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Welsh Govt plans to inspect churches

The Welsh Government is proposing to inspect church youth work to ensure children are learning "tolerance of different faiths and beliefs" and being protected from "undesirable teaching". These are deeply troubling plans.

The plans would apply to any institution in Wales which provides instruction to under 19-year-olds for more than 6 hours in any week.

This would catch various forms of church youth work, such as holiday Bible clubs, church weekends and summer camps,

as well as a vast number of different voluntary groups.

The consultation document states that those who work with young people must not "promote intolerance" when expressing their own beliefs.

Groups would have to register with their local authority.

We believe the proposals represent an unparalleled attack on religious freedom in Wales.

The consultation closes on 5 April. Please respond to:
SMED2@wales.gsi.gov.uk

Govt inspectors to question young people behind their parents' backs

Legal power will be given to state officials to inspect out-of-school education settings in Wales.

This could mean inspectors questioning children from Christian families about their beliefs during church youth work without their parents present, as has already happened in some schools in England.

The Welsh Government's consultation states that children must be "protected from harm", and that any "undesirable" teaching which is "incompatible with our values of mutual respect and tolerance, or which promotes



Christopher Fletcher

extremist views" will be prohibited.

Similar vague wording about tolerance and respect has seen Ofsted inspectors in England demonstrate hostility towards Christian and Jewish schools. Over the past 18 months they have been caught

out questioning school pupils about their views on same-sex marriage and transsexualism.

It is likely that teaching that salvation is found only in Jesus Christ would qualify as 'intolerance' in the minds of some inspectors.

The registration scheme will be administered by local authorities, some of which can be very opposed to Christian beliefs. A hostile council could ask the inspectorate to investigate evangelical churches in its area.

The Welsh Government has not said which body will conduct the inspections, but whoever is given the role would in effect become the state regulator of religious beliefs. The proposed sanctions include closing a group's premises and banning its leaders from working with children in future.

Ofsted head seeks power to inspect Sunday schools for radicalisation

In January 2016 the head of Ofsted, England's schools' regulator, explained why he wants the power to inspect out-of-school settings in England.

Sir Michael Wilshaw (pictured), said that the Westminster Government is concerned about the radicalisation of children in unregistered schools, and therefore Sunday schools, madrassas and after-school clubs should be registered.



The Department for Education in England says it does not intend to cover Sunday schools, but Sir Michael is correct that the plans in its consultation

paper will do so. This is because of 'time aggregation', e.g. when time at Sunday school forms part of 6 hours of church activity for an individual child.

When Sir Michael Wilshaw was asked on-air why he could not just focus on madrassas, he said there needed to be an "even-handed" approach.

Education ministers in England have said that one-off residential weeks like summer camps will not be affected. But where does this leave non-residential activities like holiday Bible clubs? Or a residential weekend away that happens two or three times in a year?

In contrast, the consultation in Wales openly talks about wanting to "capture" events which take place during the school holidays.

Plans breach longstanding legal freedoms

The proposals drive a coach and horses through longstanding legal freedoms.

It is easy to envisage an avalanche of court cases by affected Christian youth groups, seeking to defend their religious liberty. No doubt this would involve big legal bills for churches.

Inspectors questioning children in secret about their beliefs could easily breach fundamental human rights and harassment laws.



Huge new bureaucracy to check thousands of groups

A vast range of organisations would be forced to register under the proposed scheme.

Many different groups provide instruction during evenings, weekends or school holidays.

Political parties, atheist groups, sports clubs, wildlife summer schools, driving instructors and cookery classes would all have to register if they instruct or train someone under the age of 19 for 6 hours in any one week. Church



Even driving schools could be inspected.

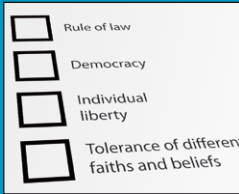
youth work would undoubtedly be covered and there are thousands of churches in Wales.

This is surely a massive distraction from targeting those

places where children are known to be at risk of harm.

Many voluntary groups would close in the face of burdensome regulation.

'Fundamental values' test



Inspectors will assess church teaching to see if it complies with "fundamental values".

But the Welsh Government's definition of these values is very vague and subjective: "democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and the mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs".

