

Introduction

Many church schools include church attendance as one of the oversubscription criteria within their admissions arrangements. During the period where churches were required to close during the COVID19 lockdown, the admissions difficulty this created was resolved by the variation to those arrangements which our schools applied for and now have as part of the admission arrangements. Please note, that we advise retaining this in the arrangements to cover any future closures. If you do want to remove it, this would need a consultation.

That variation also covers churches which could not be re-opened for public worship after July 4, 2020, because, in the judgement of the incumbent and their PCC, that could not be achieved in a COVID-secure manner. It also applies to the situation where a subsequent local, regional or national lockdown leads to a church being closed for public worship.

What about when a church reopens, but with restrictions on public worship?

Whilst the majority churches have reopened, the COVID-safe requirements have required significant changes to the conduct of public worship. Chief among these has been the limit on the number of worshippers at each service, although the reduction of provision such as Sunday Schools and young people's groups has also had an effect in terms of some oversubscription criteria.

Two particular concerns have been

- (a) people who were shielding or clinically vulnerable may have in theory been able to return to church, but judged that it involved too great a risk to their health, or to another family member
- (b) people who sought to return to church could find themselves unable to attend because all of the places available had been taken up, despite their best efforts.

Our schools were founded to generously serve their communities, especially those who were disadvantaged or marginalised. It is essential to make provision which maintains that ethos, while also fulfilling our statutory obligation to be fair to all applicants, and clear and transparent about how they can fulfil the school's admissions requirements.

The solution

The model variation specifically refers to the church being closed for public worship and **no alternative premises being made available**. That wording covers the situation where the church's usual capacity is not available to all its congregation, either because they are not able to attend because they are clinically vulnerable or are shielding, or because they have not been able to 'book' one of the available seats during public worship.

For admissions purposes, those unable to attend for one of those reasons can be treated as if the church was in fact closed for public worship.

SOME FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Is any evidence needed that one of those circumstances applies?

Yes because otherwise it isn't possible for an admissions authority to show its decision to offer or decline to offer a place was objectively based in a particular case.

What sort of evidence could be provided?

As we have previously indicated, that could be a letter from a GP, or the NHS or their consultant, or another professional such as a social worker, advising a person that they should shield. For those unable to access a place at a service, the evidence might be an email or other communication with the incumbent or church warden, information from one of the 'booking systems' that many churches are using and so on.

What about families who will find it hard to provide such information, for example because they do not have ready access to technology?

That's an important point, although families will of course be completing their application and SIF, either on line or in hard copy. Schools and churches should therefore be flexible about how this evidence is produced: at the same time, important decisions about school places will be made upon it, so it is not unreasonable to expect applicants to help provide such information.

Should that information be included in the Supplementary Information Form?

Yes and it should also be referred to in the Minister/ Faith Leader Verification Letter, so that it can be properly considered by the admissions authority.

What about people who do return to public worship?

It's important that those able to resume attendance do not feel (however incorrectly) their application is in some way disadvantaged by this process, for example because they feel it is being ignored or discounted. They are, after all, meeting the admissions criterion governing church attendance, and that attendance should continue to be recorded in whatever way that church uses

Taking this approach is perhaps likely to be of significant importance where a school is heavily oversubscribed and where faith-based criteria are correspondingly prominent, perhaps leading to large numbers of appeals, or general complaints that the system is 'unfair'.

Surely people could be told that they must attend another church if their own is closed?

That isn't possible because the Church of England places no requirements on worshippers to attend a specific church, other than where that is required in order to fulfil particular criteria for matters such as marriage, or baptism or joining an electoral roll. In addition, there may not be another church within a reasonable distance. It is also the case that for practical, liturgical or pastoral reasons, people may freely chose which church they attend, whilst may attend more than one church, for example where parenting arrangements are shared. If such a condition were to be considered by the Office of the Schools Adjudicator, there is no doubt that it would be judged as being in breach of the Admissions Code.

Why not remove any reference to church attendance in admissions until every church is able to reopen for public worship without any restrictions?

We cannot support that for two reasons. Firstly, we do not know when all the restrictions on public worship might be lifted - it could be that they remain in place for another 12-18 months, or conceivably even longer, especially in the light of the recently-increased restrictions announced by the Prime Minister.

Secondly, as we know, the situation varies greatly between and within dioceses, and across time. A blanket approach does not take account of the fact that many people are able to return to church and actively wish to do so. If that attendance is needed for admissions purposes, then it can and should be used, since doing so clearly meets the school's determined arrangements and does not disadvantage those who are unable to attend.