

# COVID-19: Guidance for small marriages and civil partnerships

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 [gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-small-marriages-and-civil-partnerships/covid-19-guidance-for-small-marriages-and-civil-partnerships](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-small-marriages-and-civil-partnerships/covid-19-guidance-for-small-marriages-and-civil-partnerships)

## 1. Introduction

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The UK is currently experiencing a public health emergency as a result of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The characteristics of COVID-19 are outlined by Public Health England. The transmission of COVID-19 is thought to occur mainly through respiratory droplets generated by coughing and sneezing, and through contact with contaminated surfaces. The predominant modes of transmission are assumed to be droplet and contact.

This guidance for marriage and civil partnership has been drafted on the basis of the scientific evidence available and will be updated as necessary as more data becomes available on COVID-19.

Marriages and civil partnerships are a vital part of our society, uniting couples to start their new life together and affording certain legal rights. However, by their very nature, in bringing families and friends together, they are particularly vulnerable to the spread of COVID-19.

The government has been working closely with stakeholders in the wedding industry, the Places of Worship Taskforce and the National Panel for Registration to consider how we are able to allow small marriages and civil partnerships to begin safely from 4 July 2020.

This guidance remains under review and may be updated in line with the changing situation.

## 2. Purpose of this guidance

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This guidance is designed to assist people planning to get married or form a civil partnership in England, and venues that host such ceremonies, to prepare for small ceremonies to be allowed to restart, in accordance with the associated legislation which will come into effect on 4 July 2020.

The guidance sets out how this can be done in a manner that is safe and in line with social distancing guidelines, in order to minimise the risk of exposure to infection for all individuals attending the marriage or civil partnership, including those who work at the venues.

This guidance does not set out how to meet the requirements for a lawfully binding marriage, or civil partnership formation, nor how to give notice of marriage or civil partnership or Special Licences.

This guidance applies only to marriages and civil partnerships taking place in England under the law of England and Wales. Religious ceremonies (those not taking place under the law of England and Wales), belief ceremonies, blessings, or other non-statutory ceremonies are not covered, and those wishing to conduct them should refer to other guidance on gatherings (see links below).

At present, legally-valid ceremonies or formations are strongly advised to go ahead only where they can be done in a COVID-19 secure environment. It is also advised that the ceremonies are kept as short as reasonably possible and limited as far as reasonably possible to the parts of the ceremonies that are required in order for the marriage or civil partnership to be legally binding. No more than 30 people should attend a marriage or civil partnership, where this can be safely accommodated with social distancing in a COVID-19 secure venue.

Any receptions that typically follow or accompany marriages or civil partnerships are strongly advised not to take place at this time. Small celebrations should only take place if following social distancing guidelines – i.e. in groups of up to two households indoors, or up to 6 people from different households outdoors.

The government is working with the wedding and civil partnership celebration industry on how receptions that typically follow or accompany marriages and civil partnerships could take place safely in the future.

### **Definitions for the purpose of this guidance**

“Marriages” and “civil partnerships”      The ceremony of solemnisation of marriage or formation of a civil partnership which includes the usages or requirements for the marriage or civil partnership to be legally binding under the law of England and Wales and may include other elements (which are not legally required).

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“Venue”      Any location at which a legally binding marriage or civil partnership can take place. These include, among the various permitted places: Register Offices; Approved premises for civil marriages and civil partnerships (that is, places approved by the local authority of the area in which the premises are situated); Church of England churches or chapels, Certified places of worship that have been registered for the solemnisation of marriage (“registered buildings”); Naval, military or air force chapels

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## Definitions for the purpose of this guidance

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“Venue managers”	The person or persons responsible for the management of a venue, including assessment of compliance with the following guidelines.
“Visitor”, “attendee” or “guest”	Individuals or households entering a venue for the purpose of attending a marriage ceremony or civil partnership formation.
“Officiant”	A person acting in an official capacity. This could be a person with certain legal responsibilities at the ceremony, such as a registration official or authorised person, or a minister of religion solemnising the marriage.
“Must”	Where the guidance states that an activity must take place this is because it is a requirement under the <u>Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) Regulations 2020</u> , and therefore is a requirement in law.
“Should”	Where the guidance states that an activity should take place this is not a legal requirement under the <u>Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) Regulations 2020</u> , however it is strongly advised that consideration is given to following the advice being given to reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19.
“Household” and “Support Bubble”	<p>A household is a person or a group of people who live together in the same accommodation.</p> <p>A support bubble is where a single adult living alone, or a single parent with children under 18, can form an exclusive network with one other household where social distancing does not have to be observed.</p> <p>The two households that form a support bubble count as one household for the purposes of this guidance.</p>

