

NSS urges councillors in Norfolk to scrap prayers before meetings

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The National Secular Society has urged councillors in Norfolk to abandon the practice of holding prayers at the start of meetings after a councillor tabled a motion to remove them.

Norfolk County Council, which currently holds Christian prayers at the start of meetings, [will vote](#) on a [motion](#) calling for their end next Monday.

The motion, proposed by independent councillor Mick Castle, instead proposes a short multi-faith service to take place in an alternative room ahead of meetings for those who choose to attend.

In a letter to councillors NSS chief executive Stephen Evans said holding acts of worship immediately before or during council meetings was "incompatible with a genuine commitment to religious freedom".

"The absence of prayers from meetings in no way impedes the religious freedoms of believers or denies anybody the right to pray. However, the inclusion of organised worship in a council setting leads to believers imposing acts of worship on those that do not share their faith.

"I ask you to ensure that all elected councillors, and indeed members of the public, are accorded equal respect and esteem at council meetings, irrespective of their privately held beliefs."

Mr Evans highlighted recent figures from the British Social Attitudes Survey, which [found](#) that just 12% of Britons affiliate to the Church of England and 52% are non-religious. He also noted that just 36% of young adults say they have a religion and only 1% identify with the Church of England.

He added that if councillors overwhelmingly wished to replace rather than scrap Christian prayers, holding a period of silent reflection would be a possible option.

Explaining his decision to write the letter, Mr Evans said: "Holding prayers during or immediately before council meetings undermines the principles of equality and freedom of and from religion. It is exclusionary to councillors who do not share the religious tradition in question and compels people to take part in a ritual which they do not wish to be a part of.

"Councillors in Norfolk and indeed elsewhere who wish to take part in religious worship should be expected to separate it from formal council business."

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.

But 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.

Explaining his decision to table the motion in Norfolk, Castle said: "We are an increasingly multicultural society so personally I feel it is a bit dated in 2019 to be still saying Christian prayers

at the start of council meetings."

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Prayers are personal & shouldn't be an official part of government business or imposed in meetings

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