

From Directors of Public Health to Faith organisations
re voluntary closure of Places of Worship

7 January 2021

Dear friends,

You will all have seen from the news that, as we enter a new year, we have also entered a new national lockdown.

This is because there is a new variant of Covid-19 that is spreading faster than others. This variant of the virus was first identified in Kent. Since early December it has increased rapidly in London, the East and the South East of England.

Cases are still rising sharply in Greater Essex and hospitals across our region are near capacity. A major incident was declared here over the new year because of the pressure on hospitals. Most regrettably of all, death rates are also rising sharply.

The government is keen to stop the spread of Covid-19 in this region and the rest of the country and so are we. We are doing all we can, and we know residents are too.

We know that you all worked extremely hard last year to adhere to the rules and to make your places of worship safer for people to use. We also recognise the incredibly important role faith and religious observance plays in sustaining residents through this pandemic, as well as the many ways faith organisations and communities have come together to support and help residents. We thank you deeply for those efforts. Sadly, however, we must ask you to do more.

For the reasons set out below, we strongly advise that all places of worship should close for congregational worship from tomorrow morning (Friday 8 January). All prayer and services should move online with no congregation physically present. We also strongly advise that any other activities, such as support groups, take place by other means or are cancelled.

The only exception is for funerals. These must adhere to the [Government guidance for funerals](#). Please limit numbers and discourage attendees from mingling outside your venue.

Many places of worship have already taken this step to close voluntarily. If yours hasn't, we ask you to do so. However, this is not a legal requirement so we recognise that you may have strong reasons for keeping your place of worship open for limited use.

We know that the support you are able to offer is invaluable to some of the most vulnerable members of our community but that they are often those who have found it harder to adapt to online worship and prayer. However, it is also our most vulnerable that we need to protect from potential exposure to the virus.

If you do wish to continue to keep your place of worship open for limited uses the existing Covid-19 safety measures you have in place are unlikely to be sufficient. Therefore, we strongly advise you to review your current risk management in the light of your actual space

and practice and what is known of the new variant. You should think about safety as people arrive, during any activity and as they leave. Actions should include much longer fallow times, ensuring people can always keep at least two metres apart, more thorough and more frequent cleaning, closing off spaces, shorter services, no singing and encouraging people to disperse straight away.

Why we are advising places of worship to close

Evidence about the new variant of Covid-19 shows that previous measures to control the spread are not enough. Government advice is that actions that limit people's interactions and therefore reduce or, if possible, prevent exposure to the virus are the most effective. Where individuals and organisations can do this, they should prioritise these actions. These include moving interaction online rather than face to face, reducing the size of groups and restricting travel.

All sectors of society are being asked to take extraordinary measures to reduce contact and interaction. Schools, leisure centres and many businesses are closed. Everybody must stay home except for essentials such as basic shopping, work and medical care.

Additional behaviours required to control this more infectious virus strain include:

- reducing indoor contacts to the lowest level possible;
- high adherence to testing and self-isolation if symptomatic or a close contact of someone who has tested positive for Covid-19;
- consistent use of high-quality face-coverings whenever indoor close contact mixing is unavoidable;
- more effective ventilation of enclosed spaces.

You can find more information about steps you can take to reduce transmission of the new variant here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/emgspi-btweg-mitigations-to-reduce-transmission-of-the-new-variant-sars-cov-2-virus-22-december-2020>

You can read the latest published Covid-19 case data at:

[Essex Covid-19 data](#)

[Southend Covid-19 data](#)

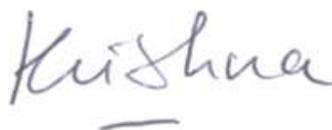
[Thurrock Covid-19 data \(government website\)](#)

Finally, we would like to thank you for everything you have done and are doing to help keep your communities safe. We know that with your continued support we will be able to reduce infection rates to a point where it will once again be safe for you to worship together.

Yours sincerely



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