

“No plans” to review school collective worship, government tells UN

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The UK government is refusing to review laws requiring collective worship in schools despite repeated requests from a United Nations committee.

In a [report](#) to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the UK government said there are "no plans" by the UK government, the Welsh government or the Northern Ireland executive to review laws requiring all state-funded schools to hold [daily acts of invariably Christian worship](#).

Parents have the right to withdraw children from collective worship, but children cannot withdraw themselves unless they are sixth form pupils.

The Scottish Government is examining whether to review the policy on the right to withdraw from religious observance. Scotland's new UNCRC Bill will strengthen children's rights by making it unlawful for public authorities to act incompatibly with the rights incorporated by the bill. The NSS has said compulsory religious observance in Scotland's schools is [incompatible](#) with the bill.

The UK is the only Western democracy to legally impose worship in schools. This has been [challenged repeatedly](#) by the UNCRC after the National Secular Society raised it as a child right's issue.

In its most recent list of issues of concern, the UNCRC asked the UK government to describe what measures it has taken to "repeal legal provisions for compulsory attendance at collective worship in publicly funded schools" and "ensure that children can independently exercise the right to withdraw from religious observance at school".

Recent moves to end collective worship in nonreligious schools in England, including a [private member's bill](#) and [amendments to the Schools Bill](#), have been opposed by the government.

Progress for child rights in other areas

The UK government's state report highlighted other areas where children's rights have progressed. These include several developments supported by the NSS:

- [Relationships and sex education \(RSE\)](#) is now mandatory in England and Wales, after lobbying from many children's rights groups including the NSS.
- The UK government is [intervening](#) in Northern Ireland to roll out safe abortion services.
- The UK government has strengthened laws to tackle violence against women and girls, including new laws to protect girls from forced marriage and [female genital mutilation \(FGM\)](#). It has also [banned](#) so-called 'virginity testing' and 'virginity restoration' procedures. Northern

Ireland recently held a consultation on developing a strategy to tackle violence against women and girls, which the NSS [responded to](#).

- The legal age of marriage has been raised to 18 in England and Wales, while Scotland and Northern Ireland are considering raising the legal age. The NSS [responded](#) to Northern Ireland's consultation in support of the plans in February.

But there are other areas where the UK is failing to tackle religious interference with children's rights:

- Despite the UK government strengthening protections for girls from FGM, and reviewing the practice of non-consensual surgery on the genitals of intersex children, it has made no moves to protect boys from forced religious or cultural [circumcision](#). A recent NSS-backed [report](#) from an international NGO has called on the UNCRC to work towards "full, equal protection of all minors" from non-therapeutic genital cutting.
- Although it has a duty under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child to protect children from discrimination, the UK has not acted to [end discrimination on the basis of religion or belief](#) in faith school admissions.

NSS head of campaigns Megan Manson said: "While the UK government has made some progress in protecting children's rights from religious imposition, the refusal to review compulsory collective worship at schools stands out as a serious failure.

"Forcing schools to hold acts of religious worship means the UK is lagging behind other Western democracies in upholding freedom of religion or belief for children.

"The government must listen to the UN and work to abolish the archaic and wholly unnecessary collective worship laws throughout the UK."

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