

**United Synagogue: Covid-19
Guidance to Member Communities on
Reopening Buildings and Restarting Services**

31 May 2020 / 8 Sivan 5780

Aims of this guidance

This guidance is framed by and builds upon the Chief Rabbi's Guiding Principles for Exiting Lockdown which can be read in full [here](#) and a tailored version of which is set out below.

It has been approved by the Chief Rabbi and the London Beth Din.

The document outlines the key principles of the reopening process and provides policy and advice to United Synagogue member communities as they prepare to return to their buildings. Its content has been developed by a team of Rabbanim, medical professionals, US Trustees, US Chairs and professionals who will continue to work to develop updated versions over the coming months.

In the government's framework for easing the lockdown, Places of Worship feature in Step 3 i.e. they will not reopen before 4th July at the earliest. The United Synagogue will contact all communities to confirm exactly when they can reopen. In the meantime, this guidance has been written to aid planning. Please ensure that you are reading the most recent guidance.

Structure

The guidance is organised into five sections:

- A. The Chief Rabbi's Guiding Principles for Exiting Lockdown
- B. Restarting services safely - practical considerations
- C. Restarting services safely – content and format
- D. Planning for the Yamim Noraim
- E. Planning for Broader Provision

ת"וב

United Synagogue

305 Ballards Lane
London N12 8GB

T: 020 8343 8989

E: info@theus.org.uk

www.theus.org.uk

Registered Charity No. 242552

President: Michael Goldstein

Treasurer: Maxwell Nisner

Trustees: Andrew Eder, Claire Lemer, Fleurise Lewis, Nicola Rosenfelder, Barry Shaw, Saul Taylor, Jacqui Zinkin

Chief Executive: Steven Wilson



TheUS

A. The Chief Rabbi's Guiding Principles for Exiting Lockdown

1) Pikuach Nefesh

Every step on the long road towards reopening our communities must be governed by the overwhelming priority of Pikuach Nefesh - the protection of life. Our greatest strength - our close-knit nature, the scope of our communal activity – is, during COVID-19, also our greatest weakness. Over the last few months, we have experienced tragic losses. Whilst every day that we do not open our shuls is painful, it is essential that we follow a cautious path centred on the wellbeing of our members, Rabbinates, staff, volunteers and visitors and take a risk-managed approach.

2) Reopening is a process

The government's approach and guidance is absolutely clear that the reopening of our shuls will not be a single event, but rather a cautious, phased process, which will take place over the course of many months. As such, the answers to the questions we have are subject to the latest medical and scientific data and will therefore evolve and change. We must be prepared for this and the uncertainty this brings.

Communities need to have in place plans for a rapid shut-down, should there be a suspected case of Coronavirus amongst those attending the synagogue or potentially a cluster of cases in the local area. The actual action needed will be subject to the prevailing advice at the time, taking into account our context.

3) We must work together

The process of reopening is a learning curve for us all; for religious and lay leadership as well as for members. It requires the active participation and cooperation of everyone. It will also require a great deal of forbearance from every person wishing to partake in communal life. It can only succeed if we work carefully and cautiously together.

4) One size does not fit all

Every one of our communities is different; from demography to size of membership, from geographic location to the function of the building. Whilst we will all be led by government guidance and the phases the government has set out for emerging from lockdown, what happens within each phase may differ from community to community. What one community does may not be right or appropriate for another community. It may be appropriate for some to move slower whilst others move faster, all whilst adhering to Government guidelines. As a result, these guidelines include options for consideration by community leadership.

5) No community operates in a vacuum

It is important that the detailed guidance being developed for the reopening of our shuls is used by all communities and that communities sense check other ideas, should they have any. In particular where these ideas touch on issues of a halachic or shul services related nature, please discuss these with the Office of the Chief Rabbi and the United Synagogue. Since all communities stand to benefit from the experiences of others, all communities are encouraged to engage with this process by providing comments and feedback, once the first set of guidance is issued.

6) Patience and agility

Whilst we would like to be able to plan months in advance, this year such advance planning will be more difficult. The government's phased approach together with the ever-changing 'R' rate could significantly impact our planning. It is possible that our path out of lockdown could speed up but it is equally possible that it could slow down or even reverse. As a result we have no choice but to be patient and with that, agile, to ensure that we can adapt as necessary.

