

30th January 2008

Rt Hon James Purnell MP
Secretary of State for Work and Pensions
Department for Work and Pensions
Caxton House
Tothill Street
London
SW1H 9DA

Congratulations on your new post. I am writing to introduce myself and the interests of the British Humanist Association (BHA) as they relate to your new appointment.

The BHA is the national charity representing the interests of the large and growing population of ethically concerned non-religious people living in the UK. It exists to support and represent people who seek to live good lives without religious or superstitious beliefs.

We have had particular and ongoing involvement with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), especially since the beginning of 2007 when it began a period of consultation on welfare reform. In February, we attended a DWP-run seminar in Manchester on the 'role of faith-based groups in welfare provision' and, in June, an event for faith-based and other third sector organisations about contracting for welfare-to-work services.

In May, we made a submission on the DWP's proposals for welfare reform and the recommendations made in the Freud report (enclosed).

In November we published a report, 'Quality and Equality: Human Rights, Public Services and Religious Organisations', which examines the Government's policy of contracting out public services to religious organisations (enclosed). We were delighted that, on the instruction of Rt Hon Peter Hain MP's office, Katie Miles from the DWP's Commissioning Strategy Team attended the launch of our report, and that we were able to convey to her some of our concerns regarding the DWP contracting welfare and employment services to religious organisations.

We have been in correspondence with Caroline Flint MP and her predecessor Jim Murphy MP regarding DWP contractual agreements, and we have just responded to the DWP's interim report on its commissioning strategy (enclosed), and have requested a meeting with the team responsible for the strategy.

Unfortunately, we have not yet been able to meet with a Minister to discuss our position. I hope you will agree that a meeting with us would be useful, in order to discuss the way that DWP procedures and policies for commissioning could help to mitigate the serious potential problems for both employees and service users in terms of equality, discrimination and human rights protection that we have identified in our report, in our submissions to the DWP, and in our correspondence with your Department.

We look forward to working with you in your new role.

Hanne Stinson
Chief Executive