

Taking Prayers out of Council Meetings

A guide for councillors

Many Councils still include a formal session of prayers at the beginning of their council meetings. They say they do it as a tradition, but they rarely ask anyone, including their own councillors, if it should continue.

Why does it matter?

Newly elected councillors are surprised that the first formal thing they are asked to do after signing the acceptance of office is to stand up at the beginning of their first council meeting and listen to a cleric. They haven't come across it in other walks of life, in their workplace or at social occasions, so why in the council chamber? It might not be the most important issue they face on election, and there will be a feeling of not wishing to ruffle feathers with the wise old birds who have been councillors since the dawn of time. Senior council officers are expected to join in too, and they don't even get a say in the matter.

And so prayers continue to be said year in year out in over half the councils in the country, while fewer and fewer councillors have any religious faith at all.

Religion is a matter for the individual, not the state or the council. Prayers at council meetings hardly reflects how most people go about their business, and it re-affirms a link between organised religion and government that needs to be broken. It's time we did something about it.

National Secular Society v. Bideford Town Council

In February 2011, the National Secular Society won a legal challenge against prayers said at meetings of Bideford Town Council. The High Court ruled that: "*The saying of prayers as part of the formal meeting of a Council is not lawful under s111 of the Local Government Act 1972, and there is no statutory power permitting the practice to continue*".

Simply put, it was ruled that holding prayers is not within the Council's legal powers as they do not facilitate the discharge of any of the Council's functions.

The Government responded by invoking the "general power of competence" within the newly passed Localism Act. The General Power of Competence is a localist principle that Liberal Democrats have long pressed for, and now achieved in government. Previously a council has only been able to do those things that the law specifically empowered it to do or which are incidental to those things. The general power of competence states that rather than looking to Whitehall to hand down specific powers, a council can do anything that an individual could do unless it is specifically prohibited by law. A good localist, liberal principle.

Surely councillors should have their say, but many councils have simply carried on with prayers as before, without even consulting their councillors.

I am a councillor - what should I do?

There are many different things you can do, as a councillor, and particularly as a Mayor or Chair of your Council. Quite simply you should not feel obliged in any way to take part in any religious rituals. We believe in freedom from, as well as freedom of religion. Some councillors will not want to make a fuss and will stand or sit in silence through the ritual. You could simply withdraw from that part of the meeting, but why should you? Some councillors have faced criticism even for doing that.

If Councils do have a general power of competence to decide to have prayers, why not put it to the test. **Propose a motion** that prayers should not be part of the formal council agenda and that those councillors who wish to pray together should organise to do so separately from the formal business of council. You are not denying anyone their personal freedom to their religion, you are just asking that they do not impose it on others. After all, they would not expect to do it in any other workplace. You may be surprised how many others, regardless of party or religious belief, will agree with you.

As a mayor, or chair of your council, there is much more you can do. In many councils it is customary for the Mayor or Chair to appoint a chaplain, and decide on the prayers. There are many examples of Mayors or Chairs who have simply decided not to appoint a chaplain or have appointed a humanist celebrant, and so no prayers have been held during their term of office.

You could replace prayers with a short period of silent contemplation, or choose secular readings of prose or poetry. As Mayor of my Council I used this as an opportunity for promote local poetry, prose and humour. It was enjoyed by all councillors, regardless of faith, and helped promote local talent.

Some Mayors think that they are demonstrating the diversity of their council by letting the major religions take it turns to deliver prayers, but those of no religion are usually forgotten. Replacing one religion with several does not deal with the need to separate religion from government.

Not the Council's business

Imposing prayers on councillors and council officers continues because it goes unchallenged. The National Secular Society and others will continue to challenge the principle of prayers at council meetings at national level. It is up to all Liberal Democrats to establish the principle of freedom from religion in their own council chamber, while retaining the right of those who wish to pray to do so, but separately from the formal business of a council meeting.

The National Secular Society are campaigning against prayers in council meetings and can give more advice. Humanist & Secularist Liberal Democrats are affiliated to the National Secular Society and to the **British Humanist Association**, who can offer advice on seeking humanist celebrants for civic occasions.

Eric Pickles letter to all Council Leaders setting out the general power of competence in the matter of prayers at council meetings can be read on [DCLG's website](#).

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About Humanist & Secularist Liberal Democrats

HSLD is for all Liberal Democrats, of all faiths and none, who seek a humane approach to public ethical issues and an end to privilege and discrimination based on religion or belief.

We are an Associated Organisation within the party, and are affiliated to both the British Humanist Association and the National Secular Society

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