

PE1623/L

Scottish Catholic Education Service Letter of 7 December 2016

The Scottish Catholic Education Service is an agency of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Scotland. Its interests relate to all aspects of education, in particular the education of children and young people in Catholic schools. It works with parents, teachers, young people, local education authorities, local and national government officials and elected representatives. This response is made on behalf of the Catholic Church in Scotland at the request of the Scottish Parliament's Public Petitions Committee for comments on Petition PE1623, lodged by Mr. Spencer Fildes on behalf of the Scottish Secularist Society.

The Scottish Catholic Education Service (SCES) thanks the Public Petitions Committee for the opportunity to provide a written submission regarding petition PE1623. SCES is conscious that the public petitions committee have given a very similar petition, petition PE1498, their time and consideration as recently as 3 years ago, in December of 2013, and have [included the response made at this time](#) for reference.

It is clear that, despite the petitioner stating that this is not an attack on religion, this current petition is discriminatory in nature against religious bodies as it refers solely to unelected Church representatives. This petition is not, as they would suggest, an effort to redress an anomaly but an attempt to systematically remove any religious voice from the Scottish political process.

Local Authority Education Committees include many un-elected members, including professional bodies and directors of education. Each of these representatives, like the Church representatives, is nominated and then appointed by the Local Authority according to their own ratification processes. Each of the members of the committee is appointed for their particular expertise to committee matters.

Church representatives make a purposeful contribution to the education agenda in each of the local authority areas that they serve. They operate on a non-political basis and therefore make a valuable and objective contribution to the local community.

Catholic schools were "transferred" into state ownership in 1918 in the same Education Act which established local education authorities. With this Act came assurances that the specific characteristic of the Catholic school would be protected in legislation. One of the mechanisms for monitoring the State's ongoing commitment to those assurances is the presence of a Catholic Church representative on every Council where there are Catholic schools. While Catholic Church representatives play a wider role than merely safeguarding Catholic schools, offering valuable insight into the intended and unintended consequences of

proposed changes to education policy, school estate and other matters, their role in doing so is seen by the Church as vital to the welfare of Catholic schools.

Under recent legislation, when a local authority proposes any changes to schools there must be a consultation process including parents, staff, pupils and the wider community. In the case of any proposed changes impacting on Catholic denominational schools this includes a formal consultation with the Catholic Church. The Church Representative on the education committee has an invaluable role in articulating the official response of the Catholic Church on these matters.

Roman Catholic Denominational schools, which educate approximately 20% of Scotland's school pupils, offer an ethos and values which emerge from the religious traditions of the Catholic Church and they work closely with local parish communities. Scottish parents continue to choose Catholic schools for their children because of this unique ethos. The educational approach within Catholic schools is supported by a legislative framework which governs both the appointment of teaching staff and the content of religious and moral education programmes. It is therefore right, just and proportionate to have a representative voice on the education committee to express the views of the Catholic community.

Thus, the Church is opposed to any attempt to dispense with the role of Church representatives on Education Committees and we call on the Public Petitions Committee to dismiss this petition.