7) Communication

As we are about to enter a prolonged period of uncertainty during which we will introduce, and then revise policy and guidance, regular communication with members is critical. We need to ensure that whilst we are effectively communicating the rules and the need for all members to comply, we also remain warm, welcoming and understanding. It is also important that we continue to convey the message that no-one of any age who is concerned about their health should feel obligated to attend a service, make up a minyan or say Kaddish.

B. Restarting services safely: practical considerations

Policy

- 1) Our synagogue buildings will need to meet COVID-19 safety requirements and allow for social distancing. The United Synagogue will be producing a Risk Assessment template document for each of its communities to complete. Aspects of the risk assessment are listed below. Communities should also refer to the document produced by the US Property Department entitled 'US Building Reoccupation', which advises communities on how to reopen buildings following their closure. This document will be distributed shortly.

Attendance

- 2) The following groups of people should not attend services:
 - a) Those who are shielded (extremely medically vulnerable), according to the government's definition.
 - b) Those who show any symptoms of COVID-19 or who live with people with symptoms of COVID-19, or have been in contact with a confirmed case – all in the last fourteen days
 - c) Those who have been asked to self-isolate by the government's Track and Trace Programme.
 - d) Those who are in quarantine having travelled recently
- 3) Older members (and certainly those over 70) should use their judgment to decide whether to attend services. They should take into consideration the heightened potential risk to their health should they catch coronavirus.
- 4) Those who are clinically vulnerable should take medical advice as to whether to attend.
- 5) No person should be or feel pressurised to attend a service in order to make up a minyan.
- 6) Employees who fall into any of these categories should be in touch with HR to discuss attending for work purposes.
- 7) At the present time, no child under the age of 12 should attend services. Whilst those over 12 can attend services, youth programming remains paused for now. We will update this guidance in line with government advice. See below for notes on online provision for young people.

Capacity, Seating, Layout and Access

- 8) Attendees to services should be sitting at least 2m apart from each other in all directions. Seating should be marked to make clear which seats should be used. Shuls might need to reconfigure. Clear signage will be important and a one-way people flow should be established, including separate entrances and exits.
- 9) Attendees should remain at least 2m apart from one another at all times including when entering and exiting the shul. Crowds should be avoided.
- 10) Attendees from the same household can sit, enter and exit together whilst recognising that this has implications for how seating is arranged.
- 11) Communities should ascertain their maximum capacity as soon as possible.

- 12) The US will be providing an online booking facility that will enable men and women to book into services and to notify Gabbaim of their status (chiyyuvim/aveilim, those with yahrtzeit, those with smachot etc). The system, which will help communities to keep attendance within capacity, will be hosted and supported centrally and administered locally by Gabbaim and administrators.
Once services have restarted, it will be critical to let members and other attendees know that they can only attend if they have booked through the system.
- 13) Keypads to allow entry to the site should not be used.
- 14) It will be necessary to have someone on the gates or at the door, checking people in.
- 15) Queues at gates should be socially distanced using floor markings and should be avoided as much as possible for security reasons.
- 16) We are consulting more widely to investigate the benefit and practicality of requiring communities to take the temperature of all those who attend.
- 17) The community may not facilitate, support or publicise any minyanim or services in members' homes or gardens. Sifrei Torah may not be loaned for these purposes.
- 18) Communities are asked not to hold kiddushim of any nature.

Cleaning, handwashing and infection control

- 19) The importance of good and regular handwashing should be highlighted to all members ahead of their visit. Hand sanitiser should be available on site and signs on site should encourage attendees to wash their hands on arrival and on departure. Signage should also display the correct and most effective methods of handwashing and using hand sanitiser.
- 20) If services are to be held indoors, members must wear face coverings and the room must be well ventilated by opening the windows. We are investigating the benefits or drawbacks of using air-conditioning and we will build our findings into future guidance.
- 21) Those who attend services cannot kiss the Sefer Torah, mezuzot or tallitot, nor can there be any handshaking or kissing. Community Tallitot will not be available for use.
- 22) All Baalei Tefillah and Baalei Koreh must wear face coverings, stand as far away from the kehilla as possible and face forwards (i.e. not towards those attending). In some shuls it may be more appropriate for them to daven or leyn from the front, rather than the bimah.
- 23) Those who handle the Sefer Torah or any other ritual item other than books (e.g. the yad) should wear a new pair of disposable gloves for the period that they are doing so. The gloves should be disposed of correctly. (There is no requirement for other attendees to wear gloves.)
- 24) Attendees should bring their own siddurim and chumashim from home. If this is not possible (i.e. on Shabbat where there is no eruv), they should select a particular set of books and keep them somewhere safe at the shul for their own use. Other books should be removed from the shul. Alternatively, signs should remind people not to touch these books at this time.
- 25) There can be no singing other than from the service leader who should position himself as far from others as he can, facing away from the kehilla. This is in line with government guidance.
- 26) The building should be cleaned between each service. Cleaners should wear a new pair of disposable gloves and should pay particular attention to door handles, hard surfaces, bathrooms and handrails.

