

# NSS writes to Welsh town council over prayers just before meetings

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The National Secular Society has asked the mayor of a south Wales town to ensure prayers are "sufficiently separate" from council meetings and "entirely optional".

The NSS has written to Janice Charles, the Conservative mayor of Barry, after she announced [plans](#) to hold prayers five minutes before meetings begin in the council chamber from 1 October.

NSS chief executive Stephen Evans asked her to "ensure that meetings are conducted in a manner equally welcoming to all attendees, regardless of their individual religious beliefs or lack of belief."

"Religious worship should therefore play no part in the formal business of council meetings.

"It is also reasonable for attendees to expect the chamber to be available for a fair interval before the meeting where the chamber is available so they can meet their colleagues, take their seats and prepare. If prayers begin in the chamber five minutes before the meeting starts, any councillor who does not wish to pray will be unable to do this."

Commenting on the decision to send the letter, Mr Evans added that council meetings "should be inclusive and neutral regarding religion".

"Local councils aren't clubs for Christians and Cllr Charles shouldn't seek to use her position to impose her own religious beliefs and practices on others.

"Councillors who wish to pray can do so away from the council chamber in advance of the meeting beginning. That way, prayers will in no way alienate or disadvantage other councillors who may wish to arrive early to the meeting but do not wish to take part in acts of worship."

The leader of the council's opposition, Plaid Cymru councillor Shirley Hodges, said prayer had been "imposed by one individual".

"There has been guidance from the clerk that we cannot discuss it.

"Introducing prayers is the wrong message. It splits up the town, is not inclusive and does not encourage people to get involved in politics.

"This is baggage we don't need. Let's carry on in our secular world."

In 2012 the High Court [ruled](#) that prayers should not be said as part of formal council business after the NSS initiated a judicial review on the subject. The ruling initially applied to the formal meetings of all councils in England and Wales.

The ruling remains valid in Wales, except in a few cross-border authorities. In 2015 the government changed the law in England to make prayers, "other religious observance" or "observance connected with a religious or philosophical belief" lawful at local authority meetings.

Last year research from the BBC [found](#) that 18 of the 22 unitary authorities in Wales did not hold prayers as part of council business.

In response to the criticism Cllr Charles has [accused](#) the NSS and her political opponents of "playing politics" and being "mean spirited".

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