

Women and Equalities Committee

Oral evidence: Work of the Minister for Women and Equalities, HC 386

Wednesday 24 June 2026

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Members present: Rosie Duffield; Dame Nia Griffith; Christine Jardine; Kim Leadbeater; Kevin McKenna; Rebecca Paul; Nadia Whittome.

In the absence of the Chair, Christine Jardine took the Chair.

Questions 1-62

Witnesses

I: Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP, Minister for Women and Equalities; Marcus Bell, Director, Office for Equality and Opportunity; Catherine Little, Chief Operating Officer for the Civil Service and Permanent Secretary to the Cabinet Office.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP, Marcus Bell and Catherine Little.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome to the Women and Equalities Committee. Today, we are holding an oral evidence session on the work of the Minister for Women and Equalities. We will hear from the right honourable Bridget Phillipson MP, the Minister for Women and Equalities; Marcus Bell OBE, the director of the Office for Equality and Opportunity; and Catherine Little CB, the chief operating officer for the civil service and permanent secretary to the Cabinet Office. Thank you all for coming, and welcome. I believe you would like to make an opening statement.

Bridget Phillipson: Thank you, Chair. It is good to see you all today. I should say at the start that I have a bit of a sore throat and a cold, and on occasion I might need some water, so please bear with me.

Thank you for the invitation to come before the Committee. As you will know, breaking down barriers to opportunity and promoting equality is a central part of this Government's agenda, so that everyone can achieve their ambition in work and in life, no matter their background or where they are from. I am proud of the significant progress that we have made so far.

We have delivered the Employment Rights Act 2025, with measures to grow the economy and to support workers and particularly working women and mothers. We have introduced measures that will protect against workplace sexual harassment, encourage employers to address their gender pay gap, and support women during the menopause. We have also supported working families by increasing access to free childcare, tackling child poverty through ending the two-child limit and a massive expansion of free school meals.

We have made it clear, as a Government, that we will not stand for a hierarchy of hate, and through the Crime and Policing Act 2026 we have equalised laws for aggravated offences for hate crime based on disability, sexual orientation, sex and gender identity. As you will know, Chair, in the King's Speech the Government recommitted to introducing a draft Bill to ban conversion practices, and I want to assure the Committee that the Bill will be published as soon as possible—very soon, I hope—and to reconfirm that the Bill will be fully trans-inclusive. I am proud that our Government are taking action to make it clear that these practices have no place in modern Britain, and that we are working to ban them once and for all.

We have made significant progress on our mission to halve violence against women and girls within a decade, increasing funding for victim support, perpetrator monitoring and support for the police. I am sure that Members will be aware of and interested in the cross-Government work in this area. At the Department for Education, we are leading the work around prevention, particularly within our schools, and that is why we



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have committed £60 million to pilot new interventions to support schools in teaching around VAWG, healthy relationships and harmful behaviours. We are also in the process of finalising an all-school offer on misogyny, with resources ranging from key stage 2 to key stage 5 ready for September. There is much more that I could talk about in that space as well.

We are continuing to deliver on our manifesto commitment to ensuring that disabled people's views are heard, and that is at the heart of what we do. Only this week, building on the work of the Government's BSL advisory board, we have announced new grant funding to assess specialist BSL interpreters supporting the deafblind community, which should lead to an eightfold increase in supply.

We have also worked closely through our race equality engagement group, chaired by Baroness Lawrence. It provides us with vital insight into race disparities in the criminal justice system, in the healthcare system—including around neonatal and maternal healthcare, which I know is a real focus of attention today, and rightly so—and in the education system. It has been a really effective means of delivering a proper dialogue on what we are doing across Government and bringing in experts to shape our work. We have also set out how we intend to legislate for ethnicity and disability pay gap reporting.

I am aware that there is a lot of interest in the EHRC's draft code of practice, which was laid before the House on 21 May, where it will sit until 9 July. I am sure the Committee will have specific questions that you will wish to ask today, but I thought it might be helpful briefly to set out my position, as it might help to shape that discussion.

As you know, the code of practice was drafted by the EHRC, which is independent, and the session with Dr Mary-Ann Stephenson provided insight into the challenges that it faced in drafting the guidance in a way that takes account of everyone's rights under the Equality Act 2010. We have been clear as a Government that we will protect single-sex spaces based on biological sex where they are needed, such as in women's refuges, and last year's Supreme Court ruling made it clear that "sex" in the Equality Act means biological sex. We have also been clear that everyone, including trans people, should have the right to access the services and support that they need in a way that is respectful, protects dignity and privacy, and ensures that trans people have adequate provision too.

We hope that the guidance provides further clarity with worked examples on how service providers can demonstrate that they are complying with their obligations under the Equality Act in practice. Of course, this equally applies to Government Departments as they are service providers and deliver public functions. We have a programme of activity to review and, where necessary, make changes to policies to ensure consistency with the law. This has been under way since the Supreme Court ruling and is



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continuing. As you said, Chair, I am joined today by the Cabinet Office permanent secretary. She is leading that work and can say more on this, should the Committee require it.

I want to end by saying that the Equality Act 2010 is one of the most significant achievements in modern British history. It is the quiet guardian in millions of people's daily lives. This Government will uphold and protect it, not weaken it. I am grateful to the EHRC for its work on the draft code to ensure that duty-bearers and service users have up-to-date guidance on the Equality Act. I look forward to our discussion and questions this afternoon.

Q2 Kim Leadbeater: Thank you for joining us this afternoon; I thank our other guests as well. What is your response to those who want Parliament to reject the EHRC's draft code of practice?

Bridget Phillipson: Under the Equality Act 2006, I have laid the code as set out in the law. It is probably useful to say what the purpose of the draft code is and what its relationship is with the Equality Act. I understand the concerns that have been raised by many, and I am aware of feelings across the House, including those connected to the EDM, but it is probably helpful if I set out why I believe that the draft code brought forward by the EHRC allows duty-bearers to uphold their responsibilities.

It is the Equality Act 2010 that is the law, and duty-bearers must comply with the law. The draft code is there to provide practical guidance and examples so that, right across all the protected characteristics—I appreciate that much of the discussion focuses on the questions of sex and gender—people's rights are upheld.

The draft code cannot cover every scenario, nor should it seek to do so. Instead, it explains the legal framework and provides illustrative examples so that providers can make sensible decisions that allow them to reflect their context. Of course, not having a draft code would lead duty-bearers to comply with the law without updated guidance on how to do so. People may hold different views on recent clarifications of the law and the wider equality law, but organisations need this guidance on a range of different areas across all the protected characteristics. The approach that I have always taken on this is that we should—as we are doing today in this Committee—approach this topic with respect and sensitivity, understanding the different opinions that are held. It is my responsibility as the Minister responsible to ensure that, right across society, everyone is able to live their life free from discrimination, harassment, and prejudice, and we make sure that the services and support are there for everyone who needs them.

Q3 Kim Leadbeater: I am really interested in, but also concerned about, the real-world impact of the code and what it will mean for people. When the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, Michael O'Flaherty, wrote to the Committee about this situation and compliance with the ECHR, he said that it was "Crucial for all stakeholders to receive



clear guidance on how inclusion of trans people can be achieved across all areas, and how exclusion can be minimised to situations in which this would be strictly necessary and proportionate in line with well-established human rights principles.” Do you think that the guidance delivers that when it comes to people’s human rights?

Bridget Phillipson: I was satisfied in laying the code and I believe it was right to lay the code before Parliament, because this gives service providers the clarity that they need, in terms of how they can comply with the law. To be absolutely clear with the Committee, trans people are still protected by the Equality Act. The draft code is very clear that trans people should not be left without services and support. It also sets out where service providers are able to deliver services on a single-sex or separate-sex basis. I have always believed that it is possible to make sure that, for example, women who have experienced male violence and trauma in their life have access to appropriate support after all the harm they have been through. I used to run a women’s refuge, so I know how important it is that women have access to that kind of support. I do not believe that that runs in conflict with making sure that trans people also receive the support that they need to live their life free from prejudice.

Q4 **Kim Leadbeater:** Who will be responsible for monitoring the real-world impacts of the code on people with different protected characteristics? How will that be done, and what will it look like?

Bridget Phillipson: It is for the EHRC to monitor that, and it has committed to doing so. I believe that that is the right approach. Of course, it will want to ensure that the code continues to provide the clarity that is necessary to service providers and others so that they can uphold their responsibilities in line with the law. I know that you heard from the chair of the EHRC, and I am sure that the EHRC will be happy to provide the Committee with any further information that you require as to the approach that it intends to take around monitoring.

