

'Conversion therapy' charity shows need for reform in NI, says NSS

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The National Secular Society has called for reform of charity law and more power for a regulator to tackle religious charities which promote harmful activities in Northern Ireland.

The NSS called for the removal of 'the advancement of religion' as a charitable purpose in response to an [independent review of charity regulation](#) in NI.

The NSS also said the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland should be empowered to challenge charities where there is evidence they are promoting practices which don't serve a public benefit.

Core Issues Trust

The society's response highlighted the case of Core Issues Trust, a Christian charity which promotes "change orientated therapy" for gay people, to demonstrate concerns over the relationship between religion and charity law in NI.

NI's Charity Commission recently [refused to take action against the trust](#) after the NSS raised its case.

In a letter outlining its decision, the commission said it was not its role to "adopt a position on the charity's conduct in this matter".

It also noted that Core Issues Trust "contests the view that this practice is inherently harmful" and appeared to suggest it was not the commission's role to take a position on such therapy while it's legal.

The NSS's submission to the review said this example suggested the commission "lacks the power to sufficiently challenge charities that are not complying with the public benefit requirement or are causing harm".

It added that the bar for an activity to be classified as in the public benefit "should be higher than it simply being legal".

'Advancement of religion'

The NSS also raised concerns over the inclusion of 'the advancement of religion' as one of [12 purposes which charities can register under](#) in Northern Ireland.

The purposes are used to judge whether organisations which seek to register as charities are serving a public benefit.

The NSS noted that Core Issues Trust has registered under 'the advancement of religion'. It also said many other charities registered for that purpose do not fulfill a demonstrable public benefit, and in some cases cause harm. It added that this erodes public confidence in the charity sector.

The society said the inclusion of 'the advancement of religion' allows religious charities to "register solely on the virtue of their ethos", whereas secular charities can't do the same.

In a report in 2019 the NSS argued that 'the advancement of religion' should be [removed from the lists of charitable purposes](#) across the UK, to ensure charities are providing a genuine public benefit regardless of their religious ethos.

NSS comment

NSS head of policy and research Megan Manson said: "Charities should serve a public benefit and should be consistently held to account, regardless of whether they have a religious ethos.

"This isn't currently happening in Northern Ireland and the example of Core Issues Trust, in particular, shows this.

"With that in mind the review of charitable regulation in Northern Ireland should recommend the removal of 'the advancement of religion' as a charitable purpose. It should also ensure the Charity Commission is empowered to tackle charities which cause harm or fail to serve a public benefit."

Note: conversion therapy's legal status

- The UK government has said it is ["committed" to ending conversion therapy](#) and will bring forward proposals shortly.
- The Northern Ireland assembly [voted for a non-binding motion](#) calling for a ban on gay conversion therapy "in all its forms" this week.

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