

NSS urges MoD to address Christian-centric approach to welfare

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The National Secular Society has urged the Ministry of Defence to ensure its welfare provision is fully inclusive of all service personnel, irrespective of religion or belief.

In a letter to Chief of Defence People James Swift, the NSS said former and currently serving members of the Armed Forces had raised concerns that chaplaincy is discriminatory and "failing to provide inclusive welfare services".

The letter follows the recent publication of the Ministry of Defence's (MoD) [Defence People Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2022 to 2027](#), which says chaplaincy is "key to providing support and wellbeing to defence people".

Chaplaincy in the army

Only ministers of a [select group](#) of eight 'sending churches', all Christian, may be chaplains of regular army units. The Armed Forces has appointed "advisers" for members of five other faiths instead of chaplains, while there is no equivalent pastoral support for nonreligious personnel.

The 'sending churches' include denominations with anti-LGBT views, including the Free Church of Scotland, Elim Pentecostal Church and the Salvation Army. As military chaplains are required to "set forth God's word at all times" according to the Royal Army Chaplains' Department, LGBT soldiers "may reasonably doubt these chaplains' ability to give impartial and non-judgmental counselling regarding issues of relationships and sexuality", the NSS said.

Recent [research](#) into chaplaincy in prisons, where there is also an institutional Christian bias, found nonreligious inmates are less likely to receive the pastoral help they need, which may lead to poorer outcomes. The research also found this may amount to unlawful discrimination under the Equality Act 2010.

Figures consistently show the number of nonreligious members of the Armed Forces is increasing rapidly. [UK Armed Forces Biannual Diversity Statistics for April 2022](#) revealed an increase of 21% over the past ten years in the proportion of tri-service regular forces professing no religion, to stand at 36% in April 2022 compared with 60% Christians.

NSS: Army chaplaincy "increasingly unsustainable"

NSS chief executive Stephen Evans said: "Like the UK population in general, the army is growing less religious and more religiously-diverse year by year.

"The Armed Forces' approach to providing pastoral support largely through Christian chaplaincy is therefore inappropriate and unsustainable.

"To continue with the discriminatory status quo risks poorer health and wellbeing outcomes for those who are ill-served by an effectively exclusive Christian chaplaincy.

"We therefore hope the MoD will take steps to ensure it welfare provision is fully inclusive of all service personnel, irrespective of their religion or belief."

[Image: Sergeant Alison Baskerville RLC](#)

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