

NSS welcomes council in Somerset's decision to scrap prayers

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The National Secular Society has welcomed a decision to scrap official prayers at the start of meetings at a council in Somerset.

North Somerset Council [voted](#) to remove prayers from the start of council meetings on Tuesday and rejected calls to replace them with a multi-faith 'period of reflection'.

NSS campaigns officer Megan Manson said: "This is a very welcome move from North Somerset Council.

"Councillors have acknowledged that opening meetings with Christian prayers is not only unnecessary – it's alienating for many people in the region's diverse community.

"The council has also wisely decided to avoid a 'multifaith' approach to prayers, recognising the potential conflict this could cause.

"We hope more councils adopt the same policy to make council business inclusive to all, regardless of religion or belief."

The NSS [campaigns](#) to end official prayers at all government meetings at both a local and national level.

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.

In Somerset independent councillor Caritas Charles initially proposed the change, arguing that Christian prayers should be replaced with a period of reflection led by a "variety of spiritual and voluntary groups".

He said Christian prayers gave a message "that favours one particular group".

Councillors including Labour's Catherine Gibbons argued that meetings should be secular. But others including the council's deputy leader, Mike Bell, opposed change.

Recent NSS campaigning on council prayers

- In July the NSS [wrote](#) to councillors in Norfolk urging them to vote to scrap prayers at the start of meetings. The council voted to retain the prayers.
- The NSS has also [lobbied](#) councils in Wales to ensure any prayers are genuinely separate from meetings. The 2012 High Court judgment still applies in Wales.

- The NSS recently [asked](#) an equalities charity in Kent to reconsider its support for council prayers.

Image by [reenablack](#) from [Pixabay](#).

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