Options to consider

- 27) Communities should consider starting to run weekday minyanim only, to rehearse the new system before moving to Shabbat services.
- 28) Communities should consider, where practicable and when the weather allows, holding services outdoors on the synagogue site. Wherever possible, spaces should be marked out to assist with social distancing. If outdoors services are held, please give consideration to neighbours. If there are neighbours living close to the site, it might not be practicable to hold shacharit.
- 29) Some communities may wish to assign responsibility for the oversight of these safety and social distancing requirements to a member of the Honorary Officer team or to another lay leader. In some communities, Chairs may wish to retain responsibility for this area. In either case, the HOs, Rabbinic team, Council and volunteers should be notified about who holds this portfolio.
- 30) In preparation for welcoming people on site and holding an increasing number of services, communities should build a team of volunteer ushers.
- 31) As allocating seating and determining people flow in a traditionally designed shul with pews is complex, communities might consider reopening services first in the shul hall where layout is more straightforward.
- 32) In order to accommodate need, communities might need to run several minyanim sequentially or with staggered starts. In either case, sufficient time must be allocated for cleaning and for people to avoid meeting at the gates or doors.

C. Restarting services: content and format

- 33) It is essential that we are responsive to medical, scientific or government advice that prescribes the amount of time that people can be together indoors. In any event, services should be run without an unnecessary delay.
- 34) There might be several reasons for communities to choose to adjust the content of services:
- To limit the time that people are together indoors
 - To allow for staggered services to meet demand
 - To enable social distancing
 - To ensure that all aspects of the service are safe (i.e. handling of objects, singing etc)

Options to consider

- 35) In order to adjust the service for the reasons mentioned above:
- Weekday Shacharit can begin at 'Rabbi Yishmael Omer'
 - Shabbat Shacharit can begin from 'Shochan Ad'
- Those parts of the service that are not said in shul should be said at home prior to arrival.

Leyning Options

- 36) The Baal Koreh takes the Sefer Torah from and back to the Aron Hakodesh, and no one may kiss it. He and anyone touching the Aron Hakodesh, Sefer Torah or Yad should wear disposable gloves. Gloves should be put on and taken off following best practice.
- 37) Calling up should be done by the Baal Koreh. If that is not possible, then the person calling up must ensure that they are socially distanced from the Baal Koreh.
- 38) Ideally, but only if easily practicable (e.g. Gabbai acting as an usher), individuals who are receiving an Aliyah should come to the bimah, following all the rules of social distancing (with the Baal Koreh stepping away whilst the brachot are said). If this is not feasible, then those who are given an Aliyah should move to a designated space where they can see the Sefer Torah and that is at an appropriate distance from others e.g. the other side of the bimah or the pulpit. They should recite the brachot from this space.
- 39) The Baal Koreh could do both Hagbahah and Gelilah. Alternatively, communities could consider giving Hagbahah to someone else provided that they wear gloves, approach the bimah in a socially distanced way and are comfortable to do so. In this situation, Gelilah could only be carried out by someone in the same household as the person doing Hagbah.
- 40) A Barmitzvah boy and his father could go to the bimah together in order to leyn and/or recite the haftarah
- 41) One communal mi sheberach should be made at the end of leyning for all those who were called up.
- 42) On Shabbat afternoons, communities might wish to hold a shiur between mincha and maariv. The same social distancing rules apply.

