



Quakers in Britain

Advice to Quaker Trustees on relationships with non-violent direct action protest groups

This document summarises advice sought by Quakers in Britain from our lawyers in Spring 2025. Trustees may find it helpful to [read the advice on support and provision of resources to groups that engage in civil disobedience and non-violent law breaking](#). The advice was sought following a police raid on Westminster Friends Meeting House, during a meeting of the direct-action campaign group Youth Demand. This advice covers use of Quaker premises by this and other similar direct-action groups such as Just Stop Oil or Extinction Rebellion, and provides guidance based on a variety of scenarios, including use of premises on a chargeable or non-chargeable basis, and use of premises for lawful and potentially unlawful activities. Our assumption throughout is that Area Meeting (AM) Trustees will not support groups who use or threaten violence.

Different AMs and groups of AM Trustees will take different approaches to working with organisations engaging in nonviolent direct action to further a particular cause. Some may wish to directly support a particular cause (such as by providing financial support) and others may wish to offer a fair and consistent policy of commercial opportunity, such as letting of AM meeting houses. Different relationships with protest groups will create different risks for an AM. This advice should be used by Trustees to help them decide how to manage those risks.

This advice focuses only on charity law risks, including the risks of charities being reported to the Charity Commission and the Commission taking enforcement action. The extent to which actions by AMs might be considered criminal is unclear and the advice that can be offered at this stage is limited. In addition, as owners and operators of premises, the AM's duties of care towards its members, hirers, and visitors, should be considered when higher risk lettings and hirings are contemplated.

Contents

Part 1: General considerations on forms of support to non-violent direct action protest groups.....	2
Part 2: Risk level attached to 'types' of support.....	5
Part 3 List of considerations and risks around bookings by non-violent direct action groups.....	7

Part 1: General considerations on forms of support to non-violent direct action protest groups

Basic requirements

1. AM Trustees must know what their charitable purposes are and be prepared to consider how any supportive action they are thinking of taking would further one or more of their charitable purposes. AM charitable purposes which might be furthered by support for organisations might include furtherance of Quakerism generally or standalone charitable objects that fall within Quaker principles, e.g. relief of poverty / need.
 - 1.1.1. Each AM should have a policy in place for the letting and use of its premises (which should be required to be complied with by constituent local meetings responsible for administering the letting), which collects the right types of information to spot where the risks of any lettings decisions lie.
 - 1.1.2. The AM's approach to the use of AM premises should comply with [14.27 of Quaker faith & practice](#).

Support for protest groups who engage in unlawful acts

This section focusses on support outside of normal hiring practices and includes actions like letting a group use space for free or for a significant discount when other groups must pay, making a direct donation, organising a joint event.

Friends in meetings may want the meeting to support non-violent direct-action groups that are known to undertake unlawful acts. Even though discussion of these issues might arise in a local or area meeting for worship for business, it is important that AM trustees are aware of the meeting's general wishes with regard to supporting such groups, as ultimately they are the body who will hold the risk in relation to any decisions in this area. This will allow trustees to give appropriate directions, ensuring that processes governing use of the meeting house enable wardens, meeting house managers or premises committees to gather sufficient information about potential users of the Meeting House, and make appropriate risk mitigations for the AM and for other building users.

Trustees should also work with committees and staff involved in the day-to-day administration of room use (whether paid or not) to develop tools to recognise which groups or bookings might potentially be high risk. Committees and staff will need to know of any circumstances in which Trustees would want more direct involvement in decisions about a booking, as well as how to contact them quickly in such cases.

Just because a group engages in non-violent direct action, does not mean supporting them will be automatically high risk – they may want to use your meeting house to show a film or have a social event, not plan a non-violent action. Some forms of support for non-violent direct-action groups will be low risk from a charity law perspective and may in fact contribute to an Area Meeting fulfilling its charitable purpose(s). Other forms of support will be much higher risk – this is covered in greater detail below. What is important is that Trustees, supported as appropriate by the Area Meeting as a whole, take appropriate guidance into account when making any decisions in this area.

