

## **Protecting the Health of Our Clergy and Congregations**

### **Email Statement from Bishop Robert Byrne**

Dear Fathers, Deacons and Religious

As you will be aware the Government has confirmed that it will proceed with taking the next step on the Roadmap out of lockdown, with most restrictions set to be lifted from Monday 19<sup>th</sup> July.

This comes at a time when COVID cases are rising rapidly across all areas of the Diocese, with some areas recording the highest infection rates in the country. When this is considered alongside the more elderly demographic of the Diocese, it would present a very serious situation if we were to abandon our existing COVID controls.

The Government will remove the legal requirement to comply with many (if not all) COVID controls on 19<sup>th</sup> July and leave it to individuals to exercise responsibility and judgement. This means that some aspects of the “Coronavirus Act 2020” may be revoked or amended and many (if not all) of the resulting COVID regulations made under the Act, may be revoked or amended.

Regardless of the changes to Coronavirus legislation and [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk) guidance, organisations still have a general duty under the “Health and Safety at Work Act 1974” to protect the health and safety of everyone who is affected by their activities. One of the regulations made under the ’74 Act, “The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999”, details a specific legal duty to manage risks by carrying out a risk assessment. This still applies and includes an assessment of COVID risks.

The Diocese has done this for all its churches and church halls that are currently open. Despite a relaxation of legally enforceable controls made under Coronavirus legislation, the remaining requirement to carry out a risk assessment gives the Diocese the ability to introduce (or retain) whatever COVID controls we feel are appropriate based upon the circumstances and risks in the Diocese.

The Government has given us the freedom to make our own decisions but has urged us all to be cautious. Included for your information is the link to the latest [Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales \(CBCEW\) Guidance](#) dated 15<sup>th</sup> July and entitled COVID-19 Route Map: Step 4 Guidance. At this stage, given our Diocesan circumstances, I am not suggesting that we adopt this CBCEW Guidance in its entirety. It is however now possible to celebrate Life Cycle Events with numbers up to the safe capacity of your church as identified by your site specific risk assessment. Please find attached for ease of reference v15 of the Diocesan Risk Assessment for the Return of Congregations to Church and v11 of the Diocesan Handbook for the Re-opening of Churches which still apply.

I have taken both Clergy and Lay advice and due to the very high infection rates across all areas of the Diocese, **I ask you to retain all of the COVID control measures and**

cleaning protocols that you are currently following in all our churches and church halls until at least the end of August 2021.

The virus is expected to peak in the middle of August, following which in September there will be a review of available data and guidance to allow a decision to be made regarding controls and protocols. If the data allows, we may then take a cautious and staged approach to the relaxation of controls and protocols.

Also attached for your information is a statement from the Bishops' Conference. I ask that you make this available.

With every good wish and blessing

+ Rt Rev Robert Byrne CO

Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle