

27 September 2021

# Equality & Human Rights Commission strategic plan for 2022 to 2025: **NSS** **response**

Submitted online: <https://www.smartsurvey.co.uk/s/OurWorkPlan-22-25/>

6. Do you work in any of the following sectors? Please tick all that apply.

*I do not work in any of these sectors. Please use the text box below to list your sector:*

The NSS is a not-for-profit, non-governmental organisation founded in 1866, funded by its members and by donations. We advocate for separation of religion and state and promote secularism as the best means of creating a society in which people of all religions and none can live together fairly and cohesively. We seek a diverse society where all are free to practise their faith, change it, or to have no faith at all. We uphold the universality of individual human rights, which should never be overridden on the grounds of religion, tradition or culture. We campaign for the law and the administration of justice to be based on equality, respect for human rights, and on objective evidence. In a secular democracy everyone is equal before the law, regardless of religion, belief or non-belief. We seek to ensure that human rights do not lose out to religious demands, and challenge inappropriate or discriminatory exemptions to equality law for religious groups. We campaign across many different fields including education, law, healthcare and the workplace.

13. To what extent do you support the proposed focus on upholding an effective framework for protecting equality and human rights for all groups? \*

5 (completely support)

14. Please include any comments on your response below. \*

Including 'caste' as a protected characteristic in the Equality Act should be a priority. More information: <https://www.secularism.org.uk/uploads/download-the-full-report.pdf>.

We encourage the EHRC to support the UN's recommendations regarding child rights. More information: <https://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2021/02/uk-quizzed-over-collective-worship-law-by-un>

Finally, we are concerned that too many charities are failing to protect equality. More information: [https://www.secularism.org.uk/uploads/nss-advancement-of-religion-charity-report-\(electronic\).pdf](https://www.secularism.org.uk/uploads/nss-advancement-of-religion-charity-report-(electronic).pdf)

15. Consider the role and powers of the Equality and Human Rights Commission. Please list up to three issues you would like to see us prioritise, which will help to uphold an effective framework for protecting equality and human rights. \*

1. Including 'caste' as a specific protected characteristic in the Equality Act 2010

2. Supporting UN recommendations regarding inclusive education

3. Tackle charities that are failing in their duties to equality and human rights

16. To what extent do you support the proposed area of focus on fairness for children and young people? \*

We support EHRC's ambitions. But exceptions in the Equality Act allow faith schools to discriminate: <https://www.secularism.org.uk/faith-schools/end-pupil-discrimination.html>

Legally-required collective worship in all schools are also discriminatory: <https://www.secularism.org.uk/end-compulsory-worship/>

Many children may not receive adequate RSE, because DfE guidance suggests faith schools can teach RSE according to the tenets of their faith: <https://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2021/02/uk-quizzed-over-collective-worship-law-by-un>

17. Please include any comments on your response below. \*

1. Eliminating religious discrimination in school admissions

2. Removing laws requiring collective worship in schools

3. Ensuring all schools teach an LGBT+ inclusive curriculum, with no religious exceptions.

19. To what extent do you support the proposed area of focus on upholding rights in health and social care? \*

5 (completely support)

20. Please include any comments on your response below. \*

There are recent reports of women being turned away from pharmacists when requesting emergency contraception: <https://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2020/11/ensure-women-can-access-emergency-contraception-pharmacy-told>

The government is attempting to bring more faith groups into public services, without evidence they will safeguard against discriminatory practices: <https://www.secularism.org.uk/opinion/2021/09/beware-the-governments-new-normal-of-faith-based-public-services>

While girls are protected from forced genital cutting, boys are not: <https://www.secularism.org.uk/religious-surgery/>

21. Consider the role and powers of the Equality and Human Rights Commission. Please list up to three issues you would like to see us prioritise, which will uphold rights in health and social care. \*

1. Ensuring all women can fully access abortion services and emergency contraception.

2. Ensuring religious organisations providing public services do not proselytise.

3. Address the disparity of protection for male and female children in laws regarding genital cutting.

22. To what extent do you support the proposed area of focus on fairness in a changing workplace?

5 (completely support)

23. Please include any comments on your response below. \*

We're concerned the 'genuine occupational requirement' allowing limited forms of discrimination in employment is being abused by religious organisations:

<https://www.secularism.org.uk/uploads/download-the-full-report.pdf>

There may soon be an increased demand for religious exemptions from workplace vaccines, e.g. in healthcare. Accommodating religious demands must not undermine the welfare of other employees and service users.

24. Consider the role and powers of the Equality and Human Rights Commission. Please list up to three issues you would like to see us prioritise, which will promote and safeguard fairness in a changing workplace. \*

1. Preventing organisations from abusing the 'genuine occupational requirement' in job adverts
2. Ensuring that fulfilling religious accommodations does not undermine the rights or welfare of others

25. To what extent do you support the proposed area of focus on fostering good relations, promoting respect and understanding of rights?

5 (completely support)

26. Please include any comments on your response below. \*

We urge the EHRC to support understanding, respect for difference, and more cohesive communities by advancing the case for enhanced citizenship and human rights education in all schools, and promoting free speech.

We're concerned by the erosion of the principle of 'one law for all' caused by religious tribunals:

<https://www.secularism.org.uk/one-law-for-all/>

27. Consider the role and powers of the Equality and Human Rights Commission. Please list up to three issues you would like to see us prioritise, which will foster good relations, promote respect and understanding of rights. \*

1. Advancing enhanced citizenship and HR education in schools
2. Uphold free speech
3. Upholding the principle of one law for all – including tackling the effects of religious courts on this.

28. To what extent do you support the proposed area of focus on safeguarding and advancing human rights and equality in artificial intelligence and emerging digital technology?

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29. Please include any comments on your response below. \*

If not properly managed, algorithms designed to protect users by censoring 'hate speech' may easily censor other kinds of speech, including satire and criticism of religion. All technology designed for human interaction must pay due regard to the need to protect freedom of expression.

30. Consider the role and powers of the Equality and Human Rights Commission. Please list up to three issues that you would like to see us prioritise, which will safeguard and advance human rights and equality in artificial intelligence and emerging digital technologies. \*

We have nothing further to add.

31. To deliver our aims and fulfil our duties effectively, we focus our work on a number of priority areas, using a range of powers and levers to achieve change. Are there any areas of focus missing from these proposals, which you would like to see the Equality and Human Rights Commission take action to address? \*

We are concerned that there are many 'gaps' in the Equality Act 2021 that enable unjust discrimination to continue: <https://www.secularism.org.uk/uploads/download-the-full-report.pdf>

We urge the EHRC to support the recent recommendations made by the Law Commission to reform marriage for greater equality, fairness and freedom of choice:

<https://www.secularism.org.uk/marriage-equality/>