

Wednesday, 18th March 2020

Latest (No.2) Directives for Gurdwaras, Sikh Organisations, Charities and Jathebandis during the Covid-19 pandemic

Sikh Council UK and the Sikh Doctors Association have been working in collaboration to formulate a robust plan to address the public health emergency due to coronavirus. **We are extremely concerned about the health and safety of the Sikh community and wider society.**

We are about to enter a very dangerous phase in the coronavirus spread, as the death rate is predicted to rise massively. This has already occurred in Italy and the UK will follow that emerging catastrophe in the next few weeks if we do not put the timely government action plan in place. Whilst we stand at 104 deaths nationally today, it is likely to escalate to 200,000 deaths within a short period. The government plan in place is likely to reduce this number to 20,000 deaths, which in itself is still a tragedy. **The worst of the pandemic is still to come.**

In line with Government guidance and the emerging government plan, we have produced a preparation plan. This plan will massively reduce the potential spread of the virus in Gurdwaras and the local community, address common risks and ensure our implementation saves lives and protects the vulnerable.

With good awareness programmes and regular coronavirus updates, the sangat should be better informed and will act more responsibly to keep themselves safe and others safe too. The Sikh Doctors Association is working especially on this aspect.

Yesterday, UK Health Secretary, Matt Hancock confirmed that coronavirus social distancing measures extend to places of worship as they also pose a significant risk. We have taken the necessary specialist advice and analysed this in light of Gurmat. The aim is to gain the fullest compliance in social distancing whilst remaining in accordance with the tenets and spirit of the Sikh Faith.

Please view the following as the latest guidelines that should be enforced fully by management committees and supported by all *sangat*:

1. As Sikhs, we worship and obey the edicts of the Shabad-Guru, Sri Guru Granth Sahib Jee. We ask that all Gurdwara Management Committees seek refuge and find solace in Gurmat Principles.

Sikh Council UK requests that every Gurdwara should include a prayer in their daily

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Ardhaas (both in the mornings and evenings) to rid humanity of this deadly disease and for guidance and protection of the Panth and the whole of humanity.

2. Gurdwaras should display large, bright signs at entrances (front door/foyers/ jorhaghars), asking people to leave the Gurdwara Sahib and self-isolate as per NHS guidelines if they feel unwell or have either or any of these symptoms:

- a high temperature over 37.8C – you feel hot to touch on your chest or back,

- a new, continuous dry cough – this means you've started coughing repeatedly.

These signs should especially address high risk individuals (elderly, pregnant or ill in any way).

Gurdwaras should make provisions to live stream divaans where possible and encourage *sangat* to read Gurbani and do Simran at home if they cannot attend the Gurdwara Sahib.

3. It would be against the tenets of Gurmat to ban elderly members of the *sangat* from coming to the Gurdwara. As mentioned in our last directive, the Gurdwara is often the only support network for elderly/vulnerable people.

However, over 65s should be encouraged to restrict the duration of their time at the Gurdwara to an absolute minimum (*darshan*). Posters should direct our elderly *sangat* to shorten their visits and inform them of the heightened risks to their age group.

4. Hand-washing should occur when entering the Gurdwara premises. Sinks should be cleaned and disinfected (including all taps and handles) regularly. Hand gels and liquid soaps should be used instead of soap-bars. Posters displaying the correct method of washing hands (in accordance with 'WHO' guidance) in Punjabi and English should be displayed at every sink (including toilets and kitchen areas). These posters should also encourage people to clean *karas* every time they wash their hands. The Sikh washing protocol is to wash up to the elbows, anyways.
5. General signage reminding people that if they sneeze or cough they should strictly adhere to the 'catch it, bin it, kill it' policy. The standard NHS poster should be displayed around Gurdwaras.
6. Every individual coming to the Gurdwara should bring a clean scarf or *parna*. Special care should be taken to cover your mouth with the scarf when bowing in front of Sri Guru Granth Sahib Jee. It is essential to avoid any germs particles being transferred to others via the floor/rug/mat in front of Satguru Jee. Remember, *matha tekna*

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(bowing) in itself is a great blessing and should not be avoided. However, it is vital to maintain the sanctity, hygiene and safety of this important Sikh custom.

