

Town Council divided over prayers in meetings

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The controversial topic of prayers in council meetings has divided local councillors in Hampshire after a recent vote on the matter saw a 3-3 split on Whitchurch Town Council.

Councillor Steven Neilson drew attention to the practice after attending his first meeting, saying that prayers made him feel uncomfortable and that the saying of prayers could be unwelcoming for non-Christians. According to Cllr Nelson only "about half of councillors take part" whilst "others fiddle about quietly" waiting for the prayers to end.

Cllr Neilson said: "I'd like to see our meetings conducted in a manner equally welcoming to all councillors, regardless of their individual religious beliefs or lack of belief. I'm pleased for those who benefit from prayer but for non-Christians it can be intimidating having to sit in silence whilst people pray during a meeting."

He added that the council is "friendly and co-operative" and that causing unrest was the "last thing" he wanted to do.

The issue came to a head in a vote which saw six councillors deadlocked, with another five abstaining. With three councillors in favour of keeping the prayers on the official business of council meetings and three councillors against, chairman Mike Kean took the unusual decision of declining to cast a deciding vote. The Council's Register of Members' Interests indicates that two of the councillors in favour of including prayers in meetings have connections to local churches.

Councillor Kean, who supported the continuation of council prayers before declining to cast a deciding vote, said: "It would be wise for everyone to reflect on this issue and bring it back to full council at a later date."

Currently, prayers appear above the agenda for full council meetings, listed as "opening prayers." Neilson noted that "suggesting people leave the room to avoid attending prayers would not make a meeting welcoming to non-Christians."

According to the [Andover Advertiser](#) "all councillors agreed that they were acting within the law" in holding prayers as part of their meetings. However, a 2012 High Court ruling cast some doubt on whether Whitchurch Council has behaved lawfully.

Stephen Evans, National Secular Society campaigns manager, said: "The High Court ruled that it was not within a council's powers to hold worship or to summon councillors to prayer. Periods of quiet reflection are fine, but formal prayers should be entirely voluntary and held informally before Council business proper gets under way. If prayers are being held after the meeting has been called to order, the council may well be in breach of the Court order.

"Hopefully this situation can be resolved amicably, either by prayers being replaced by a period of quiet reflection, or by councillors who wish to simply praying before the meeting begins."

A decision on prayers was due to be taken at the full council meeting on 2 February, but the matter was again deferred. No prayers were held at the meeting.

The NSS has raised concerns about prayers causing divisions in local communities, and is currently [opposing the Local Government and Religious Observances \(Etc.\) Bill](#), which would empower a wide range of local authority bodies to conduct prayers as part of their official meetings.

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