

Mr William Powell AM
Chair
Petitions Committee
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay
Cardiff
CF99 1NA

25 April 2013

Dear Mr Powell

Petition: Prayers at Councils Meeting

I write with reference to your letter seeking views on the petition your committee has received requesting amending the Local Government Act 1972 to enable local councils in Wales to hold prayers at Council meetings as part of the official business agenda should they so wish to do so.

We have sought the views of the National Executive Committee members of One Voice Wales and sought legal advice on this matter which is set out below and which we are using for the purposes of advising our member councils.

“s.111 of the 1972 Act does not give a parish (community) council the power to:

- hold prayers as part of a council meeting or
- summons councillors to attend a council meeting at which prayers are on the agenda or
- include prayers in the summons to councillors or in the agenda.

Before a council meeting, it would not be unlawful for councillors, if they so wish, to get together for quiet reflection or saying prayers or other religious worship.”

It is One Voice Wales view that it is sensible for there to be a clear separation in terms of timing, place and purpose between (i) an informal gathering which is voluntary for councillors to attend for saying prayers and at which the public is not present and (ii) a formal council meeting which councillors are required to attend and at which the public is present. If councillors choose to say prayers etc in the council chamber or meeting room, there should be a distinct break before the formal council meeting commences.

If a council provides a room or other facilities for councillors to say prayers before a meeting, then it should ensure that it does not discriminate against a councillor on the basis of his or her religion (or a lack of religion) or religious or philosophical belief (or lack of belief).

Llais Cyngorau Cymuned a Thref yng Nghymru - The Voice of Community and Town Councils in Wales

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Although the facts in the claim against Bideford Town Council did not result in a finding of indirect discrimination or an infringement of Convention rights, councils are reminded that they are subject to obligations in the Equality Act 2010 and that they are public authorities subject to the Convention rights.

One Voice Wales National Executive Members considered the correspondence of the Minister for Local Government Prayers at Council Meetings and indicated that they felt that individual councils should consider the issue from their own perspective. The consensus of opinion was that prayers could be held just prior to the formal commencement of a meeting. However there is not a defined position across the community and town council sector and as such it would be considered helpful if Welsh Government could provide guidance based on its own legal advice to enable individual councils to determine the most appropriate course of action moving forward.

I trust you will find our comments helpful.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lyn Cadwallader', written in a cursive style.

Mr Lyn Cadwallader
Chief Executive
One Voice Wales

Cc Cllr Mair Stephens, Chair One Voice Wales