

Prayers cause conflict on Northern Ireland council

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Councillors in Northern Ireland have been left bitterly split after an hour long row over whether to begin council meetings with prayers.

The Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council was left deadlocked for over an hour, before finally voting to say prayers at the start of official meetings – leading one councillor to warn that a "huge case" could be made to the Northern Ireland Equality Commission by staff required to attend meetings and thus forced to sit through the religious observances.

UUP councillor William McCandless said: "I am annoyed that we are sitting here in a Christian country being asked to vote with or against the Lord's Prayer."

He added, "Christians are being beheaded in Islamic countries, I think we need time to reflect for a moment."

Sinn Féin councillor Cara McShane said that religion and politics should be separate, and according to the [Coleraine Times](#), suggested that legal advice was needed.

She also warned that "staff are compelled to be at these meeting, there is a huge case waiting to happen either with the Equality Commission or a Tribunal" if the meetings opened with prayers.

McShane told her fellow councillors, "we shouldn't be shoving beliefs down people's throats."

DUP councillor George Duddy said he was "disgusted" that "a prayer that we should all say every day has become a debate."

NSS campaigns manager Stephen Evans commented, "This should serve as another example to those who think local authorities in other parts of the UK should open their meetings with prayers. They are inappropriate, divisive and unnecessary."

A range of proposals were considered before the vote finally passed. A twenty minute recess was needed as arguments became heated and intractable.

One SDLP councillor said that it is "not very inclusive to expect members to stand outside" while prayers are being held. She added, "I don't come here to pray."

An amendment was tabled suggesting that prayers be held before meetings begin – something which the National Secular Society has suggested for councillors in the rest of the UK, rather than expecting all councillors and staff to sit through prayers during official meeting time – however the suggested amendment was defeated.

A full meeting of the council is needed to ratify the business of the meeting.

The [1998 Northern Ireland Act](#) states that a public authority shall "have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity" between "persons of different religious belief, political opinion,

racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation."

It also requires a public authority to have "regard" for the "desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group."

Mr Evans added, "The imposition of religious observances during official meetings does nothing to promote good relations between people of different religious and non-religious views."

Earlier this year the UK Government [passed legislation](#) giving English local authorities an explicit power to include prayers "or other religious observance" in their official meetings. The Local Government (Religious etc. Observances) Act was opposed by the National Secular Society, which had previously won a [High Court ruling](#) that the inclusion of prayers in meetings to which councillors were summoned to attend was not lawful under the Local Government Act 1972.

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