

The Government's announcement over the weekend of a national lockdown from Thursday will have an impact on our faith communities and places of worship across Leicester.

Diwali will be even more severely affected than we had anticipated; something that will no doubt cause concern for many residents, businesses and other stakeholders across the city. This recent development comes at such an important time in the year for many thousands of people in our city and elsewhere, meaning that some changes will have to be made to any plans already in place to mark the occasion.

Sadly, at a time when friends and family usually come together to celebrate, our common responsibility to look out for and protect family, friends and community members from the pandemic means that things will undoubtedly be even more different this year. Having said that, I really am very proud of the way our city has responded in recent months as we've moved from one lockdown to the next, and as we've tackled head on together a prolonged exposure to the virus locally.

Because of our past experience in Leicester, I'm convinced that our community spirit won't be dampened by the announcement, particularly as we do all we can together to find COVID-safe ways to mark the occasion and celebrate such an important time.

Though families from different households won't be able to get together in person, to eat, to mark the occasion through collective worship and prayer, and to take part in all of the usual glorious festivities that we've become so used to here in Leicester, I am in no doubt whatsoever that creative community spirit will be harnessed and other arrangements will be put in place and, though done differently, this important occasion will still be marked in 2020.

The announcement also means changes to the extent of the activity able to take place in places of worship, despite all of the extra steps that have been taken to make them as COVID-safe as absolutely possible. According to the published guidance, collective worship and prayer will have to stop from Thursday onwards, as we move back to a position like that of a few months ago. Specifically, the expectation is that places of worship will be closed unless they are being used for the following activities;

- Funerals
- To broadcast acts of worship
- Individual prayer
- Formal childcare or where part of a school
- Essential voluntary and public services like food banks or blood donation; and
- Other exempted activities such as some support groups

Weddings or civil partnership ceremonies cannot take place either, a further step away from the arrangements that currently apply and have applied in recent months.

As is often the case, what these requirements mean in practice might become clearer over the coming few days as Government issue more guidance to us all.

Of course, as we have done over recent months, we will continue to provide support and assistance where we can so that our communities are able to respond in ways that enable everyone to conduct themselves safely and in line with what's expected of us all. For those communities and individual organisations you are in touch with directly, I'm sure you will continue to do everything possible to reinforce the essential public health messages that are so important in our fight against COVID19.

Peter Soulsby
City Mayor

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