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Dear Andrew

27 FEB 2007

SEXUAL ORIENTATION REGULATIONS

Thank you for your letter on behalf of your constituents, regarding the impact of forthcoming regulations to outlaw discrimination in the provision of goods and services on grounds of sexual orientation. I apologise for the delay in responding. This new legislation raises difficult issues about how to reconcile potentially competing rights and freedoms and we have received a large volume of correspondence on this subject. It is exactly because of this complexity that we have taken the time to consult extensively on these measures.

The Sexual Orientation Regulations, together with the Religion and Belief provisions in Part 2 of the Equality Act, 2006, will provide protection for individuals from unfair treatment because of their sexual orientation and religion or belief, in relation to the provision of goods and services, premises, education and public functions. This covers, for example, shops and hotels, the delivery of health and education services and the rental and sale of premises. Our aim is to bring these provisions into force alongside each other, in April.

The principles behind these measures are straightforward. It can't be right in a decent, tolerant society that a shopkeeper can refuse to serve a customer or a doctor refuse to provide health care to a patient on the basis of their religion or sexual orientation. Nor is it acceptable for any young person to be bullied at school because of their faith or because they, or their parents, are gay or lesbian.

Both the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government made statements about how these regulations will affect faith based adoption agencies, on 29 January, setting out what I believe to be both a principled and practical way forward. I am enclosing a copy of these with this letter, for your information.

I also want to take this opportunity to clarify a number of myths circulating around the effect of the proposed regulations. For example, the regulations will not force ministers of religion to bless same-sex couples or officiate at civil partnerships. Teachers will not be prevented from talking about particular doctrinal beliefs in relation to family and sexuality or be forced to use certain texts. In reality, schools will continue to be obliged to develop their sex education in consultation with parents. There is nothing in the planned regulations which interfere with the right of religious groups to worship and preach as they see fit. Further information will be contained in the Government response to the 'Getting Equal' consultation, to be published shortly.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Meg Munn'. The signature is stylized with a large initial 'M' and a looped 'g'.

MEG MUNN