

Children and Young People Committee School Standards and Organisation (Wales) Bill SSO21 – Response from British Humanist Association

Response from British Humanist Association to Consultation on the School Standards and Organisation (Wales) Bill

22 June 2012

About the BHA

The British Humanist Association (BHA) is the national charity working on behalf of non-religious people who seek to live ethical and fulfilling lives on the basis of reason and humanity. We promote Humanism, support and represent the non-religious, and promote a secular state and equal treatment in law and policy of everyone, regardless of religion or belief. Founded in 1896, we have around 30,000 members and supporters, and over 70 local and special interest affiliates.

The BHA is an active member of many organisations working in education. We also provide materials and advice to parents, governors, students, teachers and academics. We have made detailed responses to all recent reviews of the school curriculum, and submit memoranda of evidence to parliamentary select committees on a range of education issues.

Our response

We would like to respond specifically to question 3.

3. What are your views on each of the main parts of the Bill—
Part 3 - School Organisation (sections 38-84) (see pages 17-21, 99-106 of the Explanatory Memorandum)

Clause 51: This clause sets out that category 1 objectors include *'if the school to which the proposals relate is, or is intended to be, a school which has a religious character, the appropriate religious body'*, while category 2 objectors include *'the appropriate religious body for any other school which has a religious character and which the proposer considers is likely to be affected by the proposals.'* We welcome the change here compared to what was proposed in the White Paper consultation. At that stage, diocesan bodies were category 1 objectors in all cases (i.e. their complaints needed referring to Welsh ministers).

Clause 53/schedule 3: This clause and schedule sets out local determination. The white paper response explains that *'The composition and operation of the proposed local determination panel (LDP) have received significant comment with some concern expressed in relation to the suggestion that these panels, in most instances, be restricted to local authority members. In the light of the views, the Welsh Government is considering extending the potential membership of these panels so that they might include a wider group of impartial persons.'*

The membership rules found in schedule 3(2) now state that *'If a panel is dealing with proposals relating to a school which has a religious character... the appointing authority must invite the appropriate religious body to nominate a representative to sit as a member of the panel.'*

We do not think there should be reserved spots on local determination panels for religious representatives. Through their appointment by the local authority, local determination panels should reflect the democratic will of the local electorate. This should in turn mean that the membership reflects the diversity of religious and non-religious beliefs of that electorate.

Giving reserved places to representatives of religious bodies gives them undue privilege to influence decisions about the local education system. Without this privilege, religious groups would still be

able to influence local educational decisions to the same degree as any other group, and so the concern described in the white paper seems unreasonable.

Furthermore, there seems to be an inherent contradiction between schedule 3(2) and schedule 3(3), which states that *'(1) A person may not be a member of a panel dealing with proposals if that person has, or at any time has had, a relevant connection with— ...the proposer... or the school to which the proposals relate. (2) A relevant connection is one which might reasonably be taken to raise doubts about the person's ability to act impartially in relation to the proposals.'* A person appointed by a religious body would surely be disqualified from the panel when any proposals related to that religious body come under consideration.

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