

Quakers in Britain Submission to the Home Office Call for Evidence on the Serious Disruption to the Life of the Community) Regulations 2023

September 2025

Quakers in Britain are a faith group committed to peace, equality, truth and sustainability. Quakers have a long track record of 400 years of acting out of conscience to campaign for social progress, from the abolition of slavery to prison reform and same sex marriage.

Guided by our values, we work to tackle the root causes of violence and to build a more just and peaceful world. We call this form of action 'witness' – living out our faith through action. The freedom to speak, assemble, protest and dissent is integral to Quaker faith.

We are deeply concerned about the successive crackdowns on protest rights in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022, the Public Order Act 2023 and the 2023 Serious Disruption regulations.

The invalidated 2023 Serious Disruption regulations have had a direct impact on Quakers, some of whom were arrested during a peaceful act of collective worship held outside the DSEI arms fair in September 2023, as part of the “No Faith in War” protest.

The impact of these restrictive laws goes beyond Quakers and impinges upon the rights of all people to assemble and make their voices heard. We believe the threshold for police interference with protests is now too low and is having a chilling effect on civil society. Between June 2022 and March 2024, at least 712 protests in England and Wales were subject to police conditions.¹

We welcome the Court of Appeal’s decision to quash the Public Order Act 1986 (Serious Disruption to the Life of the Community) Regulations 2023 and do not support any attempts by the government to redefine ‘serious disruption’ or ‘cumulative disruption’. Instead, this judgment should be seen as an opportunity to reaffirm the right to peaceful protest, raise the bar to interference in nonviolent protest and give greater clarity to protestors and police alike.

¹ Home Office. 2024. *Police protest powers, June 2022 to March 2024*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/police-protest-powers-june-2022-to-march-2024>

Interpretation of serious disruption

- The 2023 serious disruption regulations sought to define serious disruption as ‘more than minor disruption’. Not only did these regulations receive little parliamentary scrutiny or stakeholder consultation, they were also alarmingly vague and lowered the bar to imposing conditions on protest to an unacceptable degree. We welcome the Court of Appeal’s decision to quash the regulations and do not support any attempts by the government to redefine ‘serious disruption’ or ‘cumulative disruption’.
- When drafting laws and regulations that seek to balance the rights of protestors and the ‘community’, it should be recognised that these are not fixed categories that are necessarily in conflict with other. As Quakers, we are often worshippers, protestors and community members simultaneously.
- Quaker public witness work can take a range of forms – including engaging with powerholders, speaking out, helping to relieve suffering, protest, as well as prayerful upholding and support for activists within our community. We see this work as religious practice and as such is protected by Article 9 of the Human Rights Act.
- Quakers see an important moral difference between disruptive nonviolent protest and violence against people. We support the rights of the police to take the minimum necessary action to defend people in situations where they are directly threatened by hate speech, intimidation and violence. Any restrictions should apply to individuals and not gatherings. They should be exceptional, clearly defined and subject to ongoing safeguards and democratic scrutiny.
- Minor disruption, noise and inconvenience are a regular part of communal life and can occur under many different scenarios - from sports matches and concerts to bad weather, accidents and traffic. We do not support restrictions on protests for causing minor disruption. These restrictions unacceptably impinge upon Articles 10 and 11 of the Human Rights Act, the rights to freedom of assembly and freedom of expression.
- Protests are dynamic events. The vague and poorly worded 2023 regulations left protestors and organisers unfairly exposed to arrest and prosecution for failing to comply with restrictions arising from circumstances beyond their control. Protestors and organisers should not be held responsible for protests that breach arbitrary numbers of attendees or shifting geographical limits.

The concept of cumulative disruption

- We do not support cumulative disruption public order assessments. Urban areas, government buildings, or sites of perceived injustice are much more likely to be sites of sustained or repeated protest. It is important that these sites remain accessible to protestors. Indeed, sustained or repeated protests can be evidence of strength of

feeling which is an important democratic barometer and mechanism for citizens to have their voices heard.

- The invalidated 2023 regulations demonstrate the dangers of granting powers to restrict protests based around vague terms such as “community” or “area”.
- The definition of “community” was too wide-ranging. This wide-ranging definition could mean that police may be forced to consider the opinions of people who do not live or work in the vicinity of a protest.
- The definition of “area” was also too wide-ranging and the geographic limits of protests should not depend on the interpretation of the senior police officer. This increases the likelihood that protestors could be in breach of area-based restrictions inadvertently as a result of the shifting definition.
- These poorly defined terms increase the risk of ‘political policing’ or the perception of it. People who do not agree with a certain protest, message or group could use these regulations to attempt to shut down legitimate speech of those they disagree with.
- Section 14 (2B) states that “it does not matter whether or not the assembly mentioned in paragraph (a) and any assembly or procession within paragraph (b) or (c) are organised by the same person, are attended by any of the same persons or are held or are intended to be held at the same time;”. There is a danger that this could lead to a scenario where protests carried out by one group could trigger an area-based restriction which then precludes a ‘counter demonstration’. In this scenario only those that protested before restrictions were imposed could hold a protest. This would present an unfair restriction on freedom to protest.
- As stated in the previous section we understand the necessity of protecting people from violence. However, we see this as different to disruption, or even cumulative disruption. Our view is that existing powers in the Public Order Act 1986 allow proportionate restrictions in most relevant scenarios where violence against people could occur.

Summary

We do not support any attempts by the government to redefine ‘serious disruption’ or ‘cumulative disruption’. New powers to police protest are unnecessary, undermine our rights to freedom of expression and ability to practice our religion freely.

We understand that it is sometimes necessary for police to take action to defend people in situations where they are directly threatened by hate speech, intimidation and violence. Any restrictions should apply to individuals and not gatherings. They should be proportionate, exceptional, clearly defined and subject to ongoing safeguards and democratic scrutiny. The 2023 invalidated regulations do not pass these tests.