

Submission to the Independent Review of Public Order and Hate Crime Legislation from Quakers in Britain

Quakers in Britain are a faith group grounded in the values of simplicity, truth, equality, and peace. These lead us to work for strong rights to protect freedom speech, assembly, worship, and protest. Our tradition of conscientious objection and nonviolent action stretches back centuries, from resisting slavery to campaigning for nuclear disarmament and climate justice.

This submission responds to the Independent Review's six question areas, drawing on anonymised testimonies from Quakers and organisational experience, including the March 2025 Metropolitan Police raid on Westminster Quaker Meeting House. We offer evidence of how current legislation and policing practices affect faith-led, nonviolent action and the spiritual life of our community. As is clear from the below answers, these practices often affect these activities in a negative way.

Recent developments such as expanded protest powers, vague legal thresholds, and the proscription of Palestine Action have created a climate of fear and uncertainty for our members. Quakers report being arrested during peaceful witness, silenced in court, and deterred from giving ministry or exploring moral questions during meetings for worship. These experiences undermine democratic participation and Quakers' ability to practice their faith freely.

Our aim is constructive: to help the Review identify where law and practice fail to balance safety with liberty, and to propose changes that protect minoritised communities from hate while safeguarding the right to peaceful assembly and expression. We believe clarity, proportionality, and dialogue are essential for rebuilding trust and ensuring that conscience-led action remains a valued part of civic life.

Some of our commentary and evidence relates to the legislation listed as being within the remit of this review, and other aspects of our submission focus on related issues such as the use of the Terrorism Act 2000 and the treatment of protesters in court.

You may quote from this submission in your report if necessary. All testimony from Quakers has already been anonymised so that shouldn't be an issue.

1. Your experience of protests, public expression and hate-related incidents

Quakers have a long tradition of nonviolent protest as an expression of faith. For Quakers, protest isn't merely the expression of a civic right (or some might call it a duty). It is an innately spiritual act. Our book of discipline states:

“Remember your responsibility as citizens for the government of your town and country, and do not shirk the effort and time this may demand. Do not be content to accept things as they are, but keep an alert and questioning mind. Seek to discover the causes of social unrest, injustice and fear; try to discern the new growing-points in social and economic life. Work for an order of society which will allow men and women to develop their capacities and will foster their desire to serve.”

- *Quaker Faith & Practice* 23.01

Recently, our ability to put our faith into action has become increasingly difficult due to restrictive laws and policing practices. For example, in March 2025, around 20 Metropolitan Police officers raided Westminster Quaker Meeting House and arrested six young people planning a nonviolent protest. This response appeared disproportionate to the circumstances and caused significant disruption to worship and community life. We recognise the need for policing powers, but believe clearer thresholds could prevent such outcomes. Places of worship should only be subject to this kind of excessive state intervention in the most extreme circumstances, and we believe the meeting taking place that day did not meet this threshold.

We have also seen Quakers arrested at peaceful demonstrations, such as the Parliament Square Palestine Action protest in August 2025. These incidents have created fear and uncertainty among Quakers about exercising their right to protest, and by extension their right to put their faith into practice.

2. Clarity, fairness and accessibility of the law

We believe that there are several aspects of existing legislation that are too broad. These include the following.

Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 (PCSCA):

- Police powers to impose noise-based restrictions on protests, with no definition as to how noisy a protest can be before it can be restricted.
- Police powers to restrict the number of people who can attend a protest – it is very difficult for organisers to keep track of the number of people attending, and for people joining the protest to know how many people are already in it, therefore it is difficult for them to know if they are breaching the restrictions or not.

Public Order Act 2023 (POA):

- The offence of ‘being equipped to lock on’ enables police to arrest people in the vicinity of a protest for possessing items such as bike locks, even though they may not be involved in the protest or may have a non-protest related reason for carrying them.
- The expansion of ‘stop and search’ powers is too broad, especially given the substantial evidence that these powers are disproportionately used against Black, Asian and ethnic minority groups.

We also believe that some of the key provisions around protest in the Crime and Policing Bill currently going through parliament are too broad and have extremely serious implications for peaceful protest, including:

- Allowing police to impose restrictions on protests in the ‘vicinity’ of a place of worship if the protest ‘may’ deter people from accessing the place of worship, with no definition of what is meant by ‘vicinity’ and a broad implication from the word ‘may’
- The government amendment that would allow police to impose restrictions on the basis that protests are happening repeatedly in the same area, with no definition of ‘area’ and no specificity around how many times the same group should be allowed to protest in one place or how one group’s protests should be able to affect other groups’ protests in the same area

Quakers across Britain report uncertainty and inconsistency in how public order legislation is applied in practice. This lack of clarity can lead to risk-averse behaviour and unnecessary strain on policing resources without improving public safety, with nonviolent protests becoming harder to organise and more likely to result in arrests. Quaker testimonies to simplicity and truth set a benchmark: laws must be knowable, precise and proportionate so people can act with integrity. In practice, Quakers report persistent uncertainty about thresholds (e.g., when simply being “in the road” becomes

arrestable; how “serious disruption” is defined) and uncertainty about speech that might be construed as “support” for a proscribed organisation. One Quaker put it plainly: “It is unclear what could lead to arrest and what an individual’s rights are around protesting.”

