

Churches and the Government's COVID-19 recovery strategy ('roadmap')

Overview of roadmap

This is divided into three steps namely:-

Step 1 - this has already been introduced and includes for instance the reopening of outdoor spaces and the ability to exercise more than once per day.

Step 2 - the earliest date for this is 1st June and includes a phased return for primary schools and the opening of non essential retail shops.

Step 3 - the earliest date is 4th July and includes the reopening of places of worship.

The rationale behind these steps is based on the relative degree of risk of transmission of the virus. For instance, the risk of transmission outdoors is significantly lower, hence Step 1 is the first one to be taken.

It should be noted that the timescales given for Steps 2 and 3 are earliest dates. They are conditional rather than guaranteed. Whether or not they actually take place on those dates depends on rates of transmission of the virus continuing to decrease.

The need for social distancing, hygiene and cleaning

The reopening of churches is included in Step 3. This, however, will be conditional on new COVID-19 Secure guidelines being met. The government is in the process of preparing and releasing such guidelines.

We can, however, expect that these will include measures to ensure social distancing, good hygiene such as hand washing and appropriate measures to clean the church buildings.

We cannot be sure yet what this will mean specifically for us in the Camelot Group. However, our Bishops promise to give further guidance as this becomes available nationally. This will help us determine the specific measures we need to take to ensure that our buildings and services comply with the new COVID-19 Secure guidelines.

The continued impact of 'shielding' measures

This too is very relevant to us in the Camelot Group. However, we need to distinguish between two different categories of people.

The first are considered to be 'extremely vulnerable'. They have serious underlying medical conditions and have already received a letter from their GP advising them not to leave the house or to attend any gatherings. They are being 'shielded' at least until the end of June but the Government thinks it likely that they will be advised to shield for a further period beyond June.

Clearly, for as long as this shielding lasts we would not and should not expect to see these people (or those who live with and care for them) as and when church services resume.

The second group are considered to be 'vulnerable'. This includes all those over 70 which for us this means a very substantial proportion of our congregations. At the moment they are being asked to take particular care to minimise contact with others outside their household. As matters develop we would expect more detailed guidance to be given both by the government and the church on what the resumption of church services might mean for this group. We also of course need to respect people's individual decisions as to the degree of risk (within the limits permitted by the guidance) they are willing to accept.

We will need to bear in mind the impact of all this on our potential congregational numbers as and when the position on resuming church services becomes clearer.

Weddings, funerals and private prayer

The government roadmap indicates an intention to enable small wedding ceremonies to take place as part of Step 2 (earliest date 1st June). They tell us that they will be working closely with faith leaders and local government over the coming weeks to go through the practicalities of this.

Our Bishops' Letter mentions offering further guidance about funerals in churches and opening them for parishioners and visitors to enter for private prayer. There is no timescale given as this depends on continued decline in new COVID-19 cases and deaths. However, in a Downing Street briefing on 13th May Robert Jenrick, the Housing Secretary, who is meeting with faith leaders in relation to the reopening of places of worship said that 'potentially' private prayer in churches could happen earlier than 4th July.

Sources of information

The government roadmap is published online under Our Plan to Rebuild: The UK Government's COVID-19 recovery strategy.

The Church of England publishes its up to date coronavirus guidance for churches on a dedicated page on its own website. This now includes a statement from the Bishop of London (the lead bishop on this matter) in response to the government roadmap.

Clergy and others receive letters and guidance from our Bishops to help us understand what we need to do in our local context. Our Archdeacon, Ven Anne Gell, is also available to supply help and clarification as and when needed.

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