

A 2021 'HEALTH CHECK' FOR CHURCHES

Introduction

This simple 'holistic health check' seeks to help churches of all sizes to:

- clarify how you can develop your ministry and reach out to your communities in the face of new needs, challenges, and opportunities
- identify what support will be needed to achieve this

The questions are designed to help you assess the ways COVID-19 has impacted upon your church and community. They will help you to recognise the ways you were able to support your congregation and wider community during the pandemic and consider how your church can develop this support as we move into recovery. This review has been shaped by over 5,500 responses from churches and the general public as part of the 'COVID-19, Churches and Communities' research project.¹ The main report and further information can be found at www.churchesandcovid.org

This is a resource to encourage you and help you plan for the future. It is not an official audit and there is no obligation to share your responses.²

COVID-19 has brought a time of unprecedented loss, change, and challenge, which has placed great demands on everyone. However, there is also much to celebrate in what churches have been able to continue, initiate, and develop, and this should give us great confidence for the future. As we look towards recovery, there is a unique chance to pause, recognise what has been learned, and think how this can shape and energise ministry and mission going forward. This process, which can only be driven by *your* church context and opportunities, is based on four main questions:

- Where are we now in our church life and relationships with the wider community?
- What are our priorities in moving forward?
- How can we ensure our buildings are fit for purpose?
- What support will we need?



¹ A partnership between the University of York, the Church of England, the Association of English Cathedrals, Historic England, the National Churches Trust, and the Historic Religious Buildings Alliance.

² If you *would* like to share thoughts or plans to encourage others, contact info@churchesandcovid.org.

A holistic 360° view of mission and ministry

COVID-19 has shown yet again how closely every aspect of church life can work together in outreach. Each relationship and activity developed, whether online worship, running a foodbank, or helping the grieving find comfort, has shown the potential to transform lives as part of a holistic vision for mission.

Members of the wider public told our research team of the great sense of loss felt when in-person worship was not possible, and church buildings were unavailable at a time of crisis. Yet churches still managed to meet spiritual needs and care for those who were suffering, especially the most vulnerable. The hard work, local

knowledge, and creativity seen in the response of so many churches during the pandemic has brought enhanced respect and recognition across communities as well as productive new partnerships with individual volunteers, local authorities, charities, and other organisations. These relationships offer exciting new ways to reach out and serve.



Carrying out your 'health check'

It will be important to set aside a specific time to work through the questions, perhaps at a PCC meeting, or inviting the congregation and those who use your buildings to share thoughts and responses.

Dividing into small groups, writing questions on large sheets of paper, and inviting people to write their thoughts on post-it notes, can help make sure all voices are heard. Post-it note boards can then be put up for through-the-week users and visitors to add their views (people can self-identify as church members, volunteers, users, local community etc). Many people have felt isolated during the pandemic and this could help them reconnect and share their experiences. It will be important to capture and record ideas and share a summary with the congregation and community to shape future vision and support.

For some churches, resuming what worked well in the past will now be the priority; others may want to continue new activities developed during COVID, or increase what they offer.

Areas to consider

The questions fall into three sections: **'BEFORE COVID,' 'DURING COVID,'** and **'2021 ONWARDS – LOOKING TO RECOVERY,'** and cover worship, evangelism/outreach, spiritual growth, pastoral care, and wider community engagement.

QUESTIONS:

1. BEFORE COVID (i.e. before March 2020)

A. List the worship, discipleship, and evangelism/outreach activities:

- you undertook each week/month (including youth work, school assemblies, visits to care homes etc).
- occasional activities (such as Alpha Courses, Holiday Clubs, and festivals).

What worked well and why? What were the challenges?

B. List the community activities:

- that took place in your church/hall/grounds, led by you and others
- that you were involved in beyond your building

What were the benefits to you and the community? What were the challenges? Who were your key partners or users?