The following examples from the testimony of Quakers illustrate how the lack of clarity around public order laws has a chilling effect on protest.

"I don't feel like I confidently know where the thresholds are for legal or illegal protest, especially around stuff like noise limits, or that I trust the police are well informed on the legislation. I spoke to the local Police Crime Commissioner about this and he says they just don't train their force on protest legislation – hardly makes me confident they'll police in a lawful and measured way. I'm more fearful that protests will become violent as confusion leads to conflict escalating. As a parent of a young child, that's just not a risk I'm willing to take, so I often just don't go to larger protests."

"I was organising a rural community Pride event and people were convinced we couldn't march as it would be a Public Order offence. People were so scared or angry about what they perceived the legislation to be that it was hard to explain the facts to them. We ended up not having a parade, but a small indoor event instead."

"A group were organising a peaceful protest against the arms industry and asked if they could use the Quaker Meeting house to prepare. We said yes, but after some nervousness and discussion which I don't think would have been present 10 years ago. This creates tension in our community as we try to make these decisions together as well as slowing down people trying to find spaces to meet to democratically campaign."

One Quaker who facilitates local discussions described halting a meeting after a participant said, “It’s our moral duty to get arrested for this,” fearing that further conversation might breach Section 12 of the Terrorism Act 2000. They also felt unable to

make that statement the topic of the next month's session (as they usually would for challenging prompts) and sought internal guidance about what Quakers may lawfully say in private gatherings, ministry, or minutes. This is not abstract; it is a practical brake on spiritual exploration, worship ministry and meetings for church affairs.

A Quaker WhatsApp group set up to coordinate a Quaker presence at the regular national demonstrations for Palestine spent weeks debating whether it should change its name (which formerly included the words 'Palestine' and 'Action') to avoid inadvertently falling foul of the law. The WhatsApp group had never been used to organise action as part of Palestine Action, and its intention was clearly about supporting 'legal' witness, but the simple word association made them feel unsafe. This took time and energy away from the group's core purpose. Several former group members of the same Quaker WhatsApp group said they no longer felt secure being part of the group and left, feeling unable to return even after the name change. This included one member who had not taken part in demonstrations but whose contribution had been to offer prayerful upholding and support to those who did. After a surge in membership following BYM's genocide statement in May, the period since the proscription announcement has coincided with a notable drop off (10-20 Quakers). The group admin has told Quakers in Britain staff that they suspect that fear and confusion around the proscription has been a significant reason for this.

3. Experiences of policing, prosecution and the justice system

There are several examples where we believe the police response has been excessive.

As mentioned above, the police raid on Westminster Quaker Meeting House earlier this year was deeply concerning for the wider Quaker community, and extremely stressful for Quakers who attend that meeting. This policing approach was disproportionate to the situation and represented a serious intrusion into our place of worship. One Quaker who is a member of staff at the organisation said she was "struck by the contrast between the complete disregard shown for Westminster Friends Meeting House as a place of worship ... as compared to the idea that protests should be re-routed to avoid passing outside places of worship".

One Quaker told us about how "slow marching" provisions in the 2023 Public Order Act have impacted her peaceful protest activities:

“I am on court bail with conditions not to demonstrate with Just Stop Oil for 3.5 years awaiting trial for slow marching. This means that if I demonstrate I am in contempt of court which is a much more serious charge than demonstrating ... 3.5 years is a large part of the rest of my able bodied life when I can expect to be fit enough to demonstrate. My trial may be put off again making it considerably longer than 3.5 years.”

Another Quaker spoke about how she has been dissuaded from peaceful protest since recent public order laws came into force:

“As someone with a chronic illness, I am scared of getting arrested just because I am in the 'wrong' place. My health is such that even being arrested and kept for a few hours might be very difficult for me to cope with I have limited energy for everyday life now, so having the stress of an impending court case would be very detrimental ... I still want the same changes in the world I was asking for before the changes in the public order laws, but I now feel the risks are too high”

At a regular protest in Kendal, a police officer asked Quakers if they had placards with the words “Palestine” and “Action,” warning that this could constitute support for terrorism. Such interactions, combined with reports of arrests for peaceful protest, demonstrate a lack of proportionality and clarity in enforcement.

In the courts, concerns deepen. One Quaker recounted: “I had prepared a 10–15 minute statement and asked if I could present it... The magistrate said we had no time, scanned my notes, and convicted me without hearing me. I found that outrageous and humiliating.” Others who tried to address juries about their motivations were removed, the public cleared, and some have been jailed for contempt.

Another Quaker recounted a trial where the judge forbade any mention of climate change, excluding context central to conscience led action. We are increasingly concerned at the creeping threat posed to the principle of independence of jury verdicts, as established by the *Bushel's Case* of 1670. From a Quaker vantage point, silencing conscience in court undermines legitimacy. The right to explain motivation, especially in necessity framed civil disobedience, helps juries weigh context, intent, and harm—elements central to moral judgement.

