



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

WRITTEN STATEMENT BY THE WELSH GOVERNMENT

TITLE Welsh Ministers' response to a letter issued to all Catholic secondary schools in Wales by the Catholic Education Service regarding same sex marriages

DATE 8 May 2012

BY Leighton Andrews, Minister for Education and Skills

Members will be aware of recent coverage in the media concerning a letter dated 10 March from the Archbishop of Westminster and the Archbishop of Southwark and issued, with other related correspondence, to all Roman Catholic secondary schools in England and Wales via the Catholic Education Service.

In March 2012 the Coalition Government commenced a consultation on proposed changes to the legal definition of marriage so as to open the institution of marriage to same sex partnerships. The Archbishops' letter set out the Roman Catholic Church's vision of marriage which focused on the relationship between a husband and wife. In a covering e-mail, head teachers were asked to consider asking staff and pupils to themselves consider signing the Coalition for Marriage's on-line petition to support the existing definition of marriage. This petition is only intended for signature by those aged 16 or over as the petition website makes clear. Head teachers were also asked to consider reading the letter out at school or class assemblies and arranging for its use in appropriate classes. It is unfortunate that the original e-mail of 10 March did not make it clear that only persons aged 16 or over should sign the on-line petition, and I am pleased that the CES has now clarified this.

Following the media coverage, I sought advice from my officials as to whether there had been any potential breach of duties under the Equality Act 2010 or duties in relation to political impartiality in the Education Act 1996.

In relation to the Equality Act 2010, as the Archbishops' letter merely expressed support for preserving the current legal situation and did not contain homophobic statements, I am advised that the correspondence and related actions of the CES do not breach the Act. Whilst schools are free to employ the materials provided as suggested, it is incumbent on them to do so in a balanced way.

The provisions in the Education Act 1996 concerning political teaching in schools are also relevant. Section 406 of the 1996 Act requires that local authorities, head teachers and governing bodies shall forbid the pursuit of partisan political activities by any registered pupil

who has not attained the age of 12, and forbids the promotion of partisan political views in the teaching of any subject at the school. Section 407 of the 1996 Act requires schools to take whatever reasonably practical steps are necessary to ensure that where political issues are brought to the attention of pupils they are offered a balanced presentation of opposing views. Whilst the on-line petition is not directly related to a party political matter it could be seen as relating to political matters generally as the petition seeks to lobby the current Westminster Government to prevent a change in the law. Opposing a proposed change in the law could itself be considered to be a political act.

I have therefore written to all the Roman Catholic secondary schools in Wales reminding head teachers and governing bodies of their duty and responsibilities under the 1996 Act in particular. I have asked them to ensure that if any pupils have been made aware of the correspondence, that those pupils will also be made aware of the converse view in order to give them a balanced perspective. A copy of this letter is attached for Members information.

I will keep members informed if there are further developments on this matter.