Q5 **Kim Leadbeater:** If that is how the monitoring is to be done, will the Government and/or the EHRC publish evaluations of the impacts on different groups and the costs to duty-bearers? If so, who will conduct those evaluations, and when? What will that look like?

Bridget Phillipson: Both the Government and the EHRC completed equality impact assessments, as we are required to do, and I am sure that the EHRC would be happy to discuss further with the Committee how it intends to continue to monitor, as the code comes into force, when we have gone through the 40-day period. That is the right way forward in this.

Q6 **Kim Leadbeater:** So that duty would sit with the EHRC rather than the Government?

Bridget Phillipson: It is the independent equalities regulator. It brings forward the code that I lay in Parliament, but should it wish to update the code at a later date, it is of course able to do so. We are discussing a



draft code that is a new code that has been revised. The previous code had been in place for many, many years and—setting aside the questions of sex and gender—required significant updating, because case law evolves and it is right that the code that the EHRC brings forward fully reflects the law as it stands.

Q7 Kim Leadbeater: Can you describe the differences between the EHRC's April 2026 equality impact assessment of the draft code and the additional assessments published on 21 May by the Government alongside the draft code?

Bridget Phillipson: Of course, the EHRC has its own work to do and we have our own work to do around understanding the impact of policy. I wanted to be clear with the assessments that were carried out that we were taking full account of all the impact of the draft code on all groups, including women, and I wanted to make sure that we fully understood the impacts across all protected characteristics as part of that process.

Q8 Kim Leadbeater: The chair of the EHRC told us that the Government's equality impact assessment included no evidence for some identified impacts, such as safeguarding risks for trans women. What is your response to that?

Bridget Phillipson: I would have to look carefully at what the chair has said. I do not have that in front of me. I can certainly write to the Committee in follow-up if that is helpful. I would need to check exactly what it was that she said.

Kim Leadbeater: That would be appreciated, thank you.

Q9 Rebecca Paul: Thank you, Secretary of State, for your time. I just wanted to thank you for laying down the code; it is very much appreciated. I know it is an incredibly emotive and difficult topic. One of the issues that we have had—obviously this was before your time—was that the original code has misinterpreted the law, shall we say, and given some confusing advice to people. That has caused no end of problems for lots of different groups, so obviously it is important for that to be updated. When we heard from the chair of the EHRC and the chief executive a couple of weeks ago, they said they had asked the Government to withdraw the existing code because of that confusion, and the Government decided not to. I wonder if you could elaborate on why that was? What was the thought process?

Bridget Phillipson: I understand the point that the EHRC makes in this regard, but were we to do so without the new code coming into force, a vacuum would be left. While I appreciate the need to update the code and I understand the argument the EHRC makes, it would leave quite a big gap, because it would not cover other areas of equality law. Of course, because the draft code has now been laid and we are in the 40-day period, if Parliament does not choose to disapprove the draft code, the next steps will commence in taking forward a statutory instrument to revoke the 2011 code, with a new statutory instrument to bring the new



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code into force. Again, I understand the point it is making, but this process is now fully under way.

- Q10 **Kevin McKenna:** This is quite a gnarly and intense subject, and it is something that the public care a great deal about. There were some technical changes to the code during its drafting and before it was laid before Parliament. What prompted the Government to suggest to the EHRC that it should revise the original draft in relation to membership associations where the membership criteria included separate as well as overlapping characteristics?

Bridget Phillipson: The EHRC has set out the approach that it has taken, and I just want to emphasise that it is for the EHRC as the independent regulator to draft the code to bring it forward. I then follow the process that is set out in the law around responding to that.

The EHRC board considered further changes in a number of different areas following feedback from others, including Government, and brought forward a number of clarifications in this. It has set that out in response to its consultation and engagement, as it wanted to ensure that the code was robust and provided the clarity that duty-bearers would need. Where it comes to the question of associations, it set out the position so that everyone is able to understand how to uphold their responsibilities under the law. There are, of course, differences between services and associations; the draft code that the EHRC has brought forward makes very clear that distinction, but also provides very helpful guidance to us all as to how we can make sure that we are complying with the law.

- Q11 **Kevin McKenna:** If that was from the EHRC's point of view, what was your intention in asking for that revision? Why were you pushing for a revision to this?

Bridget Phillipson: There were a number of areas that were discussed. The EHRC took account of areas where we wished to make sure that the draft code was as clear as it could be, and it ran a consultation following the publication of the draft code to ensure that it had fully taken into account the views that were shared in that point.

On the point around associations, the clarity that the EHRC has given is that an association that wants to include trans people can do so. If it is an association for women only, the draft code indicates that it should be on the basis of biological sex. If an association wanted to be trans-inclusive, the draft code section on associations based on more than one protected characteristic means that it can do so by choosing its membership to be both sex and gender reassignment.

Of course, it is for individual associations to set out their policies in line with the law, but I hope that the draft code gives associations the starting point for that. Should they have any concerns or doubts, they can then seek further legal advice in that area.

- Q12 **Kevin McKenna:** In opening this guidance up for being able to consider



protected characteristics separately as well as overlapping, it has been suggested that this is a legally untested proposition. From your point of view—the Government’s point of view—in slightly fresh waters, why did they push for a legally untested position in the guidance?

Bridget Phillipson: Everything in this space is legally tested on a pretty regular basis. Of course, I am not sure that that is going to change any time soon. That is the beauty of living in a democratic society with the rule of law, where people are able to challenge decisions and hold Government to account to make sure that rights are upheld. More seriously, the EHRC wanted to be confident that the draft code it was bringing forward provided everyone with what they needed. While I understand that the position we have arrived at will not satisfy everyone in what it offers, I believe it is the right place to be, which is why I laid the code on behalf of the Government.

- Q13 **Kevin McKenna:** After the Supreme Court judgment, some organisations went ahead proactively and quite rapidly to changing their own rules; some organisations that stand out are the Women’s Institute, Girlguiding and so on. They changed them in advance, but now the guidance says something slightly different. Where do you think that leaves them now with this new guidance? What would you say to those organisations that may want to change back to where they were previously?

Bridget Phillipson: You will appreciate that I cannot comment on individual organisations and their decision-making process. They will have different ways in which they are constituted—rules of association and so forth. It is really for those associations to seek further legal advice if they are uncertain. The draft code indicates that membership of an association that is, for example, women-only should be on the basis of biological sex as defined in the Equality Act. But if an association wishes to be trans-inclusive in line with what has been set out in the draft code that has been laid, the code makes clear how they can seek to do that. It is about the clarity that comes with understanding the basis on which an association is formed. As I say, I am sure individual organisations and associations will wish to reflect on the draft code and take further legal advice if there is any uncertainty.

- Q14 **Kevin McKenna:** Obviously, the code is guidance, but people are probably still going to have to go to actual lawyers to hash this out. Has the guidance provided the level of clarity that organisations really need in what is a very contested space?

Bridget Phillipson: As this is a very contested space, there will continue to be further debate, challenge, scrutiny and legal challenge, which would be the case whatever the draft code said. While I understand that point, the draft code gives as much clarity as is possible in this area. Can I say to the Committee, “This will not be subject to further discussion?” No. People will wish to continue to discuss this, and that is our right within a free and open society.



- Q15 Kevin McKenna:** Another area that was being explored in this code was the position of special category data, particularly where that relates to sex. Fundamentally, until now sex has not been seen as a special category. I get called “Mr” and many people here get called “Miss” and “Mrs”. That was the argument from the EHRC, and that is fine, but now, under some circumstances, sex identification in a document can be a special category and the EHRC has had to issue some further clarification. Had the Government identified this as a possible gap beforehand? If not, why was that missed?

Bridget Phillipson: The EHRC wished to set out its position on this through the statement you referred to, published on 10 June, to clarify the context of what was covered by the draft code. The draft code states that it is legitimate to collect data about sex from service users for purposes such as equality monitoring or service planning. The draft code also explains that there may be legitimate reasons for service providers—those exercising public functions—and associations to ask individuals to confirm their sex to ensure that there is lawful single or separate-sex provision of services, but it stresses that this must be done sensitively and with respect for people’s privacy. The code therefore advises that that needs to be done in a way that is appropriate, with conversations handled with enormous care and sensitivity, but someone’s sex is not in itself a special category of personal data.