7. The mat or rug which is placed in front of Sri Guru Granth Sahib Jee should be replaced with a white sheet and ideally covered with a plastic cover. This sheet should be changed regularly (every hour), and the plastic cover should be disinfected/sterilised every hour.
8. All Granthi Sahibaan and others in-service or contact with the *saroops* of Sri Guru Granth Sahib Jee should bring their own personal, fresh *parnas* and should avoid sharing these at all times. Sevadaars should cover their mouths while reciting Gurbani. It is beneficial to limit the number of people performing Maharaj Seva and enforce a '*Harmandir Sahib*' like protocol in which only designated *sevadaars* perform the *seva* of Satguru Jee. This includes *chaur sahib* seva.
9. Please clean *Golaks* regularly as they have a hard surface and come into frequent hand contact. Money can transfer germs and the virus, so this needs to be understood and special care should be exercised i.e. hands should be thoroughly washed after any contact with money and disposable gloves should be worn whilst counting the money in the *Golak*. One should not touch their face during this time.
10. As specified in our last directive, we maintain that *langar* should remain open but in a minimised, simple form. The *sevadars* cooking or distributing *langar* should be in good health, cover their mouth with a *parna* and wear disposable gloves. As per government guidance food banks and community kitchens have not been closed. Therefore we should not close *langars* but instead exercise extra caution and minimise our entire *langar* operation.
11. As per our historical traditions, we encourage *Karah Parshadh* to be prepared at Amrit Vela and Rehras Sahib time only (as opposed to all day). Those distributing *Parshaadh* should ensure they have thoroughly cleaned their hands, and their general hand hygiene (nails, cuts, plasters) is in not compromised in anyways. While distributing *parshaadh*, the *sevadar* should cover their mouth with a *parna* and *parshaadh* should be 'dropped' as opposed to placed on *Sangat's* palms (to minimise contact). The *bata* (*bowl*) containing *Parshaadh* should be kept covered by a clean white cloth in between serving.
12. It is the decision of each Gurdwara Management committee as to how they minimise, postpone or cancel programmes in their Gurdwaras. They should have business continuity plan outlining the functions in the gurdwara that are critical to community functioning. This includes events such as Anand Karajs, funerals, Akhand Paaths or Sukhmani Sahib Paaths. It is unreasonable to expect all programs to halt immediately. *Live-streaming to families is an option that can be used in some circumstances.*

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Please take special care in informing families or individuals of changes or cancellations that you are enforcing. We urge the sangat to be understanding during this difficult and challenging time.

13. *Sangat* should be instructed to sit at least at a distance of one metre apart (arm's length) in the *darbar sahib*. Programs should be scheduled in a staggered time-table promoting minimum numbers of gatherings as possible. If there is a large number of sangat eager to come and prayer, then it is reasonable to stagger their admittance and allow 10 in at a time, or whatever is deemed safe and reasonable.
14. Gurdwaras and Sikh organisations should make provisions to support elderly and vulnerable members of the community. Soon, there may be a further need in terms of *langar* and other support.
15. Sikh Council UK will shortly be launching a special freephone helpline for elderly/vulnerable members of the community. This will nationally co-ordinate and unify the efforts of many brilliant organisations, individuals and Gurdwaras that wish to carry out support work in this time.
16. As government advice is changing daily, the Sikh Doctors Association will advise of the timely changes. It is crucial that Sikh Media outlets and displayed posters accordingly change their guidance and information to the sangat. Updates relevant to our community and Gurdwaras will be updated on our social media and conveyed to media outlets.

We believe this robust set of plans will mitigate risks and help save lives and protect the vulnerable.

There is increasing pressure to call for Gurdwaras to shut completely at the earliest instance. We believe this is contrary to the teachings of Gurmat. Sikh Council UK encourages Gurdwara Managements to balance their responsibilities for the safety of the *sangat* with the need to come to the Guru's house for darshan of Guru Sahib to seek guidance and spiritual uplift from Gurbani. We should all take time to safeguard our mental health during this difficult time, taking strength and guidance from the positive and ultimate truth of Gurbani.

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