

# Challenge to council prayers in Scotland

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The practice of council prayers held by some local authorities in Scotland has now been challenged by the National Secular Society.

Although the High Court case successfully brought by the National Secular Society against Bideford council recently ruled that prayers as a part of official council proceedings were illegal under local government legislation which was brought in by the Conservative government in 1972, this legislation applies only to England and Wales.

The NSS has written to members of Edinburgh City Council, which regularly holds prayers at the commencement of its meetings, to point out that ruling suggests the need for the council to review its practices. It is one of the few councils in Scotland to hold prayers at the start of its meetings. Prayers are not on the agenda or recorded in the minutes but are held after councillors are summoned by a bell to the start of proceedings.

The NSS has urged Edinburgh Council to cease the practice of prayers until it has conducted an official review and determined by debate that it is legal under Scottish law or desirable to continue with the practice.

The letter to councillors points out that while it does not necessarily approve the practice of the Scottish Parliament's weekly Time for Reflection, which involves contributions from many religions and denominations, there is at least a written record of who leads this event in the agenda and the minutes of the proceedings.

It is impossible to tell who leads prayers in Edinburgh Council and which faiths and denominations have been involved since there is no written record. Nor have councillors, so far as is known, ever debated whether the practice should be held or continued.

Commenting on the letter, NSS Council member Norman Bonney stated: "The coming council meeting on 15 March will give councillors an opportunity to discover whether prayers are legally allowed at meetings of the city council and whether they should be discontinued pending a full resolution of the issues involved".

The NSS suggests in its letter that the best solution might be collective silent reflection by all councillors at the start of meetings (on the model of the Northern Ireland Legislative Assembly) or the complete cessation of the practice of prayers at council meetings.

Norman Bonney added: "Councillors who wish to pray before a meeting can cross the road to St Giles Cathedral or be provided with rooms in City Chambers but the NSS, in line with its policy for the separation of church and state, is opposed to any attempt to impose prayers at public meetings or in the proceedings of public bodies".

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