

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

25 February 2021

Dear friends,

In January we advised you voluntarily to close your places of worship to help stop the spread of Covid-19. At that time cases were rising fast because of a new variant of the virus and strong action was needed. We repeated that advice on 10 February. Although the outlook was better, case numbers and the pressure on the NHS were still high. We promised to review the situation after the Government had set out its plans. On Monday 22 February the Government published its [roadmap for exiting lockdown](#). See the graphics attached to this letter for details of the four steps.

We have now reviewed the situation in Essex, Southend and Thurrock and are able to change our advice.

Our new advice is that places of worship can re-open for congregational worship if they strictly follow the guidance below:

1. [mitigations to stop the spread of the new variant of Covid-19](#) and
2. [guidance for the safe use of places of worship, special religious services and gatherings during the pandemic](#) .

Before you reopen you should:

- **conduct a rigorous risk assessment**
 - take account of your actual space and practice and what is known of the new variant
- **make necessary adjustments**
 - to reduce social interaction, both in and outside your venue, enable people to keep at least two metres apart and ensure you have good ventilation
 - Actions could include reducing capacity, staggering entry times, longer fallow times between activities, one-way travel routes between transport hubs and your venue
 - Also plan for more thorough and more frequent cleaning, closing off spaces, shorter services, no singing and encouraging people to disperse straight away.
- **be confident you can open safely**

- The guidance on the safe use of places of worship says “Venue managers of places of worship will have discretion over when they consider it safe to open and **should decide to remain closed** if they are not able to safely adhere to the guidelines”.

Reasons for this new advice

We can offer this advice because of the tremendous efforts you and everybody in Greater Essex have made. Most people have stayed at home and followed guidance to reduce social contact and the spread of the virus. Cases in Essex fell from 1,000 per 100,000 people in at the end of December to 112 per 100,000 in the week by 11 February (the latest data available). You can read the latest published Covid-19 case data at:

[Essex Covid-19 data](#)

[Southend Covid-19 data](#)

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

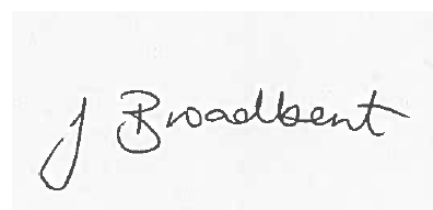
The vaccination programme is also going well. More than 17.9 million people in the UK had had their first dose and over 600,000 had had their second (at 22 February). Here the first four priority groups have been offered their first jab. People aged over 65 and adults aged 16 to 65 in an at-risk group are now being offered jabs. Please encourage people in your community to take the vaccine when offered. Find out more about the vaccination programme at [COVID-19 Vaccine Information for Essex \(essexcovidvaccine.nhs.uk\)](https://www.essex.gov.uk/covid-19/vaccine).

Next steps

The pandemic is far from over. If we ease the lockdown too fast there is a serious risk that cases will rise again. We must all still follow the rules. Whether your venue is open already or you are now planning to re-open, please follow the guidance above and the limits on gatherings set out overleaf.

We thank you for your co-operation and sacrifice so far and ask that you continue to do everything you can to support your communities and keep them safe.

Yours sincerely



Dr Mike Gogarty
Director of Public Health
Essex County Council

Krishna Ramkhelawon
Director of Public Health
Southend-on-Sea Borough
Council

Dr Jo Broadbent
Interim Director of Public
Health
Thurrock Council

Contact: faith.communities@essex.gov.uk

The Government Roadmap out of Lockdown – steps 1 and 2

STEP 1

8 March

29 March

EDUCATION

8 MARCH

- Schools and colleges open for all students
- Practical Higher Education courses

SOCIAL CONTACT

8 MARCH

- Exercise and recreation outdoors with household or one other person
- Household only indoors

29 MARCH

- Rule of 6 or two households outdoors
- Household only indoors

BUSINESS & ACTIVITIES

8 MARCH

- Wraparound care, including sport, for all children

29 MARCH

- Organised outdoor sport (children and adults)
- Outdoor sport and leisure facilities
- All outdoor children's activities
- Outdoor parent & child group (max 15 people, excluding under 5s)

TRAVEL

8 MARCH

- Stay at home
- No holidays

29 MARCH

- Minimise travel
- No holidays

EVENTS

- Funerals (30)
- Weddings and wakes (6)

STEP 2

No earlier than 12 April

At least 5 weeks after Step 1

EDUCATION

- As previous step

SOCIAL CONTACT

- Rule of 6 or two households outdoors
- Household only indoors

BUSINESS & ACTIVITIES

- All retail
- Personal care
- Libraries & community centres
- Most outdoor attractions
- Indoor leisure inc. gyms (individual use only)
- Self-contained accommodation
- All children's activities
- Outdoor hospitality
- Indoor parent & child groups (max 15 people, excluding under 5s)

TRAVEL

- Domestic overnight stays (household only)
- No international holidays

EVENTS

- Funerals (30)
- Weddings, wakes, receptions (15)
- Event pilots

The Government Roadmap out of Lockdown – steps 3 and 4

STEP 3

No earlier than 17 May

At least 5 weeks after Step 2

EDUCATION

- As previous step

SOCIAL CONTACT

- Maximum 30 people outdoors
- Rule of 6 or two households indoors (subject to review)

BUSINESS & ACTIVITIES

- Indoor hospitality
- Indoor entertainment and attractions
- Organised indoor sport (adult)
- Remaining accommodation
- Remaining outdoor entertainment (including performances)

TRAVEL

- Domestic overnight stays
- International travel (subject to review)

EVENTS

- Most significant life events (30)
- Indoor events: 1,000 or 50% (plus pilots)
- Outdoor seated events: 10,000 or 25% (plus pilots)
- Outdoor other events: 4,000 or 50% (plus pilots)

STEP 4

No earlier than 21 June

At least 5 weeks after Step 3

All subject to review

EDUCATION

- As previous step

SOCIAL CONTACT

- No legal limit

BUSINESS & ACTIVITIES

- Remaining businesses, including nightclubs

TRAVEL

- Domestic overnight stays
- International travel

EVENTS

- No legal limit on life events
- Larger events