However, if information gathered also reveals specific details about an individual’s health status or medical care, or the organisation uses the information to make specific inferences about health, such as someone’s gender dysphoria diagnosis or healthcare that they are receiving, that would involve special category data. That is what the EHRC has sought to clarify, because that may arise in some specific circumstances addressed in the code.

- Q16 Kevin McKenna:** In terms of the status and standing of the code, is the Government satisfied that the clarification that the EHRC issued is sufficient and legally tight, or do we need a new, fully revised code laid, with a new text?

Bridget Phillipson: I am satisfied that what the EHRC has set out merely seeks to clarify the position that it had already made clear. But in order to put beyond doubt what was intended through the draft code, it provided that further clarification, which is welcome and hopefully has assuaged people’s concerns in this area.

- Q17 Kim Leadbeater:** I welcome your honesty about the reality that the code is not going to eliminate legal challenges. Are you worried about the impact of those legal challenges and the concept of lawfare on organisations such as Girlguiding, the Women’s Institute, parkrun and others? We are talking about charities and voluntary groups that have expressed some serious concerns about the impact that this will have on them, because it is going to be deeply problematic financially and will have an impact on many of their members who are currently in a really



difficult situation and struggling to know what to do.

Bridget Phillipson: I understand that for smaller organisations these can be difficult areas where they are seeking to do the right thing, both in terms of the draft code and of the previous code. They may not have access to big budgets and legal teams. That is why it is essential that the draft code provides organisations, including smaller organisations, with what they need in order to make decisions.

I cannot comment on specific individual cases, but while I would advise organisations that are in any doubt to seek legal advice, the draft code provides for what is needed across the protected characteristics. It is a statement of the obvious that this is an issue that is not going to go away, regardless of the intent that I have in laying out the code.

I would like us to be able to move forward on that basis—not just because of a dry legal argument or a draft code, but because there are two important aspects. First, I do not want trans people to be constantly on the front pages of newspapers. I do not want trans people to be constantly pilloried on social media for being who they are and wanting to live the life that they want to lead. Secondly, I want women to be able to access the services, and service providers to be able to deliver the services that they believe are necessary on a single-sex basis for women who have experienced male violence.

I do not think those two things ought to be in conflict. My belief has always been that we can deliver appropriate single-sex services, whether that is Rape Crisis, women's refuges or good access to sporting activity for girls, without that meaning that we have to engage in what has become the deeply unpleasant targeting of people who simply wish to live their life without causing any harm to anyone else.

Q18 **Chair:** Looking at the EHRC's resources, the budget is the same today in cash terms as it was in 2013. Do you think that it has sufficient resources to fulfil what is a wide-ranging equality and human rights duty, particularly following the For Women Scotland judgment?

Bridget Phillipson: I will answer briefly and then pass to Marcus, if I may. We all exist in a world of budgetary pressures—that is the sad reality—but we have been working closely with the EHRC in this regard. Marcus, you might be able to share a bit more about that.

Marcus Bell: You are quite right. From a factual point of view, the EHRC's budget has been effectively flat in cash terms for quite a number of years. It is £17.6 million in the current financial year, but it has been in that sort of area for three, four or five years. As the Secretary of State implies, this reflects wider financial constraints in Government that continue. We are conscious of a number of pressures on the EHRC and regularly discuss the pressures on it, not least because of new legislation and new requirements, and we are certainly open to further conversations with them about that. It is—and I am conscious that my



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permanent secretary is in the room—the accounting office of the EHRC’s budget, subject of course to proper financial constraints.

Catherine Little: I do not think the Cabinet Office permanent secretary has ever come to this Committee, so it is a great pleasure to be here, because I have a number of different hats. As Marcus said, I am the principal accounting officer, I am responsible for the policy and I am also responsible for making sure that we implement the policy across Government, so it is good to be able to answer your questions directly.

Just to expand on what Marcus has said, quite a lot of what we are dealing with here is unpredictable. It is not possible to forecast, and I have a responsibility to make sure that I maximise constrained budgets across everything that we are trying to do for the country. Unfortunately, sometimes that means that we cannot provide more generous resources to important parts of the work that we are doing. It has to be an ongoing dialogue, and I am very grateful to Marcus for sponsoring the EHRC and the chief executive for updating me on the pressures that it has. I am always very open to helping and supporting wherever we can to manage things we did not predict. The biggest challenge has been some significant legal costs, well above expectations. I am always open to that, and where possible the wider Cabinet Office budget will always be there to provide additional resource when we can.

Bridget Phillipson: In addition to the budget, I know that in the past the Committee has taken a keen interest in making sure that the EHRC is in the strongest possible position to deliver on the important responsibilities that it is tasked with. Since I last came before the Committee, in addition to the new chair, who I know has been before you, we have six new commissioners, two short-term direct appointments and an interim Scotland commissioner, and I am working with the new Government in Wales to agree a new interim Wales commissioner. I believe that that is important in ensuring that the EHRC is able to work as effectively as it can to ensure that all our rights are upheld and that we take into account all the important areas that the public would expect both the EHRC and Government to be considering when it comes to protected characteristics.

Q19 **Chair:** Just to be clear, would it be fair to say that we can expect to see the EHRC provided with more resources to reflect its increasing responsibilities where possible?

Catherine Little: I do not want to rephrase what you have said, but my position as accounting officer is that we set our budgets based on what we know, what we can afford and what we can justify to Parliament in terms of how we maximise the efficiency of our budget. That is an important part of what we do. We have set the budget for this year; it is broadly flat. That is against a backdrop, as the Secretary of State alluded to, of significant cuts in some parts of what we do, so protecting that budget has been an important part of our considerations. If there are things that are unforeseen and need funding, there is a very open



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dialogue and of course it is up to us to make sure that we can cover that budget. Quite often, these things are unforeseen and unpredictable which is exactly why we have regular dialogue about how we cover those unforeseen costs. Wherever possible, we will cover them. We would never leave the EHRC with costs that it cannot afford.

Q20 Dame Nia Griffith: Secretary of State, as you will be well aware, the Gender Recognition Act 2004 was originally brought in to enable the UK to comply with the European convention on human rights. Do you think it is still fit for this purpose?

Bridget Phillipson: This code, and the Equality Act alongside it, make it clear that trans people are protected from discrimination and harassment. Those with a gender recognition certificate are still recognised in their acquired gender and in other circumstances. Of course, a GRC still allows people to legally change their sex for a range of reasons that matter to them. You will appreciate that across Government we are working on a number of fronts to make sure that trans people have the support they need, including through the draft Conversion Practices Bill and around tackling hate crime on healthcare, which has been an important focus of our work. I am absolutely committed to making sure that trans people are able to live their lives free from discrimination. Of course, many trans people may not have been through the process of acquiring a gender recognition certificate; the Equality Act does not require them to do so in order to enjoy protections under the Equality Act.

Q21 Dame Nia Griffith: Labour came in with a very ambitious commitment in our manifesto of trying to simplify this, make it more dignified and so forth. What plans do you have to do anything at all in respect of the GRC now as a Department?

Bridget Phillipson: We have sought to prioritise other areas, given the limitations that can exist. You will have seen in the King's Speech that we committed to bringing forward a draft Conversion Practices Bill. There will be further news on that very soon, I hope, because I appreciate that the progress on that point has been slow and I understand the concern that has generated.

Alongside that, through reform of the Crime and Policing Act, we have made sure that hate crime is taken more seriously. We are also making sure that trans people have access to appropriate healthcare. Those are important steps forward. Clearly, there is still work to do on bringing forward the draft Conversion Practices Bill and making sure that it has the full pre-legislative scrutiny that we have committed to and therefore comes into law. This will mean that once and for all we can ban the harmful abuses that have damaged far too many people over many years.

Q22 Dame Nia Griffith: When it was first enacted, having a gender recognition certificate was like a one-off. You did that, and then you were in your acquired gender and that is how you lived your life. You may have



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moved, had new jobs, new friends and a new environment, and nobody ever needed to know that you had done this via a GRC. With the situation that we are in following the Supreme Court judgment, what are the benefits of having a GRC now?

Bridget Phillipson: You are right that the For Women Scotland ruling made it clear that “sex”, for the purposes of the Equality Act, meant biological sex. That then has implications in terms of gender recognition certificates because biological sex is the determining factor when it comes to the understanding of sex within the Equality Act. Of course, through the Equality Act, trans people continue to be protected from harassment and discrimination; the Act is very clear on that point.

