

Briefing: Council prayers

July 2019



The National Secular Society (NSS) is a non-profit organisation campaigning for the separation of religion and state, and equal respect for everyone's human rights so that no one is either advantaged or disadvantaged on account of their beliefs. We regard secularism and freedom of expression as essential features of a liberal democracy.

Introduction

- The Local Government (Religious Etc. Observances) Act enables a majority of councillors to impose their beliefs and acts of worship on other councillors. As a result, a number of local authorities in the UK begin their meetings with prayer as part of their official business.
- The NSS believes religious worship should not play any part in the formal business of parliament. We want to see parliamentary and local government meetings conducted in a manner equally welcoming to all attendees, irrespective of their personal beliefs. Simply because a majority of councillors wish to impose their beliefs on other councillors does not make it legitimate for them to do so.

Why are council prayers exclusionary and divisive?

- Whilst prayers as part of council meetings may not seem like a great imposition to those who are not involved with or do not enjoy the prayers, it can be alienating for those who do not believe, or who hold faiths different to those of the religion invoked by the prayers in question.
- One example is given by the late Clive Bone, a councillor who was a party to a High Court challenge of the inclusion of prayers before meetings of Bideford Town Council. Cllr Bone felt uncomfortable in refusing to participate, and said the worship created an unwelcoming atmosphere for non-religious councillors, and that he was aware of it putting off potential councillors from standing.
- There is a history of local councillors being bullied and marginalised for challenging council prayers. For example, Cllr Imran Khan, a Muslim and Conservative councillor on Reigate and Banstead Borough Council, was deselected by the local Conservative Party after he objected to the saying of Christian prayers as part of the Council meeting. He claimed the prayer row had “a big influence” on the decision not to reselect him.
- In another example, councillors in Shropshire called a fellow non-religious councillor “disgusting” after he wore headphones during a prayer held during a council meeting.

Have any councils ended the practice of prayers before meetings?

- Many councils recognise the validity of our arguments and have now either ended the practice of saying prayers, or moved them away from the official business of their meetings.
- In 2013 an [investigation](#) found more than three-quarters of local councils do not hold prayers at meetings.
- In 2017 [research](#) revealed that 18 of the 22 unitary authorities in Wales do not hold prayers as part of council business.

What about religious freedom?

- The absence of prayers from the formal business of meetings in no way impedes the religious freedoms of believers or denies anybody the right to pray.
- However, the inclusion of organised worship in council settings leads to believers imposing acts of worship on those that do not share their faith. It is important to note that religious freedom is not just for believers - it also includes non-believers. It is therefore clear that the inclusion of acts of worship in the formal business of council meetings is incompatible with a genuine commitment to freedom of religion or belief.

What about tradition?

- Continuing a practice simply for the sake of tradition cannot be justified if that tradition is exclusionary or divisive, as opening council meetings with prayers is. There are countless traditions that have been phased out of civil life because they are no longer appropriate for contemporary society.
- Political engagement among the public is a problem. One reason is that people feel disconnected and alienated by aspects of politics that have become increasingly antiquated. Council prayers contribute to this feeling of alienation within an increasingly secular and religiously-diverse society, where [over 50%](#) of the population say they have no religion.
- It should be noted that young people in particular are far more likely to have no religion than older people. According to the 36th British Social Attitudes survey, just 36% of young adults say they have a religion, and only 1% identify with the Church of England. If we want to ensure the young are engaged in community decisions that affect them, council procedures must feel welcoming and relevant to them. One clear way to do this is to phase out council prayers as part of official council business.

Can councils hold alternatives to prayers?

- If local authorities wish to hold a moment of silent reflection at the beginning of a meeting, or if councillors wish to meet for prayers prior to the meeting off the agenda, they should be at liberty. No change in the law is necessary to facilitate this.
- We advise against the introduction of multifaith prayers to replace exclusively Christian prayers. Such initiatives, though often well-meaning, became cause of tension rather than cohesion.
- An example is given by Portsmouth Council, which in 2011 allowed for Muslim Imam to say a prayer during a meeting. In response, a local councillor excluded himself from the meeting while the prayer was said, and accused of “disrespect” as a result. The councillor told local media: “I don't feel it's appropriate for Muslim prayers to be said, as I don't feel we worship the same God as Muslims, so I left.”