RSCM website:

<http://www.rscm.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Risk-assessment-introduction.pdf>

<http://www.rscm.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Risk-assessment-template.pdf>

The responsibility for this rests at local level – PCCs, incumbents and churchwardens. The RSCM is not itself responsible for the implementation of these guidance notes; and the spirit underpinning all your decision making should be one of reasonableness and responsibility.

Updates will be issued on a periodic basis: **this copy of information was updated on 29th November 2020.** Please also refer to the RSCM's webpage for all our Covid-19 resources:

<https://www.rscm.org.uk/covid-19-resources-for-churches/>

PLEASE read the document first, but if you have any subsequent questions, please email enquiries@rscm.com; we will post questions and the appropriate replies in a page on the RSCM website.

FAQs:

1. **So can we resume choir practice as usual?** *We now return to sets of guidelines issued in the Summer/earlier in the Autumn – though please see introductory note regarding tiers above.*
2. *Following the announcement that live indoor performances can resume from 15 August with socially distanced audiences, DCMS have updated the Performing Arts guidance to confirm that non-professionals can now engage in all performing arts activities, including singing, wind and brass. Such activity must take place in line with the performing arts guidance. Where non-professional groups plan to meet, there are no set limits on the numbers who can be involved when taking place outside and/or in Covid-secure venues. This is in line with rules on [meeting people outside your household](#) for clubs and groups and gatherings in Covid-secure venues. Organisations must ensure that they carry out an appropriate Covid-19 risk assessment and that individuals are socially distanced at all times. Organisations will want to minimise risk as far as possible and the Performing Arts guidance sets out a number of mitigations that should be considered to minimise risk including operating outside where possible, limiting the numbers involved in and duration of activity and considering how ventilation can be improved. Think about how to keep your rehearsals as efficient as possible and consider how you can continue to use technology to rehearse the music in advance via online methods.*

Rehearsals should take place within the place of worship for any choir over 6 in number – not in buildings which fall outside the church footprint (e.g. a church hall or community facility)

The use of church premises by non-church (secular) choirs and other music groups for rehearsal is currently being urgently clarified with relevant government departments. We will update this as soon as information is available.

3. **How many can be in the choir?** *This will be informed by your own local risk assessment of space available (following 2m between singers). Good ventilation and duty of care towards singers are both essential. There is therefore no concrete answer to this question. Again, please refer to Government guidance on a safe return to singing for professional and non-professional choirs.*

The single 'Rule of 6' (Tier 1) does not apply to church choirs, with DCMS guidance confirming that multiple groups of 6 are possible as long as they strictly maintain separation between each groups of 6, but social distancing and mitigation measures (e.g. screens, cleaning, and other routines) must be in place.

4. **Can children sing?** *Yes, as long as you have fully risk-assessed the numbers involved. Additional guidance is supplied in the accompanying document: 'models for playing and singing'*
5. **How many children (U18s) can be in the choir?** *This is related to the necessary, separate, risk assessment for 'supervised activity'*
6. **With choristers (children), how far do bubbles need to distance?** *Churches with Choir Schools may be able to utilise similar protocols relating to 'bubbles' (defined groups) from school. In other scenarios it is advised that all singers observe 2m distance.*
7. **Within a bubble, how far apart to singers need to be?** *In a choir school setting, where the choristers are in a 'bubble' in the school environment, social distancing between members of the same 'bubble' may be relaxed, including when singing within the bubble, in the same way that social distancing may be relaxed in the school environment in situations where full social distancing is not possible. Please see: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-schools-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak/guidance-for-full-opening-schools#section-1-public-health-advice-to-minimise-coronavirus-covid-19-risks> and <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19/performing-arts>*
8. **I don't have any 'bubbles' (consistent, school-based groups of children) in my choir. How far apart should the singers be?** *Again, a cautious approach would suggest at least 1 metre with mitigations (e.g. not singing 'at' each other but singing in a straight line facing forwards and 2 metres from people in front of them).*
9. **If someone is ill and potentially diagnosed with COVID, does all the choir have to isolate?** *As a group activity that may carry higher risk, it is essential that choirs make full use of the T+T system. In consequence, it is essential that all choirs keep secure*

records of attendance and contact details. If any choir member falls ill and is tested positive, Track and Trace will contact every other member of the choir.