On the wider question around Gender Recognition Act reform in the future, of course this is an area that we will keep under review, along with many others. But it is not currently a priority for Government, given the limitations that will often exist around parliamentary time and the other priorities that we have around the draft Conversion Practices Bill, which will be fully trans-inclusive.

Q23 **Dame Nia Griffith:** Previously, you were able to change your sex on documentation. How does that now sit?

Bridget Phillipson: The ruling made it clear that “sex”, for the purposes of the Equality Act, was biological sex and therefore, when it comes to gender recognition certificates, sex is not changed for the purposes of the Act. But I would expect—and the draft code makes this clear—that trans people need access to services that are appropriate for them, and no one should be left without access to services because of who they are. The draft code also sets out how service providers and duty-bearers can make sure that that is upheld and honoured.

Q24 **Dame Nia Griffith:** How do we ensure that trans people do not feel that they continually have to disclose who they are? There seem to be so many reasons, through the code of practice and so forth, why they would have to. Surely that must be very degrading and not what they would want.

Bridget Phillipson: We would not for one moment want anyone to feel that way and lack the services, support and provision that is required. The draft code sets out practical ways in which that can be delivered. Often, this discussion will come down to questions of services and provision within businesses and public buildings. The draft code sets out a number of practical ways in which that can be delivered to protect people from having to disclose who they are. Government and the civil service are making sure that is done across Government, so that while women have access to the services that they need, everyone is able to access provision that does not put them at risk of harm and require them to set out private information about themselves that would not be necessary for that purpose.



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There will sometimes be occasions when there are questions to be asked and it will be necessary to have a sensitive conversation about it, for example in accessing a women's refuge. The draft code is clear as to how that should be done in a way that respects people's privacy and respects their dignity. That is obviously something that we would all want to ensure.

Marcus Bell: As the Secretary of State says, the Supreme Court ruling is relevant to the interpretation of the Equality Act. There are a number of other areas that affect people with GRCs where that is not the case. For example, regarding marriage, death certificates, and other areas, the acquired gender under the GRC remains relevant and unaffected by the ruling.

Q25 **Dame Nia Griffith:** Perhaps I could ask a slightly different question. The Equality Act currently has some quite outdated language. What, if anything, are the Government planning to do about that?

Bridget Phillipson: Terminology has changed over time. It is also true with the code that is in force at the moment that we intend to revoke, and the draft code that I have laid. That applies not just in what we have been discussing, predominantly around sex and gender, but in disability rights groups, where there are preferences to how we frame discussions and the language we use. I am not sure if it would be necessary to revisit a piece of primary legislation in order to achieve that purpose, but I recognise that the Equality Act came into force in 2010 and we are a long way away from that point. The draft code has to reflect the Equality Act, but in certain circumstances it allows for an updating of language in a number of important respects, particularly in understanding the impact of discrimination on groups with protected characteristics.

Q26 **Kim Leadbeater:** I really welcome your comments about the conversion practices legislation, and I probably speak for many colleagues in saying that we would love to see that law come through as soon as possible. Thank you also for your comments about the work around strengthening hate crimes; I just want to put on record the brilliant work that our colleague on the Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire and Bedworth, did in this area in strengthening hate crime laws for disabled and LGBT people.

This might be a question for one of our colleagues other than yourself, but could you give your understanding of how other liberal democracies manage trans people's inclusion in single and separate-sex services? Since the Supreme Court judgment last year, ILGA-Europe says that we are now one of only six European countries without a functioning legal gender recognition framework. How does that sit with you, and what are your thoughts on where that leaves us internationally?

Bridget Phillipson: Marcus, I am not sure if that is a conversation you have had with international counterparts.



Marcus Bell: We have a functioning gender recognition framework. It has of course been moderated by the Supreme Court judgment, but we have such a framework and we continue to engage with a wide variety of countries that are facing similar situations to try to understand what they are doing and learn from them. We are certainly engaged on that and are aware of issues being raised internationally about this.

Kim Leadbeater: Presumably that is an ongoing piece of work.

Marcus Bell: Yes.

Q27 **Rebecca Paul:** I have a quick question. Dame Nia raises really important points on the GRA. One group that was obviously quite impacted by the Supreme Court ruling was long-term medically transitioned trans women. Obviously, they went through the process and acquired a GRC in good faith and expected certain things to happen; the Supreme Court changed that. Going forward, it is really important that there is clarity about the benefits of a GRC in terms of what it gives you and what it does not, just so that people are really clear. Are you planning any work around very clearly defining the outcome of acquiring a GRC? I do not want to see anyone in a situation where they are not securing what they thought they would.

Bridget Phillipson: I understand that point, and I know that many Members of Parliament have raised cases in which they have met constituents who have been living in their acquired gender for many years, going about their life and not causing any harm to anyone. I also understand the worry and the anxiety that has been caused, while recognising that the Government have been clear about their position around the Supreme Court ruling. We will of course continue to keep the Gender Recognition Act 2004 under review and the case that some will make for reform.

For many people it still matters to acquire a gender recognition certificate, even though the For Women Scotland Supreme Court ruling set out that “sex”, for the purposes of the Equality Act 2010, means biological sex. I want to stress that many trans people choose not to go through the process and will continue to enjoy protections under the Equality Act without a gender recognition certificate. A very small number of people within our country have chosen to acquire a gender recognition certificate; there are many other trans people who have chosen not to. It is obviously a matter of personal choice and preference, but my personal view—alongside the Government’s position—is that whether or not you have been through that process, whoever you are, you should be able to live your life without facing hostility or prejudice because of those kinds of choices.

The draft code seeks to navigate how we ensure that we provide the right services and support for women, but also ensure we have the right services and support for trans people. There are practical ways in which that can be delivered; there can be more difficult and tricky areas in



some of this, but there are many areas where this is quite practical and straightforward. This discussion often takes us to how businesses might make sure that there is, for example, adequate toilet provision. The draft code is very clear as to how that can be done in a way that is proportionate and does not involve burden or financial costs for businesses, many of which are already in a position where what they offer would be accessible to an individual regardless of sex or gender.

Q28 Kevin McKenna: Building on all that and particularly on what Nia and Rebecca said, there is obviously a difference between the gay same-sex experience in the LGBT community and the trans experience. However, one of the areas where there is a strong degree of commonality is the way we all have to keep coming out in different situations with different workplaces and people.

There are two parts to that. It is extremely psychologically over-tiring. It does not just become boring; it actually becomes quite corrosive and wearing, and there is psychological harm that comes from that. I can tell you that for certain: I have experienced it, and other Members in this Committee room probably have too. There is also a degree of vulnerability. When you have to keep coming out in certain situations, choosing whether to hold your partner's hand and so on, you can put yourself in a potentially violent situation or at risk of other forms of harm. At the moment, as a gay man I can try to butch up a bit and try to blag it like I always have if I feel really under threat or come out against it in a particular way, but I can choose not to and shy away.

Trans people have now been put in a situation where they feel obliged to, because it is not just the immediate physical threat; there is also a potential legal threat or a threat to their employers and other service providers. This is not just about services; this is often a very personal one-on-one situation. What will the Government do? Now that we are in this new world with the Supreme Court, all these problems have been uncovered. It seems that there is a much bigger piece of work that the Government need to do to make these two bits of legislation fit together. Is there a further stage that you are thinking of to try to pull this all back together because it is not cohering? That is the big weakness in the EHRC code, and ultimately it is going to be for the Government and Parliament to decide on that. What are your thoughts?

Bridget Phillipson: First, I want to recognise your personal experiences and what you said at the start; I understand that that can be incredibly traumatic. People should be able to live their life as they wish and as who they are. We have come a long way as a country and have made tremendous progress on a number of different fronts, but that progress is always contested and remains fragile. In recent times, we have seen significant pushback against many of the things that have developed in my lifetime and that I have taken for granted, whether it is discussions around celebrating Pride Month or around rights at work for women. Progress is never guaranteed, and we have to be ever vigilant on that.



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I understand the wider point about the narrative and the discussion that then arises out of the draft code and the Supreme Court ruling. Of course there are different views across the community on this topic, as there are on many other topics, but I understand the real concern and worry that people have about the impact on trans people. Under no circumstances would I want trans people to be on the receiving end of hostility, or targeted because of who they are. The code provides a way for services and organisations to make sure that what they are providing does not require people to out themselves in order to access what they need to go about their life. At a very practical level, we do not police services, toilets or changing rooms in this country. The approach we have always taken as a country is one of pragmatism, by which I mean that we treat one another with respect. The draft code allows for organisations to make sure there is a range of options so that trans people do not end up in a situation where they are required to disclose information that they would not wish to.

