

Government Equalities Office,
Home Office
3rd Floor Fry Building,
2 Marsham Street,
London
SW1P 4DF

4Children
City Reach
5 Greenwich View Place
London E14 9NN

Tel: 020 7512 2112
Fax: 020 7512 2010
info@4Children.org.uk
www.4Children.org.uk

equalcivilmarriage@geo.gsi.gov.uk

11 April 2012

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am responding on behalf of 4Children to the “Equal civil marriage: a consultation” document, published in March this year.

4Children is the national charity all about children and families. We have spearheaded a joined-up, integrated approach to children’s services and work with a wide range of partners around the country to ensure children and families have access to the services and support they need in their communities. We run Sure Start Children’s Centres as well as family and youth services across Britain.

We develop, influence and shape national policy on all aspects of the lives of children, young people and families. As the Government’s strategic partner for early years and childcare we have a crucial role in co-producing policy with the Department of Education and representing the sector’s views and experiences. Our national campaigns, like Give Me Strength, change policy and practice and put the needs of children and families on the political and policy agenda.

It is our view that the government is taking a welcome step forward in extending the right to marry to same-sex couples. We know that family is an important part, often the most important part, of the lives of a millions of people across the country, and we applaud the government’s efforts to expand legal and societal recognition to all of Britain’s modern, diverse, loving families.

We know that family life is made more difficult by discrimination, intolerance and prejudice – but we also know that public acceptance of LGBT rights has grown exponentially over the past fifteen years, often driven by the equality legislation of the previous administration, and committed ground level action by lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgender people, and their allies. Consequently, we whole-heartedly welcome this consultation as the latest in a broad array of positive changes proposed by government.

While we are in favour of the broad principles of the consultation – the extension of marriage rights to same-sex unions, the ability for transgender people to legally change their gender and remain married, and the ability for civilly partnered couples to convert their relationships into marriages, there remain a number of issues upon which the government’s stance appears contradictory, or unnecessarily tentative.

For example, as the government acknowledged in 2011, there are many LGBT people of faith who would want to undertake religious partnership ceremonies. As such, it seems a peculiar position for the government to take that LGBT people with faith must choose between a religious civil partnership and a civil marriage. It is important that families in the UK have the right to constitute and define themselves in whichever way they see fit – and denying LGBT people of faith access to a full religious marriage denies them that right. To resolve this issue, the government should ensure that LGBT people have the right to marry in any religious premises with the agreement of the premises' owners.

In further regard to families rights to constitute themselves and their legal arrangements as they see fit, it seems oddly contradictory to offer same-sex couples the right to be either married, or civilly partnered, but not to extend that right to opposite-sex couples. As we well know, 'separate but equal' relationships are rarely separate and never equal – so we call on the government to reject the current divided system, in favour of one with equality at its core. If some same-sex couples wish to undertake civil partnerships, it seems entirely likely that some opposite-sex couples will too – the government should take this opportunity to extend to them that right.

As outlined above, we believe the government's recognition of same-sex marriages and families is an important step forward – as such, we are concerned that the government is still considering the impact of recognising same-sex marriages and unions undertaken in other countries. It is our view that the government should recognise all same-sex partnerships, wherever they happen in the world, to avoid alienating those who have married or formed a union elsewhere, prior to coming to the UK. There should be no barrier to family life erected due to the geographical location of where families chose to make their commitments to each other.

On a similar note, we believe that it is the government's responsibility to work with all other countries around the world to maximise the number who recognise same-sex marriages and unions. Significant progress can be made on social issues on the back of other diplomatic engagements, and we believe that the UK should take every possible step to make that progress. This applies as much to Scotland and Northern Ireland as it does to countries further afield.

Finally, we are pleased to note that none of the doom and gloom pronouncements about the 'end of marriage' that were made during the passage of the Civil Partnerships Act have come to pass. Indeed, early indications from the UK statistics authority suggest that civil partnerships are currently less likely to dissolve than marriages – highlighting the high number of committed same-sex partnerships that prospered even in the days when they were could not be formally recognised in the UK.

We expect to see a similar effect when statistical evidence on the impact of same sex parents becomes more accessible. The existing research – set out helpfully in the American Psychological Associations 2005 paper, "Lesbian and Gay Parenting" suggests that children of lesbian and gay parents suffer no negative consequences or having same-sex parents, beyond the impact of homophobia on their lives. As such, we are clear that the divisive and unhelpful

language employed by enemies of gay and lesbian families and equality should have no place in the current planned move to give LGBT relationships the recognition they deserve. In the days and weeks to come, the government must take the strongest possible line in condemning those who use inflammatory or discriminatory language in the context of this debate, or any other, to reaffirm its commitment to equality, and its embrace of the United Kingdom's lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender families.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to this consultation, please do let us know if you require any further information regarding 4Children's stance on these issues and we will be happy to provide it.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mark Bennett". The signature is written in a cursive style with a prominent loop at the end of the name.

Mark Bennett,
Director of Public Affairs, 4Children