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Mr Balvinder Kaur
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(by email)

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Rer Balvinder

Thank you for your letter of 8 February addressed to the Rt. Hon. Maria Miller MP about equal marriage. I am replying as the Minister responsible for this policy area. I am sorry you have had to wait so long for a reply.

Marriage is an important institution in this country. The Government believes that we should not prevent people getting married unless there are very good reasons – and loving someone of the same sex is not one of them. By extending its availability, we will strengthen marriage and ensure that it remains an essential building block of modern society.

Last year's public consultation on equal marriage allowed us to hear from interested organisations and individuals on how the Government might best deliver on its commitment to allow same-sex couples to marry, and we published our response to the consultation on 11 December setting out our intention to legislate to extend marriage to same-sex couples in England and Wales. In doing so, we will protect and promote religious freedom by enabling those religious organisations which want to solemnise same-sex marriages to do so, while ensuring that no religious organisation or minister can be compelled to marry same-sex couples. The Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill, to give effect to this commitment, was introduced into Parliament on 24 January and had its Second Reading in the House of Commons on 5 February.

You write stating that same sex couples can already make commitments/vows to each other by entering into a civil partnership. Civil partnerships and marriage are two entirely separate legal regimes with different pieces of legislation covering each of them. Marriage, as is clear from its history, has a particular significance and importance to our society and to many people, whatever their sexual orientation. That is why we believe it should be open to same-sex couples.



Your organisation also has concerns about the impact of same sex marriage on traditional Sikh marriage ceremonies.

The Bill ensures no religious organisation can be forced to conduct marriages for same sex couples. In particular:

- I. It makes clear that no religious organisation can be compelled to opt in to marry same-sex couples and no individual minister can be compelled to marry same-sex couples. [clause 2(1) and (2)]. For example, a same sex couple could not successfully take a Gurdwara to court for refusing to permit same-sex marriage ceremonies on their premises.
- II. It provides an 'opt-in' system so that same-sex marriages can only occur on religious premises, or under religious rites, where the governing religious body has expressly consented; and there is no requirement to give consent.
- III. It amends the Equality Act 2010 so that it is not unlawful discrimination for a religious organisation or individual minister to refuse to marry a same-sex couple. [clause 2(5)] For example, even if the Unitarian Church as a whole was to opt-in, this would protect a Unitarian minister who refused to marry same-sex couples because of his beliefs.

We recognise the position of your organisation, but the Government is committed to equality within the institution of marriage.

I enclose an equal marriage short guide which provides information about the proposed legislation, and what it will mean in practice. I hope you find this helpful.



HELEN GRANT

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