

This document was produced by Friends House to advise Local Meetings. We include it in our Reference Documents to make it easier to access.

Guidance on accepting into our meetings people who may pose a risk

Advices and Queries 18:

“How can we make the meeting a community in which each person is accepted and nurtured, and strangers welcome? Seek to know one another in the things which are eternal, bear the burden of each other’s failings and pray for one another. As we enter with tender sympathy into the joys and sorrows of each other’s lives, ready to give help and receive it, our meeting can be a channel for God’s love and forgiveness.”

These guidelines are based on two major considerations:

1. The need to find a balance between our Quakerly desire to welcome everyone into our Meetings and our responsibility to provide a safe place for everyone attending our Meeting Houses;
2. The need for Meetings to be prepared for the challenges which welcoming everyone might pose, e.g. when aware of the attendance, or proposed attendance, of an ex-offender, or the possibility of offending behaviour of a member of the Meeting.

These guidelines are based on experience; all Meetings are different but we recommend that all Meetings should give timely consideration as to how to provide a genuine welcome to everyone while ensuring a safe environment.

The word ‘ex-offender’ is used here to mean all those who have been convicted of an offence, but we also recognise that many people have committed offences for which they have not been convicted, and that many ‘ex-offenders’ do not pose a threat to a Quaker Meeting. Some ex-offenders will have been released from prison recently or be serving a community sentence and Probation may contact a Meeting about their wish to attend a Quaker Meeting. Some may self-disclose, others choose not to.

1. Awareness

Remember faith groups are sometimes seen as a soft target, particularly if they are known to have weak safeguarding procedures.

Watchfulness need not be unfriendly; it includes understanding that some people may bring risks with them, and of what the outward signs might be. These might include

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requests for money, erratic behaviour and obvious inebriation. Cultivating a culture of watchfulness towards those whose life story and circumstances we do not know could remove a great deal of anxiety.

Be aware that there are many different offences.

Where someone is known to have committed an offence the nature of the offence should be taken into account in the response of the Meeting e.g. someone who has offended sexually is likely to present different basic problems to someone who has committed theft, fraud or drink driving. Also different issues of trust will arise for the Meeting. In helping the ex-offender to be accepted and to fit into society we have a responsibility to distinguish the situations in which trust can be safely offered from others where it must be earned and have time to grow.

2. Communication

It is important for members of a Meeting to get to know one another. Members who are well acquainted would find it easier to notice inappropriate behaviour and to be aware of the need to protect particularly vulnerable members. Think about and consult, wardens, Quaker Prison Chaplains, adults with learning difficulties, survivors of sexual abuse as well as children and young people. Any concerns over behaviour should be shared quickly according to your Area meeting Safeguarding policy.

If an ex offender moves away, be sure to notify the putative receiving Meeting.

3. Preparation

In the busy life of a meeting it can feel hard to justify giving time to consider what systems could be put in place to help deal with the inclusion of an ex offender, nevertheless experience shows that preparation can help to pre-empt difficulties which may arise.

Meetings may wish to consider appointing a Receiving Group. Meetings and Churches have found this to be helpful, even where there is no known offender currently attending the meeting. This group could consist of the L.M. Clerk, an Overseer, someone with responsibility for children and one or two experienced Friends. It could be helpful to include Friends with some relevant experience e.g. all aspects of the criminal justice system. The Receiving Group can familiarise itself with the Area Meeting safeguarding policy, good practice and available materials.

In some cases it may be judged that the Meeting as a whole cannot cope with a particular person because of the nature of their offences. It may be that another nearby

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Meeting is better able to cope, or that an alternative can be found, such as arranging special Meetings for Worship which the person can attend.

The existence of a Receiving Group can provide the Meeting as a whole with assurance that reasonable measures are being taken to protect the whole Meeting. The Receiving Group can act as a contact point for Probation Officers, Social Workers, Community Chaplains, or Quaker Prison Ministers who may be aware that an ex-offender wishes to attend the Meeting. When desirable the Receiving Group should meet the ex-offender before he or she has any other direct contact with the Meeting, discuss their wish to attend Meeting and any conditions, appropriate to the risk, which should be observed. The matter of confidentiality should be considered, with the possible adoption of a need to know policy.

This is an issue which needs to be considered by all LMs, although some Meetings, particularly those small in size may feel that they need to work as a group, or perhaps appoint a Receiving Group at Area Meeting level.

4. Advice

Do seek help.

Reading material can be helpful but advice is available from the Churches Child Protection Advisory Service (0845 120 4550), local probation and Quaker Life. In matters concerning the effect on a meeting contact the Support for Meetings Officer in Quaker Life (020 7663 1023), concerning the media contact the Media Relations Officer in Quaker Communications (020 7663 1048).

Some problems may go far beyond Friends' ability to solve them e.g. where specialist advice and action are needed as in issues of a criminal nature relating to violence, drug abuse or sexual offending.

Where there is evidence that such an offence may have been committed, even by a well-known and, perhaps, loved member of a Meeting, Friends need to have the courage to report the matter to the police and to explain to the Friend concerned that this cannot and should not be concealed.

If a Meeting fully implements safeguarding advice, and is sensible about money and other valuables, it is likely be protected from those offenders who have not been notified to the Meeting, including those not yet charged with any offence.

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