

# New taskforce developing plan to reopen places of worship

Faith leaders and government have agreed to develop a plan to enable the phased and safe reopening of places of worship when the evidence shows it is the right time to do so, Communities Secretary Robert Jenrick confirmed today (15 May 2020).

This follows the first virtual meeting of the new Places of Worship Taskforce which includes leaders and representatives from all the major faiths.

Earlier this week the government set out its ambition to reopen places of worship in step 3 of its plan to lift restrictions, which is expected to be no earlier than 4 July subject to further scientific advice.

In recognition of how difficult it has been for people of faith to not be able to practice their religion with their community, members agreed to work together to consider whether some forms of worship, such as individual prayer, might be permitted in places of worship before they fully reopen in step 3, where appropriate and safe to do so in line with social distancing guidelines.

Members of the taskforce also agreed to consult their faith communities on the measures being considered and to support ongoing engagement with their communities on this important work as it develops. The Communities Secretary also confirmed today that Faith Action will receive £125,000 to consult and engage with different community groups and places of worship up and down the country to ensure their views are represented at the Taskforce's meetings.

The Communities Secretary was clear places of worship will only be opened when the government is confident that people can use these spaces safely and will not put themselves or others at risk.

Communities Secretary Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP said:

During this pandemic, significant spiritual moments such as Easter, Passover, Ramadan and Vaisakhi when families, friends and congregations traditionally gather together, have been celebrated at home.

I realise how challenging being separated from their communities has been for people of faith. That's why I have convened the Places of Worship Taskforce to establish how religious practices can safely resume outside the home as soon as possible.

Today's first meeting of the Taskforce was very productive. We will now work together with all faith communities to understand how we can open places of worship as a priority, while continuing to prioritise safety. I look forward to working with the Taskforce

over the coming weeks to reach a solution.

Faith Minister Lord Greenhalgh said:

Places of worship serve such an important role in supporting and providing spiritual leadership for this country's diverse communities and in bringing communities and the generations together, but this also makes them places that are currently particularly vulnerable to the spread of the pandemic.

We realise that practical issues such as the size of both physical buildings and congregations are significant but we are determined to find a way to safely reopen places of worship as soon as possible, ensuring that people are not put at undue risk.

The Taskforce will jointly produce guidance with Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government which supports places of worship across England to reopen safely.

For the time-being, churches and places of worship must remain closed as set out in law. However, funerals are still able to go ahead in places of worship and in crematoria where possible to do so safely.

Members of the Taskforce that met today include:

- The Archbishop of Canterbury
- Cardinal Vincent Nichols,
- Chief Rabbi, Ephraim Mirvis
- Imam Asim Yusef, Board of British Scholars and Imams
- Rajnish Kashyap, Hindu Council UK
- Jasvir Singh, City Sikhs
- Daniel Singleton, Faith Action

Other faith representatives and government officials may be invited to attend future meetings depending on the Taskforce's priorities.

No place of worship will be able to reopen before a final decision by the government and the accompanying change to the legal position in the published regulations. Faith organisations will be able to reopen at a slower pace if they wish.

The Minister for Faith has held a series of roundtables and one on one meetings with faith and community leaders over the last few weeks and will continue to do so in the weeks ahead.

The funding for Faith Action has been awarded from the £360 million pot of funding recently announced by Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport to provide targeted support to the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector. As made clear at the time, this funding was not allocated via an open bid but awarded in line with agreed departmental priorities.