Nonetheless, trustees should assume that charities themselves cannot engage in or support unlawful activity, regardless of whether they feel that activity supports their charitable purposes or not. Any Area Meeting considering whether to engage in or directly support unlawful activity, is strongly advised to seek specific legal advice. The full legal advice from March 2025 explains the risks around this sort of support to direct action groups. Part of the difficulty we face is that it is not clear how far the concept of 'supporting unlawful activity' extends in the wake of legislation enacted in 2022 and 2023. If the act of planning an illegal nonviolent action can be a criminal conspiracy, is providing the space in which that happens also potentially criminal? This issue

remains untested, but as noted below our expectation is that simply letting a room would be unlikely to be classed as unlawful activity.

AM trustees could agree to support protest groups on the basis that such activity supports their charitable purposes for the public benefit. To manage the risks of this approach, it would need to be on the basis that the activities being supported are **lawful**. This support might take the form of giving meeting space for free, enabling storage space or donating to the group.

For example, donating to Just Stop Oil, and specifying that this is to be used for pastoral support of JSO members or maintenance of a website, would be lower risk than an unrestricted donation to JSO which could be used for any of their activities. Similarly, giving a space for Extinction Rebellion to have a social event would be lower risk than accepting a booking where they intend to plan a non-violent direct action.

To reach a decision about supporting protest groups, AM trustees must first:

1. Ensure they understand their charity's charitable purposes and how those purposes meet the public benefit requirement;
2. Consider what the link is between advancing their purposes for the public benefit and support for the given group - i.e. is there credible, objective evidence indicating that the group's actions and campaign asks will be likely to further one or more charitable purposes of the AM in for the benefit of the public? This thought process should be documented and records retained.

In undertaking this analysis, AM trustees should have regard to the Charity Commission's public benefit guidance (in particular, PB2 which relates to running an existing charity for the public benefit) and should record the fact that they have taken note of its contents in reaching a decision about support for a third party.

It is important to be clear about precisely what group of individuals or entity an AM might be supporting, and how the above principles fit with that specific group's plans, ethos and objectives – AM trustees should ensure that appropriate due diligence into the body they will be supporting is undertaken (see www.gov.uk/guidance/guidance-for-charities-with-a-connection-to-a-non-charity as to the processes to put in place generally when working with or supporting a non-charity, including due diligence and www.gov.uk/guidance/draft-guidance-grant-funding-an-organisation-that-isnt-a-charity for funding non-charities).

AM trustees should consider whether the type of support they want to offer is of an acceptable risk level to the charity and its beneficiaries, given the potential impact on the charity's purposes, and consider how associated risks might be mitigated. They should ensure it does not impact on the public benefit accruing from carrying out the charity's purposes.

Again, trustees should document their consideration of the risks / benefits of supporting a given group and how those risks might be mitigated, should they choose to go on to provide support to it, in compliance with the general principles for trustee decision making www.gov.uk/government/publications/its-your-decision-charity-trustees-and-decision-making and risk management www.gov.uk/government/publications/charities-and-risk-managementcc26.

In particular, the reputational implications of the activity will need to be carefully considered; noting that both supporting and failing to support these movements could have reputational implications for AMs

Forms of indirect support for protest groups

For AMs indirect support for protest groups is likely to be focused on the use of premises. Whether rooms are generally made available to the community for free, or charges are levied, AMs should ideally have a standardised lettings policy with standard paperwork to allow them to collect the right types of information to spot where the risks lie.

Providing support to a group through allowing meeting space to be used for free

Where this is done as a form of direct support for a group, it is covered by the section above (this would be e.g. where most groups have to pay a fee, but a specific protest group is gifted meeting space for free – the guidance above on supporting a non-charity is particularly relevant).

However, if the meeting generally allows community groups of a variety of types to use its premises for free, then the risk to the meeting is reduced. In these circumstances the meeting should still:

- 1.1.3. Take reasonable steps to ensure that the way in which they make resources / premises available to the public protects the charity (including its reputation) and its assets;
- 1.1.4. Comply with their safeguarding and broader legal duties (such as under the Occupiers Liability Act and negligence) to those who use their premises and resources;
- 1.1.5. Comply with the Equality Act in setting and implementing a policy to making premises and services available to the public and avoid discriminating against those with protected characteristics when making decisions in this area; and
- 1.1.6. Understand enough about the user and its intended use of the premises to be able to comply as above and to understand where the key risks are.