C. How much was the building open for the community or visitors?

D. How was the church seen by the wider community before lockdown?

2. DURING COVID (especially the three national lockdowns and tier restrictions)

A. Worship, discipleship, and evangelism/outreach:

- What activities were you able to continue?
- What new or expanded faith-focused activities did you provide? (e.g. online services; Sunday School at home; online daily prayer; outdoor carols; online groups exploring faith)

What worked well and why? What were the challenges?

What new skills were developed by church members? How could these be used going forward?

B. Community activities and care

- What activities were you able to continue?
- Which social/community activities had to be paused? (e.g. toddler groups; coffee mornings; lunches; dementia groups; addiction support; exercise classes; young people's/uniformed groups; welcoming visitors; concerts)
- What new activities did you develop? (e.g. foodbanks, networks of volunteers to deliver shopping etc)
- Were you able to form new partnerships with other churches, organisations, parish councils, or local authorities? If so, what role did you play?

- What was the impact of COVID-19 on your volunteers? Did new volunteers come forward? How are you planning to continue any new relationships?

How do you think the church is seen now by the wider community? How has the pandemic strengthened or weakened the relationship?

C. The role of church buildings, churchyards, and other related green spaces

- How did COVID-related access restrictions affect the views of your congregation and the wider community on the value and role of church building(s) and any outdoor spaces?
- What would be necessary to keep your building open as a space of peace and comfort and/or maintain activities in the event of future outbreaks?

How can your buildings and/or outdoor spaces be used more effectively in outreach and care for your community and in welcoming visitors?

3. 2021 ONWARDS - looking to recovery

A. Worship, discipleship, evangelism/outreach

- What aspects would you like to re-instate?
- Which new activities would you like to continue and develop?

B. Community activities and care

- What new needs have you identified within your community (e.g. increased debt, food poverty, stress, unresolved grief, educational needs)?
- What do you see as the priorities in helping individuals and groups recover and rebuild in the next few years?
- How important will it be to have your building open for the community and visitors?

C. What support or resources will you need to continue/develop key activities

Possible examples:

- guidance on COVID-related risk assessment and management
- hardware/software for online work; materials for prayer spaces
- training for working with volunteers and partner organisations
- funding for activities, staffing, and/or adapting your building to meet need
- advice and guidance on welcoming for visitors and telling your stories

4. Final reflection

- **What is your vision for your church in the next ten years? What are the key words that summarise this? Include all aspects of church life, including worship and engagement with the community**

Further guidance

If you would like more guidance on undertaking this review and further steps in community consultation and project planning, you can find free additional resources here:

Churchcare: This Church of England website offers guidance and advice on the day-to-day maintenance of your church; how to open up your buildings to the wider community; and, where applicable, how to go about making changes to your building.

<https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/churchcare>

The Crossing the Threshold Toolkit: a step-by-step guide to managing a church building project. In particular, we recommend Chapter 2 - Undertaking a Community Audit and Consulting with the Community.

<https://www.hereford.anglican.org/parish-support/community-partnership/crossing-the-threshold-toolkit/crossing-the-threshold-toolkit.php>

This resource is in the process of being updated and a new version will be available in the autumn.

The National Churches Trust provides grants, practical support and information, as well as sign-posting to other sources of useful advice. There is a detailed Building Advice section on their website which covers care and maintenance, making the most of your building as well as advice on managing building projects. There is also a Resource Centre with over 2500 documents and web links to other sources of advice, sorted into topics and easily searchable and the House of Good report which outlines the huge contribution of churches.

www.nationalchurchestrust.org/building-advice

<https://www.houseofgood.nationalchurchestrust.org>

The **Empowering Design Practices** research project has also produced several easy to use resources that describe practical ideas on how to engage with your community on identifying their needs and how you and your church building can work to achieve this.

<https://www.empoweringdesign.net/edp-resources.html>

Centre for the Study of Christianity & Culture
University of York

<https://churchesandcovid.org/>