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The National Secular Society is to launch a legal challenge against a local Council's practice of starting its meetings with prayers.

Following a complaint to the NSS from a councillor on Bideford Council in Devon, the NSS will seek a Judicial Review to consider whether including prayers as part of council meetings breaches the European Convention on Human Rights.

Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society said: "The Councillor objects to being subjected to prayers, or having to leave the chamber while they are said. Elected Councillors of public bodies should not be put in such an uncomfortable and embarrassing position. The Council's purpose is to provide local services, not church services."

Mr Porteous Wood said: "The Councillor is aware of potential councillors who are put off becoming candidates because of this archaic practice. The practice is therefore interfering with operation of local democracy. There is a chronic shortage of candidates and unnecessary obstacles to new councillors should be discouraged.

"The Society took advice from top city lawyers, Beachcroft, who believe that the practice is a breach of the European Convention on Human Rights which not only guarantees freedom to manifest religion, but also freedom *from* religion. The Society fully supports both aspects of this freedom – we support, for example, the freedom of street preachers to preach against homosexuality.

"It is nonsense to claim that the rights of councillors to manifest their religion would be restricted if the Review is successful. Councillors can, like anyone else, go to church or pray at home whenever they wish, and indeed we do not have a problem with them praying separately before or after Council meetings. But it is not appropriate in modern-day Britain for prayers to form an integral part of the Council meeting. The majority of people in this country do not enter a church, expect perhaps for weddings and funerals, from one year's end to the next. It is also possible that some from other religions will not feel comfortable being expected to participate in Christian prayers.

The argument that prayers have been held in councils for centuries is not in itself an argument for their retention. Many councils throughout the country manage perfectly well without prayers and council meetings should confine themselves strictly to council business, not to promoting religious beliefs. We know of another Council where the religious element takes ten minutes. In a nation that is rapidly changing, with many non-believers and non-Christians taking part in the democratic process, religion should be left to the individual conscience and not foisted onto people in contexts that are inappropriate."