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FREEDOM TO PRAY

On 10 February, the High Court issued a ruling in a case brought against Bideford Town Council, banning the practice of prayers at the formal beginning of council meetings. The basis of this ruling was a narrow interpretation of Section 111 of the Local Government Act 1972. In short, it asserted that councils do not have an explicit power to hold prayers as part of the formal business at council meetings.

I do not believe it was ever the intention of Parliament when it passed that Act forty years ago to prohibit council prayers, which are a common day practice that dates back many centuries. This high profile case has generated a public debate about the marginalisation of faith and illiberal and intolerant secularism.

I believe religion continues to play an important part in the culture, heritage and fabric of our nation. We respect those with faith, and those with none. The right to worship is a fundamental and hard-fought British liberty, and the fight for religious freedom in British history is deeply entwined with political freedom.

As a consequence of the High Court ruling, I have decided to fast-track the commencement of the general power of competence in the Localism Act 2011. The power is now in effect for all principal local authorities in England (including London, district, county, metropolitan and unitary councils) and by April for parish councils meeting the necessary requirements. Previously councils have only been able to do those things that the law specifically empowered them to do or which are incidental to those things. The new general power of competence turns the current situation on its head. Rather than looking to Whitehall to hand down specific powers, it enables councils to do anything that an individual could do unless it is specifically prohibited by law. These new flexibilities for councils include the freedom to pray and hold prayers at the start of council meetings, should they wish.

It will of course continue to be for councils to determine the content of prayers, including by reflecting the faith composition of their local area, but the decision on whether to hold prayers is now a local one again. Our multifaith nation, which has brought many benefits, is not strengthened by the secularisation of civil life.

I hope this action sends an important signal about how this Government values and will champion the continuing role of religion in public life.

RT HON ERIC PICKLES MP