D. Yamim Noraim

- 43) For all of our communities Yamim Noraim is the high point of the year, both spiritually and in terms of levels of engagement. In an ordinary year, attendance is extremely high and communities not only run numerous services in multiple venues but also hold children's services, explanatory services, youth services and programmes, Q&As and children's lunches as well as providing a coffee station. It is as much a social and educational experience as a religious one. This year will look different but our aim must be to find a way to invite every person who normally attends – as well as those who have not yet done so- to participate in some way.
- 44) Ordinarily, communities would have made good progress with planning for the Yamim Noraim, often aiming to have all details in place by the end of July. This year is particularly challenging because, we are not able to predict accurately how the government guidance might change nor estimate with any confidence the numbers that might attend.
- 45) These notes have been put together to support communities in planning at this stage. More detailed guidance will follow.

Policy

- 46) Assuming that a community is able to get a minyan, one full set of services should be held on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Options to consider

- 47) In order to be able to run additional sequential services (with cleaning in between), communities might consider the following options:
- a) Asking members to daven Shacharit at home and running only Musaf as communal prayer beginning with Kriyat Hatorah or Tekiat Shofar. More than one additional Musaf service could be held if necessary.
 - b) Supplementing the services outlined above with 'highlights' services and explanatory services.
- 48) In order to slightly shorten the services, some piyyutim can be omitted. Information on sections that can be omitted this year only will be published soon.
- 49) To allow for the scheduling of multiple services the US will publish a list of timings i.e. the earliest and latest times that each service can be held.
- 50) If communities do not have sufficient Baalei Tefillah, a Baal Tefillah is permitted to lead the repetition of the Shacharit or Musaf Amidah in more than one service. However, the Baal Tefillah may not repeat the Birchot Keriya Shema or the quiet Amidah. In this scenario, during Shacharit, another member of the kehilla should lead the Birchot Keriya Shema rather than there be no leader.
- 51) As communities might choose to hold additional services in new venues and as regular guest chazzanim might not be able to visit, communities might face challenges in finding sufficient

service leaders. The US Centre will be supporting communities in sourcing chazzanim as well as looking into running online training for Baalei Tefilla for the Yamim Noraim. More details will be shared soon.

- 52) To complement this, communities might consider training Baalei Tefillah locally. A full set of recordings of the Yamim Noraim services is available on the US website at <https://www.theus.org.uk/article/services-audio-recordings>

Rosh Hashanah

- 53) On Rosh Hashanah this calendar year, shofar blowing will only take place on the second day (Sunday). It is important to note that it is only minimally necessary for individuals to hear 30 notes of the shofar. Communities could organise multiple shofar blowings on and off site and could consider holding a shofar blowing in the local park on condition that it does not cause a disturbance or Chillul Hashem.
- 54) When blowing the Shofar inside, the Baal Tekia should face away from the kehilla. We are investigating whether there might be a benefit to arranging a Covid virus test for the Baalei Tokea a few days ahead of blowing the shofar. Similar consideration might be given to other officiants for Yamim Noraim services.
- 55) Although normally the peak time for Rosh Hashanah is the morning, if government guidance at the time allows, communities might consider running alternative programming (e.g. explanatory) in the afternoon and evening as well as inviting people to come to Mincha to hear the Shofar.

Yom Kippur

- 56) To allow for sequential Kol Nidrei services to take place and for maximum participation, an early Kol Nidrei (to be concluded before Yom Kippur commences) could be held from plag hamincha and livestreamed.
- 57) A Baal Tefillah can lead the Kol Nidrei prayer itself and the Selichot of Kol Nidrei more than once, but he may not repeat the Birchot Keriya Shema or Silent Amidah.
- 58) Yizkor can also be held several times over the course of the day (including before Mincha or Neila) and can also be held online ahead of Yom Kippur.
- 59) Neila must happen at a particular time and communities should explore the option of holding simultaneous services.
- 60) Following Neila, Havdalah and a shofar blast could be livestreamed once the Fast goes out. Alternatively, the community could arrange for a second shofar blowing to be shown online.

Ideas

- 61) Communities might consider holding shofar blowings in different locations such as roads and public parks, to enable people to fulfil the mitzvah in a socially distanced manner, on condition that it does not cause a disturbance or Chillul Hashem. This could be tied in with Tashlich. (See 55 above.)



- 62) In order to provide opportunities for as many members as possible to attend a service, communities should explore alternative venues, noting that Rosh Hashanah falls over a weekend.
- 63) For many members, the melodies of the Yamim Noraim services are a highlight. To ensure that this aspect is not lost this year, communities might ask their regular chazzan to record highlights from the Yamim Noraim services to allow people to listen at home ahead of Yom Tov. A full set of recording of the Yamim Noraim services can also be found on the US website.