In March 2025, the Court of Appeal upheld harsh sentences for climate protesters, including Quakers, who engaged in nonviolent action. Sixteen Just Stop Oil protesters are

serving a combined total of 41 years. While one elderly Quaker's sentence was reduced from 20 months after being deemed "manifestly excessive," most appeals were dismissed. This demonstrates how sentencing practices can feel punitive and inconsistent, eroding trust in the justice system.

4. Impacts on individuals, communities and trust

We believe that people from minoritised communities and individuals residing in the UK on visas are unfairly discouraged from exercising their right to speak out and protest. This weakens their trust in the police and other institutions.

For example, an environmental campaigner and Quaker originally from Germany has been threatened with deportation after being criminalised for taking part in a nonviolent protest. This would have been the first deportation of its kind, had his lawyers not successfully argued at his appeal that it would undermine his human rights and have a chilling effect on freedom of expression and assembly across UK society.

Legal uncertainty and heavy-handedness create multiple harms: personal anxiety, professional risk, community fragmentation, and institutional drift toward risk management. One Quaker, an NHS worker, wrote: "I am concerned about being arrested while I exercise my right to protest... This could end my career and I could lose my job and professional registration." Professional vulnerability translates into self-censorship, diminishing diverse participation in public life and skewing protest demographics away from those with more to lose.

Practical remedies to improve trust include transparent pre-protest guidance, consistent local liaison with faith and civil society, prioritising the safety for vulnerable participants, and helping peaceful protest to flourish. Trust grows where people feel seen, heard, and treated with respect. These steps are in line with our own testimonies: peace (reducing harm), equality (protecting the vulnerable), and truth (accurate public understanding) and invite wider society back into confident, lawful participation.

One Quaker who works as a grassroots organiser said to us:

"I feel that people are sometimes over-cautious to the point of being irrational about some of the new laws. I think this is caused by lack of clarity in the law but also a decreasing trust and increasing fear of the state. An example has been at least one conversation about whether praying with someone to help them decide whether to protest would be considered conspiracy under the law"

Gaie Delap, a 78-year-old Quaker, was returned to prison because electronic tagging equipment could not be fitted to her ankle. She described the experience as “absurd” and deeply distressing. Such cases highlight how rigid enforcement disproportionately harms older and vulnerable individuals, deterring participation in peaceful protest.

5. Balancing freedom of expression and protest with safety and protection

We recognise the challenge of balancing safety with freedom of expression. However, our evidence suggests the current framework tilts too far toward restriction, creating operational complexity and reducing trust. A harm-based approach could better achieve both aims. By using anti-terror legislation to proscribe the nonviolent direct-action group Palestine Action, the law has created a climate of fear that prevents some Quakers from following their consciences and engaging in lawful, peaceful witness. Freedom of Information requests carried out by a Quaker whose daughter is in prison on remand for a protest-related offence show a worrying lack of governance, oversight and accountability around the use of counter-terrorism legislation in relation to protest, which seems to have expanded well beyond parliament’s original intent for the legislation.

This excessive restriction and punishment undermines fundamental rights to freedom of expression, assembly, and religion. Restrictions intended to protect public safety are instead silencing legitimate voices – protestors are also members of the public – and discouraging democratic participation. We believe that places of worship are already more than adequately covered by existing primary and secondary legislation, and the police have sufficient powers to protect them.

Safety and freedom should reinforce each other, yet current practice sometimes conflates nonviolent dissent with disorder. “The way protests have been reported and the political approach to suppress the right to protest has curtailed our freedom of expression,” said one Quaker.

A just balance protects people from intimidation, harassment and hate while affirming peaceful protest as a public good. Practically, that means harm-based thresholds, facilitative policing (safe routes, stewarding support, accessible information, care for frail participants), restraint in worship spaces, and courts that allow brief motivation statements so juries can assess intent and proportionality. This framework reduces risk without silencing conscience and aligns with Quaker testimonies to peace, truth and equality.

6. Priorities for change, and any other issues the Review should consider

On public order legislation, we are calling on the government:

- Repeal the Public Order Act 2023 and Part 3 of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022.
- End attempts to bring in further restrictions on protest in the Crime and Policing Bill or any other legislation.
- Replace these with legislation that safeguards the right to peaceful protest while maintaining public safety.
- Review policies and practices around the use of counter-terrorism legislation in relation to protest.
- Provide guidance that good-faith discussion, ministry, and minutes do not constitute “support” for a proscribed group; distinguish analysis or pastoral care from encouragement.

On policing, we believe there is a need to improve training, communication and accountability so that legislation is applied more fairly, consistently and proportionately across different protests and different areas. Our partners at Netpol, Human Rights Watch and JUSTICE will shortly be publishing recommendations in this area which we advise the inquiry to consider.

For Quakers, faith and action are inseparable. When this is criminalised, we consider our religious freedom to be undermined. This underscores the need for guidance that distinguishes peaceful faith-led witness from unlawful activity, ensuring that peaceful conscience-driven protest remains protected.