

Councils told to stop praying before meetings

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Ahead of our challenge to Council Prayers in Bideford, two local Councils have been censured for saying prayers before meetings.

Crowborough Town Council and Mayfield Parish Council in East Sussex have received advice from the Sussex Association of Local Councils (SALC), to suggest that any prayers for those who wanted them should be entirely separate and not form part of the formal meetings. This accords with our legal advice.

Mayfield Parish Council voted last week to say a prayer before each meeting and then received the advice from SALC. Before meetings at Crowborough Town Council, councillors stood up to ask God to 'grant them wisdom to make the best decisions', followed by a prayer by the Mayor or Reverend Andrew Cornes.

SALC told them if councillors want to say prayers they should do it outside the council chamber. Jacqui Simes of SALC said: "Prayers are not part of the parish council's duties and cannot be included in the agenda. They should not be part of the parish council meeting. If they do then it should be something completely separate – and not any part of sitting around a table."

Reactions to the advice (reported by pro-Christian newspapers as a "ban") were mixed. The Reverend Cornes said "I've heard from councillors in the past who said they were grateful for the presence of a representative of Christ and his church." The chair of Mayfield Parish Council said "We live in an Anglican society and I felt an Anglican prayer was the right way forward." She now admits they were wrong.

On the other hand, one Mayfield councillor said "I think it's inappropriate. This can offend so many people who may not be of the same faith or may not have a faith." Another said "The law is very clear. If people wish to pray they should not do it at the meeting and it should not be on the agenda for discussion. We live in a multicultural society. We have to look at the population and we have to move with the times."

The NSS' challenge to prayers at Bideford Town Council is at the High Court in London on Friday 2 December.

Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society, said: "Astoundingly, prayers are conducted in the majority of council meetings. Such prayers — often pushed by a religious clique — are entirely unnecessary, cause needless friction, and are a discourtesy (or worse) to those of other faiths and none. That is why we have taken one Council that refused our request to desist following a complaint by a councillor to a Judicial Review at the High Court. If we are successful, prayers will become unlawful throughout England and Wales.

"The Judicial Review will be very expensive and is likely to go to appeal, whoever wins at this stage.

“We have launched an appeal for £20,000 and invite you to express your support in a tangible way and make a donation via the [Donate page](#) on our website.”