10. Can a choir sing at a pastoral service, then? (e.g. a wedding or funeral).

Numbers are still limited both at weddings and funerals. *Legislation states explicit numbers, but government guidance needs also to be considered. The crucial factor is to look at the spirit of what is intended – to minimise the numbers of people and staff interacting. So, a vicar and organist, for example, might need to be there, as work (and therefore not part of the limit of numbers), to enable the service; but other music groups and choirs should be kept to an absolute minimum, follow local risk assessment, and be able to be defended by the officiant that their presence is appropriate.*

11. What do we need to do about music copies? *Copies should not be shared, and should be ready in place before singers arrive. Anyone issuing the music should ensure they have used hand sanitiser before handling copies. Alternatively, singers can use their own, pre-supplied copies or digital music on iPads or Tablets.*

12. Can we use choir robes? *Yes. Robes should be taken home by choir members following their first visit back to church after lockdown, and brought back as required. If they have not been used since lockdown started there is no need to wash. Robes should not be shared.*

Additional note: *The name of the game here is to have thought through all your steps to safe return carefully. The RSCM guidance is predicated on perhaps smaller premises and the need to make sure that the whole choir is not entering a small space and hanging robes at the same time. As long as you have thought all these things through carefully and listed rationally on your own risk assessment then there is potentially no need to take robes home.*

13. What about masks? *All choir members should wear masks on arrival and departure from church (though Government guidance does not require children under the age of 11 to wear a mask). As members contributing to the leading of worship, they may remove masks to sing. Masks may be removed in rehearsal, as long as social distancing is complied with.*

14. What about visors? *Not specifically necessary nor helpful.*

15. What (additional) protection does the conductor need? *Where the conductor stands is important; and should not be too close to the singers in a face-to-face configuration.*

16. Can we use the choir stalls? *Stalls should only be used if the choir can be appropriately distanced; choirs should aim to sing in a wide semi-circle if at all possible, and certainly to avoid singing directly face-to-face.*

17. **Do the musicians need to be a specific distance from the congregation?** *A significant space gap needs to exist; distances can potentially be mitigated by using appropriate Perspex screens.*
18. **Can we process in church?** *Yes, if space allows; consider processing in single file.*
19. **Can the congregation sing?** *No – not yet.*
20. **What instruments can we use in worship?** *There are no specific restrictions, but social distancing must be adhered to.*
21. Government guidance says: '**Any instrument played during worship should be cleaned thoroughly before and after use**'. **What does this mean?** *Keyboard instruments: the keys, stops, switches and access doors should all be cleaned with suitable wipes. Drum kits should be cleaned also; and in all cases if the player changes during a rehearsal or service, cleaning MUST take place.*

For other, personal instruments, normal hygiene should be observed. Please see the following Guidance from Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19/performing-arts>

22. **Can music group singers share microphones?** *Within a performance, no. If there is space, condenser microphones will be capable of picking up multiple performers. But personal, vocalist-type microphones should not be shared. Microphones of this nature are very difficult to clean, but leaving set aside for 72 hours would then enable subsequent usage by someone else.*
23. Government guidance says: '**Groups of professional singers are now able to rehearse and record indoors for broadcast**'. **Can we record an amateur choir?** *We can see no reason not to be able to do so.*
24. Government guidance says: 'Except for the limited circumstances outlined above, 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 because of the potential for increased risk of transmission from aerosol and droplets.'
So can the organ play a loud voluntary? *The solution to this is partly in choice of repertoire, but also in encouraging congregations to engage with, and listen to the voluntary before and after services. Duration of voluntaries is thus an important factor.*
25. **Are Visiting Choirs welcome at Cathedrals and Greater Churches?** *Yes, but only for acts of worship, and as long as the said cathedral/greater church has satisfied itself that its own risk assessment and protocols (such as using different rehearsal space from resident choir) are robust.*
26. **Can an Officiant sing (at Evensong for example)?** *Yes, as long as they adhere to all protocols associated with choir members (eg Track and Trace record keeping)*

27. **Where do I find the risk assessment materials?** See these links:
<http://www.rscm.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Risk-assessment-introduction.pdf>
<http://www.rscm.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Risk-assessment-template.pdf>

General, positive pointers to consider in making your plans and completing your risk assessment (see separate page for draft examples):

- Extra consideration should be given to those people at higher risk.
- You should not compel people back at this point: work with the needs of your own musicians, with the appropriate pastoral sensitivity (and, where necessary, respect for confidentiality)
- Hand sanitisers should be available as a minimum at entrances and exit points.
- Registers need to be kept, which must be robust enough to be used as part of a 'track and trace' exercise.
- Singers should supply their own water/no shared refreshments
- If possible, the entrance and exits should be separate.
- If possible, arrival and departure times of choir members/musicians should be staggered, to maintain social distancing.
- Supply a clear indication to your musicians as to what appropriate distancing looks like – e.g. with suitable floor markers.
- Make sure you are aware of 'Covid-secure' plans and protocols for the administration of First Aid in your church.
- Rehearsals should be organised to be as short as reasonable, and spaced appropriately.
- Improve ventilation to a space as far as possible. Consider holding rehearsals in e.g. the main body of the church or parish hall, rather than a modestly-sized rehearsal room (as part of your risk assessment). Modify (ie, reduce) the number of musicians if the spaces are insufficient.