I appreciate that none of this discussion is easy, and over recent times it has become something that has not benefited from many of the ways in which it has been aired. People hold genuine and strong views in a range of areas across the discussion around sex and gender. They should be able to express those views, and we should do so in a way that understands the sensitivities, but that can sometimes be a robust conversation. It is in the best traditions of our country around freedom of speech, but the way some of it has played out has not advanced the interests of anyone. I hope that, through the publication of the draft code and the Supreme Court ruling, we can seek to move forward as a country in upholding the rights of all within our society, while making sure that those who are required to provide services do so in a way that respects the dignity and privacy of everyone.

Q29 **Chair:** You referred to the Macdonald review on hate crime. Could you give us an indication as to when the Government will publish that review and their response?

Bridget Phillipson: I need to come back to the Committee on that point. I am afraid I cannot give you a date, but I will happily provide an update afterwards if that is helpful, Chair.

Chair: Thank you.

Q30 **Kevin McKenna:** You have a very large brief in terms of equalities. I would like to move on to some other areas, specifically around disability. Not being able to access British Sign Language courses and training for deaf people and their families can have a devastating impact on those people and everyone around them. This may also be with your Education Secretary hat on: what are you going to do to improve access to learning BSL?

Bridget Phillipson: I agree with you that everyone in our country should be able to access information. British Sign Language is incredibly



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important. In the work of the Department for Education, we have been encouraging exam boards and awarding organisations to consider bringing forward a GCSE. It is not my responsibility or my role to compel them; it is not within my power to do that. There are a number of calls in other areas for GCSEs to be introduced, but we encourage exam boards to consider the case for that. We want to make sure that our services are as inclusive as possible for the deaf community and BSL users.

I understand that there is also a wider point around support for families and younger children, which is an area where we are doing work connected to wider SEND reforms. The British Sign Language Act 2022 supports the wider recognition and understanding of BSL and requires us as a Government to set out what Departments are doing in that regard.

Q31 Kevin McKenna: There is some variation across the UK. Northern Ireland has legislated the right for access to sign language courses for deaf children and their families. Will this Government do the same for England, or maybe recommend it more widely across the UK?

Bridget Phillipson: I want to make sure that deaf children receive consistently high-quality support. I have met with parents who have made exactly that request because of the variability and the importance to them of having the support they need, particularly when their children are young. There is wider work under way in terms of SEND reform, early years settings and schools to make sure that the relevant support is in place. As I say, I have met with many parents who have raised this, and we continue to look at what more we can do to improve access for parents where it would be beneficial in their role as parents.

Q32 Kevin McKenna: This Government have done quite important things around making sure that where there are structural inequalities, particularly ones related to income, wealth and disability, resources are moved to support and overcome those inequalities. Have you made any assessment of the financial cost of providing free BSL training to families of deaf people and deaf people themselves?

Bridget Phillipson: I am not aware that we have, but I will happily take that point away and look at it. I know that the Committee has taken a keen interest in all areas around BSL and there are a number of related points in terms of the approach that we consider as a Government. I will take away that specific point, will seek to understand if there has been any further work done in this area and will happily come back to the Committee on that.

Q33 Kevin McKenna: When you are having negotiations with Treasury, wherever that goes in the future, it may help the growth agenda. RAND Europe published a report last year that suggested that every £1 invested in this could return £14 of economic benefit over the course of a person's life. Have you encountered that kind of benefit, particularly as it relates to helping people with disabilities into the workplace and being economically productive?



Bridget Phillipson: We know that there are significant barriers both to disabled people accessing employment and to their being able to access the kind of employment they would wish to do, not feeling pushed into particular kinds of work. We also understand the impact to wider society that some of those costs can bring. I will take your plea to Treasury colleagues; I am always engaging with Treasury colleagues on additional funding required to do even more important work around all aspects of this. You will also know that we will bring forward ethnicity and disability pay gap reporting legislation as soon as we can. We have further work under way around areas like equal pay.

I want to make sure that, whatever people's background, they are able to succeed both through childhood into adulthood and the world of work, and that we break down some of the barriers that we know are structural, as you say, that hold people back from participating in the labour market and in society more widely. Even today, we know that many wheelchair users often find it impossible to travel on public transport. It is an incredible barrier to accessing employment if you cannot guarantee that you will be able to get to work every day. A lot of progress has been made, but there is still much more that we need to do to ensure that people's background—whether that is on the basis of disability, race or socioeconomic background—does not determine what they can achieve in life. That has been a real focus of the work in Government over the last two years.

Q34 **Dame Nia Griffith:** I want to talk about the socioeconomic part of the legislation. I really welcome the Government's commitment to commence the socioeconomic duty. It is immensely important but it is incredibly challenging to make it into a tool for real change. Could you tell us when you hope to commence this, what you hope to achieve by it, and by when?

Bridget Phillipson: We are committed to commencing it and we will update both the Committee and Parliament when we have more precise detail as to the timeline around it. We are engaging with future duty-bearers to best understand how to support them to implement that socioeconomic duty in a way that is effective and efficient.

It is important that we consider the impact of decisions on people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. I believe it is a gap and it ought to be better considered, because we know that socioeconomic background is associated with poor outcomes across a range of different areas, whether that is in health, life expectancy or the contribution they make to the labour market. We also see it in young people's outcomes through the school system. Sadly, where you are at five years old is a bigger determinant of where you will go on to be by 16 than anything else. There is a lot that can influence things along the way in that period, but we know that we are not setting up children to succeed if they are already much further behind their peers.



This is all designed to make sure that public bodies consider the impact of policy and how they can reduce those inequalities. I will provide more information around the timelines on taking that forward when I am in a position to do so, but the commitment is absolutely there.

Q35 Dame Nia Griffith: Obviously, you have gathered evidence from Wales, Scotland and some councils in England where they have already commenced it. What have you learned from that?

Bridget Phillipson: The EHRC conducted two evaluations around the implementation of the socioeconomic duty in Scotland and Wales in 2021 and 2025. It found widespread understanding but differences in terms of implementation by duty-bearers. It pointed to the need for good guidance, training and knowledge sharing. We are seeking to learn from the experience in Scotland and Wales and from the evidence that the EHRC has brought forward, alongside commissioning our own research to understand how we can use that duty to improve people's lives. If there is good evidence in Scotland and Wales, we will draw upon that in order to make sure that what we deliver in England is as effective as it can be.

Q36 Dame Nia Griffith: Can you give us some examples of tangible benefits that you hope we might see as a result of the commencement of the duty?

Bridget Phillipson: There are a number of areas where this could work effectively. We know that socioeconomic background leads to worse outcomes in education, employment and health. There has been a lot of discussion recently about public bodies and Government, thinking about the impact of policy on different groups and whether that is helpful or necessary. This goes beyond socioeconomic duty in the wider sense, but were we not considering the disproportionate impact on health, the delivery of service would be more limited.

To take a different example, we know that black women are far more likely to die in childbirth than any other group. It is therefore right that we understand that and take account of it in the delivery of services. Today, as we see Donna Ockenden bring forward further work in this area, it underlines the importance of making sure that we have safe and effective maternal healthcare for all women. If we do not deliver better outcomes for black women in childbirth and maternity services, we will not deliver what we need to do.

When it comes to socioeconomic duty in education, we see very stark differences in what happens later in life for children and young people. That is something I have certainly considered and taken very seriously through the publication of the schools White Paper and the SEND consultation, which we published in February this year. We know that white working-class children in the English system—boys specifically, but girls are not very far behind—are among the lowest attainers. It is therefore right that we take into account how we deliver a better education system that caters for the needs of all children and young



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people. It is hard to look at the data around the outcomes for white working-class children and not think there is something profound that needs to change in order to deliver better outcomes.

Where this becomes slightly more complicated—this was a discussion we had through the race equality engagement group—is that outcomes in education are one thing, but labour market outcomes can be different as well. For example, we know that some minority groups will secure very good outcomes through the education system, but then there is a sharp disparity when it comes to employment opportunities, the pay gaps that open up, access to employment, and access to advancement and promotion. We have to think about all this in a way that is led by the evidence around the gaps that we see and how we target it. There are a number of clear ways in which the socioeconomic duty, if properly implemented by public bodies, could make a significant difference on health, employment, and education.