E. Planning for Broader Provision

- 64) Our communities are far more than places to pray. Together we learn, socialise, celebrate and mourn. Our buildings are intergenerational spaces, ordinarily filled with a diverse range of programmes, meetings and events. Since we have been in lockdown, much of this activity has migrated online with considerable success.
- 65) Whilst some members will return to our buildings for services as soon as they are open, others will be unable to attend. We do not yet have a timeframe for when we can reopen for non-service activity, As a result, it is essential that the online provision remains strong and that those that cannot or are not ready to return quickly do not feel excluded. Over the last few months, we have learned that many online activities have attracted higher attendances than their 'real-life' counterparts, perhaps due to their immediacy and ease of access. Communities should therefore aim to take a holistic view on their provision integrating the physical and the virtual where possible.

Suggestions

- 66) On weekdays, online programming should continue and be developed. The United Synagogue is soon to launch an online television station/video-on demand-service so that members and people in the wider Jewish community can watch and catch up on a wide range of online programming. The platform will be available to local communities too in due course.
- 67) Even when services resume in the building, communities should maintain online davening either as livestream from the building or in the format that has been successful over recent weeks
- 68) Communities might explore the use of the telephone and radio to connect with members who do not have internet connectivity or confidence with technology (often the oldest and most vulnerable)
- 69) Keeping up creativity online is likely to become more challenging as lockdown continues. To keep up momentum, communities might ask creative members to brainstorm ideas and run focus groups of members.
- 70) Communities might run a 'skills audit' in order to identify the skills and interests of members, enabling you to ask them to contribute their time.
- 71) We recommend that communities collaborate and share programming ideas. If details of all online events are uploaded to the US Events System, HOs, Rabbis, Rebbetzins and members will be able to search for, view and access online programming across all US communities.
- 72) Communities might also choose to participate in the community buddying programme which brings two (or more) communities together, enabling them to share digital content and welcome each other's members to their events.
- 73) Some outdoor socially distanced activities can now be resumed or introduced such as cycling, walking and jogging in groups of no more than six.
- 74) Similarly, a small shiur of no more than six people in total could be held in a garden assuming that the social distancing were applied and a booking or invitation-only system were implemented. Further detail on how such programmes could be run safely will be shared soon.
- 75) On Tisha B'Av, communities might wish to livestream kinnot from shul, supplementing this with online programming, discussions and, where possible, the broadcasting of films.
- 76) All of the above should be considered in the context of each community's capacity and resource ensuring that staff are not overwhelmed.

Children and Youth Online provision

- 77) As children and youth programmes will not resume in our buildings immediately, online provision - both from Tribe centrally and local communities - is essential. Tribe already has a range of online programming. Details are available [here](#).
- 78) Online davening, activities, story time and children's services should continue.
- 79) Communities might consider giving children ownership of some of their own activities and broadcasts, inviting them to produce the shul's YouTube channel, for example

Supporting those who are unable to attend shul on Yamim Noraim

- 80) Communities should hold educational programmes online in the weeks and days before Rosh Hashanah and during the Aseret Yamei Teshuva
- 81) They might also wish to livestream some or all of their Selichot services.
- 82) Erev and post Yom tov programmes could include
 - a) Zoom get together just before Rosh Hashanah comes in, featuring popular tunes from the liturgy.
 - b) Kol Nidrei Zoomed from shul before the Fast begins (see above)
 - c) Yizkor online ahead of Yom Kippur
 - d) At the end of Neila, Havdalah and a Shofar blast can be shown on Zoom
- 83) Materials could be produced to support prayer at home such as:
 - a) Page numbers of key prayers in Routledge, ArtScroll & Koren
 - b) Printed short prayers for those who are less committed
- 84) Communities might wish to share with members the full set of recordings on of the Yamim Noraim services on the US website
- 85) They might also advertised the times of public, outdoor shofar blowing (with the support of the CST and police) and with a view to not causing a disturbance
- 86) Members of the Rabbinic team might call all those not attending shul to wish them Good Yom Tov
- 87) Deliveries to the homes of those unable to attend could be:
 - a) Small food gift e.g. challahs, honey and apple, and card
 - b) Gift for children and youth
 - c) Cards produced by children for the elderly and housebound.
 - d) Prayer guides (see above)