

9 August 2007

Peter Hain MP
Secretary of State for Work and Pensions
Department for Work and Pensions
Caxton House
Tothill Street
London
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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 principal organisation representing the interests of the large and growing population of ethically concerned but 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 this year 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 (see attached).

We have a number of concerns specifically in regard to the contracting out of welfare and other public services to religious organisations; concerns which are set out in our May submission.

We have also had continuing correspondence with Jim Murphy, in which we have explained our serious concerns about contracting out statutory public services to religious organisations - concerns that are, we know, widely shared. These include the fact that religious organisations can and many do discriminate in their employment practices on grounds of religion or belief and/or on grounds of sexual orientation and the real risk of such organisations discriminating against and harassing service users on these or other grounds.

We were glad to see reports that you may be taking a fresh look at the proposals for most Jobcentre Plus services to be contracted out to private and third sector organisations. However, we continue to be concerned, despite assurances in Mr Murphy's letter of 19 June, about the actual contracts and subcontracts, and especially the latter, given that their detail is left up to the individual organisations and not the Government. Further, because it is left to the main contractor to monitor how subcontractors operate, and not the Department, this might well leave service users with no effective recourse in the event of suffering discrimination.

We were also perturbed to see in the contracts that the DWP uses that discrimination on grounds of religion is prohibited, rather than on grounds of religion and belief. The use of religion and belief would encompass non-religious beliefs including Humanism, atheism and agnosticism, as well as religious beliefs.

In view of our concerns, I would like to request a meeting with you as soon as possible?

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

Hanne Stinson
Chief Executive