

Key points from Guidance on the safe use of Masjids from 4 July

Assālāmu ‘alaykum

The UK Government has released Guidance for the safe use of places of worship from 4 July. In light of many queries from Masjids, the following are some of the key points worth noting:

(1) 30-limit does not apply: The 30 limit applies to weddings and funerals and other activities. It does not apply to communal worship in religious places. The Guidance states: *“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 places of worship and their surrounding premises.”*

(2) Social Distancing: From 4 July, 1-meter distance with risk mitigation is acceptable where 2 meters is not viable. The Guidance states: *“From 4 July, 2 meters or 1 meter with risk mitigation (where 2 meters is not viable) between households are acceptable.”* This is general and it applies to places of worship and other settings. Therefore, individuals from various different households can perform Ṣalāh in one congregation with social distancing. Individuals of the same household can worship together without social distancing.

Masjids can, therefore, start to plan congregational Ṣalāh with 1-meter distancing between the participants. It is, however, imperative to adopt additional risk mitigating measures. The Guidance outlines some examples: *“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...”*

(3) Outdoor areas of Masjids: Car parks and other outdoor areas within the Masjid complex can be used for Ṣalāh. The Guidance states: *“A place of worship refers to a building used for regular religious ceremonies, communal worship or similar gatherings by religious organisations. It includes the use of surrounding grounds, for example, adjoining car parks, courtyards or gardens for which the venue managers are also responsible.”* This should be considered for Jumu‘ah Ṣalāh, where possible, to accommodate more people. The risk of infection is also lower outdoors.

(4) Non-Masjid Venues: Congregational Ṣalāh can also be performed in non-Masjid venues subject to number 5. The Guidance states: *“The guidance also covers premises when being used for religious gatherings, even when their primary purpose is not for religious gatherings, such as a community centre.”*

(5) Public parks, open spaces and private homes: The gathering of more than 30 people is not yet permitted in public parks or private homes. The Guidance states: *“This guidance does not cover public parks, private homes, cultural sites or other open spaces, such as woodlands which may be used for religious purposes. If people do want to engage in worship in these spaces, then the guidance relevant to that place should be adhered to.”* Anyone planning on Eid in a public park should consult with the local authorities.

(6) Risk Assessments and Staffing: Masjids should start completing risk assessments if not already done and ensure they are adequately staffed. The Guidance states: *“Failure to complete a COVID-19*

risk assessment could constitute a breach of Health & Safety legislation, as could having a risk assessment with insufficient measures set out.” The Guidance states further: “Ideally consider having separate stewarding for managing social distancing and health and safety aspects, and for security as this will allow proper due attention to be given to keeping the site safe from threats.”

This demonstrates the importance of adequate manpower. This is the new norm for many months, and Masjids should consider employing people if volunteers are not available on a daily basis.

(7) Multiple congregations: Multiple timings should be fixed for congregational Ṣalāh especially Jumū‘ah Ṣalāh, the sermon should be concise and worshippers should be encouraged to perform Nafī (supererogatory) Ṣalāh at home. The Guidance states: “Places of worship and faith communities should adapt religious services, especially where ceremonies would otherwise have taken place over a number of hours or days, to ensure the safety of those present and minimise spread of infection. It is advised that the ceremonies and services should be concluded in the shortest reasonable time.”

(8) Prayer Mats: Prayer mats can be brought from home or single use alternatives can be used. The Guidance states: “Reusable and communal resources such as prayer mats, service sheets, religious texts or devotional material should be removed from use. Single use alternatives should be provided as long as they are removed and disposed of by the worshipper.” It states further: “Items owned by the individual to aid worship such as a prayer mat or religious text, can be brought in but should be removed again by the worshipper.”

(9) Ablution facilities: Ablution (Wuḍū‘) should be done from home. Limited ablution facilities should be available for necessary use. The Guidance states: “Any pre-requisite washing/ablution rituals should not be done at the place of worship but carried out prior to arrival. In rare circumstances where it is necessary, washing facilities within the place of worship should be used in line with social distancing guidelines and hygiene measures applied.”

(10) Toilet facilities: The Guidance states: “Toilets inside or linked to places of worship should be kept open and carefully managed to reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19.” As using the toilet generally necessitates ablution, everyone should be encouraged to use the toilet at home. However, some toilets should be available for emergency use and for travellers.

(11) Young people: Young people can attend Masjids with appropriate supervision. The Guidance states: “Young children should be supervised by the parent or guardian.”

(12) The Vulnerable: Masjids should consider setting a time for the vulnerable. The Guidance states: “Venue managers advertising set days or times when places of worship are open solely for those particularly vulnerable to COVID-19, such as those over 70 or clinically vulnerable...”

(13) Face Coverings: The use of face masks in places of worship is not mandatory. Nevertheless, the Guidance states: “Evidence suggests that wearing a face covering does not protect you. However, if you are infected but have not yet developed symptoms, it may provide some protection for others you come into close contact with.” This is relevant because face covering is one of the suggested methods to mitigate the risk of transmission due to 1-meter distancing as mentioned in number 2. Face coverings should therefore be encouraged.

(14) Over 70s: Over 70s without any underlying conditions should be encouraged to perform Ṣalāh at home. However, if they decide to come to the Masjid, they should not be refused. The Guidance states: *“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.”* Masjids should also consider allocating a time for the over 70s as mentioned in number 12 and consider a dedicated Jumu‘ah Ṣalāh for them if possible.

(15) Records of Worshippers: Masjids are recommended to record details of visitors. The guidance states: *“In line with other government guidance for other venues including in the retail and hospitality sector, you 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.”*

Some possible options include: (a) online registration (b) several sign in tables with sanitisers available (c) registration slips. Any option chosen must be practical and not create additional complications. Long registration queues should be avoided as this increases the risks.

If for some reason, the details of visitors are not recorded, the risk assessment should detail how all members of the local community will be informed in the event of an outbreak (for example via the receiver and social media) and how visitors from out of town will be strongly encouraged to register their details, even if after the prayer.

(16) Doctors and health professionals: The guidance does not make reference to preventing doctors and other healthcare workers from attending places of worship. Healthcare workers are fully aware of the risks and should decide for themselves. There is no need to have a general rule prohibiting them from entering the Masjid.

The above addresses some of the common queries. Masjids should read the full guidance available on the following link: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship-from-4-july/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship-from-4-july>.

Covid-19 is still present and it is our duty to manage and minimise the risks. Masjids should start preparing and invest in resources and manpower as necessary. We have spent millions of pounds in the building of Masjids and it is now time to invest in facilitating access to the Masjids safely. Let our inaction and inadequate preparation not become a means for increasing the risk.

May Allah Almighty protect us all. Āmīn.

Wassalāmu ‘alaykum

Yusuf Shabbir

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Note: This advisory document is to help Masjids deliver the safe opening of Masjids. For the Fiqh implications, visit the following link: <https://islamicportal.co.uk/covid-19-congregational-salah-in-masjids-from-4-july/> and previous answers.