

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

UPDATE 19.5.21. Despite recent better news, recent announcements from Government have changed ways many choirs are advised to work from this week. This document is the result, as ever, of detailed conversation between RSCM and the Church of England, and puts into context the different elements of the various Government guidance documents. The RSCM remains completely committed to a safe resumption of singing in worship, and has been advocating this in the national conversation.

1. Helpfully, Government guidance states that 'where music normally takes place in worship this should continue'. This replaces the previous 'essential to worship' position. As ever, think carefully about your own church environment, ventilation and practical matters when considering musical provision in your particular circumstance.
2. Congregational singing is now permitted outdoors but only on church grounds or the outside space of your place of worship, though once again consider social distancing matters carefully, though guidance now adds that this should be in 'multiple groups of 30' with social distancing.
3. Wind Instruments may now be used in worship.
4. A distinction between Amateur and Professional musicians has returned to government guidance. Amateur musicians should limit all (indoors) rehearsals and services to a maximum of 6 singers* until the next version of guidance is issued. Professional musicians are not limited by number. This distinction made by the government, though undoubtedly difficult for many church musicians reflects the principles behind government guidance around Covid restrictions relating to a place of work.
5. Choirs can meet outdoors, subject to the capacity of the space in question when complying with the relevant social distancing. Social distancing is still an essential part of planning an organised activity.
6. *Children's Choirs (including those from multiple schools) can continue to rehearse with no limit on numbers, as long as this is working within the DFES Out of School Settings guidance (see [HERE](#)). You should carefully risk assess what number children and adult singers you use for public worship and if they operate in a professional or amateur setting.

This is based on the guidance from the Government in Westminster, and not arrangements for devolved administrations. Our website contains other information for the UK's devolved administrations [HERE](#); this set of guidance notes has taken the Church of England as the guiding 'church' context.

General principles:

This is a temporary situation – covering, as we understand it, the period of Step 3 in the Government roadmap.

Go ahead? *Think carefully about what is the minimum provision required to offer the worship intended. 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. For musicians on paid contracts, remember that the furlough system may be able to help support loss of earnings.*

How safe does it need to be? *In thinking through your potential provision, and in completing risk assessments, you might use a working hypothesis that one or more members of your musicians may be infected with COVID. Do your mitigation measures mean that you are reasonably satisfied that the rest of your group is protected sufficiently?*

The responsibility for this rests at local level – Chapters/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.

FAQs

PLEASE read the document first, but if you have any subsequent questions, you are welcome to email enquiries@rscm.com.

1. What about the choir: can they still sing?

Both amateur and professional choirs are able to contribute to worship, but with only 6 amateur singers allowed indoors.

Outdoor worship is governed by the introductory remarks above.

2. **How many musicians and singers can we have?** *Aside from the 6-singer limit, 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. Again, please refer to Government guidance on a safe return to singing for professional and non-professional choirs. 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. Similar thinking needs to underpin the use of instruments/instrumentalists.*

3. **Can the congregation sing?** *Congregational singing indoors may not yet take place. Please see note above concerning outdoor singing.*

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4. **Where can I find Risk Assessment templates?** *Here are links to the RSCM website documents:*

<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>

Please also refer to the RSCM's webpage for all our Covid-19 resources:

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

5. **So can we resume choir practice as usual?** *Choir practices (indoors) are now limited to 6 people, unless the choir is a professional group of singers.*
6. **Can children sing?** *Choirs with children from multiple schools can gather to rehearse, following the DFES guidance (see [HERE](#)) and lead worship. Chorister teams working within a professional scenario (e.g. a cathedral music department) might be accepted as professional musicians in this context.*
7. **How many children (U18s) can be in the choir?** *To be locally risk-assessed; if they are part of a mixed-age group then they are counted as part of the group of 6. Please make careful provision over changing and robing facilities, social mixing and arrival/departure arrangements.*
8. **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.*
9. **Can a choir sing at a pastoral service, then? (e.g. a wedding or funeral).** *Up to six singers, yes. No absolute restriction on the number of professional singers (but guided by the building's risk-assessed capacity). Outdoors: they may perform in multiple groups of up to 30.*
10. **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.*
11. **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.*

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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.

12. **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.*
13. **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.*
14. **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.*
15. **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.*
16. **Can we process in church?** *Yes, if space allows; consider processing in single file.*
17. **What instruments can we use in worship?** *There are no specific restrictions, but social distancing must be adhered to.*
18. 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>

19. **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.*

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20. 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.*
21. **Can an Officiant sing (at Evensong for example)?** *Yes, as long as they adhere to all protocols associated with choir members*

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 to participate: 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. Modify (ie, reduce) the number of musicians if the spaces are insufficient.