Q37 Rebecca Paul: It is obviously really important work. Could you set out for us the work that you are doing with the Social Mobility Commission on this?

Bridget Phillipson: The Social Mobility Commission has done a number of key pieces of work in understanding particularly some of the regional impacts. Coastal communities is an area that we have previously discussed but it is not something I have recently discussed with the Social Mobility Commission or its chair.

Q38 Rebecca Paul: Have you met with it in the last two years?

Bridget Phillipson: I have. I cannot recall off the top of my head when that was, but I have met with the chair of the Social Mobility Commission. I would also emphasise that while it does important work, the chair has done incredible work. I met with him previously in his role leading further education in Blackpool as well as in his role chairing the Social Mobility Commission.

The approach that we have taken as a Government is that we also need to embed this approach across the work of every Government Department in formalising the Office for Equality and Opportunity to make sure it delivers across Government. That is part of the approach we have been taking. It is an academic discussion, but an important one, as to how we consider the question of social mobility as opposed to structural disadvantage and how that relates to the socioeconomic duty. There is a risk that social mobility can be understood as meaning that just a lucky few get lifted out and then nothing changes for the vast majority. I appreciate that that is not what people mean when they say "social mobility", but that is what we have to guard against in making sure that the change that we deliver is lasting and structural, rather than piecemeal.

Rebecca Paul: Equality of opportunity is so important, is it not?



Q39 Rosie Duffield: My apologies for being late, Chair; I was in the Chamber for the Ockenden report statement just now.

Secretary of State, you mentioned black maternal health in the light of the Ockenden review. The Health and Social Care Committee recently published a report on black maternal health. Is your Department working in conjunction with the Department of Health and Social Care specifically on this and the broader issue of maternal health and deaths, in the light of the fact that it affects protected characteristics?

Bridget Phillipson: Yes, we are. It is right that the Department of Health and Social Care leads this work. Obviously I was here at this Committee, so I did not hear the statement in the House, but I am aware of what the families there and women across the country have experienced through appalling experiences and avoidable tragedies in maternal healthcare where women and babies lost their lives in a way that should never have happened. This is a big priority for the Health Secretary: to work with families to deliver justice, to get this right and, critically, to deliver improvements in healthcare. There are lots of changes that we can make as a Government through funding, training of midwives and better understanding of racism in the delivery of healthcare services.

The critical point, for me, is that we do not listen to women, trust their experiences or take their concerns seriously. What is consistent in all the failings that we see across maternal healthcare and neonatal care is that we do not listen to women, and that is the fundamental point that needs to change. Frankly, women are often shown a lack of respect when they are at their most vulnerable. I am sure money, training and resourcing will help, but it is a culture change that we need most of all.

Q40 Dame Nia Griffith: Can we move on to race and disability, and in particular pay reporting and equal pay? The Government announced the intention to legislate in respect of mandatory race and disability pay gap reporting nearly two years ago. When will we see a draft Bill?

Bridget Phillipson: As you will know, in our first King's Speech in July 2024 we committed to publishing the draft Equality (Race and Disability) Bill. The Bill was to deliver on two important manifesto commitments around mandatory ethnicity and disability pay gap reporting for employers with 250 or more employees to make the right to equal pay effective for ethnic minorities and disabled people.

Due to the complexity of the equal pay policy, it was decided that these measures should undergo further consultation, and the draft Bill was therefore not published in the first Session. Instead, the Government response to the mandatory ethnicity and disability pay gap reporting consultation was published in March this year, including indicative clauses of the new primary legislation. I am committed to legislating on this as soon as parliamentary time allows. We are doing further work on unequal



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pay, because it is a big priority to make sure we have a society where everyone is valued and treated with dignity in the workplace.

- Q41 **Dame Nia Griffith:** Is there any danger of unintended consequences, such as employers not employing people with disabilities because they think it will increase their pay gap?

Bridget Phillipson: The intention was for this to be for larger employers with more than 250 employees. Of course, many organisations already choose to provide more data than is required under law, and I would encourage employers to be as open as possible in publishing information. Certainly, the experience I have heard from many businesses is that although they are not required to do this, when they go away and do it, it tells them some very instructive things about what they are or are not doing and what they might seek to do in order to make the experience of their workforce better.

This is also true when it comes to the gender and disability pay gap. In seeking to draw upon a much wider range of people across the labour market, businesses have said that it has led to improvements in their effectiveness as organisations, and there are many powerful advocates for all that.

- Q42 **Dame Nia Griffith:** How are you going to measure the effectiveness of the pay gap reporting and action plans that you hope would develop from that?

Bridget Phillipson: We would need to set out further plans in this area in order to understand that better, but we want to work with businesses to make sure that this is done in a way that allows them to make the right decisions and allows greater transparency around the experiences of people on the basis of ethnicity and disability.

- Q43 **Dame Nia Griffith:** Is it the intention that that should be in the draft Bill?

Bridget Phillipson: We are doing further work on equal pay because I want us to be in the strongest possible position around enforcement of existing law, as well as looking to where we can go further. I am not able to comment on what might be in future legislation, but I would obviously want to keep all options under review.

- Q44 **Dame Nia Griffith:** What sort of comparatives might you have for race comparisons on equal pay, for example?

Bridget Phillipson: There are a number of ways in which we could do that. We have obviously consulted on a number of areas and we want to consider the best available options prior to bringing forward any legislation.

- Q45 **Chair:** Could we move on to look at non-consensual intimate image abuse? When the previous Minister for safeguarding and violence against women and girls resigned, she cited the Government's failure to require



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tech companies to prevent children from taking explicit photographs of themselves. Why do you think the Government is delaying legislating in this area?

Bridget Phillipson: It is because legislation would take longer than tech companies just getting on with it. We want them to get on with it, and if they do not get on with it, then we will legislate. We will have quicker action if they do what is right and necessary rather than waiting for legislation, but we will legislate if they do not do it. There is nothing more important than making sure that children and young people, for example, are not exposed to these kinds of images. We have seen some appalling cases where young people have suffered serious harm, abuse or intimidation because of this. We believe this can be stopped ahead of legislation. As the Prime Minister set out, that is very much our expectation, but if action does not follow, legislation will.

Q46 **Chair:** We had an inquiry that covered intimate image abuse, and one thing that came out was that there is not really a great deal of co-operation with the tech companies. As soon as they do something to try to clamp down on it, it is circumvented and there is another development. To what extent has relying on the good will of social media companies worked so far?

Bridget Phillipson: I am grateful for the Committee's work in this area. This is an area across the House where there is considerable support for further action. We obviously have the Online Safety Act 2023; through the Act, there are now greater powers available to Ofcom to enforce and uphold the law. We will continue to review whether more is needed to go further. We are taking action around social media and young people, but as you rightly observe, the technology moves fast and we have to make sure that the framework we have in place allows us to respond and adapt as technology changes. That is obviously a consideration in what has been looked at through action around social media and young people. It is true in this area, where we need to make sure that action is taken rapidly.

Of course, it is not enough just to expect the good will of people to do this. We all hope that people will behave in a way that is responsible. Sadly, that is not the world in which we live, and we therefore need a clear and strong legal framework. The Online Safety Act gives us much of that, but it is clear that further action may well be required, given the fast-changing nature of technology.

Q47 **Chair:** During the inquiry, we met victims of intimate image abuse who suffer ongoing harm because the content is now hosted on websites based overseas. Internet service providers have said that they could block access to this content if required to do so by law, but the Government have not taken that step. Will you be pushing Cabinet colleagues to give victims of non-consensual intimate image abuse the protection they need through legislation?



Bridget Phillipson: I will take your views on this area away and discuss it with colleagues across Government to get the full update that you want. Of course, we should be taking action to make sure that people are protected. I will seek to understand the position of the DSIT Secretary as to what more is needed in this area, and will provide the Committee with an update.

Q48 **Kevin McKenna:** Leading on from that, but also linked to the work we have been doing to look at the manosphere and its impact on gender relationships and relationships between sexes, the Government have announced a social media ban for under-16s. Behind that—particularly because this impacts on age equality, as well as anything else—is the main aim of the social media ban to reduce children’s time accessing and using screens, or is it to reduce exposure to harmful content online?

