

## **Diversity in Local Government Consultation - Local Government and Housing Committee**

### **Submission from the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales**

#### **Introduction**

- The Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales (CBCEW) is the national permanent assembly of Catholic Bishops and Personal Ordinaries in the two member countries. The CBCEW represents the Catholic community across the 22 dioceses across England and Wales, with three of those dioceses sitting within Wales.
- The Catholic Church in Wales comprises the Diocese of Wrexham, the Diocese of Menevia and the Archdiocese of Cardiff. Their combined 181 parishes serve a Catholic population of around 200,000, making Catholicism one of the largest faiths in Wales.
- The Catholic Bishops' Conference commissions five agencies to undertake specialist work on behalf of the bishops. These are the Catholic Education Service (CES), the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD), the Caritas Social Action Network (CSAN), Missio and Stella Maris.
- The Catholic Church is a partner of the Welsh Government, providing schools as well as other services such as hospital, prison and port chaplaincy across Wales. Some local Catholic charities work alongside their local authorities or with the Welsh Government to provide services.
- Most members of the Catholic community have multiple protected characteristics connected to them in addition to their Catholic faith. There is significant cultural, ethnic, age, disability, sex and gender diversity within Catholic communities across Wales.
- The Catholic Bishops' Conference engaged with Colin Bloom during the production of his recent independent review into how government engages with faith: 'does Government 'do God'?'.<sup>1</sup>

#### **1) Protected Characteristics and Religious Literacy**

The Bloom Review highlights the importance of ensuring high levels of religious literacy within the public sector:

*'Any prejudice towards faith, people of faith and places of worship is just as unacceptable as any other form of prejudice based on protected characteristics, such as racism, sexism or homophobia. Faith literacy is therefore essential for everyone and especially those in public service. As religious identity becomes more diverse, but fewer people recognise*

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<sup>1</sup>[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1152684/The\\_Bloom\\_Review.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1152684/The_Bloom_Review.pdf)

*the role of religion in their own lives it becomes even more important to ensure that our public services are able to understand faith and people of faith.*<sup>2</sup>

'Religion and belief' is a protected characteristic and should be treated equally to all other protected characteristics listed within the Equality Act 2010. However, it is the sense from the Catholic community in Wales that other protected characteristics can sometimes overwhelmingly receive priority attention from local government. Also, within the protected characteristic of 'religion and belief', beliefs and worldviews have often been prioritised over religious groups in consultations and discussions. At the root of this is often a lack of religious literacy from those in public sector roles. This can cause unintended problems for communities of faith when training offered to public officials is focused on other protected characteristics but rarely on religion and belief.

Without employees of faith or at least those with an in-depth understanding of faith communities in Wales, it is not possible for local authorities across Wales to engage with religious communities productively. A lack of religious literacy within national and local government disproportionately affects religious populations.

An example of this has been the disparity across local authorities as to how much engagement they are willing to have with the Catholic Church especially in relation to Catholic schools and their buildings. Those local authorities that have not accepted the invitation to dialogue demonstrate an ignorance towards the traditions of Catholics and those of other faiths. This has subsequently led to schools in their areas receiving less support. Subsequently, pupils in Catholic schools in these areas – of all faiths and none – are disadvantaged. LAs with a keenness to engage hold much more positive working relationships with Catholic schools and this is reflected in the support offered.

## **2) The Catholic Church as a Formal Partner**

Pope Benedict XVI expressed the view that *"there are many areas in which the Church and the public authorities can work together for the good of citizens"*.<sup>3</sup>

As a formal partner with the Welsh Government, it is important to recognise the Catholic Church's relationship to national and local government as different to that of a lobby group. On occasion the engagement received by local authorities does not reflect this relationship. It is important for local authorities to consult with the Catholic Church, especially in relation to decisions that will affect Welsh Catholics, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the Catholic faith. We have recognised a growth in engagement from

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p.50.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cbcew.org.uk/pope-benedict-xvi-requiescat-in-pace/>

Welsh parliamentarians, Government Ministers, officials and some local authorities. We look forward to continuing to build this relationship moving forward.

### **3) Further Engagement with the Catholic Community**

We would welcome the opportunity to engage more with local authorities across Wales to increase literacy about the Catholic faith and the important social work of the local Catholic Church. There are mutual benefits of increased engagement between the Catholic community and local authorities. This is particularly the case with regard to the Nation of Sanctuary Plan. Catholic communities across Wales have been supporting refugees, including those who have fled to Wales from Ukraine during the current conflict. Many of these refugees are Catholic and so it is important that local authorities are aware of the important role that Catholic communities can play in building trust and signposting services.

Equally, protecting Welsh heritage is another value shared by both the Catholic Church and those in local government. We recognise our shared responsibility to ensure Welsh historic buildings, places of worship and traditions, especially those within a Catholic context, are preserved for future generations. It is important to foster dialogue between the Church and the public sector to ensure that there is an understanding of Catholic traditions and the reasoning behind our patrimony priorities.

We look forward to building upon our existing relationships with local authorities and taking part in new dialogue opportunities to ensure that religious literacy is improved within local government and that religion and belief as a protected characteristic receives the recognition it deserves.