

New proposals for Eldership for Quakers in Scotland following consultation on the original proposal

From the Pastoral Care and Eldership subgroup, 25 August 2025.

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This document offers a **revised and provisional model for eldership across Quaker meetings in Scotland**, developed after feedback from Elders and Pastoral Care Friends from across the country. It reflects the original plan (now separated out into two documents) following two consultation sessions held in June 2025, and incorporates the feedback, concerns, and hopes shared during those sessions.

Overall Response to the Proposal

Affirmations

- Many Friends welcomed the proposal's intent to broaden participation, reduce reliance on formal appointments, and foster a culture of mutual responsibility.
- The vision of interconnected support between meetings was seen as hopeful—enabling Friends to share experience, build confidence, and respond flexibly to needs.
- A shared sense of spiritual responsibility was affirmed, with encouragement to make care and ministry more embedded in the life of all Friends, not just those in appointed roles.

Concerns

- Larger meetings, in particular, expressed concerns about being overstretched by the proposed changes:
 - They already face complex internal demands and felt the risk of adding external responsibilities or expectations.
 - There was a worry that redistributing tasks more broadly might increase the load on active members, rather than relieving pressure.
- Some Friends cautioned against introducing new structural layers (e.g. coordinators or intermediary roles), which might unintentionally complicate or bureaucratised spiritual care.

The plan below hopes to address some of these fears and give a clearer picture of how the Quakers in Scotland Eldership Group might work.

QiS Eldership Group

The QiS Eldership group will meet up to six times a year. It will be open to every appointed elder in Scotland. There may be times when it will be opened further (for example to Friends of meetings which are following a corporate eldership model).

There is an expectation that appointed elders will try to attend the meetings. Where there are larger teams of elders for a meeting, there is the hope that at least one elder from the team will attend so they can report on their meeting and bring information back to the rest of the team.

The QiS Eldership group will be clerked by an appointed elder, previously appointed elder, or a team of elders. These Friends will be nominated by Quakers in Scotland Nominations, in consultation with the QiS Eldership Group, and appointed by Quakers in Scotland.

The responsibility of the QiS Eldership group is to:

- Provide a forum where concerns can be raised and advice can be sought.
- Provide support and learning for new elders.
- Be a point of contact for Friends resident in meetings that do not have appointed elders.
- Promote best practice and enable collaboration across meetings.
- Work to support combined approaches to learning for all Friends.
- Coordinate support for newcomers across Scotland.

There may be times when elders feel that setting up subgroups may be useful. This could be for learning, consolidating information held within the membership or for dealing with a tricky situation. In all cases these would have a set review point (either a date or a list of work to be completed). At the review point Friends will consider whether the subgroup has served its purpose and is to be laid down.

In all things capacity of those who are serving as elders should be considered and taken into account.

Here are some examples of how the QiS Eldership group might work:

Hypothetical situation 1:

A new elder is really excited about the idea of Spiritual Accompaniment and suggests a year long program of events and online talks about the subject, alongside setting up a Spiritual Accompaniment “dating service” to connect Friends who are interested in the subject.

The elders at the QiS Eldership group recognise his excitement but do not feel able to support such a large program of work. Instead, they ask him to approach Woodbrooke about organising an online introductory event on the subject. After seeing Woodbrooke’s suggestion they agree to go ahead with the workshop and advertise it amongst Friends across Scotland.

At the event the elder collects names of those attendees present who are interested in taking this idea further. They meet and plan a programme

together. He reports the planned future work back to the next QiS Eldership group meeting, so that the plans can be disseminated across Scotland.

Hypothetical situation 2:

A Friend writes to the QiS clerking team to complain that there are no opportunities for newcomers to learn about Quakers at their meeting. This is a meeting which is very small and does not have an eldership team. There are no other meetings nearby.

A healthy but geographically remote meeting has just started a series of Becoming Friends in their meeting. They offer to make this a hybrid opportunity and open it to anyone in a smaller meeting who is interested in taking part.

The opportunity is offered to all smaller meetings where there are no elders. Another medium sized meeting realises that it has been some years since they have offered similar and the elders of that meeting offer to provide further support to the geographically remote meeting in delivering the sessions, whilst promoting the sessions to their newcomers.

Hypothetical situation 3:

At a QiS eldership group meeting an elder mentions that a Friend who is not known to the meeting has died. The elder has been approached by the dead Friend's widow, asking for her support with funeral arrangements. She has never done this before and would appreciate some advice.

