

NSS: government should revisit review of engagement with faith groups

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The National Secular Society has warned that a government review over its engagement with faith organisations in England appears "designed to reach a conclusion which will please religious interest groups".

The government's review will see [faith engagement adviser](#) Colin Bloom make recommendations to the communities secretary about how the government should engage with faith groups.

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), which Bloom is attached to, is currently seeking evidence as part of the review.

It raises several questions over faith groups' role in public policy. For example it asks:

- "Do you think that faith-based schools are good for society?"
- "Do you think that faith-based or religious practices in schools have a positive impact on a child's education?"
- "Are there areas of religious or faith-based practice which cause you serious concern?"
- "In your opinion does the government engage with the right religious and faith leaders?"

In a letter to the secretary of state, the NSS has highlighted concerns that:

- A [call for evidence](#) attached to the review says: "Because the review is specifically about faith and religion, priority will be given to responses that fit within those parameters."
- The opening line of a press release launching the review stated only that it was calling for views from "people of all faiths", with no mention of anyone else. This contrasted with a statement by Bloom that the review would also consult with those of no faith.
- Bloom has held several roles which have focused on working towards greater representation of faith in politics. His previous roles have included working as the executive director of the Conservative Christian Fellowship and a director of Christians in Politics.

The letter urged the government to pause the consultation and redesign it to ensure the public is consulted in "a fair and impartial manner".

And it said "the widest possible spectrum of society and opinion" should be sought in formulating government policy concerning religion or belief.

Content of NSS letter

In the letter, chief executive Stephen Evans wrote that the NSS had "no confidence that this review will reflect anything other than the priorities of religious interest groups".

He said the government's approach would "result in one-sided conclusions, and in turn give rise to simplistic and divisive policies that privilege one group of people to the detriment of others".

He added that the presence of a 'minister for faith' in MHCLG appeared to be "leading to a disproportionate focus on religious communities' input into public policy, to the exclusion of the non-religious and religiously unconcerned".

He also questioned whether the consultation was in line with the government's duties under equality law.

NSS comment

Explaining the letter, Mr Evans said the review "places a disproportionate focus on religious communities' input on matters of public policy".

"It's likely to marginalise those who see religion as a private matter – and who have a legitimate interest in its findings.

"As it currently stands, it appears the government has designed this review to reach a conclusion which will please religious interest groups. Ministers should revisit it and ensure it takes an even-handed and inclusive approach."

Additional note

- Earlier this year Conservative MP Danny Kruger published a report calling for [religion to play a greater role](#) in meeting the UK's social challenges.

You can read the government's [call for evidence](#) and [respond to the consultation](#). The deadline to respond is 11 December.

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