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Scottish Strategic Framework on Religion and Belief Relations

Thank you for your letter of October 2008. Please accept my apologies for not responding sooner. I was delighted to be able to give evidence on 23 September and am happy for the Equal Opportunities Committee to be kept up to date with the work which is being taken forward in relation to religion and belief.

In response to the specific question from Hugh O'Donnell MSP in relation to denominational education, I can confirm that this matter falls within the portfolio of my colleague Maureen Watt MSP, Minister for Schools and Skills. I understand that under education and equality legislation, local authorities must ensure that candidates for all posts from all denominations and none are free to apply for posts in denominational schools and are treated equally throughout the recruitment and selection process run by the Education Authorities. The exact process of applying for approval and the way it is granted is a matter for the relevant local authority and the denominational body.

You also ask about the remit of the Scottish Working Group on Religion and Belief Relations, and the questions which are being used to support the consultations they are carrying out. I have attached two annexes to this letter which give a concise description of the vision, aim and remit of the Working Group (Annex A), and the questions which are being used by the Working Group as the basis for their consultations (Annex B).

The Working Group has carried out a number of consultations already and these have included groups as diverse as Scottish religious leaders, local authority equality officers and Shetland Pagans. The Working Group is currently developing further consultation meetings and intends to continue to meet with as wide a cross section of Scottish society as possible. In addition they are happy to take written contributions from anyone who has an interest in this area of work and will be making copies of their agendas and minutes available on-line so that interested parties can keep up-to-date with the work of this group.

The Working Group reports to me and I am expecting them to report in the middle of next year, however, I believe that this is an extremely important piece of work and have therefore asked them to report to me early in the new year so that I can assess the progress being made and identify areas where I can assist the development of this initiative.

I am more than happy for the Equal Opportunities Committee to be kept up-to-date with the progress being made by the Working Group and suggest that the Clerk of the Committee contacts David Bell directly general updates. David can be contacted by phone on 0131 244 1677 or by e-mail at david.bell@scotland.gsi.gov.uk . In addition I am looking to undertake some events in relation to this initiative and I will be happy to extend invitations to these events to members of the Committee. I will write to you again when I have agreed dates for events that I will participate in.

Yours sincerely

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**Scottish Working Group on Religion and Belief Relations:
Vision, Aim and Remit**

Vision

The Working Group believes that as people in Scotland we need to recognise and appreciate the key things which bind us together as a society:

- Our common humanity.
- Our shared belonging.
- Our different and multiple identities.

Aim

The aim of the strategic framework is to allow good relations between religious and belief groups to flourish and develop and so ensure that all the citizens of Scotland can thrive in an atmosphere of mutual trust, respect and understanding.

Remit

The remit of the Working Group is to develop a strategic framework which can be used to encourage constructive dialogue between religious and belief communities and support the Scottish Government in promoting positive activity between these communities.

Scottish Working Group on Religion and Belief Relations: Consultation Questions

The following consultation questions are used by the Scottish Working Group on Religion and Belief Relations to consult with stakeholders. These questions are being refined by the Working Group as more consultations are carried out, however, the basic thrust of the questions will always remain the same.

Strategic goals:

- Do you agree with the vision and aim set out by the Working Group?
- What do you think is missing from the vision/aim?
- Is there anything in the vision/aim which you think shouldn't be there?
- Do you think government has a role in promoting better relations between religious and non-religious belief communities?

Community cohesion:

- Why is it important for people of different religions and non-religious beliefs to be able to live harmoniously together?
- What do individual religious or non-religious belief communities gain from living together more harmoniously?
- Why is it in the interest of government to encourage better relations between religious and non-religious belief communities?
- What does society as a whole gain from greater harmony between all religious and non-religious belief communities?

Overcoming barriers:

- What are the barriers which prevent religious and non-religious belief communities living together harmoniously?
- What barriers prevent **religious communities** from engaging with non-religious belief communities?
- What barriers prevent **non-religious belief communities** from engaging with religious communities?
- Looking at the barriers you have identified, which do you feel are based on perception and assumption rather than first hand knowledge?

Building a better future:

- What are the practical steps which can be taken to overcome real and perceived barriers to bring religious and non-religious belief communities together?
- What can you do as an individual to overcome these barriers?
- What can your religious or non-religious belief community do to overcome these barriers?
- What can others (statutory service providers for example) do to overcome these barriers?