Bridget Phillipson: I would say both. There is the question of time, even if we are not talking about social media. That is why the Department for Education has published guidance around screen time use for the under-fives, which is not about accessing social media but is just about the amount of time that many very young children spend unsupervised using devices and the problems that can arise out of that. There is quite clear and practical guidance to parents about how to manage that and how to navigate this world. Technology is here to stay—it is not going away—but parents want to know how best to support their children through this. There are enormous benefits that can come from the use of technology in education and in many other ways, if done in a way that is led by the evidence and well understood.

On the point about exposure to harm, we are increasingly allowing our children to access material online at a point at which we are more worried about not allowing them to do things that probably in our lifetimes we would have regarded as normal and happy childhood experiences. There is a juxtaposition between what our children can see online in their own bedrooms, things that we would not want them to see or access, and the harm that that can cause. In parallel, my responsibility as Education Secretary is to make sure that with colleagues across Government we are providing opportunities for young people so that they can take part in sport, music and other activities. It is not enough to take things away; we have to make sure that there are good opportunities out there for young people. We are doing a lot of work with colleagues across DCMS to make sure that we have a really strong offer around sport, physical activity and youth work, which has slipped away in recent years. It is both the amount of time and what young people are accessing, but it is also the kind of childhood that we want for children growing up today.

Q49 **Kevin McKenna:** All those are very important, but in going down this route of a flat ban, are we conceding that we just cannot force the social media companies to make these platforms safe? Is it innate to social media, or is it something that social media companies are choosing to do? What is your take on that?



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Bridget Phillipson: I do not think we are saying that there should not be further action, because there must be action. It is not just about what young people will see; it is about some harmful material that adults will be exposed to, or some of the abuse that can arise through inappropriate use of technology and the need for tech companies to take firm action. When it comes to social media and the under-16s, it is about making a judgment that it is not good for children of certain ages to be exposed to certain things. That is about maturity and the ability to absorb and consider what they are seeing and to discern what is in front of them. We have seen some awful examples where children are seeing things that no child should ever see. Companies should be taking that down, but we would limit their exposure to that if we bring forward further action around a ban.

Am I saying to the Committee that in this new world no young person under 16 will ever get on TikTok or Snapchat or whatever? No, I am not saying that. It was not allowed for girls to smoke in the toilets when I was at school, but plenty of girls would sneak into the toilets at lunchtime. It is about the enforcement and making sure that you are trying to do that. You cannot guarantee that no young person will access it, but this will represent a step change in the childhoods that our children will be able to enjoy into the future.

Q50 **Kevin McKenna:** I can see that there are some things which are very specific to young people at different developmental stages of a human being's life, but as you have alluded to, some things that young people are being exposed to are also harmful to adults, for example inducing people to kill themselves online. There is some really toxic Nazi stuff, and political or social radicalisation. From the point of view of equality, is there not a question about older adults and people across the entire age range? You have gone for a ban for under-16s but not for over-60s, but clearly people of all ages are being exposed to these harms. Just by banning it for young people under 16, are we setting up a system where we are saying that harm is okay, so we leave it untouched and expose the whole age range to that?

Bridget Phillipson: I understand what you are saying. This is not about further action not following, in terms of enforcement of the tech companies and the role of Ofcom. We have also been clear that more is needed in this area, but it is important to recognise, given the nature of the development of children and young people, what is age-appropriate and what can be harmful as they grow up, in shaping of attitudes, and to protect them from some of that harmful material. You are absolutely right: there is a lot of bad stuff out there that is not good for adults to see either, and that is where wider enforcement action has to follow. Of course, there are differences in how children and young people may understand some of the things that we see and be unable to fully absorb or rationalise them in the way an adult might, but that is not to say that an adult seeing some of the harmful material that young people would see is not affected by some of that content as well.



Q51 Kevin McKenna: Just to declare a personal interest, I have 11 nephews and nieces in Australia. We know that Australia went down the route of a ban; we also know that there is data that many children are still accessing social media. I know the Government's argument, and part of the theory of change is that having a ban for under-16s will eventually start to shift how younger people behave, even if some of them continue to access social media. However, it leaves this enormous gap where young people, maybe in huge numbers, will continue to be able to access harmful social media. What are we actually going to do about that? How are we going to make sure that this is a line in the sand and we make all children safe at this point?

Bridget Phillipson: You are right: we need action on the content as well as the question around age and use of social media. We have been seeking to learn from the experience in Australia, and we intend to put effective age verification steps in place. That is not without its challenges, and we are working with Ofcom on that. That has been part of the experience in Australia, where it has been more difficult. It goes back to the point that I made that the Prime Minister was very clear in setting out the Government's position on this: we cannot guarantee that no young person will ever access social media in the future, but it will represent a big shift in terms of attitudes. From what I have heard from many parents, it will also mean that there is less of that pressure for children to feel that they have to be online at an ever earlier age, because there will be no means by which it can be achieved.

Q52 Kevin McKenna: Again, from the point of view of equalities law, we are likely to be asking everyone of every age to have to verify that. Everyone in this room would have to verify their age to access their Facebook accounts and so on. Does that have an equalities implication? To protect young people, we are asking adults to change how they behave to access what we are fundamentally saying is legal content for adults.

Bridget Phillipson: In bringing forward this work and in the development of any policy, we and Ofcom will have to consider the equalities impacts on all of this. It is becoming increasingly routine that to access online banking you have to do some form of verification, for example voice or face verification, in order to confirm that it is you. This is becoming more and more a way of ensuring that there is strong cyber-security, that people cannot access other people's bank accounts and that we reduce the risk of fraud. I am sure this can be done in a proportionate way, but there is further work to do in this area and Ofcom will be looking carefully at how we can ensure effective verification systems.

Q53 Kevin McKenna: In wider areas of equalities where social media has a big impact, we have had evidence that content produced by women about women's health and enabling women to talk openly about women's health issues is being shadow-banned and downgraded by social media companies because, frankly, it is less divisive and more inclusive. To be blunt, it is because it does not necessarily get the hits. Misogynistic content from men in the manosphere is then being boosted, so you get



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quite a skew in terms of benefit across the sexes and genders. What is your take on that? Will the Government take steps to stop social media from profiting from misogynistic content and to boost health-promoting content, particularly by women creators?

Bridget Phillipson: Part of this is action and work around some of the harmful algorithms and the impact they have, so that is absolutely right. Of course it is not for Government to seek to control platforms if material is being shared that is lawful and in line with people's freedom to express their views. It does not surprise me that women's health does not get as much attention as other areas; it has unfortunately been the case since time immemorial that issues affecting women and their health are not given the seriousness that is merited.

What young people in particular see around misogynistic content online is the reason why we are bringing forward revised RSHE guidance in schools. It is to make sure that, in an age-appropriate way, young people are better equipped to understand, to challenge and not to take what they see online at face value. For the first time, there will be a proper understanding around misogyny, with more on healthy relationships and what consent looks like. It will be done in a way that does not seek to target men and boys as a problem to be fixed, but seeks to involve men and boys in that conversation, particularly in how they can seek to influence their peers around what good, respectful relationships look like and understanding important areas like coercive control, again in an age-appropriate way, healthy relationships, and misogyny. The updating that we have done to the RSHE guidance represents a big step forward in what our young people will experience going through the school system.

- Q54 **Kevin McKenna:** I suppose you are right, in one sense, that Government should try to encourage rather than necessarily compel, but the British Government can compel things; they can make things compulsory even if it is then done through a separate body. At the moment a lot of Ofcom's guidance for improving online safety for women in particular is not compulsory. Why does the Government not give Ofcom the powers and make Ofcom's good practice steps mandatory, rather than just relying on the good will of social media companies, which—let us be clear—does not seem to manifest very often?

Bridget Phillipson: Responsibility for Ofcom sits with other colleagues across Government, but I will put that point to them and make sure that you get an answer to those questions.

- Q55 **Kevin McKenna:** Do you have any thoughts on that?

Bridget Phillipson: I want to see strong enforcement, because I agree it is not simply about what young people are exposed to; it is about making sure that we have a culture in which unacceptable material is not being pushed on any of us. It is particularly a problem with children and young people, but it is not only children and young people who see things online that they should never see.



Q56 **Nadia Whittome:** Minister, the Government have made halving VAWG a key mission. What was your role, as Minister for Women, in the strategy?