Providing support to a group through hiring rooms with a fee paid

In this situation the AM is furthering its purposes through income generation for its usual activities and / or by providing facilities to the community as part of faith in action – rather than ‘supporting’ the group in question directly. As such, it is not necessary to examine whether the group’s own actions and aims further an AM’s charitable purposes. Much of the risk analysis and due diligence process will be dealt with via the AM’s policy and booking forms for premises use. However, even in this scenario, it is still important to capture and examine sufficient information to identify where there are high risks of, for example:

- 1.1.7. Security risk or danger to those using the premises or risk of damage to the premises – it would generally be legitimate to refuse a potential hiring on the grounds of risks to the health and safety of others, or of the potential for property damage. Trustees will need to assess these risks in individual cases.
- 1.1.8. The potential for an offence to be committed by the group using the premises. Events at Westminster Meeting House demonstrate that the police are willing to treat discussion and potentially planning of unlawful activities as a form of conspiracy to commit such unlawful activities.
- 1.1.9. Reputational impact of Quaker premises being used by the group (e.g. if its aims, activities or values could be felt to contradict Quaker principles).

In most cases, the risk of direct criminal liability attaching to the AM or Friends involved in allowing or facilitating the booking or room use should be remote. The exception to this is where the AM has knowledge or a strong suspicion that the premises or resources in question may be directly used for unlawful activity as part of the user’s activities – for example, if a meeting house were to be used to conspire to commit a crime. Even in those circumstances, we envisage that criminal law would require a stronger link between the AM’s approval process for a booking and the group’s unlawful activities for the AM itself to be held to have committed a conspiracy type crime (though we are not criminal law lawyers and to provide a more definitive view would require specialist advice).

Another risk-mitigation tool here is to make bookings and use of premises / resources subject to a requirement to use the resources only for lawful means.

Part 2: Risk level attached to 'types' of support

We have considered some potential ways in which AMs might wish to support groups that engage in nonviolent direct action within scope of this advice, and the table below offers a summary of the risks associated with different types of support. These indicators are provided at a high level, and the risk rating may be affected by the specific circumstances of an AM's support. Again, this risk rating does not consider criminal law which may also apply.

Activity	Level of risk and rationale
Directly advocating for Friends and / or the public to engage specifically in unlawful elements of a group's activity, under the charity's name or providing support for the group (i.e. funding or resources in kind such as use of premises without any charge) where AMs are aware that the resources will be used wholly or partly to support unlawful activities.	<p>This would be very high risk for AMs in terms of charity law and in extreme situations, criminal law. Whilst we believe there is a line of technical argument that could be used to attempt to defend a decision to support or partake in non-violent unlawful activity by a charity in limited circumstances under charity law, the Charity Commission would be extremely unlikely to accept these arguments. If these arguments were put forward in court to challenge any regulatory sanction imposed by the Commission (which would itself have significant reputational and cost implications) we also consider it likely that a court could decide that unlawful activity by a charity is fundamentally inconsistent with its charitable status, regardless of the circumstances in which it occurs.</p> <p>This level of support for a direct-action organisation could therefore have significant consequences for AMs and even for trustees personally (should it be found that trustees have applied charitable resources for non-charitable activities and breached their trustee duties).</p>
Providing general funding or other resource (e.g. use of premises) without charge for a group where it is unknown whether elements of it may be used for unlawful activity or not.	<p>The Charity Commission sees unrestricted or general funding of non-charities as high risk as there are no guarantees that the charity's support will be used for exclusively charitable purposes by the non-charity.</p> <p>This category of activity is high risk due to the fact that it may result in charitable resource being used to support unlawful activity.</p> <p>Provision of unrestricted funding is much higher risk than the provision of storage space or premises use (or other in-kind support) to such groups without putting conditions in place for its use, as AMs could generally rely on the fact that its provision of storage space or limited premises use is very remote from the actual carrying out by the group of potential unlawful non-violent activities.</p> <p>Where the AM is not specifically seeking to support the group but rather is allowing it to use resources that it generally allows community groups and the public to use, the risk will be lower (as it will not be necessary to demonstrate that the group itself furthers any particular charitable purpose – rather the general provision of facilities to the public is the way in which the AM's charitable purpose is furthered). However, it is still arguable that free use of resources in this situation is a form of in-kind support, and so this remains a higher risk option than provision of resources on a cost-recovery or income generating basis (where the arrangement can be seen as more arms' length).</p>

