

Return to Congregational Singing

On 20th September 2021, new public health measures come into place which permit Organised Indoor Group Activities, including group singing, with certain limits on numbers and with social distancing and protective measures in place.

This change indicates that the time is now right to resume singing in church with protective measures in place. Therefore from 1st October 2021 we will resume congregational singing in the Donegal Group of Parishes with protective measures in place as summarised below and set out in detail in the Risk Assessment which follows.

Protective measures:

1. The congregation are to wear face masks throughout the service.
2. Physical distancing of 2m between household groups is to be maintained at all times.
3. People are to face in the same direction or away from each other while singing.
4. The duration of singing should be limited.
5. Singing should be at a reduced volume.
6. The best possible ventilation of the space is to be ensured during services and between services.

These measures will be reviewed in light of any new public health guidance, particularly the planned lifting of restrictions from 22nd October 2021.

David Huss
17th September 2021

Detailed Risk Assessment and protective measures on following pages.

Risk Assessment for Return to Congregational Singing

1. Introduction

This document sets out a protocol for the resumption of congregational singing in line with the new regulations coming into effect from 20th September 2021, described in the Government's 'Reframing the Challenge' document (published 31st August 2021).

This protocol has been developed using risk assessment guidance from Sing Ireland (the Irish Association of Choirs) and material from the HPSC Guidelines for Places of Worship, as well as guidelines issued by the Department of Education, the Arts Council and the Methodist and Presbyterian Churches in Ireland. See endnotes.

This document complements the Church of Ireland Return to in-Church Worship Protocols and the parish-specific policies based on them which were published in June 2020.

2. Risk Assessment and control measures for congregational singing in indoor worship services.

2.1 Hazard

The hazard is infection with the SARS-CoV-2 virus which causes the illness Covid-19. Most people infected with the COVID-19 virus will experience mild to moderate respiratory illness and recover without requiring special treatment. Older people and those with underlying medical problems, such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease and cancer, are more likely to develop serious illness.

2.2 Likelihood of occurrence

The most common means of transmission is by coming into close contact with someone who has the virus.

The virus can also spread through airborne transmission by way of minute water droplets and aerosols which are expelled from the respiratory system through:

- Sneezing
- Coughing
- Talking, singing, breathing

Louder talking, singing and shouting produce greater volumes of droplets and aerosols than quieter talking and singing.

The risk of transmission is greater in poorly ventilated and/or crowded indoor settings, and increases with the length of time spent in the setting.

The virus can also be spread via infected surfaces, when someone who has the virus sneezes or coughs droplets onto surfaces around them and someone else touches these surfaces and then touches their eyes, nose or mouth without cleaning their hands. The virus can survive on surfaces for a period after transfer (depending on such things as the surface type, its moisture content and temperature).

The likelihood of transmission, as well as the likelihood of serious illness, is less for fully vaccinated people and those who have recovered from Covid-19 infection.

2.3. Control measures for congregational singing

1. Singers are to use face masks, correctly fitted and worn. An exception is for a soloist singing at the front with extra protection measures (see below). Visors/face shields should not be worn instead as aerosols can circulate under them.
2. Physical distancing of 2m between household groups is to be maintained at all times.
3. People are to remain facing in the same direction or away from each other while singing. They should not face each other, with the exception of a soloist singing at the front, in which case the measures below apply.
4. The duration of singing should be limited, with a guideline of no more than 5 minutes at a time and no more than 15 minutes in total in a one-hour service.
5. Singing should be at a reduced volume, comparable to a normal talking level.
6. The best possible ventilation of the space is to be ensured by keeping doors and windows open where possible during the service and between services.
7. The maximum duration of a service is one hour, with a one hour interval between services.
8. CO₂ monitors may be used to give warning of poor ventilation levels.
9. The measures around social distancing, hand hygiene, entry/exit to the building, cleaning, administration of the sacraments, etc. as set out in the earlier Return to Church Protocol, remain in place.

2.4 Control measures for a soloist leading from the front

Where a soloist is singing at the front (facing the people) the singer should be placed behind a plexiglass screen and/or increased distancing of 4m from the congregation should be used.

3. Relevant Documents

COVID-19: Reframing the Challenge, Continuing Our Recovery and Reconnecting (31st August 2021) <https://assets.gov.ie/197018/ee93451c-2c67-4ea4-ad2b-ba5fb38bfce2.pdf>

Young People, Children and Education Covid-19 Reopening Guidelines from the Arts Council, Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (6th June 2021) https://www.artscouncil.ie/uploadedFiles/wwwartscouncilie/Content/Contact_us/COVID-19/YPCE%20C-19%20Reopening%20Guidelines_July21_Vaccination.pdf

COVID-19 Response Plan for the safe and sustainable operation of Post Primary Schools (August 2021) <https://assets.gov.ie/83312/6c36aaac-22fc-44fd-a4be-88cea4db82d6.pdf>

Letter to All School Principals from Dr Abigail Collins, Consultant in Public Health Medicine, HSE Schools lead & Dr Kevin Kelleher, Assistant National Director Public Health and Child Health RE: Return to school guidance from the HSE Public Health (30th August 2021) <https://ecdumcondra.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/HSE-letter-to-Principals-from-HSE-on-reopening-measures-30-Aug-2021-Fina..pdf>

Sing Ireland Covid -19 Risk Assessment Questions (10th Sept 2021) <https://www.singireland.ie/content/files/Choral-risk-assessment-updated-100921.pdf>

HPSC Covid-19 Guidance for Places of Worship (6th Sept 2021) https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/placesofworshipguidance/COVID_religious%20settings.pdf

David Huss
17th September 2021