

4 December 2017

Ms Tracey Crouch MP
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Dear Ms Crouch

Commissioning faith groups for public services

We are writing to seek assurance that, where the Government or local authorities commission faith-based charities or other groups to provide a public service, the group will not be afforded any particular privileges due to their faith status.

Our concern follows your comments made in your keynote speech at the “Raising Funds for Christian Charities and Churches” event held on November 21st. In your speech, you stated, *“Some of you here feel that successive governments and local authorities have wanted to applaud all the good things that you do as Christians, but discourage you from speaking openly about the faith that motivates you. I assure you that that is not the intention, and I encourage you to challenge anyone in government who makes you feel you need to suppress your faith.”*

I am concerned that this statement could be interpreted as a condoning, or even encouraging, proselytising by faith groups contracted to provide public services or given public funding for activities that benefit the country.

It goes without saying that social action by faith-based organisations has contributed enormously to the welfare of our society. However, any attempt to give faith-based organisations more room to discuss religion when running public services risks making their services less inclusive. As the Government looks to faith groups to 'fill in the gaps' in public service provision, the risk of discrimination against employees and service users increases, as does the risk of faith groups using public money to proselytise.

While the NSS acknowledges that faith groups should not be excluded from contracts and grants simply because they have a religious ethos, it is imperative that such groups deliver their services in an entirely secular manner in order to ensure that the service is open to all members of the public without direct or indirect discrimination. Specifically:

- **No public service provider should use their position as a platform for proselytising.** The public should be able to use a public service without religious strings attached. Proselytising puts vulnerable people in particular at risk of exploitation. A non-proselytisation clause should not be controversial; we are not aware of any cases where one would be a barrier to a service.
- **The Equality Act must apply to all charities and other providers, with no exemptions granted for religious reasons.** No provider should be able to discriminate against any member of the public, be it in delivering the service or in employing workers or volunteers.

- **No public service provider should receive privileges due to religion.** A charity or organisation should not be treated favourably in tendering for contracts or grants, or at any stage in its contract with the Government, simply because it is religious.

These three simple principles would not only afford protection to the rights of the public, they would also protect religious organisations who want to bid for contracts. If levels of suspicion and mistrust of faith-based organisations were lessened, service commissioners may be more willing to give contracts to such providers, safe in the knowledge that resources would be used to provide services in a neutral and inclusive manner – with no attempt to promote any particular religion.

Could you please give your assurance that in awarding contracts and grants to religious charities and other organisations, the Government will insist on the principles outlined above in order to ensure equality, fairness and human rights are kept at the forefront of public services?

Thank you for your time on this matter. We look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely

Stephen Evans
Executive Director