

NPHE T Discussion Paper
Phase 3 Restrictions on Mass Gatherings

Information in relation to COVID-19 and Religious Events

25 June 2020

DRAFT UNDER DELIBERATION

Action required

- For noting
- For discussion
- For decision

Phase 3 Restrictions on Mass Gatherings Information in relation to COVID-19 and Religious Events

1. Background in relation to Mass Gatherings

What are mass gatherings and why are they considered high risk in the context of COVID-19

Mass gatherings are events characterized by the concentration of people at a specific location for a specific purpose over a set period of time that have the potential to strain the planning and response resources of the host country or community. Mass gatherings can include a single event or a combination of several events at different venues, such as the Olympics. There are a diverse range of mass gatherings such as sports, music/entertainment, religious events, large conferences and exhibitions, and others¹.

The WHO emphasises that “[i]n the context of COVID-19, mass gatherings are events that could amplify the transmission of the virus and potentially disrupt the host country’s response capacity”².

2. International Health Organisation Guidance in relation to Mass Gatherings

ECDC

The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) in its *Rapid Risk Assessment: Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) in the EU/EEA and the UK – tenth update*³ advises that the pandemic is not over and that continuous efforts are needed to ensure that the remaining physical distancing and infection prevention control measures continue to be observed to limit the spread of the disease. ECDC’s hypothetical forecasting indicates a rise in cases is likely in the coming weeks.

Therefore, for the coming months, the ECDC has recommended that some public health measures should be maintained whether or not there is an observed increase in the number of reported COVID-19 cases. These include: keeping a recommended >2 metres physical distance between individuals in public places; avoiding small, medium-sized and mass gatherings⁴. Indeed, in Table 2 of the Rapid Risk Assessment the ECDC identifies maintaining national-level interventions in place on public gatherings (small, medium and mass gatherings) as a public health measure in response to COVID-19 to be maintained regardless of transmission rates⁵.

WHO

The World Health Organization (WHO) in its interim guidance *Key planning recommendations for mass gatherings in the context of COVID-19* issued on 29th May 2020⁶ identifies that in countries continuing to implement some movement and physical distancing measures, mass gatherings are likely to be restricted for a period of time. However, as countries progressively adjust their public health restrictive measures in response to the evolving epidemiology, the *Interim Guidance* provides a risk assessment process to guide how countries’ make decisions on the convening of mass gathering events, tailored to the individual event.

3. NPHE’s current advice to Government in relation to Mass Gatherings

The NPHE in its ‘*Advice to Government in relation to realigning the Public Health Framework Approach to reducing restrictive measures into two final Phases*’ on 18th June recommended, having regard to the ECDC advice, and the current approach of many other EU countries, that outdoor and indoor mass gatherings be restricted up until at least the end of Phase 4, as set out below. This will be subject to review.

¹ <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/10665-332235> at page 1

² *ibid* at page 1

³ <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications-data/rapid-risk-assessment-coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19-pandemic-tenth-update>

⁴ <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications-data/rapid-risk-assessment-coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19-pandemic-tenth-update> at page 14

⁵ <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications-data/rapid-risk-assessment-coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19-pandemic-tenth-update> at page 16

⁶ <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/10665-332235> at page 1

Measure Category	Phase 3 Commencing 29 June	Phase 4 Commencing 20 July
Organised indoor mass gathering total numbers:	50 people	100 people
Organised outdoor mass gathering total numbers:	200 people	500 people A review will be carried out in relation to the ongoing restriction of indoor and outdoor mass gatherings.
Mass gatherings operating in line with the limits above should comply with physical distancing and the Public Health Checklist. However, notwithstanding the limits above, physical distancing should continue to be complied with, having regard to the size of the venue.		

The NPHE recognises that mass gatherings are not merely recreational events, such as music concerts or sporting events. Mass gatherings also span religious, educational, cultural, social, community etc. events that are important to individuals and communities in terms of their beliefs, values, opportunities for wider participation in and contribution to society and spiritual life.

In making its recommendation regarding mass gatherings, the NPHE has taken a risk-based public health approach and has not differentiated between the activities or purposes for which gatherings of people occur indoors and outdoors at a specific location for a specific purpose over a set period of time. On purely public health considerations, based on current the state of knowledge, the risks associated with indoor mass gatherings of people (at an equivalent venue for an equivalent duration) are broadly equivalent, irrespective of the nature of the mass gathering (i.e. a concert, a religious ceremony, a cinema viewing, a community group meeting etc.). On this basis indoor mass gatherings have been treated the same, irrespective of the purpose of the gathering.