Providing funding or other resource in kind (such as premises use) to higher-risk groups on a restricted basis on the specific condition that it may only be used in lawful ways, and not for unlawful activities.	<p>If an AM wished to provide funding to higher-risk groups, it could seek to do so on a restricted basis that ensures (as far as possible) that the funds will only be used for activities which advance that AM's purposes by lawful means. It may not be possible to fully mitigate risk in this approach. For example, the Charity Commission could take the view that the grant recipient's overall purposes and activities include such a substantial element of unlawful activity that there are unmanageable reputational risks associated by the provision of funding to it.</p> <p>Providing resources in kind, such as premises use, on the condition that it cannot be used to facilitate unlawful activity, is even lower risk (as again the provision of premises or space is a type of support that is quite far removed from what a group goes on to do following use of the premises in most circumstances). However, it may be difficult to police and articulate this in the applicable terms and conditions.</p> <p>Any conditions in place would however be beneficial to AMs in being able to frame its relationship with a given higher-risk group and demonstrate to the Commission that it took prudent steps to mitigate reputational risks, and particularly risk of use of charitable resource for non-charitable or unlawful purposes.</p>
Allowing groups who engage in nonviolent direct action to book meeting rooms on the same basis as all other groups using meeting houses.	This activity carries some risk as noted above, in particular as it now clear that the police may decide to take action to interrupt meetings of this type.
Enabling discussion amongst Friends about higher-risk direct action groups, including proposing that individuals support those groups; Friends & meetings supporting individuals who choose to participate independently in direct action (whether unlawful or otherwise).	Low risk – although it would likely be high risk to extend this support to meetings paying the fines of individual Quakers if they are convicted.
Public expressions of support for groups engaged in nonviolent direct action e.g. via social media.	<p>This form of support would involve the lowest risk but would still carry some reputational risk of being seen to endorse the group in question generally, which may engage in both lawful and non-lawful activities (and thus engages in activities which would both further and not further AM's charitable purposes).</p> <p>AMs may also feel this option does not carry sufficient impact for AMs or help such groups in a meaningful way, which would potentially involve reputational risk of a different kind.</p>

Part 3 List of considerations and risks around bookings by non-violent direct action groups

Many of these matters will be best dealt with by Trustees agreeing a policy, guidance and template documents which wardens, meeting house managers and premises committee can use. In each case, we assume that existing lettings / hirings / room use policy and practice enables AMs or their employees / volunteers to find out the name, purposes and aims of the groups seeking to use space in their meeting rooms, as well as their specific intentions during the hiring period.

Questions to consider when deciding about potential hirers or room users

1. Does this group engage in non-violent direct action?
2. Does this group intend to plan non-violent direct action at this meeting?
3. Can you find out whether other previous meetings of this group have attracted police interest, counterdemonstrations or other adverse publicity?
4. What risks might this booking attract (see list below).

Risks associated with higher risk bookings

This list is not exhaustive but may be useful for Trustees or premises committees to consider whether and how they could mitigate some of these risks when offering support to non-violent direct action groups.

Category	Risk
Building	Police raid building; damage to the building.
Building	Groups at odds with a group meeting in the MH staging counter demonstration and acting violently around and in the MH.
Financial	In case of serious incident, possible loss of bookings.
Hirings	A hirer is at greater than normal risk of having issues with the police under public order legislation.
IT / Data	Police access digital devices and other data source on the premises.
Legal	Intervention from Charity Commission.
Personal safety	Staff or volunteers are expected to handle a situation as it evolves.
Personal safety	Someone is injured in the course of an incident.
Personal safety	Groups at odds with a group meeting in the MH staging counter demonstration and acting violently around and in the MH.
Reputation and personal safety	Police come to building and want access to search and potentially arrest people.
Reputational	Interest from media.
Reputational	Interest and concern from other Quaker bodies.
Safeguarding	If there are children or vulnerable adults in the building they are at elevated risk.