

Review status of charity promoting 'conversion therapy', NSS says

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The National Secular Society has urged Northern Ireland's charity regulator to review the charitable status of Core Issues Trust, a Christian organisation which promotes "change oriented therapy" for gay people.

In a letter to NI's chief charity commissioner Nicole Lappin, the NSS said promoting such therapy was not in line with charities' requirement to serve a public benefit.

The NSS has also written to Northern Ireland's communities minister Deirdre Hargey and health minister Robin Swann over the issue.

The letters come after Swann made a [commitment](#) to put the issue of LGBT conversion therapy "in our work scope" in the Northern Ireland Assembly in February.

The harm caused by conversion therapy has been widely acknowledged by leading psychotherapy bodies and the UK government.

Core Issues Trust and "change orientated therapy"

Core Issues Trust [advocates](#) what it calls "change orientated therapies" for people "seeking to leave homosexual behaviours and feelings".

The trust says the therapies it promotes "support client goals to prioritize (*sic*) conservative religious values over their same-sex attractions in identity development".

The trust is registered as a charity in NI, with one of its charitable purposes being to advance religion.

Under its [objects of association](#), it encourages "lifestyle choices consistent with Christian living" and upholds the view that sexual relationships outside heterosexual marriage are "inconsistent with" the Bible.

Contents of NSS letters

In its letter to Lappin the NSS wrote: "Given that this practice can cause individuals significant mental health issues and harms society by reinforcing stigmas against LGBT+ people, we believe a clear tension exists between the public benefit requirement and the promotion of 'conversion therapy'.

"Organisations that serve no clear public benefit – or worse, cause harm by, for example, actively promoting 'conversion therapy' – risk fundamentally undermining public confidence in the charitable sector."

In its other letters the NSS asked the ministers to work with the commission to ensure "no charity" could "promote or facilitate this harmful and ineffective pseudoscientific practice".

The society added that the legal provision which makes 'the advancement of religion' a charitable purpose should be re-evaluated.

NSS comment and Charity Commission response

NSS chief executive Stephen Evans said: "Bogus therapies which encourage people to change or suppress their sexuality are harmful and widely discredited. Those promoting them shouldn't enjoy the tax breaks and public recognition that charitable status brings.

"Northern Ireland's executive and Charity Commission should review the status of organisations which promote these so called therapies and remove their charitable privileges if they keep pushing them."

In a statement to the [Belfast Telegraph](#), the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland said the NSS's letter would be considered in detail.

A spokesperson added that a charity's purpose "must be beneficial, not harmful".

Charities and public benefit

- Organisations which register as charities are required to serve a public benefit. The [Charities Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2008](#) outlines a series 'charitable purposes' which charities can register under. One of these purposes is 'the advancement of religion'.
- In a 2019 [report](#) the NSS [argued](#) that 'the advancement of religion' should be removed as a charitable purpose.

Conversion therapy: the harm caused

- In 2018 the UK government [said it would](#) "fully consider all legislative and non-legislative options to prohibit promoting, offering or conducting conversion therapy".
- A 2014 [consensus statement](#) from the UK Council for Psychotherapy concluded that 'conversion therapy' was harmful. In 2017 major counselling and psychotherapy bodies from across the UK [committed](#) to ending 'conversion therapy'.
- According to the Ozanne Foundation's [2018 National Faith & Sexuality Survey](#), well over half of respondents who had attempted to change their sexual orientation had suffered from mental health issues as a result. Around 40% of those who had suffered mental health issues had self-harmed.
- Last week [Germany](#) became latest country to pass legislation restricting 'conversion therapy'.

Further note

- A recent [petition](#) against the trust's charitable status, from the advocacy group All Out, secured more than 10,000 signatures.

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What the NSS stands for

The Secular Charter outlines 10 principles that guide us as we campaign for a secular democracy which safeguards all citizens' rights to freedom of and from religion.

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