In the following discussion it becomes clear that a couple of the now laid-down area meetings had developed helpful advice and documentation on this subject. A subgroup is formed to consider this material, check how up to date it is and consolidate it. When that work is done the subgroup is laid down.

Some experienced elders agree to act as "funeral experts" should further questions arise for elders in Scotland. They will keep and maintain the information. When they feel it needs to be reviewed, a new subgroup can be formed to do so.

Hypothetical situation 4:

A meeting gets in touch with QiS eldership group with a problem. They have a Friend who has started attending and has been causing some problems. The Friend keeps interrupting, disagreeing with others' ministry and bringing prepared ministry.

The elders in this meeting are also the appointed pastoral care Friends. They have tried to address this and feel that they've been unsuccessful. They are reaching out for advice across both the elders and pastoral care networks of Quakers in Scotland.

The QiS eldership group includes a number of elders who have experienced similar issues in the past. They offer to speak to the elders and pastoral care Friends in the meeting and provide support.

The QiS Pastoral Care Support Group knows that a different local meeting has had this challenge recently and organises a meeting between the Friends in both meetings to share learning and start to develop a plan of action to address the concern.

When a decision is made on what to do, a Friend from the QiS Eldership Group travels to provide the meeting with their support and a pastoral care Friend from the other meeting offers to come as well.

Elders and local meetings

Elders appointed by QiS will have the same responsibilities to their local meetings as they currently do. The only extension of that responsibility comes with the extension of their area meeting to cover the whole of Scotland (there is currently a responsibility for elders to serve the Friends in their area meeting and not just in their local meeting).

In practice it would be very rare that an elder would be asked to directly support a meeting that is very far away from where they are based.

Elders and Intermediate meetings

Intermediate meetings can be quite formal and look quite similar to a current area meeting or they could be small and one-off.

It is likely that elders who have been appointed to serve by Quakers in Scotland will be asked and expected to serve as elders during Intermediate Meetings. However, this does not always have to be the case. Particularly for ad hoc meetings a trusted Friend may be asked (or offer) to provide eldership, even though they are not an appointed elder. This is something for the meeting itself to discern.

Opportunities for review and change of this structure

This is an experimental model and would be subject to a yearly review by the elders themselves. Changes to this model can be made at any time, however any significant changes will need to be reported to Quakers in Scotland (just so a record can be kept)

External facilitators could be approached or appointed to support this review process if the Quakers in Scotland Eldership Group felt that this would be helpful.

We suggest that a more in depth review should be undertaken 3-5 years after this model is put into practice to consolidate learning and consider any changes that should be made.

Other questions:

How would elders be nominated and appointed?

Names of Friends to serve as elders would be forwarded from local meetings and worshipping communities to the QiS nominations committee. This committee would consider geography, numbers of Friends that the elders served, life experience of those Friends, also checking on safeguarding and PVG where relevant.

The appointments would be made by QiS to emphasise that they serve the whole body and their responsibilities go beyond the Friends' local meeting or worshipping community. The QiS nominations committee would work with the local meetings to ensure that each meeting has the eldership cover that they require.

What about elders who wanted to meet in person?

If elders wanted to meet in person regionally, this is something that could be coordinated through the Quakers in Scotland Eldership Group, who could pass out invitations directly to the elders in the group.

Larger meetings

Following our consultation it was clear that elders in large meetings (30+ Friends) already feel stretched overwhelmed with complex internal demands. This model will not fix all of the issues of being an elder in a large meeting, but there are some ways it will help:

- It gives a platform for elders from the larger meetings in Scotland (Central Edinburgh, Inverness, Glasgow, Portobello and Musselburgh, South Edinburgh) to meet together to speak about similar issues they are struggling with and ways of combatting them.
- It does not add to the number of meetings. The Quakers in Scotland eldership meetings would replace the area meeting eldership groups.
- As there are additional challenges for elders of larger meetings, not all elders from meetings with a larger eldership team are expected to attend. Instead they are asked to send one elder to represent them to the Quakers in Scotland Eldership Group. All elders can attend the meetings if they choose.
- It allows for shared learning, opportunities can be shared across Scotland where appropriate. This is particularly helpful for online learning opportunities and in person opportunities at venues with good transport links. It can avoid duplication and allow space for other work.

Travelling ministry

In the review Friends expressed an interest in promoting and supporting the concept of elders "travelling in the ministry" particularly to those meetings who do not have appointed elders. This is something that Friends in the QiS Eldership Group could explore, and it would be helpful to have a budget set aside to help that work.