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Venue managers will have discretion over when they consider it safe to open, and the officiant should also be content that it is safe to proceed. The venue should decide to remain closed or not proceed with the marriage or civil partnership if they are not able to safely adhere to the guidelines outlined below. Where the legislation requires that a venue does not open at this time then it must remain closed.

This guidance has been published alongside industry or venue specific guidance, and this should be used alongside this guidance to ensure public safety. These include:

- Guidance for the safe reopening of Places of Worship

- [Guidance for hotel and other accommodation providers](#)
- [Guidance for working safely during C19 in the visitor economy](#)
- [Guidance for people who work or volunteer in heritage locations](#)
- [Current stay alert and social distancing guidance](#)

This guidance remains under review and may be updated in line with the changing situation.

### 3. Key principles for planning COVID-19 secure marriages and civil partnerships

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During all activity linked to the marriage ceremony or civil partnership formation, all parties should adhere to social distancing guidelines. From 4 July, 2 metres or 1 metre with risk mitigation (where 2 metres is not viable), are acceptable.

From 4 July, gatherings of more than 30 people will be permitted but only in certain public places as set out in law. This will include all licensed venues where legal marriage ceremonies can take place however it is strongly advised that numbers are restricted to 30 for public health reasons.

Those operating venues following COVID-19 secure guidelines should take additional steps to ensure the safety of the public and prevent large gatherings or mass events from taking place.

#### The marriage ceremony or civil partnership formation

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- Should only take place in COVID-19 secure environments. Where a marriage ceremony can take place legally in other places not covered by this guidance (such as outdoor weddings that are permitted under the Marriage Act), the legal restrictions on gatherings must be followed for that place.
- It is advised that the ceremonies and services should be concluded in the shortest reasonable time, and limited as far as reasonably possible to the parts of the marriage or civil partnership that are required in order to be legally binding under the law of England and Wales.
- Religious communities should therefore adapt traditional religious aspects, especially where celebrations would otherwise have taken place over a number of hours, or even days, to ensure the safety of those present and minimal spread of infection.
- Large wedding receptions or parties after should not take place after the marriage ceremony or civil partnership formation. See [restaurants and other hospitality industries guidance](#) for further information.
- No food or drink should be consumed as a part of the event unless required for the purposes of solemnisation.

- Where the exchanging of rings is required or desired for the solemnisation of the marriage or the formation of the civil partnership, hands should be washed before and after. The rings should be handled by as few people as possible.
- Where an infant is involved in proceedings a parent/guardian or member of the infant's household should hold the infant.

## Singing, chanting and the use of musical instruments

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- People should avoid singing, shouting, raising voices and/or playing music at a volume that makes normal conversation difficult or that may encourage shouting. This is because of the potential for increased risk of transmission from aerosol and droplets.
- Therefore, spoken responses during marriages or civil partnerships should also not be in a raised voice.
- Activities such as singing, chanting, shouting and/or playing of instruments that are blown into should be specifically avoided. This is because there is a possible additional risk of infection in environments where individuals are singing or chanting as a group, and this applies even if social distancing is being observed or face coverings are used.
- Where required for the marriage or civil partnership, only one individual should be permitted to sing or chant, and the use of plexi-glass screens should be considered to protect guests, as this will further prevent transmission and the screen can be easily cleaned.
- We recognise the importance of communal singing in marriages or civil partnerships, and as this should not happen at this time, we suggest you consider using recordings that may be available to you.
- You are advised only to play musical instruments that are not blown into. Organs can be played for a ceremony, as well as general maintenance, but should be cleaned thoroughly before and after use.
- The government and the medical and scientific communities are urgently engaged in research around transmission risk and how such activities can best be managed safely, and further guidance will follow when available.