Too often state officials fail to distinguish between respect for people and respect for their beliefs.

The Bible clearly teaches that everyone is made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27) and so Christians respect and love all people, whatever their background or beliefs. But expecting people to show "mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs" is very different.

In fact, when a person rejects a particular belief they can respect the believer but do not respect the belief – an atheist does not respect belief in God and a capitalist does not respect Marxist beliefs.

True tolerance allows people freedom to disagree.

How your church would be required to register

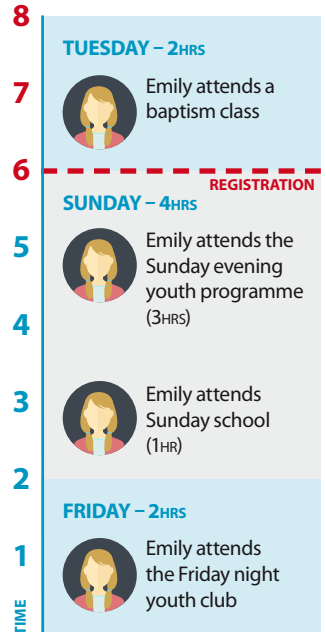
The proposals cover "anything which entails an individual child attending for 6 hours or more per week". This will often apply to church youth activities.

A child doesn't have to attend one long session once a week – a few shorter sessions could reach the 6-hour threshold under 'time aggregation'. For example if a teenage girl goes to her church's youth group for 2 hours on a Friday night, then to church on a Sunday morning for 1 hour and again in the evening for 3 hours.

Any additional teaching at special events or baptism/membership classes makes it still more likely that churches will be drawn into the scheme. Even church family services could end up being inspected.

It's not the total number of hours of all a church's youth activities which counts, but whether or not any one child experiences 6 hours of teaching in a week.

Christ Church



What's been happening in England?

The Westminster Government has held a consultation on regulating out-of-school education settings in England to see if they comply with a vague 'British values' test.

Under the plans, church youth work and many other groups would face inspection by Ofsted, the schools' regulator.

The format of the scheme for England is virtually identical to that the Welsh Government is now

proposing, though the English proposals are incorporated in the UK Government's counter-extremism strategy.

MPs at Westminster have strongly criticised

the scheme as being "disproportionate" and "authoritarian", with Fiona Bruce MP saying it poses "a real threat to freedom of speech, conscience and belief".



Which groups would be inspected?

The Welsh Government proposes to regulate any institution in Wales which provides more than 6 hours of teaching in a week to under 19-year-olds. A vast array of organisations will be covered, including certain church youth work. Possible scenarios could include:

Holiday Bible club

Ebenezer Church has run a holiday Bible club for a week in August for many years. However, a complaint is made about leaders teaching that only people who believe in Jesus go to heaven (from John 14:6) and the inspectorate seeks to close down the holiday Bible club for holding an extreme view.



Cookery class

A chef runs weekend cookery classes for those over 16. However, he refuses, on animal welfare grounds, a request from a Muslim enquirer to use only halal food. The enquirer asks the inspectorate to close down the course for failing to show tolerance of different faiths and beliefs.



Church youth group

A 15-year-old attends Christ Church's youth group on a Friday evening for 2 hours, on Sunday morning for 1 hour, and Sunday evening for 3 hours. His over-cautious schoolteacher knows that the pastor is a prominent opponent of same-sex marriage and complains that teenagers in the church are at risk of being indoctrinated with hateful opinions contrary to equality laws.



Wildlife charity

A local wildlife group runs a week's activities for children during the school holidays. One of the organisers gives a talk which promotes joining local protests against fracking. A parent who works in the engineering sector complains that the group is putting children in harm's way and an investigation is launched.



Humanist conference

An interested 17-year-old goes to a Saturday day conference run by her local Humanist Association. The event uses materials from the national 'Exploring Humanism' course which says: "Religious authority has been, and still is, used to justify oppression, discrimination and injustice". The mother of the 17-year-old later complains that the course is promoting intolerance.



RAF Air Cadet training

National RAF Air Cadet training weekends study the bombing campaign in Syria and Iraq. Co-ordinated anonymous complaints are made to the authorities that the Air Cadets' course is promoting hatred and violence against minority groups.



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