

Changes to English COVID-19 government guidance and the “rule of six”

Updated 18 September 2020



On Monday 14 September the UK government introduced restrictions on how people in England can meet friends and family and socialise. On the same day, they published a series of small but very important amendments to the guidance they had published before. On 17 September they revised the ‘Places of Worship’ guidance, and provided some frequently asked questions.

These may change how some Quakers understand what is now allowed:

- for worship,
- socialising after worship, and
- organisations that hire space in meeting houses.

Often this revised small print gives more permission than the headline messages we first heard. You may need to re-read the latest versions of several documents (outlined below), and read several parts together rather than just a single sentence. This may affect decisions you made as recently as Sunday 13 September.

The Scottish and Welsh guidance has not had this level of changes, and is rather clearer. So this paper is just about England. Local restrictions may also be in place.

Britain Yearly Meeting (BYM) cannot provide an authoritative interpretation of the guidance, but we have highlighted the key changes, and can give some advice on how to make sense of the new guidance.

Key points

- The main point is: “...venues following COVID-19 secure guidelines will be able to continue to host more people in total - such as religious services in places of worship - but no one should mix in a group of greater than 6.”
- The key wording change is that no-one should **mix** or **minge** in a group of greater than six. Previous guidance talked about not **visiting** in a group of greater than six.
- There are many other exemptions, and the list changed on 14 September.
- Socialising after worship is not exempt.
- There are significant changes for outdoor worship.
- Remember this is mainly about socialising, friends and family.

Worship – what’s allowed now?

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has confirmed direct to BYM that for worship (using our summary wording):

- Don't arrive in a group of more than six.
- There are several exemptions for worship. A series of people who arrived in groups of up to six can be worshipping in the same space, as a larger gathering, provided individuals stay socially distanced from each other and comply with the places of worship guidance during worship.
- After worship, the general rules for socialising apply. So keep socialising to a group of six or fewer, socially distanced, without mixing with others outside that group of six. This group can now be more than the people you arrived with.

The **‘Places of worship’** guidance [available here](#) was then changed on 17 September, bringing it into line with the new regulations. BYM’s advice this week has been consistent with what this new version says.

A set of frequently asked questions about this guidance has now been provided by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. This resolves a lot of questions Quakers have been asking, and is reproduced in an appendix below.

Note that there are significant changes for outdoor worship:

- In the grounds of a place of worship: *“More than 30 people can pray in a place of worship or its grounds. The law allows for multiple groups of 6 people to participate, provided that these groups do not mingle.”*
- In public outdoor spaces: There is new wording about: numbers of people; the need to liaise with those responsible for the open space for more than 6 people; and *“Local authorities will make decisions on applications for prayers in public places, including those on private land which are not attached to a place of worship.”*
- In private outdoor spaces: *It is illegal for groups larger than 6 to meet in a private outdoor space, including private gardens unless the group consists solely of a single household or 2 linked households. Religious activity is not exempt from this rule.*

The main wording changes to other guidance on 14 September

'Meeting with others safely (social distancing)' [available here](#)

This new piece of guidance was published first on Wednesday 9 September, alongside the Prime Minister's announcement. It says "*Limits on the number of people you can see socially have changed.*" It contains a list of exemptions, for example:

- *for work, or the provision of voluntary or charitable services*
- *wedding and civil partnership ceremonies and receptions - up to 30 people, in a public place*

But on 14 September these exemptions were changed, and now include, for example:

- *support groups – formally organised groups to provide mutual aid, therapy or any other form of support. This includes support to victims of crime, recovering addicts, new parents, people with long-term illnesses, those facing issues relating to their sexuality or gender, and those who have suffered bereavement.*
- *supervised activities provided for children, including wraparound care, youth groups and activities, and children's playgroups*

In section 3 it has the key explanation about worship, quoted below. On 14 September this was changed to say is that no-one should **mix** in a group of greater than six. Previously it said not **visiting** in a group of greater than six. Its first sentence summarises the whole approach:

*As well as the exemptions above, venues following [COVID-19 secure guidelines](#) will be able to continue to host more people in total - such as religious services in places of worship - but no one should **mix** in a group of greater than 6. This includes places like a pub, shop, leisure venue, restaurant or place of worship. When you visit one of these places you should:*

- *follow the limits on the number of other people you should meet with as a group - no more than six people unless you all live together (or are in the same support bubble)*
- *avoid social interaction with anyone outside the group you are with, even if you see other people you know*
- *provide your contact details to the organiser so that you can be contacted if needed by the [NHS Test and Trace programme](#)*

'Coronavirus outbreak FAQs: what you can and can't do' [available here](#)

This was also changed on 14 September. Its section 3.19 *hobby clubs, amateur music groups and other leisure activities* makes the overall approach more clear:

It is against the law to gather in groups of more than six, where people are from different households or support bubbles. The rule above does not mean

that there cannot be more than six people in any one place. All activities for under 18s are exempt. There can be multiple groups of six people in a place, provided that those groups do not mingle.

In practice, however, this will make it difficult for some activities to take place without breaking the law. Activities where there is a significant likelihood of groups of more than six mingling – and therefore breaking the law – should not take place until further COVID-19 Secure guidance has been developed and approved to enable the activity to happen safely. This may include extended tour groups, large banquet dinners, society or club meetings, or amateur music or drama rehearsals.

There are also useful answers in 3.18 support groups and in 3.16 sport and physical activity

‘Multi-Purpose Community Facilities’ [available here](#)

This document has been in place for many months, and is used by many meeting houses who hire out space. It was updated again on 14 September.

Sections 2a and 3c were changed significantly, and merit re-reading.

This document is quite complex, and for the full meaning to become clear you need to read 2a and 3c together. In particular, please read very carefully the whole of the paragraph in section 3c starting “*However, for activities*”, to avoid seeing this as an absolute prohibition of the examples in the bulleted points.

Note again how the ‘*Coronavirus outbreak FAQs*’ number 3.19 we quoted above clarifies things.

Many other pieces of specific guidance

New pieces of text about social distancing and groups of six have been inserted into many of the documents covering specific activities which are referred to by the general guidance.

The regulations themselves

If you want to refer to the legal Regulations, they are [available here](#).

We hope this eases a little the complex situation we face.

Revised 18 September 2020

Appendix - Frequently Asked Questions about worship

These has been provided by the government department responsible for the guidance.

Q. Do I need to arrange my seating into groups of six rather than in households?

- No. The total number of people attending worship is limited by how many people can socially distance within the venue. Seating should enable everyone to practise social distancing from those they don't live with.
- The maximum number of people that you should socially interact with in a place of worship is six, particularly when leaving or arriving.

Q. Can you stop social distancing within a group of six?

- No. Everyone should continue to practise social distancing when mixing with people they don't live with or are not in a support bubble with, even within a group of six.

Q. How does the rule of six work for Friday prayers etc where the activity is communal, and not in groups?

- The number of people able to attend a place of worship is determined by the number of people the space can safely contain while all attendees adhere to social distancing of 2m between households, or 1m with additional safeguards.
- You should only enter and leave the venue together, and socially interact, within a group of up to six, whether this six consists of one household or multiple households.
- Where group members are from different households, they should maintain social distancing of 2meters, or 1meter with additional safeguards

Q: Can groups socialise with one another after worship/ study?

- No, groups of six should not mix within the venue and should leave in the group they arrived in.
- Everyone, at all times, needs to limit social contact as much as possible.

Q. Does the exemption for Places of Worship cover faith groups hiring other venues (or outside spaces) for communal worship?

- Yes, it is the activity of communal worship that is exempt from the law against groups of more than six people from gathering.
- A faith group can host a prayer service or communal worship at a hired venue that is Covid-19 secure, with the same restrictions as a place of worship.