## Social distancing measures

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- All individuals involved in the ceremony (including attendees, guests and officiants) should be signposted to the [current stay alert and social distancing guidance](#) and that they or members of their household should not attend the marriage or civil partnership if they are unwell with symptoms of COVID-19. If either member of the couple have symptoms of COVID-19 the ceremony should not go ahead.
- Wherever possible, adhere to social distancing of at least 2 metres, or 1 metre with risk mitigation (where 2 metres is not viable), between households. For frequently used venues, mark areas using floor tape or paint to help people maintain social distance.

- You should consider and set out the mitigations you will introduce in your risk assessment. These could include, for instance, avoiding any face-to-face seating by changing layouts, reducing the number of people in enclosed spaces, improving ventilation, using protective screens and face coverings, and closing non-essential social spaces, as outlined throughout this guidance.
- People from different households should maintain social distancing between one another. This may require marriages or civil partnerships to be adapted to remove practices that would otherwise have brought people into contact with one another, unless required for the marriage or civil partnership to be legally binding. Where this is the case precautions should be put in place to minimise contact and ensure the timeframe is as short as possible.
- Visitors should avoid touching property belonging to others, such as shoes which, if removed, should be placed and collected by their owner while adhering to social distancing principles.

## Washing/ablution rituals

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- Any pre-requisite washing/ablution rituals should not be done at the venue but carried out prior to arrival.
- In the rare circumstances where this is not possible, washing facilities at the venue should be used in line with social distancing guidelines and hygiene measures applied.
- People should not wash the body parts of others.
- Where rituals or ceremonies require water to be applied to the body, small volumes can be splashed onto the body, but full immersion should be avoided. Others present should stand distant from any splashes and stay socially distanced. All individuals involved should thoroughly wash their hands before and after and ensure good hygiene.

## Handling objects and communal resources

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- Venue managers should take steps to prevent visitors from touching or kissing devotional and other objects that are handled communally. Where shared items are required for the solemnisation of the marriage or the formation of the civil partnership, hands should be washed before and after. The items should be handled by as few people as possible. Barriers or clear signage should be put in place where necessary.
- Books, reusable and communal resources such as service sheets, prayer mats, or devotional material should be removed from use. Single use alternatives can be provided as long as they are removed by the attendee. Items owned by individuals for use in the ceremony or registration (such as a prayer mat or religious text, a pen for the signing of the register) may be brought in but should be removed after the marriage or civil partnership.

- Where possible, venue managers should discourage cash donations and continue to use online giving resources where possible minimising contact around transactions. Regular cleaning and hygiene should be maintained and gloves worn to handle cash.

## 4. Guidance for venue managers

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This guidance has been published alongside industry or venue specific guidance. Venue managers should also refer to guidance specific to their venues (see above).

### Restrictions on capacity

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For the purposes of a marriage ceremony or civil partnership formation, the number of attendees should ideally be kept to a minimum as far as possible. The lower the number of attendees, the lower the risk of spreading the virus.

However, we understand the unique significance that marriages and civil partnerships hold in people's lives.

For this reason, up to 30 people, but no more, can attend a marriage or civil partnership, where this can be safely accommodated with social distancing in a COVID-19 venue.

This maximum number includes all those at the ceremony, including the couple, witnesses, officiants and guests. It also includes any staff who are not employed by the venue, which may include photographers, security or caterers. It does not include staff employed by the venue.

Strict adherence to social distancing is strongly advised (see above for social distancing measures). A distance of 2 metres should be kept wherever possible.

## 5. Guidance for vulnerable or symptomatic individuals

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There should be a particular focus on protecting people who are clinically vulnerable and more likely to develop severe illness.

Actions should include:

- All guests or those involved in the ceremony staying at home and self-isolating if they have a new, continuous cough or a high temperature or loss of or change to sense of smell or taste. This is to minimise risk of spread of COVID-19 to friends, the wider community, and particularly the vulnerable. Where individuals are self-isolating due to a possible or confirmed case of COVID-19 in the household or because they have been requested to do so by NHS Test and Trace, they should participate remotely. See [stay at home guidance for households with possible or confirmed COVID-19](#).

