

The Swine Flu pandemic: Briefing note for parishes

*This briefing note is based on guidance provided by Jim McManus
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1. Introduction

Over the past weeks, it has become apparent that there are parts of England and Wales where clusters of Swine Flu cases exist.

In view of this, it is appropriate to issue a reminder of key public health infection control measures.

This briefing note also includes guidance on the Liturgy which allows parish priests to make decisions appropriate to local conditions and which are epidemiologically and pastorally valid.

It is expected that further guidance will be issued later in the year as the progress of the flu pandemic unfolds.

2. What is Swine Flu and the risks of transmission

Swine influenza (A H1N1) is a highly contagious acute respiratory disease of pigs, caused by one of several swine influenza viruses. As with regular, seasonal influenza, transmission of Influenza AH1N1 is

- i) largely person to person, by spread of droplets from the respiratory secretions of infected individuals. These can directly contact healthy people's nose, mouth, or eyes, resulting in infection, or
- ii) by contamination of surfaces with infective droplets.

3. General Infection Control Advice

The key infection control measures for pandemic influenza in general community settings are fairly well rehearsed.

- **The most important advice is to maintain clean hands.**
- Practice good hygiene.
- Use the "Catch it, bin it, kill it" messages (sneeze into a tissue, dispose of the tissue and then wash hands carefully).
- More information is available at www.direct.gov.uk/en/Swineflu/DG_177831
- Wash your hands often. Wash with soap and water. Be sure to use a (paper) towel to turn off the tap handles so as not to recontaminate your hands. The same applies to doorknobs.

- If you can't wash your hands, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol.
- Frequent cleaning of other touchpoints such as telephones, light fittings etc with an ordinary cleaning product to prevent droplet infection.
- Keep your hands away from your face, or wash them first.

4. Application to parishes

In essence the key risks during public liturgy in a pandemic are:

- i) the inherent risks from being in a large public gathering.
- ii) the risks of contaminating hands during the sign of peace because of people sneezing/coughing on their hands or surfaces.
- iii) the risk of contaminating the minister's hands and chalice during communion with respiratory secretions and passing these on directly into other peoples' mouths.

Infection control in parishes should include:

- Priests meeting and greeting parishioners; ensure hands are washed before beginning Mass.
- Provide hand washing facilities or alcohol based sanitizers for Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion before they commence their ministry.
- You should also keep in close touch with local schools to help assess the situation in your parish.

5. Decisions at parish level on suspension of the Chalice, Communion on the Tongue and Sign of Peace

Handshaking, communion given on the tongue and sharing the chalice could be vectors for droplets of respiratory secretion to pass from one person to another. In particular:

- The Chalice and Communion on the Tongue - this is a source of potential infection during a large local outbreak.
- The Sign of Peace – suspending or changing this to a bow or other gesture during a large local outbreak.

The grid below has been produced to help parish priests make local decisions concerning Liturgy.

All of the questions should be able to be answered in the affirmative before a decision is taken to suspend or change practice.

However, as this guidance note has been issued at the start of the school summer holiday break, question 2 may not be valid until the start of the autumn term.

It is suggested that a staged approach be taken:

Stage 1 is to suspend the chalice/communion on the tongue.

Stage 2 is to change in the sign of peace.

If at a later date, government advice suggests suspending public gatherings, further guidance will be issued.

Stage 1
Suspension of the Chalice and Communion on the Tongue

1. There is a large number of cases swine flu locally.
2. At least some schools have closed or have very high levels of sickness absence including schools which educate the parish children
3. There are multiple confirmed or suspected cases known to be near the parish community or are personally known to parishioners

Stage 2
Suspending or changing the Sign of Peace

1. There is a large number of cases locally.
2. At least some local schools have closed or are operating on very high levels of absence including the schools which educate the parish children
3. There are multiple confirmed or probable cases in the parish community

If you answer 'No' to any of the questions in the two stages above, then it is not necessary to make the relevant suspensions. However, the more general infection control advice should be followed.

6. Further Information

General Information about Swine Flu can be obtained from the Direct Gov website:

www.direct.gov.uk/en/Swineflu/DG_177831

Information can also be obtained from your local authority.