Mass Gatherings at Places of Worship

With regard to mass gatherings at religious buildings and places of worship, an argument has been made that the limit of 50 persons for an indoor gathering is small based on the size of many churches in Ireland. The following points may be noted:

- the limit of 50 persons for indoor mass gatherings will only apply for Phase 3 from 29 June to 20 July and will increase to 100 for Phase 4 and then to be reviewed;
- the limits placed on mass gatherings seeks to apply a consistent and fair limit across all mass gatherings irrespective of the purpose of the mass gathering (be it cultural, social, religious, educational etc). A similar approach is applied in many other countries;
- importantly, the public health risks associated with mass gatherings are not only limited to attendance at the religious building (e.g. dependent on the size of the church in proportion to the size of the congregation) but to broader considerations associated with gatherings e.g. attendees travel to and from the gathering, access into the venue, the duration of the event associated with the gathering, the feasibility of complying with physical distancing before, during and after an event, socialising that may occur in conjunction with the gathering;
- with regard to religious buildings and places of worship in particular, while many churches are large and would easily hold more than 50 or 100 while maintaining physical distancing, many other places of worship are small. The mass gathering restrictions require that, in addition to compliance with the limits, physical distancing should continue to be complied with, having regard to the size of the venue;
- for ease of communication and compliance, and in line with the approach in many countries, a number limit on mass gatherings has been proposed rather than a restriction based on a number of people per square area. This approach was not adopted for public health restrictions, would be complicated to communicate and ensure compliance with;

- it is widely recognised that COVID-19 infection spreads easily in crowds. It is not intended in any way to interfere with a person’s right or ability to practice their religion. The public health objective is to protect people from COVID-19 infection and prevent the spread of infection in potentially crowded indoor environments, through limiting indoor and outdoor mass gatherings in a fair and consistent manner across social, cultural, religious and other activities. Similar to businesses, employers, retailers, schools and others across Irish society, religious organisations are encouraged to carry out a risk assessment and examine ways in which they can deliver religious services and activities in ways that reduce the risk of infection spread for their staff and congregation.

Information from Dept of Foreign Affairs & Trade in relation to restrictions on religious ceremonies (as of 16th June)

- **Belgium:** From 8 June religious services or ceremonies may resume with max. 100 people observing social distance. Increased to 200 from 1 July.
- **Cyprus:** Indoor gatherings restricted to 10 people, including church and religious services. It is expected that an announcement will be made regarding the limitation of 10 persons for gatherings will on 24th June (not clear if a further limitation will apply thereafter).
- **Germany:** From 4 May religious services for up to 50 people (depending on room sizes) allowed. There have been two high profile recent outbreaks— one of which related to a Baptist church service.
- **France:** From 11 May, regular religious ceremonies should not be held or any grouping of 10 persons allowed.
- **Italy:** From 4th May, Funerals can now take place subject to a maximum attendance of 15 relatives but religious ceremonies or masses are still not allowed. Further easing of restrictions on 15 June including Indoor gatherings thereafter will be limited to a maximum of 200 spectators, but unclear if this includes religious ceremonies.
- **Romania:** From 2nd June, masses for private events such as christenings, wedding ceremonies or funerals can be held, but maximum 8 people can attend.
- **Slovakia:** Religious celebrations allowed again as of 6 May but only for people of max 60 years of age.

With regard to Australia public health measures have been decided at State level. Current information in relation to religious services and ceremonies in certain States is as follows⁷:

State	Numbers permitted at religious services and ceremonies
Queensland	20
Victoria	20
New South Wales (current as at 13 June)	Up to 20 guests can attend a wedding — plus the couple and people who conduct the ceremony. In addition, there can be a photographer and videographer present. Up to 50 people can attend a funeral. Up to 50 people can be in a place of worship, such as church. People should only attend a wedding, funeral or place of worship if there is no more than 1 person per 4 square metres. For example, a space for a wedding must be at least 80 square metres to hold 20 people. If the space is 60 square metres, it can only hold 15 people. Places of worship must have a COVID-19 prevention plan that involves physical distancing, hand hygiene and cleaning measures.
South Australia	75 Places of worship — such as churches and mosques — can open to the public for religious gatherings, private worship or small ceremonies. But only 75 people, can gather in one room, and a maximum of 300 people can gather at a site.
Tasmania	80

Information and reports of outbreaks associated with religious ceremonies, church congregations

With regard to gatherings associated in religious settings, there have been a number of reports from a diverse range of countries, including recent reports of outbreaks of the virus which have been sourced back to religious activities, church services and religious communities. Germany is currently reporting a number of outbreaks linked to church congregations in different states.