- Individuals who are shielding should continue to follow the government's advice on shielding.
- If anyone becomes unwell with symptoms of COVID-19 at a venue they should go home and be advised to follow the stay at home guidance. If they need clinical advice they should go online to NHS 111 (or call 111 if they don't have internet access). In an emergency, call 999 if they are seriously ill or injured or their life is at risk. They should not visit the GP, pharmacy, urgent care centre or a hospital.

Other people who may have been in contact with a person who has become unwell should wash their hands thoroughly after the interaction, but they do not need to take any other specific action unless they develop symptoms themselves or are advised to do so by NHS Test and Trace. If they do develop symptoms they should follow the stay at home guidance.

## Individuals aged 70 years and over

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Certain groups of people may be at increased risk of severe disease from COVID-19, including people who are aged 70 or older, regardless of medical conditions.

Individuals who fall within this group are advised to stay at home as much as possible and, if they do go out, to take particular care to minimise contact with others outside of their household.

You should consider informing these groups in particular of the symptoms of COVID-19 and current stay alert and social distancing guidance.

## Individuals who are extremely clinically vulnerable/shielding

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The NHS has written to around 2.2. million who are considered to be extremely clinically vulnerable to coronavirus, advising them to shield. See the current guidance for this group.

## Young people and children

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Parents or guardians should ensure children maintain social distancing and frequently wash their hands thoroughly for 20 seconds with running water and soap and dry them thoroughly or use hand sanitiser ensuring that all parts of the hands are covered.

Any shared facilities for children, such as play corners, soft furnishings, soft toys and toys that are hard to clean, should be removed and/or put out of service. Outdoor playgrounds are permitted to open where venue managers risk assess that it is safe to do so. Particular attention should be paid to cleaning frequently touched surfaces by children and those that are at child height.

## 6. Test and trace

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The government has launched an NHS Test and Trace service to manage the risk of the virus re-emerging. The service:

- provides testing for anyone who has symptoms of COVID-19 to find out if they have the virus
- gets in touch with anyone who has had a positive test result to help them share information about any close recent contacts they have had; and
- alerts those contacts, where necessary, and notifies them they need to self-isolate to help stop the spread of the virus.

Further information can be found online including for contacts of people with possible or confirmed COVID-19 infection who do not live with the person and for places of work.

The opening up of public places following the COVID-19 outbreak is being supported by the NHS Test and Trace service. In line with other government guidance for other venues including in the retail and hospitality sector, the venue manager should assist this service by keeping an accurate temporary record of visitors for 21 days, in a way that is manageable for your place of worship, and assist NHS Test and Trace with requests for that data if needed for contact tracing and the investigation of local outbreaks.

We will work with relevant bodies to make the process for recording your customers and visitors compliant with data protection legislation and as manageable as possible, including the development of digital solutions.

## 7. Enforcement

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It is important to note enforcement provisions, as is the case for other sectors.

Where the enforcing authority, such as the HSE or your local authority, identifies employers or venues who are not taking action to comply with the relevant public health legislation and guidance to control public health risks, they are empowered to take a range of actions to improve control of venue risks. For example, this would cover venue managers not taking appropriate action to ensure social distancing, where possible.

Failure to complete a risk assessment which takes account of COVID-19, or completing a risk assessment but failing to put in place sufficient measures to manage the risk of COVID-19, could constitute a breach of existing health and safety legislation.

The actions the enforcing authority can take include the provision of specific advice to venues to support them to achieve the required standard, through to issuing enforcement notices to help secure improvements. Serious breaches and failure to comply with enforcement notices can constitute a criminal offence, with serious fines and even imprisonment for up to 2 years. There is also a wider system of enforcement, which includes specific obligations and conditions for licensed premises.

Venue managers are expected to respond to any advice or notices issued by enforcing authorities rapidly and are required to do so within any timescales imposed by the enforcing authorities. The vast majority of venues and venue managers are responsible and will join with the UK's fight against COVID-19 by working with the government and their sector bodies to protect their workers and the public. However, regulators are carrying out compliance checks nationwide to ensure that employers and venues are taking the necessary steps.

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