

Councillor proposes silent reflection in place of council prayers

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A councillor in Ards and North Down, in Northern Ireland, has proposed replacing religious prayers at council meetings with a moment of silent reflection.

Councillor John Barry of the Green party will table a motion at Ards and North Down council's meeting on 14 November (*full text below*). If the council passes it, a period of reflective silence will sit outside official council business.

Currently a prayer is the first item on the agenda of each monthly council meeting.

"It is an official council prayer that is usually set by the chief executive," Cllr Barry said. "The last two mayors have also introduced a tradition of Bible readings. I have no issues with people wanting to have a moment's reflection or commune with their god but it has no business being part of the official agenda.

"Religious prayers at the start of council meetings do not promote inclusivity and aren't conducive to a welcoming atmosphere for people of no faith or people who are not of a Christian faith.

"We propose instead that moment of silent reflection as an alternative to the current practice. This moment of reflection would allow for the inclusion of any religious, spiritual or ethical dimension for each person at the start of the meeting.

"This is not an attack on Christianity. This is about separation of church and state. It is about the removal of any religious connotation as an official part of council business."

Cllr Barry's motion says "expressions of one particular religion are not inclusive of those of different religions and beliefs, are not necessary for the conduct of council business, and are unrepresentative of the Ards and North Down Borough and its diverse communities".

The National Secular Society campaigns for prayers to be separated from official council business. In 2012 the High Court [ruled](#) that saying prayers in council time was unlawful. The ruling applied to councils in England and Wales, though in 2015 the Government responded by changing the law in England.

NSS campaigns director Stephen Evans said passing Councillor Barry's motion would be "a positive move".

"A council meeting isn't a religious meeting and shouldn't feel like one. Councillors should be free to get on with the business for which they have been elected, without having other people's religious beliefs and practices imposed on them. The council should pass the motion and others should follow suit.

"Keeping prayer out of council business in no way prevents religious councillors from praying for guidance before meetings if they choose."

Robert Adair, the Mayor of Ards and North Down, said he would oppose the motion. "I just feel it is an attack by the Green Party on Christianity and Christian values," he said.

Councillor Barry's proposal comes shortly after Belfast's new Lord Mayor, Nuala McAllister, [attracted headlines](#) by not asking anyone to say grace at her installation dinner in September. The NSS [expressed support](#) for her decision.

The full text of the motion is as follows:

"That this Council, while recognising the importance that religion plays for many people, believes that religious prayers should not form part of the official agenda of a council meeting. Such expressions of one particular religion are not inclusive of those of different religions and beliefs, are not necessary for the conduct of council business, and are unrepresentative of the Ards and North Down Borough and its diverse communities. A moment of silent reflection at the start of council meetings could instead be considered as a more appropriate way to allow for the inclusion of any religious, spiritual, or ethical dimension."

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