

Bishops: adoption agencies should apply for grants

LONDON – The bishops of England and Wales have encouraged Catholic adoption agencies to apply jointly for government grants to help them find ways of staying open despite new gay rights legislation.

The government has said it is willing to make 20,000 pounds (US\$41,000) available to each of the country's approximately 12 Catholic adoption agencies, which together find new homes for about 250 children each year.

If the application is successful, the money would probably be available in January.

The Catholic adoption agencies have until the end of next year to either comply with the law forcing them to place children with same-sex couples or face prosecution, but the bishops have warned the government that their agencies are more likely to close down rather than contravene the teachings of the Catholic Church.

In a statement Nov. 16, the bishops said they welcomed the government's offer of "limited financial assistance to agencies to pay for further work to be done to explore whether, within the law, there might yet be ways found which will enable the adoption work to carry on and for our agencies to continue to be Catholic agencies."

The bishops said they wanted the Catholic adoption agencies to "continue as Catholic agencies, and we reaffirm our commitment to do everything we can to seek a workable solution to this very difficult problem."

The bishops asked adoption agency directors and trustees to use the grants to "explore all feasible ways in which the moral and doctrinal requirements of the church and the practical requirements of the law can be met."

Ultimately, they said, the trustees of each agency, in conjunction with each local bishop, must decide the future of their agency's adoption work.

Britain's sexual orientation regulations came into force in April under the 2006 Equality Act. They ban discrimination against homosexuals in the provision of goods and services. Then-Prime Minister Tony Blair gave church agencies until late 2008 to adapt to the law.

Catholic agencies in at least three dioceses are looking at the possibility of becoming secular charities so that they can carry on their adoption work.

But one agency - the Leeds-based Catholic Care - voted in July to pull out of adoption work altogether, ending a service that placed about 20 children with new families each year.

Earlier in November, media reported that the British government is struggling to find new homes for many of the 4,000 children in its care.

Official figures have revealed a 13 percent decrease in the number of children adopted, in spite of a target to increase adoptions by 50 percent.