⁷ <https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/covid19-restriction-checker/activity>

Yesli and Khan in the *Journal of Travel Medicine*⁸ on 27th April reported that COVID-19 cases had been linked to places of worship and religious gatherings in Malaysia, Delhi, Northern Italy, and other locations such as Iran, Singapore and South Korea. They identified that gatherings at places of worship represent a risk for COVID-19 transmission to potentially large numbers of people from a single case. These gatherings often involve dense mixing of many people in a confined space, sometimes over significant periods.

The article concluded that de-escalation of restrictive measures later on in the life cycle of the pandemic will need to be based on thorough risk assessments and at first may involve intermediate measures, if these are possible. These may include moving services online or outdoors, restricting the number of attendees and/or excluding high-risk populations and limiting the duration of the religious gatherings and services as well as reducing the level of personal contact at these locations and events.

Recent outbreaks associated with religious events have been reported in the following countries:

Germany:

- On 22nd June it was reported that several buildings in Berlin have been placed under quarantine following an outbreak linked to members of a religious community. So far, 85 cases are linked to this outbreak⁹.
- An outbreak has been linked to a Pentecost service in Bremen that took place in early June. The number of infections was reported at 44, but the number has risen since, and on 17th June it was reported that one man had died (It was only established that he had the virus after his death). Around 150 people are thought to have attended the church service¹⁰.
- A cluster of 40 infections in the city of Frankfurt am Main and the surrounding area was traced to a Baptist church service that took place on May 10. Church officials say they followed social distancing rules and disinfected the building ahead of the service¹¹.
- In early June, a catholic priest who travelled to three towns to lead services in the German of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania of was diagnosed with the virus, causing a further 12 people to be quarantined.¹²
- A cluster of 112 coronavirus infections and one death has been traced to a church in Bremerhaven, north Germany.

USA:

- The CDC¹³ in a report in May highlighted that large gatherings pose a risk for transmission of COVID-19 and cited an example of an outbreak at a rural Arkansas church last March which stemmed from two identified primary cases who had attended church events, at least 35 of the 92 attendees at those events tested positive for COVID-19 of which three subsequently died, and a further 26 people tested positive including 1 subsequent death as a result of coming into contact with the church cases.
- Reported in June, a church in rural Oregon is now the epicentre of the state's largest coronavirus outbreak. Of 365 church members tested, 236 tested positive for the disease¹⁴.
- In the same month, at least six local health departments in West Virginia have now reported coronavirus outbreaks related to churches. They have reported 42 positive cases across three churches (one of which has reported 34 of those cases)¹⁵.

South Korea:

- "In mid-February, there was a turning point that led to an explosive outbreak in Korea. A person (31st case) who developed atypical pneumonia without any history of travel to an area with a COVID-19 outbreak was identified in the Daegu area, and the turmoil began. Following this case, hundreds of new patients were reported everyday,

⁸ Yesli S, Khan A. *COVID-19 pandemic: it is time to temporarily close places of worship and to suspend religious gatherings*. *Journal of Travel Medicine*, 2020, 1–2 <https://academic.oup.com/jtm/advance-article-abstract/doi/10.1093/jtm/taaa065/5825510>

⁹ <https://www.euronews.com/2020/06/21/german-covid-19-infection-rate-jumps-to-1-79-after-meat-plant-outbreak>

¹⁰ <https://www.dw.com/en/german-church-at-the-center-of-over-100-coronavirus-cases/a-53804687>

¹¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52786242>

¹² <https://www.dw.com/en/german-church-at-the-center-of-over-100-coronavirus-cases/a-53804687>

¹³ <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6920e2.htm>

¹⁴ <https://www.opb.org/news/article/eastern-oregon-la-grande-church-union-county-states-largest-covid-19-outbreak/>

¹⁵ <https://www.wvpublic.org/post/governor-reports-six-church-outbreaks-wva#stream/0>

especially in Daegu and the neighboring area. A religious gathering was found to be the hot spot at the center of the spread of the virus”.¹⁶

Singapore:

- Earlier this year, three clusters of COVID-19, comprising 28 locally transmitted cases, were identified in Singapore; these clusters were from two churches (Church A and Church B) and a family gathering. The clusters in Church A and Church B were linked by an individual from Church A, who transmitted infection to the primary case from Church B at a family gathering they both attended in January.¹⁷
- Phase 2 of reopening in Singapore commenced on 19 June. As part of this phase, the vast majority of businesses and workplaces are allowed to open, however a number of social and cultural amenities remain closed, including religious services¹⁸.

¹⁶ https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/0EA2D469C3131FBDD0110922FCD4EF7E/S1935789320000695a.pdf/how_is_covid19_affecting_south_korea_what_is_our_current_strategy.pdf

¹⁷ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1473309920302735>

¹⁸ DFA COVID-19 Digest of Mission Reporting 23 June 2020