

# ***Changes to English COVID-19 government guidance***

Updated 20 October 2020



This briefing is to help Quakers who are uncertain about the government's new COVID-19 guidance for England. We have had lots of queries about worship, socialising after worship, and letting meeting houses for various activities.

## **The Headlines**

- Most things have not changed for places of worship in England in the last ten days.
- The Places of Worship guidance now has quite a lot more (and clearer) explanations
- Quaker memorial meetings now fall into a new category of 'commemorative events', at which the maximum is 15, rather than the 30 for funerals
- Socialising after worship, and worship in private gardens, is governed by the local rules for meeting people, not the worship guidance.

## **Introduction**

The government guidance keeps being updated – most recently with the introduction of local alert levels: medium, high and very high. Some changes affect what can be done, while other changes now explain the position more clearly. You may also need to consult any further local restrictions in your area, particularly in the very high local alert level.

While Britain Yearly Meeting (BYM) cannot provide an authoritative interpretation of the guidance, we can highlight the key paragraphs and documents. The Scottish and Welsh guidance has been rather clearer, so this paper is just about England.

## **The main area of uncertainty – multiple groups of 6?**

There has been a lot of uncertainty about whether only 6 people can be undertaking an activity together – such as worship or a club or exercise group.

Changes in the wording of government guidance now make it clearer that there are many instances where there can be multiple groups of six doing the same activity, provided there is no mixing or mingling between people in the groups of six.

## **Worship – what's allowed now?**

The latest version of the '**Places of worship**' guidance [available here](#) explains the situation most clearly in section 5, under the heading Social Distancing:

- *“Ensure that groups attending communal worship together do not exceed more than 6 people per group. In **medium** local alert level areas, the law allows for multiple groups of 6 people to participate, provided that these groups do not mingle. Any group of 6 can be made up of people from different households. In **high or very high** level areas, the law allows for multiple households and support bubbles to participate, provided that these groups do not mingle. Strict social distancing must be maintained between members of different households at all times.*
- *The only exception to this where a single household or support bubble is larger than 6 people. In this case, the single household or support bubble may attend communal worship together.”*

Before and after worship, the general rules in your area apply for socialising or meeting friends and family.

The guidance now gives specific ‘gathering limits’ for different activities in section 1: communal worship, marriages, funerals, commemorative events, significant life events, supervised children’s activities, support groups and small prayer and study groups. We consider that a Quaker memorial meeting is a ‘commemorative event’, which has a tighter limit than funerals.

There have been some significant changes recently for outdoor worship, and this varies according to your local alert level. The exemption for worship does not apply in private gardens. Whilst the previous explicit reference to private gardens has been removed, the guidance says:

- *“For acts of worship taking place away from the place of worship and surrounding grounds please follow the relevant guidance on the number of people permitted to gather in those spaces.”*

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has also sent faith groups a set of ‘**Frequently Asked Questions about worship**’. These resolve a lot of questions Quakers have been asking, and an amended version is reproduced in the appendix below.

## Letting rooms in a meeting house – the key guidance

‘**Local COVID alert levels: what you need to know**’ [available here](#) now summarises the main guidance on alert levels. The previous FAQs have been withdrawn. However, for each alert level there is a more detailed piece of guidance, with a link at the end of their relevant sections, like this:

[Find out more about the measures that apply in \*\*medium\*\* alert level areas](#)

[Find out more about the measures that apply in \*\*high\*\* alert level areas](#)

[Find out more about the measures that apply in \*\*very high\*\* alert level areas](#)

These merit reading in full for your area. You also need to check whether there are further restrictions for your area – there is a link on each of the pages above.

As well as overall guidance, these contains a long list of exemptions, for example:

- *“for work, volunteering or to provide voluntary or charitable services*
- *support groups of up to 15 participants – formally organised groups to provide mutual aid, therapy or any other form of support*
- *supervised activities provided for children, including wraparound care, youth groups and activities, and children’s playgroups.*
- *for outdoor exercise and dance classes, organised outdoor sport and licensed outdoor physical activity*
- *for indoor organised sport for disabled people, sport for educational purposes and supervised sport and physical activity for under-18s“*

The exemption for *“voluntary and charitable services”* may be relevant to many hirers.

After the list of exemptions, for medium alert levels it also says:

- *“Other activities, such as organised indoor sport, including indoor exercise classes and other activity groups, can happen in larger numbers, provided that participants are in separate groups of up to 6 people, which do not mix. Where it is likely that groups will mix, these activities must not go ahead.”*

For high alert levels there is an equivalent paragraph (about households rather than groups of 6), but there is no equivalent paragraph for very high alert areas.

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

This document has been in place since June, and is used by many meeting houses who hire out space. The updated version on 13 October has only been changed to refer across to additional restrictions of high or very high levels, in this paragraph:

- *“On 12 October the government introduced a system of local COVID alert levels. If you live, work or volunteer in an area that is part of the local COVID alert level – high or local COVID alert level – very high, there are additional restrictions which apply to you. Please visit the local COVID alerts page to find out what level your area is in and the additional restrictions that apply.”*

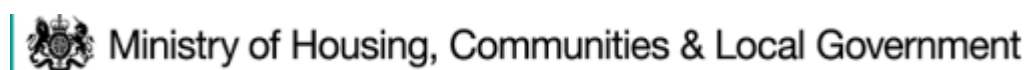
When it was updated on 2 October, sections 2a and 3c were changed significantly, and merit re-reading – though they may have been superseded for high and very high alert levels as above. This document is quite complex, and for the full meaning to become clear you need to read 2a and 3c together. In particular, please read very carefully the whole of the paragraph in section 3c starting *“However, we strongly advise”*, to avoid seeing this as an absolute prohibition of the examples that are given.

We hope this briefing makes a difficult situation a little easier.

Quaker Life [supportmeetings@quaker.org.uk](mailto:supportmeetings@quaker.org.uk)

## Appendix - Frequently Asked Questions about worship

The ministry responsible for the guidance on Places of Worship and on Multi-Purpose Community Facilities published these FAQs on 18 September 2020. We have removed those that have clearly been superseded by subsequent changes to the guidance, and left some which refer to the “rule of six”, which appear now to relate to medium alert levels.



### **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. 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?**

*Answer removed: See the latest guidance, where in section 1 it gives a 'gathering limit' for small prayer and study groups.*

**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?**

*Answer removed: See the latest guidance, where in section 4 it covers young people and children attending places of worship.*