Councillor heckled for walking out of prayers during council meeting

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A Cheshire town councillor who walked out of a meeting before prayers was heckled and told 'he should be ashamed of himself'.

Sandbach Town Councillor Richard Hoffmann told the NSS: "As I was leaving the room I was verbally abused by three members of the public saying I should be ashamed of myself, and that I shouldn't have stood for the council if I didn't want to say prayers."

Cllr Hoffmann has now called for the tradition to be removed from the formal business of the meeting so he "doesn't have to look the odd one out by leaving the room".

Sandbach Town Council has retained prayers as part of its formal business in defiance of a High Court ruling making it unlawful, following a judicial review initiated by the National Secular Society.

The town mayor Dennis Robinson is reported to have told the local *Crewe Chronicle* that removing traditional prayers would be an "attack on Christianity". He opened Thursday's meeting by saying "anyone who wishes to leave may do so now."

Cllr Hoffmann told the NSS: "As far as I am concerned, when the Mayor and their deputy is in the council chamber, and all Councillors are standing up, the formal meeting has started. I believe they have broken the law.

"My view on prayers at council meetings is that they should not be part of the formal meeting.

"I am an atheist, and strongly believe that church and state should be kept separate. If the council wants to have prayers, they should have them 10 minutes before the meeting."

Stephen Evans of the National Secular Society said: "No councillor should be subjected to such abuse for opting not to join in with the religious worship of other councillors, particularly as part of a formal council meeting."

Meanwhile, neighbouring Middlewich Town Council has confirmed that it has taken prayers off the agenda and will hold them five minutes before meetings officially starts.

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