Q. Does the exemption cover faith groups gathering in outdoor public spaces for communal worship?

- Yes, it is the activity of communal worship that is exempt from the law against groups of more than 6 people from gathering, rather than the place of worship.
- This means that a faith group can host a prayer service or communal worship in an outdoor public space, with the same restrictions as a fixed place of worship.

- In order to do so, they must undertake a rigorous risk assessment for the event alongside the private owner or relevant local authority, and ensure that safeguards are in place to allow for strict social distancing between attendees.
- All attendees should provide contact details for the purposes of NHS Test and Trace.
- This exemption does not apply to private spaces such as gardens.

Q. Does the exemption cover faith groups gathering in outdoor private spaces, such as gardens, for communal worship?

- No. The “rule of six” applies to all private dwelling spaces, including gardens.
- Only six people are permitted by law to gather in a private garden.
- We do understand that this may cause challenges for communities planning to host religious services in private, however the regulations have been changed given the public health risks associated with private houses and gardens.

Q. Are prayer groups/ study groups for adults meeting in Places of Worship capped at six?

- No, there can be multiple groups of six people doing the same activity provided that these groups do not mingle.
- Faith groups can organise prayer and study groups, both at a fixed Place of Worship and at a hired venue that is Covid-19 Secure venue.
- If the group is hiring a venue, they must undertake a rigorous risk assessment for the event alongside the private owner or relevant local authority, and ensure that safeguards are in place to allow for strict social distancing between attendees.
- All attendees should provide contact details for the purposes of NHS Test and Trace.

Q. Can six adults meet for worship in a house if the children are asleep?

- The law is clear. If there is any risk that a group of more than six will mix (including young children) then this must not happen.

Q. Are activities for children and young people, such as youth groups, allowed more than six attendees?

- Yes. Activities for children organised by a business, charity or other public organisation, taking place at a COVID-19 secure premise, will be able to continue without applying the 6 person limit to the children involved or to the organisers. Such activities also must not take place in private dwellings.
- Out-of-school settings and youth groups are exempt from the rule of six but protective measures still apply; that there should be no more than 15 children per small, consistent group and should have at least one staff member per group.
- For the purposes of this exemption, young people are below the age of 18.
- If at a hired venue or outdoors, they must undertake a rigorous risk assessment for the event alongside the private owner or relevant local authority, and ensure that safeguards are in place to allow for strict social distancing between attendees.
- All attendees should provide contact details for the purposes of NHS Test and Trace.

Q. Are community workshops, support groups, keep fit, bereavement groups, Employment drop ins etc in community venues allowed?

- Most formal support groups will still be able to take place and some will be able to have any number of people present. The list of support groups is [here](#)

- Informal groups can still take place in Covid Secure premises (but not private homes) with multiple groups of six, provided that these groups do not mingle.

Q. What's the rule for weddings, funerals and life-cycle events

- The gatherings rule of six does not apply to weddings or religious life cycle ceremonies or funerals given their importance in people's lives, but attendance continues to be limited to 30 for such standalone events. This means people can mingle with other guests present beyond the numerical limit of six, though should continue to practise social distancing when mixing with those they don't live with or outside of their support bubble. However, people and venues must strictly follow the guidance on conducting these gatherings safely.
- The cap of 30 is now set out in law, rather than just guidance, this means that there can be fines where the rule of 30 is not adhered to.

Q. Do people working count within the 30 people limit for weddings, funerals and life-cycle events ?

- Anyone working is not included as part of the 30 person limit.

Q. Can all life cycle events have receptions after?

- No. The exemption only covers the ceremonies, and does not include receptions after other life cycle events. Weddings are the only exception.

Q. Are Choirs/bands (i.e. more than 6 people singing/playing) permitted for 'performances' in PoW? (Amateur choirs are capped at 6)

- Performing professional choirs will be regarded as being at their place of work and on that basis will not be subject to the rule of six - but they will of course need to follow the guidance published on the performing arts. We are discussing and agreeing with Government Departments how the new rules will impact amateur choirs and will update our advice as soon as we can.

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