

NSS: don't let religious groups discriminate on civil partnerships

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The National Secular Society has warned against allowing religious groups to host opposite-sex civil partnerships while opting out of hosting same-sex ones in response to a government consultation.

The government has proposed letting religious groups register their premises for "either same-sex or opposite-sex civil partnerships, or both" as part of a legal overhaul in England and Wales.

Ministers published [plans](#) to allow opposite-sex civil partnerships after the supreme court [ruled](#) that restricting civil partnerships to same-sex couples was discriminatory last year.

In response the NSS said religious organisations should be able to choose whether or not to host civil partnerships, but not whether to host only opposite-sex or same-sex ones.

The NSS wrote: "A civil partnership is entirely secular in nature. Permitting religious organisations to host opposite-sex civil partnerships but refuse same-sex civil partnerships (or vice versa) would erode equality law and entrench prejudice and bigotry."

The NSS also warned about the potential impact of allowing employers to discriminate against people based on whether they are in opposite-sex or same-sex civil partnerships for religious reasons.

The government has proposed allowing employers to impose occupational requirements against people in either same-sex or opposite-sex civil partnerships.

The exemption would apply "where employment is for the purposes of an organised religion and the requirement is necessary to avoid conflict with the religion". It would be created by amending the [Equality Act](#) of 2010.

The NSS advised "extreme caution" in implementing an amendment. It said religious organisations may abuse it to reject people in civil partnerships "even when this has no bearing on their performance in the role".

The NSS welcomed a statement that civil partnership registrars should not be able to refuse to participate in either same-sex or opposite-sex civil partnerships on religious grounds.

NSS campaigns officer Megan Manson said: "Promoting equality between people regardless of sexuality requires the government to uphold consistent rules. Organisations should choose whether they want to register for civil partnerships for all couples or not register for them at all.

"The government is reconsidering the current law on civil partnerships because the UK's top court found it to be discriminatory. Creating loopholes in its new legislation which entrench discrimination of a different kind would therefore be a counter-productive step.

"We also caution against allowing religious groups to discriminate against people in same-sex civil partnerships in employment. Such a provision should not be allowed unless it can be rigorously shown as necessary for the job in question."

The NSS's response also highlighted existing inequality between same-sex and opposite-sex couples in [marriage law](#), which is largely caused by religious groups' ability to discriminate.

There are almost 40,000 places of worship registered for marriage in England and Wales, but approximately only 7,400 civil wedding venues. Only 0.6% of places of worship are registered to conduct same-sex marriages.

Last year the NSS [urged](#) the government to reform the marriage laws to secularise the legal institution of marriage.

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