

1 March 2022

Committee for the Executive Office
Room 375a
Parliament Buildings
Ballymiscaw
Stormont
BT4 3XX

**PCI Response to Committee for the Executive Office Call for Evidence on the
Fair Employment (School Teachers) Bill**

Dear Committee Members

The Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI) has been invited to respond to the Committee for the Executive Office call for evidence on the Fair Employment (School Teachers) Bill which has been proposed by Mr Chris Lyttle MLA. As Convener of the State Education Committee of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI) I have been asked to respond. In so doing I note that Karen Jardine, PCI's Public Affairs Officer has already appeared before the Committee via video-link on behalf of the Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC) on this matter, along with TRC Secretary Dr Peter Hamill.

In return for transferring their statutory rights into state control the transferor churches (Church of Ireland, Presbyterian Church in Ireland, Methodist Church in Ireland) were accorded statutory rights of representation. Schedule 4 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 details the provisions for transferor representation on Boards of Governors of controlled schools – primary and post-primary.

In addition to statutory rights of representation the transferor churches secured legislative assurance in respect of the provision of Religious Education and daily collective worship in controlled schools as detailed in Part III Section 21 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986.

The statutory rights accorded to the transferor churches and the consequent responsibilities placed upon the state combine to ensure the continued existence of a Christian ethos within controlled schools.

PCI supports equality of opportunity in teacher recruitment and is opposed to unfair discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief. We recognise that, for historic reasons, the FETO teacher exemption has been regarded as important in attempting to maintain a balance in the religious composition of the teaching workforce. The FETO teacher exemption

also allows for open conversations to take place within the framework of school ethos during recruitment.

It is important to note that all school governors, including those representing PCI and the other transferor churches receive guidance and training from the Education Authority on the recruitment and selection of teachers to ensure adherence to all appropriate legislation and good practice.

Controlled schools have an open, inclusive non-denominational Christian ethos and this cannot be sustained without the support of staff who work hard to main that distinctive culture. It is not unreasonable to expect employees of controlled schools to uphold that ethos. Any discussion on the removal of the teacher exemption would need to clarify how school ethos can be protected for any school in any sector.

The removal of the FETO teacher exemption would also place a statutory duty to allow for the monitoring and reporting on the religious/community background of all teachers employed in schools throughout Northern Ireland. It would be useful to hear more about the intended purpose of such a statutory duty; which body would be responsible for collecting this information; and whether or not such information would be published, particularly in the case of smaller schools where teachers may be readily identifiable.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'A. Brown', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Dr Andy Brown
Convener, State Education Committee