

Briefing Faith-Based Welfare / Public Service Provision

What are the issues / what do we want?

The BHA wants: the Government to be more transparent about the role it envisions faith organisations should have in the future provision of public services; to be absolutely clear about how these providers will operate (not least in terms of their religious ethos) and; to not privilege faith organisations over other, secular and inclusive potential service providers .

Increasing the number of religious organisations from the third sector as welfare providers increases the risk of discrimination against the non-religious, in terms of employment opportunities and / or as service users.

Third sector religious organisations should be on an even footing with other potential service providers from the private and third sectors and not be given an unfair advantage in terms of competing for control of such services.

Public money should not be used to fund non-inclusive organisations which are discriminatory on the grounds of religion or belief.

What's the situation for welfare / public services?

On 19th March HM Treasury published its policy review, 'Building on Progress', which sets out the Government's plan for welfare and public service reform. The Government is looking particularly to expand the supply-side of public service provision, opening up many services to bids from the private and third sectors.

In some areas, the supply-side has already been opened up, such as within the education, health and prison services.

'Building on Progress' has a specific emphasis on expanding the role of the third sector organisations as publicly-funded service providers, in areas such as employment, probation, child care and many local government services.

In terms of employment, 'Building on Progress' draws heavily on the Freud Report, which recommends contracting out the unemployment service so that private and third sector organisations 'manage' the hardest to help clients, such as the most socially excluded and the long-term unemployed.

Although neither the Freud report nor 'Building on Progress' make much, if any, discussion of faith-based organisations, Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) Ministers have emphasised their desire for such organisations to take a key role in the future of public service provision.

Jim Murphy, the Minister for Employment and Welfare Reform, has stated:

'I want to see a greater role for faith based groups in UK welfare delivery. If we are to successfully tackle problems like poverty, longterm unemployment and benefit dependency then we need to ensure that people have access to the services and support that the welfare state offers. I believe that faith based groups offer an invaluable link into communities and individuals who may at first be reluctant or unsure of how to engage with the state and the programmes that are there to help

them. What I want to do now, is see how we can take this further'. (DWP press release 11 January 2007)

What are the potential problems (for the non-religious) in increased service provision by faith organisations?

The BHA believes that publicly-funded public services / welfare should be non-discriminatory – that the services are open to all on an equal basis and that the service-providers do not discriminate in terms of, for example, their recruitment practices. We are concerned that some faith-based organisations will not be prepared to provide public services on that basis.

Speaking at a DWP seminar on 19th February, Lt. Colonel Roland Sewell, Director of Employment Services for the Salvation Army asked:

- In practical terms: 'How do we ensure that an unemployed person, or a staff member working for us, experiences the difference between a faith-based service and one from private (secular) provider?'
- If there is no difference, what point is there in being involved?

In other words, it may be that faith organisations would not be prepared to provide services unless they were able to promote their religious ethos either through their service, or discriminate in their hiring practices on the basis of religion or belief.

Speaking at the same seminar, Jim Murphy MP said:

'I believe that there is not an entirely secular solution to achieve social cohesion in our communities. It can not be done without the partnership of all faith-based groups. A partnership based on mutual respect, tolerance and understanding; that draws on the values that unite us all – of whatever creed, colour or race. That looks for the positive influence of faith-based groups as forces for good within the community – helping people to overcome barriers to work and to make their contribution to the wider social good.

Welfare provision is just one such area – and it is why I believe faith groups can play a pivotal role in delivering success in welfare reform over the next decade'.

The emphasis on their not being an 'entirely secular solution' does imply that religious organisations would not be expected to provide the same service on the same basis as any other welfare provider.

However, there has been no recognition on the part of the Government that religious groups may deliberately or inadvertently discriminate in their delivery of services.

Non-religious third sector organisations may also be (implicitly) discriminated against in contesting for services. The DWP is establishing a centre of expertise to work specifically with faith-based groups, with a dedicated point of contact for these groups, giving them information on how to develop their role as welfare providers. The BHA agrees that, while third sector and private organisations should be given assistance, this gives an unfair advantage to religious organisations.

The Government is looking comparatively to other countries' welfare systems, such as the US and Australia. In January, Jim Murphy MP praised the Australian model of faith-based welfare

'In Australia for example the Salvation Army, Mission Australia and Centrecare all have a long history of involvement in welfare delivery, helping those people who traditionally have shied away from the state. I see no reason why the same can not happen here'.

However, the BHA are concerned that the Government has not addressed the problems of faith-based welfare in the US and Australia, particularly for the non-religious. For example, in these countries, there is widespread concern about accountability; discrimination in employment and service provision; 'public services' that demanded and were allowed the right to refuse to provide certain kinds of service for reasons of conscience and welfare services that incorporate proselytising, requirements that service users pray and so on. For the non-religious, recruitment with specific faith requirements or the requirement to profess a particular belief in order to receive a public service is clearly discriminatory and unfair.

Where religious organisations in the UK are already providing public services, faith schools for example, they are allowed to discriminate both in who they hire but who they deliver their service to on the grounds of religion or belief.

Specifically in terms of religious charities providing public services, the non-religious may be excluded implicitly, even if they are protected by legislation. The non-religious may not be happy to take employment in denominational environments and there is a glass-ceiling effect operating with more senior posts in this sector.