



Dear Colleagues,

Re: North-East local Covid-19 restrictions

We are writing with advice about whether and how the new restrictions effective from today affect church activities.

1. Areas affected

The new restrictions have been introduced by the government at the request of and with the cooperation of seven local authorities in our region:

- Durham (County Council area)
- Gateshead (Metropolitan Borough Council area)
- Newcastle (City Council area)
- Northumberland (County Council area)
- North Tyneside (Metropolitan District Council area)
- South Tyneside (Metropolitan District Council area)
- Sunderland (City Council area)

This means that currently the Stockton/Tees Valley, Hartlepool and Darlington areas are not covered by the restrictions. So, all of the Sunderland and Durham Archdeaconies are included, but only parts of Auckland. However:

(1) please check carefully which local authority you are in – deanery and local authority boundaries are not the same!

(2) it seems likely or certainly very possible that they may be included soon;

2. The new regulations:

All these NE authorities are under the same restrictions. The main provisions have the force of law (so are not merely advisory), with advice to support and interpret them. The regulations can be found on local authority websites, e.g.:

<https://www.southtyneside.gov.uk/70473>

<https://www.durham.gov.uk/localrestrictions>

Our understanding is that **none of this affects the existing regulations on gathering for worship**; current restrictions and permissions continue unchanged. So, please continue to meet for worship on the understanding that the maximum numbers are your risk-assessed Covid-safe number for regular worship services and up to 30 for a “life event” service. Social distancing must be observed. Masks must be worn by anyone not engaged in leading, reading or preaching. People may not socialise before or after the service; this was already the case, but it is underlined by the new regulations, where socialising with people outside your household (or support bubble) in a home or garden is now prohibited, and people are advised against socialising with people outside their household (or support bubble) in a public place.

Advice against **car-sharing** (e.g. giving or accepting a lift) has been strengthened also.

Please note that the regulations are clear that all **hospital visiting** has now been prohibited.

We also do not think that anything here changes the **categories of other meetings which are exempt from the rule of six**. The changes are aimed at limiting social interaction, as opposed to work/charitable meetings. We cannot pretend that it is always entirely clear which meetings are exempt from the rule of six anyway. However, as the new local rules are about socialising, we do not think that they change the guidelines we already have (or the questions we have) about which meetings can go ahead in churches or church halls with up to six people and which can go ahead with more than six. They perhaps emphasise the need to think carefully about which meetings are

necessary and/or wise, which can instead be done online, etc. Where possible, meet online.

Our advice would therefore be that meetings that are necessary for the governance of your church (or for charitable bodies using your premises), and therefore legally required – e.g. APCMs – can continue. Meetings delivering charitable services can continue. Please continue to refer to the 14th September government guidelines about other exemptions, including youth and children’s gatherings, etc. Meetings that are social in nature are, however, clearly now prohibited in the restricted areas. Please also do not only think about whether it may be possible to justify a certain meeting, but also about whether this is wise, loving (especially if at-risk people would attend), and setting a good local example: we could be heading for another full lockdown if current infection rates are not reduced. It is not possible to give definitive answers about the legality or advisability of every possible meeting, but we think these parameters make clear in most situations what can be done, or should not be done.

(To avoid possible confusion, we also need to flag up that the Gov.Uk doc about the local NE restrictions released today - <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/north-east-of-england-local-restrictions> - is currently unclear about worship. As currently written, the section in this document on “Religious ceremonies and places of worship” fails to make clear that worship is still allowed in a group of 30 for a life event, and up to the risk-assessed Covid-safe number for a regular worship service; it can easily be read to imply that the maximum number at a public worship event is 6. This is not the case. We note this, because we fear that otherwise some people will read this document and be very confused.)

3. Vicarages as places of work:

One area of potential confusion for clergy may be that the new NE regulations expressly forbid people from other households coming into one’s home. This must be observed.

However, for clergy, their home is also a workplace (legally). Clergy may choose, therefore, to still hold some necessary work meetings at their vicarage. However, this can be only be done if social distancing is possible and observed. Meetings should take place in the study area,

rather than in the rest of the home. Clergy would also be wise to meet online wherever possible; if they choose to have some physical meetings, they should be careful about how this is communicated and how it may appear to other people locally. Clergy also should feel no obligation to hold work meetings in their homes at present; if a member of clergy has any concerns about hosting such meetings currently, please do not.

We continue to thank you for all your care, prayer and work in sustaining the life, worship and mission of the church at this time. If you need to call or e-mail us for further advice, we are here to help, of course.

With our best wishes, as ever,

Archdeacons Bob, Libby and Rick

Ven Bob Cooper

archdeacon.of.sunderland@durham.anglican.org

07384 510731

Ven Rick Simpson:

archdeacon.of.auckland@durham.anglican.org

01325 480444 / 07384 511671

Ven Libby Wilkinson

archdeacon.of.durham@durham.anglican.org

07436 399917

The Venerable R G Cooper

St Nicholas Vicarage

Hedworth Lane

Boldon Colliery

NE35 9JA

Office 0191 536 2300 Mobile 07384 510731