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Notes for Clergy on the variation to Admission Arrangements for Church of England Schools and Academies following the closure of church buildings for public worship

The COVID19 pandemic has led to churches – and indeed other places of worship – being closed for public worship under the provisions of the Coronavirus Act and its associated Regulations since lockdown was implemented in mid-March.

From 4 July 2020, churches have been permitted to reopen for public worship but have to do so in a COVID-secure way, following the recent guidance issued by the national church. The decision to reopen a specific church rests with parish priests and their Parochial Church Council, in collaboration with the bishop. It is recognised that churches will open on different dates and their pattern of services may also be different, for example to ensure that social distancing can operate effectively. Should it be necessary, the government has also made clear that it would not hesitate to reintroduce more restrictive measures should the number of infections increase, locally, regionally, or nationally.

This has meant that parents have been unable to show that they meet the faith-based oversubscription criterion for regular church attendance during this period of temporary church closure. This has created anxiety for them and uncertainty for clergy, schools, governors, Diocesan Directors of Education, and their teams and, most significantly, for the prospective pupils of those schools where this criterion applies.

In discussion with diocesan and other colleagues, including the Office of the Schools Adjudicator (OSA) and the Department for Education (DfE), several possible solutions were explored by the Church of England Education Office. However, it rapidly became clear that the most straightforward, least burdensome, and most practical approach was to ask schools to request a **request a variation to their admissions arrangements for this specific situation**. The variation is in fact a clarification as to how church attendance is to be calculated in these unique circumstances.

An agreed form of words was agreed:

“In the event that during the period specified for attendance at worship the church [or, in relation to those of other faiths, relevant place of worship] has been closed for public worship and has not provided alternative premises for that worship, the requirements of these [admissions] arrangements in relation to attendance will only apply to the period when the church [or in relation to those of other faiths, relevant place of worship] or alternative premises have been available for public worship”.

In essence, this means for Clergy that there are five main points to consider:

1. When presented with the Clergy Reference Form, Clergy should assume that the pattern of attendance observed before the lockdown period would have continued throughout the time during which fully-accessible public worship was not available in the church building. This is because attendance requirements do not apply for that period of time.



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2. Following the lockdown period, attendance patterns at public worship can start to be observed again **when there is unrestricted and open access to all for public worship in the church building**. Therefore, if churches are having to put restrictions on numbers attending in order to ensure compliance with the Covid-19 health and safety guidance then for the purpose of observing church attendance for compliance against Admission Arrangements the church is still technically closed for public worship.
3. This will mean that even in the same locality different churches will be starting to observe attendance at public worship on different – and perhaps vastly different – dates. It is important the churches communicate as widely as possible through the regular channels when they are once again open for full and unrestricted public worship.
4. Extensive conversations have been held with the Church of England Education Office and via them with the regulatory bodies about on-line and digital worship. **For the purposes of observing church attendance at public worship to meet criteria in Admission Arrangements it has been decided nationally that no digital or on-line format will be recognised.**
5. If when the church reopens for full and accessible public worship, people who are clinically vulnerable or shielding continue to judge that it is too high a risk to attend public worship, then they should write to the Admissions Authority (ie Governing Board of the school) with a well-evidenced reason for being unable to meet the public worship criterion. When completing the Request Form, Clergy are asked to simply confirm the applicants' pattern of attendance at public worship. It is the Admissions Authorities responsibility to take into account any mitigating circumstances.

We realise that this is not particularly straight-forward or simple; but we hope that this does at least give some clarity and guidance regarding the situation of church attendance.

If you have any questions or queries, then please do not hesitate to contact us and we will do our best to assist.

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