Bridget Phillipson: I was closely involved through the development of the strategy. Obviously, different Government Departments will have different areas where they will make an impact. For example, the Home Office is leading the work around support for victims who report or do not report to the police, training for police officers, and the stronger framework that is needed around due diligence. Other colleagues in Government, the Ministry of Justice for example, are making sure we have specialist courts and that victims are not waiting for years on end to see justice. I obviously lead the work across the Department for Education as well. We have taken a lead role in piloting the further work that I was just talking about around RSHE, action to prevent violence against women and girls, and better attitudes among our young people. In the development of that work, much of which the Prime Minister oversees personally, I was directly involved, and it is my role as Minister for Women and Equalities to ensure that all Government Departments are upholding our responsibilities to deliver a fairer, more equal society, including tackling the scourge of violence against women, which not only takes too many lives but ruins too many lives.

Q57 **Nadia Whittome:** Why is tackling violence against women and girls being led at Minister of State level rather than Secretary of State level? I know that you are also Secretary of State for Education, but what does that say about the level of priority afforded to this mission?

Bridget Phillipson: It is a big priority for this Government. We have set ourselves a big and ambitious target around halving violence against women and girls. It will not be an easy target to meet but it is absolutely essential that we do it.

Prior to being elected as an MP, I used to run a women's refuge. I know how important it is that we take action to make sure that in our streets and homes, wherever we are, women are not on the receiving end of male violence. The sad reality is that while there has been much progress made, we are still far away from being in a world where women are able to live freely in their own home without experiencing sexual violence and abuse, never mind on the streets. It is a personal priority for me to drive further action on this. It is something that the Prime Minister has personally driven over the last two years and he has a long-standing commitment to supporting survivors of violence against women and those who have experienced childhood sexual abuse. His record as Director of Public Prosecutions prior to becoming a Member of Parliament speaks for itself and the importance that he attaches to this area.

Is there more to do? Of course there is. There is always more that we need to do, and this is something that I will continue to work on with colleagues right across Government to make sure that we are doing everything within our power not just to take action against those who perpetrate it, to support victims and survivors, but also to stop this



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happening in the first place. That requires a big shift across society. It is about what we teach our young people, and those attitudes, but it is incumbent upon us all to drive forward that change.

Q58 Nadia Whittome: I know that Refuge and other sector organisations are concerned that the bold aims of the VAWG strategy have not been matched with the level of funding that would be required to deliver meaningful, widespread change. What would you say to that?

Bridget Phillipson: I understand that they want to see more. I was in their position until 2010 and would doubtless have been saying the same thing. Of course I understand they will want more resource and funding. They are campaigning organisations that very powerfully make the case for that, and we as a Government will go as far and as fast as we can. It is important that we recognise that we have put over £13 million into establishing a national policing centre for VAWG and public protection in order to have a real step change in some of the attitudes that we see. With Raneem's law, we are strengthening support for victims. We are embedding domestic abuse specialists in the first five control rooms, but we are going further on that point too and are rolling out domestic abuse protection orders. More funding for the police, as is being delivered through the Home Office, is also important. Home Office colleagues are putting more police officers on the streets, but that will only be as effective as it should be if we make sure that our police have the training, the support and the wider understanding of how to respond effectively to domestic violence and sexual violence as it presents.

We are doing a lot of work across the Department for Education too, including through our VAWG prevention programme, to evaluate the impact of interventions in primary and secondary settings and then seek to roll that out further. There is significant investment. You will be unsurprised to hear that I will continue to push Treasury colleagues to deliver more. They are sympathetic to this; they understand the importance of the issue. You only have to look to the economic cost of setting aside the appalling trauma: it comes at a significant economic cost, where people are losing days out of work and taking time off sick because they are affected by male violence.

Q59 Nadia Whittome: That is good to hear. Can you say a little more about the steps that the Department for Education is taking to reduce misogynistic attitudes and harmful behaviour towards women and girls? How are you assessing the impact of this work?

Bridget Phillipson: It is one important area, but alone it is not enough. There is a limit to what schools can be expected to deliver. As I was just saying, the changes we are making to the RSHE guidance will provide our young people with a much clearer understanding of issues such as misogyny, consent and healthy relationships and will all be done in a way that is age-appropriate.



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We are delivering £16 million of investment through the prevention programme that I mentioned. We will test and learn, and evaluate the effectiveness of that. It has a focus on teenage relationship abuse and misogyny, and how we can promote healthy relationships and prevent harmful behaviour before it starts. I know that supporting men and boys to understand what that looks like, particularly through some of the work I have seen around peer mentoring and support, can be incredibly effective. This gives us the opportunity to invest but to test the effectiveness prior to any wider roll-out of further work. The last thing any of us would want to do is spend money on programmes or interventions that not only do not deliver but are actively harmful, and there are always risks in this kind of work, given the sensitivity and nature of it.

Q60 Rosie Duffield: Let us move on to the efficiency and enforcement of the public sector equality duty. What did you learn from your call in April 2025 for evidence on ensuring that public sector equality duty is met by all parties ensuring public functions?

Bridget Phillipson: We believe that the public sector equality duty is vital for ensuring that public services work well for everyone. This is not just about hoping that discrimination does not happen; it requires public bodies to consider how their functions will affect people and what steps they need to take to ensure that everyone is well served.

In practice, that can mean quite tangible things. It could be step-free access at train stations for wheelchair users and disabled people. It could be quite practical things, such as making sure that parks are well-lit at night so that women feel they can use local provision safely. We talked earlier about healthcare provision and the stark health inequalities that we face, including around maternal healthcare. We are firmly committed to protecting and upholding this duty and making sure that it delivers genuine and meaningful change and is not just a tick box.

Q61 Rosie Duffield: Have any actions emerged that your Department will take? By the way, does anyone else want to come in on that?

Bridget Phillipson: Colleagues may wish to come in, but the point is that you can have the intention, but it is about making sure that you have consistency and compliance around all of that, and that it does not just identify where things are needed, but delivers meaningful action for those who need that kind of support. Would anyone like to add anything?

Marcus Bell: Perhaps I can add a point specifically about equality impact assessments. Equality impact assessments are not a legal requirement. They are not mandatory, but they are often used by Government Departments and public authorities as a way of showing that they have discharged their responsibilities under the PSED. I hope it is not controversial to say—having spent time in Government Departments—that EIAs are sometimes done well and sometimes less well. We are doing a bit of work to support Departments to make sure that it is not a



tick-box exercise, that it is not bureaucratic and, most importantly, that it really gets to the issues that the PSED is designed to get at, which is that this is a policy that actually improves outcomes for the public. That is my reading of what the PSED is for. If you are assessing the impact on different members of the community, that is really the question that you are asking. That is something we are looking at.

Catherine Little: If I could just situate it in the wider work that we are doing across Government Departments, the Minister for the Cabinet Office and the Attorney General are leading the work to look at all the duties and responsibilities that we place on Departments and organisations that, as the Secretary of State alluded to, might be seen as a tick-box exercise, be highly inefficient and not actually be leading to better policy outcomes or service delivery. The EIA is one example of that. We have identified a whole range of duties that we have accumulated over the years and placed upon Departments. This is part of that wider work, and it is important we get back to the basics.

What are we actually trying to do? We are trying to ensure that the Equality Act is discharged in practice, that we are providing services in a fair, respectful way, and that we are not tying up important Government and organisational resources undertaking this bureaucratic assessment when we could be using that resource to greater effect in other ways. It is a really important part of how we drive productivity and efficiency of the state.

Q62 **Rosie Duffield:** It sounds as though you are trying to make it uniform across Departments, which is key, is it not? Do you have a response to calls—I do not know if you have even had these calls—to repeal the PSED?

Bridget Phillipson: I am very much against that, for all the reasons I sought to outline at the start. Policymaking is less strong if we do not take into account the different needs of those who need that provision. While it should not be done in a way that is cursory or just going through the motions, when done properly it allows us all to ensure that what we are doing meets the needs of the wider public. Sometimes those who have very specific needs might represent a small minority within a population. They might not have a loud voice or they might not have influence or power to influence decision making, but of course that is only as good as what follows in terms of policy and change.

We have talked quite a lot in this session about maternal healthcare. It is a known problem; “problem” is an understatement. It is an outrage that so many black women die in childbirth. We know what the figures tell us. What we need to do now, as a Government, is deliver a more equal society in which that does not happen. It is a necessary precondition for recognising the problem, understanding the impact of service delivery and then following through on action. I appreciate that people will be frustrated if we identify lots of problems but do not then deliver the



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change that is necessary, but we can only deliver the change if we understand what it is we are seeking to do.

Chair: That concludes our questions. Thank you all for coming along, and particularly for coping with the heat.