

Thinking about whether to re-start in-person worship?



Many Quaker communities are finding it hard to decide whether and when to re-start meeting in person.

This is made harder by the current restrictions affecting all parts of our lives.

Some of us are carrying an additional emotional burden at the moment. We make hard decisions daily. We are stressed by not having simple social and physical contact, regular activities and ordinary life. Our personal struggles are amplified when people we love and are close to have different opinions or behave in ways we don't agree with.

When we make a discernment about holding meeting for worship, we must recognise that all these factors come into play. It is part of our spiritual discipline and needs to be considered "with an informed mind as well as a loving and tender spirit". ([Quaker faith & practice 2.86, part](#)).

What the law and the guidance says

The law and guidance about places of worship and public worship differ in different parts of Britain and at different times. Please see the main Quaker Coronavirus page for updated information, www.quaker.org.uk/coronavirus.

When in-person public worship is permitted it must be subject to satisfactory risk assessments including strict social distancing and hygiene measures.

The tone of government attitudes about worship is that in the main, faith groups can reduce risk (in comparison to other activities and places) and manage those risks well. This is part of the reason that worship is permitted when many other activities are not.

It has also been indicated that risks in Quaker worship are smaller than in other forms of worship. This is because there is little speaking, no singing or instruments, little moving around, and no sharing of objects, food or drink.

Quakers and BYM staff members are regularly part of discussions with government ministers and officers, and representatives of other churches and faiths. These inform our guidance documents.

Some thoughts about risk

Holding a meeting for worship in-person remains a risky activity. All the precautions, in a worship setting, cannot prevent all possible spread of the virus. The Wales guidance includes this helpful advice:

- In managing risk the first question should always be: "Can I avoid the risky activity?"
- Wherever practical and reasonable, alternatives to face-to-face meetings should be employed to reduce the risk of transmission.
- The safest option is to stay home and not socially mix with people who you do not live with.

- Those who are clinically extremely vulnerable should take extra precautions to minimise their contact with others.

Has your Quaker meeting previously carried out a risk assessment for re-opening during Covid-19? This document should be reviewed to ensure that it is in line with current advice and guidance for the relevant part of Britain.

What are the processes for local and area meetings?

- A meeting for worship is an activity of an area meeting.
- The area meeting trustees have legal responsibility for the activities of the area meeting.
 - Decisions about re-opening should be made in partnership involving trustees, local Friends and those responsible for managing the building.
- Part of that legal responsibility is to carry out, or to approve, risk assessments.
- Risk assessments which relate to Covid-19 should consider:
 - The legislation and guidance for the relevant part of Britain
 - National information about risks of transmission, and mitigating actions
 - Local information and advice:
 - In some places, local public health bodies are asking places of worship not to open. They cannot overrule the national regulations, but they can indicate their view of the local situation.
 - Local public health advisers can be contacted and have been very helpful in giving advice and guidance on the activity you propose.
 - Consider what other faith groups in the locality are doing. If many of them are closed, this can be an indication of local feeling.
 - Local information about prevalence, 'R' number, hospital capacity, vaccination roll-out etc. Trustees might wish to agree a figure for each of these statistics which would have to be met for an in-person meeting for worship to be held.
 - Each local meeting needs its own risk assessment. Rates of infection and hospital capacity can vary widely across a region, so opening might be plausible for one local meeting, but not for another.
- A risk assessment can therefore conclude that an activity, i.e. a meeting for worship is too risky, and the risks can't be mitigated; therefore the activity cannot happen.
- A difficult or unpopular decision may have to be made, ultimately by trustees, about whether a meeting house can re-open for worship. We hope that Friends will be supportive of these decisions even if they are not what they want.

Caring for one another in difficult times

We act as a community whose members love and trust each other (extract, [Quaker faith & practice 3:06](#)).

- We ask trustees to serve on our behalf, taking on a set of responsibilities. We place our trust in them; they take on those responsibilities.

- We may not be in unity with a decision to open, or not to open, for public worship. But our spiritual discipline requires us to honour the discernment of those in whom we place our trust; and on whom we lay responsibilities on our behalf.
- We remind ourselves that if we go against the discernment of the trustees, they are the ones who would face any consequences. We are responsible as a community to uphold trustees in the service which they do on our behalf, not to put them at risk.

When a meeting for worship is held, trustees need to be confident that there are responsible people who will ensure all the aspects of the risk assessment are met. This may be relatively simple regarding cleaning, track and trace, provision of hand sanitizer etc. However, there will be a significant responsibility on those holding the meeting for worship to ensure that everyone who comes to the meeting is safe because everyone else there is respectful of the measures in place. On the day, are Friends confident to ensure that:

- Everyone who should wear a mask does and wears it properly.
- People will not make personal decisions, e.g. about shaking hands, which set a culture which others will find it hard to refuse.
- People will respect guidance about not mixing with other households before, during or after meeting for worship.
- The fact that meeting for worship is going ahead encourages people to come to it who may be more vulnerable; or who may, for instance, take a lift which they should not.
- Although some people may have been vaccinated, we should bear in mind that none of the vaccines are not 100% effective. We still need to act as a community to ensure that those who are still vulnerable are safe.

We respect that adults can make their own decisions, including decisions which may not appear sensible. We also note the power of peer pressure and the norm which is set by the behavior of others, especially those deemed to hold authority. Again, trustees and meetings should consider what they are asking of Friends when those Friends take responsibility for holding meeting for worship.

'It follows that trustees must be well-grounded in the life and concerns of the meeting for which they act. Their own business meetings are held in a spirit of worship and they are full participants in the meetings for worship for business of the meeting that appointed them. Just as they care for the life of the meeting, the meeting should support and uphold them and their work.

In its turn, the meeting must trust the discernment of the trustees, to whom much day-to-day decision-making may be entrusted. Good communication between trustees and the meeting is essential...'

[Quaker faith and practice 15.07 \(part\)](#)