

Guide to challenging collective worship

The [law requiring](#) schools in England and Wales to hold daily acts of (usually Christian) collective worship is archaic, unfair and [unpopular](#).

The law is also unclear, and is therefore interpreted differently from school to school. Some schools provide inclusive and meaningful assemblies with no formal worship; others hold inclusive assemblies with an opportunity for voluntary prayer/reflection; and in some schools the law is used as a justification for imposing worship on pupils and inculcating religious views.

It isn't enough for schools that impose prayers and other acts of worship to simply point to the law – they need to justify their decision about how they practice collective worship and conduct assemblies.

Parents have a legal right to withdraw their children from collective worship in state-funded schools, including in faith schools.

In November 2019 parents Lee and Lizanne Harris [successfully challenged their school's academy trust](#) over a lack of a meaningful alternative for children withdrawn from collective worship. The out of court settlement reached between the school and the parents (and approved by the Department for Education) doesn't provide a legal precedent, but it does strongly indicate how human rights arguments will progress in future, if schools do not provide a meaningful alternative to worship.

Parents are now have a firmer basis for persuading schools to [make assemblies inclusive or provide an inclusive alternative](#) for pupils withdrawn from worship. In some cases, failure to make such accommodations may result in legal action.

If you wish to exercise your [right to withdraw](#) your child from collective worship, the guidance below is intended to help you challenge inappropriate worship and a lack of a meaningful alternative.

Taking action

We recommend that you contact us first, by [email](#) or using the form below, we can provide tailored advice and feedback on any draft letters. If you believe that the school has breached your rights by failing to accommodate or consider your request, you would have to act on this within three months.

1. Get your information straight

Find out what your school's collective worship policy is and how it works in practice. If you can, speak to other parents who might be concerned and ask for a record of collective worship assemblies over the last term. If it is a new academy, they should have had to set out how they will provide a meaningful alternative.

2. Decide on your aims

There are broadly two possible aims that you might have; (1) for the school to make assemblies more inclusive so that you don't need to withdraw or (2) for the school to provide a meaningful alternative so that your children can be withdrawn without suffering detriment. For example, many schools interpret the legal requirement to simply conduct inclusive,

ethical assemblies with a moment of silence at the end where pupils are invited to pray or reflect on what's been discussed rather than being led or directed in worship. We have a guide on our website that schools may find useful in [planning such assemblies](#).

3. **Write to the school**

Send a polite constructive letter to the school setting out your concerns and the accommodations you think are reasonable. Ask for a meeting with the headteacher to discuss these. We have a template letter below and are happy to look at your own draft. Remember, that you are under no obligation to provide a reason for requesting the right to withdraw or to discuss your personal beliefs.

4. **Get written confirmation**

Whatever the school agree, ask them to confirm this in writing this will help keep things clear. If their decision is to reject any changes, then ask them to confirm this in writing and set out the legal reasoning for their decision.

5. **Next steps**

Hopefully, the school will have accommodated your reasonable request, in which case your next steps will simply be to monitor the situation - and let us know so we can share this positive example. If the school are unable or unwilling to consider changes then you will likely have to escalate your complaint to the next level. This would be a good time to get back in touch with the NSS for further support.

Template letter

We recommend tailoring this letter to your specific school circumstances. We would be happy to look at and discuss a draft.

Dear [HEADTEACHER]

I am writing to object to the current practice of worship at [SCHOOL NAME].

[You may wish to expand on this. What is your primary objection to the school's current worship policy/practice?]

I would like to know the basis on which this form of worship assembly is the most suitable way to fulfil the collective worship requirement?

[You may wish to expand on this. Is there a reason why their approach is particular objectionable, has it recently changed, is it unsuitable for the school community?]

My preference would be for [SCHOOL NAME] to follow the well-established and widely supported practice in many schools of holding inclusive, ethical assemblies with a moment of reflection, where pupils may choose to pray or reflect on the themes if they wish. Many schools interpret this to fulfil their collective worship requirement. There are a very wide range of resources available for such assemblies to ensure they make an outstanding contribution to their SMSC development for pupils of all backgrounds and beliefs.

If you are unable or unwilling to follow such practice, then I have no choice but the request that [CHILD(ren)'S NAME(s)] is/are withdraw from all worship, without detriment, as is my right. I request that the school take the following reasonable steps to ensure a meaningful alternative:

1. Provide an age appropriate alternative, SMSC development focused, supervised activity of

equal educational worth to that claimed by collective worship.

2. Ensure other aspects of school assemblies (including notices, announcements, other educational elements and celebrations) are clearly separated from worship so that withdrawn pupils do not miss out.
3. Clearly inform parents in advance of which assemblies collective worship will be taking place in, who will be leading it and if practical the topic or theme.
4. Clearly publicises and informs parents of the collective worship and (alternatives for withdraw pupils) policy.

I believe that these steps are in represent best practice and are necessary to ensure that [CHILD(ren)'S NAME(s)] do/doesn't suffer any detriment and to respect their and my freedom of belief. These arrangements are in line with the agreement reached by the Oxford Diocesan Schools Trust, in 2019, with the approval of the Department for education, following a High Court challenge over their lack of provision for children withdrawn from collective worship.

I would appreciate a meeting to discuss this matter with you further.

Kind regards,

[YOUR NAME]

Challenging collective worship in your school

* Required Field

Your name*: Your email*: Name of the school: Please briefly describe the situation with collective worship at the school.* <input type="text"/> What advice/support would you like from the NSS? <input type="text"/>

[No child should be compelled to worship in school and no school should be required to organise worship. Please join me in supporting this petition.](#)

[Click to tweet](#)

[This guide helps you challenge inappropriate collective worship in your school and secure a meaningful inclusive alternative.](#)

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Write to your MP

Ask them to help end compulsory worship in schools

Enter Postcode: _____

Find my MP

While you're here

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