

Protect secular public services

Public services that are intended for the whole community, especially those funded by public money, should be provided in a secular context, open to all, without discriminating against anyone on grounds of religion/belief – either the people who are served or employed.

When religious organisations are involved in delivering secular public services, they should be bound by equality law and restrictions on proselytization.

What's the problem?

Recent years have seen a drive to contract out the provision of public services. This, perhaps encouraged by the greater freedoms allowed by the Localism Act 2011, has resulted in many more religious organisations seeking to become service providers of publicly-funded services.

Many faith-based groups have carried out social service provision without proselytising, discriminating or imposing values but we have two main concerns about religious groups taking over public service provision: proselytising and discrimination.

Both can be avoided with appropriate boundaries put in place and an end to the assumption that faith groups have some special ability to deliver services. We should also acknowledge where a religious group running a service could put off service users.

Best practice for third sector organisations interacting with and supporting the public is usually marked by four characteristics:

1. The organisation provides a supplementary rather than core service.
2. The organisation is run, and provides a service, in a non-discriminatory manner.
3. The organisation does not use the opportunity of providing the service to advance a partisan or ideological agenda.
4. The relationship between the public service and the third sector organisation is open to scrutiny.

Those advocating for faith organisations taking over more public services risk undermining these restrictions, which exist to protect both the public and third sectors.

Christian commentators are often keen to document the contribution of religious organisations to the third sector and social activism. But they fail to demonstrate why it should be the state's role to build this capacity or why local authorities shouldn't have legitimate concerns about religious groups running services.

We have concerns that some religious groups that seek to take over public services, particularly at local level, could pursue policies and practices that result in increased discrimination against marginalised groups, particularly in service provision and the employment of staff. Non-religious people and those not seen to conform to the dominant ethos of a religious body, such as being in an unmarried relationship or divorced and being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered, could find themselves subject to discrimination.

Unitarian Church (Submission to the Parliamentary Public Administration Select Committee about the Big Society agenda)

Thoughtful people – like the Irish Evangelical Alliance's Nick Park, who says he thanks God for secularism – know that privileging religion is a bad thing. No, Christians shouldn't abuse their positions to evangelise, and if they do they should be brought to account.

Reverend Mark Woods (writing in Christian Today)

What are we doing?

We challenge systemic outsourcing to religious organisations, and make sure they face appropriate scrutiny. We challenge the idea that religious organisations can or should be supported by the state to run public services.

What you can do:

Take action

Please consider supporting our petition on this issue, or writing to your MP.

- [Petition](#)
- [Write to your MP](#)

[Outsourcing to religious organisation threatens to undermine equal access and religious neutrality. I support the NSS campaign to protect secular public services.](#)

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Need advice?

If you have concerns about outsourcing to a religious organisation undermining a secular public service in your community, please get in touch.

- [Contact us](#)
- [Share a case study](#)

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More information

- [Protect secular public services briefing](#) (PDF, 335 Kb)
- [Faith in public services?](#)

When religious organisations providing public services is disastrous for both the public and faith sectors.

[Read More](#)

- [Addressing 'The Problem of Proselytism'](#)

Publicly funded services shouldn't be a platform to proselytise.

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While you're here

Our campaigns, policy and casework cover a wide range of areas where religious privilege intrudes on people's rights. Please consider a donation to help support our work.

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